

Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Cost of War

by Mary Beaudoin

First let's be clear—The Department of Defense (DoD) was called the War Department until 1947, a few years after the end of World War II. The Orwellian label “defense” is, for the most part, delusional as the department has continued the function of waging war and flexing military might around the world. But so it's understood what we're talking about, we need to refer to the DoD here as what it is commonly called.

This spring the Trump administration presented its 2018 federal budget proposal with a vision called “America First: A Blueprint to Make America Great Again.” The negotiator in chief is requesting \$639 billion for the Department of Defense, the total includes \$65 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), which is used largely as a slush fund to wage war without having to account for just where or how, and an increase of \$54 billion over the current DoD budget.

But surveys for the last five years have shown that the American public would prefer to see a *cut* in defense spending. In 2016, people responded that they do not want funding for nuclear weapons increased.

Peace activist Jay Kvale of St. Paul is one of the Americans disturbed by the new administration's budget priorities which designate who will eat and who will not. He had this to say:

Trump budget director Mick Mulvaney unveiled an absurd, heartless federal budget that proposes \$54 billion more in military spending (so Trump can "win wars") while cutting Meals on Wheels, the EPA, the State Department, etc. Meals on Wheels serves several million people, many of whom are homebound, and also half a million veterans.

The Administration also wants to cut our meager foreign aid at a time when millions in South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, etc. are on the verge of starvation. Hardest hit is Yemen, where 16 million people need assistance and several hundred thousand children may die of starvation this year if food aid doesn't reach them. Exacerbating the situation is the Saudi war on Houthi rebels. Saudis are losing even though they have bought billions in military aid from the U.S. Recently, they bombed the main port that delivers humanitarian aid.

Jay Kvale is correct in his assessment that increased defense spending comes at the expense of cuts to foreign aid as foreign aid is managed by the State Department, whose funding the proposed budget cuts by 29 percent. There is bitter irony in this cut because starvation is imminent, or already occurring, in places where the U.S. has had military involvement, contributing to the disruption of agriculture and food supplies. It is the victims of war who pay the highest cost—often with their lives. Within the U.S., the increase in defense comes at the expense of innumerable other community and low income programs that provide people in the U.S. with public housing, emergency and home energy assistance, and legal aid. Meals on

Wheels gets much of its funding through home-delivered nutrition programs for the elderly and disabled, part of the U.S. Health and Human Services Agency; the agency's budget has been slashed by 16 percent. The budget shifts spending away from public education for all to incentivizing private education. It slashes mass transportation, pollution control, climate and clean energy research, the arts, public broadcasting, the National Health Institute, and more.

Yet the new budget includes a 7 percent increase in Homeland Security, in part to pay for the massive border wall sealing out Mexico.

What are the odds of the 2018 budget passing?

If it's any indication: in a vote of 371 to 48 on March 8 of this year, the U.S. House of Representatives appropriated \$578 billion for the Department of Defense in the 2017 federal budget. This figure is not as high as Trump's but it ensures death and destruction will continue by including funding for 1.3 million active-duty military and 826,000 National Guard and reserve troops stationed inside the U.S. and around the world; weapons systems for all four branches of the military, and billions for war fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and other, perhaps yet undisclosed, places.

Representing Minnesota, one of the most liberal states, four Democrats voted in favor of the funding and only one, Keith Ellison, voted against it. All three Republicans voted in favor. 2017 DoD bill has been sent to the Senate where, as of this writing, it has yet to be approved. *Note:* The 2017 DoD bill has been sent to the Senate where, as of this writing, it has yet to be approved. It was supposed to fund the DoD starting October 1, 2016, and run up to October 1, 2017, when the 2018 budget is scheduled to begin. Military spending continues, in spite of delays in overall DoD funding authorization during any given year with the passage of emergency supplemental funding.

Before the federal budget for any given period passes, congressional committees are expected to examine the various areas in the budget and make their own recommendations. House and Senate Armed Services Committees are responsible for funding and oversight of the Department of Defense which includes all branches of military service, plus nuclear weapons, Missile Defense systems, cyber and space intelligence, research and development of new and experimental weapons programs, and more.

U.S. Representative Mac Thornberry of Texas is the chair of the House Armed Services Committee and is pushing for more defense spending. Thornberry was ranked as a number one recipient from the defense industry in the 2015/2016 election cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which tallies campaign contributions based on Federal Commissions data. He laments what he calls "excessive" government spending, but his lamentations never seem to apply to military spending. His counterpart is war advocate and Senate Armed Services Chair John McCain of Arizona. Outside the United States a visit from John McCain is feared, as it is said, "where John McCain goes, war follows." Within the U.S., it is said that "John McCain never met a war he didn't like."

It's tempting to ascribe the problem of escalating militarism to individual political personalities—after all, they provide us with so much material—but it's important to also see them in context, says Todd Pierce, Major, U.S. Army (Ret.), a commentator on military issues, who had served on defense teams representing clients at Guantanamo:

The problem with personifying everything being done by Trump blinds people to the even more radical extremists in the United States government like John McCain and Lindsey Graham who are demanding we spend even more on a world dominating U.S. military which is designed not for defense any more but for offensive, aggressive war, in violation of the Nuremberg Principles. Consider the possibility that we have what are, in essence, two rival factions of fascists: Trump's, and the other fascists, those who demand U.S. war on the world.

They may differ in degree on funding domestic priorities, yet those who still support war can be found on both sides of the political aisle. This has resulted in a dangerous inflammatory situation in which militarism is deeply entrenched through the weapons industry, financial interests, the National Security State, and supportive media.

But given these powerful interests, where is there hope to de-militarize? Hope is alive every week in the numbers of Americans that have been showing up at congressional offices (inside or outside), and in streets across the country protesting a variety of injustices. By confronting their congressional representatives in their home districts, millions of U.S. constituents succeeded in preventing Congress from passing the disastrous, misnamed American Health Care Act, which would have resulted in millions of people losing their healthcare. People in every state have continued to push back against all kinds of injustices.

These injustices do not arise out of nowhere. We need to clearly see that there is a direct connection with the funding of militarism and domestic issues. War feeds on fear. It creates enemies abroad and scapegoats minorities at home. And it steals from human needs. That's why it's time to resurrect the platitude: *Follow the money*.

Mary Beaudoin is the editor of the Women Against Military Madness newsletter. Bill Adamski contributed to this article.

Sources for this article: “Blue Print to Make America Great Again, Defense Budget,” whitehouse.gov; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, sipri.org; “The public favors cutting defense spending,” philly.com; “Trump federal budget 2018,” *Washington Post*; “Here's the \$250 Billion in Hidden Military Spending,” The Balance, thebalance.com; “Where Your Income Tax Money Really Goes,” War Resisters League, warresistersleague.com; National Priorities Project, nationalpriorities.org; “The Truth About Meals on Wheels,” usatoday.com; “How They Voted,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

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ACTION: One action you can take is to participate in or support WAMM's Walk Against Weapons.