

The Militarization of US Government Response to COVID-19 and What We Can Do About It

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This article details six broad areas of current political need and opportunity as the US government ramps up the militarization of its response to the coronavirus pandemic. We must take collective action on these areas in the time of coronavirus: (1) practicing community-based defense instead of militarized security; (2) differentiating what is acceptable versus unacceptable military response; (3) putting coronavirus in context with ongoing war and domestic militarism; (4) resisting Coronavirus Capitalism; (5) demanding that the Department of Defense adequately protect all military personnel from COVID-19; and (6) acting in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and international communities.

Keywords: COVID-19, US military, militarism, demilitarization, community-based safety, veterans, public policy, international solidarity

INTRODUCTION

We hold that moments of crisis like this expose the faulty logic of a system which conflates violence with power, authoritarianism with safety, and productivity with value. When exposed for their weaknesses, systems of oppression retaliate with a more aggressive projection of force and control. We are witnessing this dynamic now in the coronavirus crisis, and it is important that we contextualize it as such. Conversely, the opportunities of this moment lie not only in our ability to resist the US government's doubling-down of militarization, but also in our ability to center and model a different logic—one which demonstrates our alternative possibilities of social justice, resource abundance, and care.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AREAS AND OPPORTUNITIES WE NEED TO ACTIVATE AS THE US GOVERNMENT'S COVID-19 RESPONSE FURTHER MILITARIZES

We Need to Engage in and Spread the Practice of Community-Based Defense Instead of Militarized Security.

Community defense practices need to be included under the umbrella of necessary mutual aid as we face coronavirus. Community-based safety or defense is a praxis in which everyday people get together in their own communities and agree on how best to secure their safety, using their own bodies and resources. It looks different for each community but the common denominator is that community defense never centers police or military resources in securing peoples' lives; instead, it relies on communities' own resources, which communities can control. While we cannot protest en masse, let us rise in support of one another and take control of our collective health and safety—which will help us build roots to grow yet further future resistance.

Our military has already announced on a CNN feature that it views coronavirus as the new national enemy: General Stanley McChrystal said that, “we are being attacked by a virus, which is different than any of our opponents,” and thus we must activate the full force of our military to kill Sars-Cov-2.

If we do not popularize collective demilitarization now, we face the very real possibility that our government will further militarize our neighborhoods, cities, and even rural spaces, in the name of “national security.”

States can impose martial law if such power is in the state's constitution. Many of us have a fresh memory of 2013 Boston, which had quasi-martial law imposed on it and nearby Watertown (Bump, 2013). Government mandated a shelter-in-place lockdown; heavily armed soldiers and militarized police forces roamed the streets in search of the two Boston Marathon bombers. California Governor Gavin Newsom, usually a progressive Democrat, has been speaking publicly about imposing martial law across the state since March 18, 2020 (Zoellner, 2020). If martial law were imposed, it “would temporarily replace civil rule with military authority.” We know the contours of what contemporary martial law would look like via its precedents, in which “certain civil liberties have been suspended, such as the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures, freedom of association, and freedom of movement.” Notably, we already have restricted civil liberties: stay-at-home orders across the country currently

restrict us from two of the three aforementioned examples of our critical civil liberties. Newsom implicitly backpedaled his previous talk of martial law for the state on March 21st, stating in a live press conference that he was only deploying National Guard troops to help run food banks, as well as having the military lease two hospitals with a combined 3,000 beds for the state (Zoellner, 2020). Thousands of Californians have been laid off and cannot make their rent (Moleski & Kasler, 2020). We do not need soldiers in combat fatigues to run a food bank. We can do it with our own communities.

Both the President and Congress also have the power to enact martial law nation-wide. President Trump deployed nonfunctional hospital ships to New York City's harbor on March 18th to fight the coronavirus "war." (Hutchison & Smith, 2020). Our national public is so unaware of the ongoing US-led Global "War on Terror" (GWOt) that Trump can speak of himself in a novel fashion as a new "wartime president"—because of his "war" against coronavirus—and thus far get away with it. Our government went to war in October of 2001 against the international "terrorist" enemy-other (Stampnitzky, 2014) and has only continued to stoke terrorism in its global warfare ever since. GWOt is the longest-running—as well as far and away the most geographically widespread—war in US history (Scahill, 2013).

We already have militarized police forces on our streets. Their racial profiling leads to frequent police killings of unarmed, innocent people—especially black and brown people. Our military receives deep psychological training in a counter-insurgency strategy which teaches them to see black and brown people as the dangerous "terrorist" enemy-other, which needs to be eradicated, and even executed on sight (Stampnitzky, 2014). Military racial profiling will only escalate the extrajudicial killings which take place on our streets every single day.

We need a just transition from an economy of "banks and tanks" to a peaceful, green, humanity-centric economy. We already have militarized human health services. A subsidiary of military contractor corporation Lockheed Martin is already contracted to provide services in the public foster care system in Los Angeles County, California. Lockheed Martin is also more widely involved in public social services provision, as it moves "From warfare to welfare."

Privatization of public services under the Trump administration has already escalated and we can predict more of the same ahead. Privatization of service provision by health and safety-related corporations is one thing; service provision in this sector by *war corporations* is another. We do not need more funds going to these companies, which are already well over-paid and bloated by our gargantuan \$1.3 trillion "defense" budget for Fiscal Year 2019, the current calendar year. Additionally, federal resources such as those of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which are woefully mis-managed, regularly involve militarized security operations to secure their logistics, as happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in 2005.

Our governors' rhetorical gesturing toward further martial law is not the only power grab on the table. For example, Politico reported March 21st that the "Justice Department has quietly asked Congress for the ability to ask chief judges to detain people indefinitely without trial during emergencies," grasping for further powers during the national emergency (Swan, 2020). We address states of national emergency as opportunities for establishmentarian political gain in our section (4) below, on Coronavirus Capitalism (Klein, 2020).

Instead of further militarization, we need decarceration and community-based aid. Activists are calling on incarcerating institutions to release all prisoners—now more than ever. Even Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called for the release of political prisoners around the world, citing the virus (Kanno-Youngs & Karni, 2020).

This needs to be taken well beyond political prisoners—although all prisoners are, in truth, political prisoners. Prisoner releases should also include migrants and asylum-seekers in US detention centers, and the scope of prisons needs to include US-funded detention centers on proxy borders such as those in Mexico and Guatemala. Incarcerated folks are kept in crowded, small, enclosed spaces which preclude social distancing and are thus rife for COVID-19 transmission (Weber et al., 2020). Detainees also lack proper healthcare, as many of us do who are not locked up.

Note Regarding Rural Organizing and Community Defense

Rural organizers face additional, unique organizing challenges because they are more spread out than people are in cities, and people have more guns per capita. City-based community defenders need to talk and trade praxis with rural community defenders, and join forces in their borderlands. Both kinds of communities can grow through mutual reflection and refining of their praxes. There are many peoples which have long histories of community-based defense—we need to remember and learn from their legacies now, and help them spread faster than the virus among us.

We Need to Draw Careful Lines Between What Is Acceptable Military Response and What Is Categorically Unacceptable

What Is Acceptable?

For example, it could be very helpful to our society if our government puts the military to work providing communities with the massive material resources and logistics necessary to establish public field hospitals or to simply distribute medical supplies to us, such as personal protective equipment (PPE).

We do not want the military itself to run these hospitals or distribution operations with service-members because we do not want the further militarization of our society or resources, nor any more guns on our streets than there already are. Our unfortunate reality right now is that our hospitals and clinics will soon be overwhelmed with people seeking coronavirus treatment.

We need fast action, and the military can help with that, but we do not want them to run our critical civilian services. Not least, we do not want the military running our civilian treatment facilities because this will make it much less likely that vulnerable populations—prime among them, the under-documented—will be able to use them. Under-documented folks have already been not seeking treatment for their regular healthcare needs out of fear that they will be exposed and violently detained or deported (Midkiff, 2020). Their fear is well founded.

About Face staff member Jovanni Reyes notes that those without enough documentation to feel safe in our country are very reasonably worried right now. They are “worried that further militarization of the streets” in places like San Antonio, Texas “will only serve as auxiliaries to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other deportation mechanisms.” ICE agents are already pretending to be doctors to enter homes and detain under-documented residents.

Problems with supply chain logistics are also already coming up as our country hoards supplies (Hanbury, 2020). We can expect the militarization of supply chain security if these incidents continue. As About Face member Lisa Ling writes, you can “walk into any store and you will quickly recognize that the supply of incoming goods is compromised.”

It is acceptable—and necessary—for us to protect our communities by practicing control over who can and cannot enter. However, how can we do this via community-defense praxis in ways which do not reinforce the long-term power of borders, which we ultimately need to abolish?

We can, for example, enact flexibility and concern for humanity in our holding of the borderlines around our communities. The Trump administration is seeking to close the US-Mexico border to even asylum-seekers, which is blatantly against international law (Kanno-Youngs & Karni, 2020). We need to push the US to consistently allow asylum-seekers and refugees escaping conditions of violence to come into the US, not keep them out. We need to hold our own communities’ borders in community-defense, which always prioritizes our collective health and safety—inclusive of folks who are most vulnerable, and inclusive of those not already on the inside with us.

What Is Unacceptable?

What would be categorically unacceptable to communities in the US is for soldiers to have their weapons and war-grade Kevlar—as well as other battlefield gear—out on our streets while they do any of the above.

We already have a highly militarized domestic police force which fills our streets with weaponry and which daily kills innocent Americans who never have a chance to be innocent until proven guilty. We cannot afford more of the same from soldiers. We ask that necessary security operations for medical and

food supply chains be provided by community members—many of which are now out of work—and only if absolutely necessary, by unarmed police.

What would likewise be categorically unacceptable is if the militarization of federal COVID-19 response begins to break down significant federal limitations on what the military can and cannot do to enforce federal policy domestically. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 regulates how much the military can be mobilized in domestic enforcement. Neither the US Army, Air Force, nor Navy can be deployed to enforce federal policy on domestic soil. Posse Comitatus does not regulate the Army or Air National Guard, but states can “deputize them” for law enforcement purposes within state boundaries.

The last time Posse Comitatus was suspended was in 2006–07, when Congress—as urged by President George W. Bush—passed the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007 (HR 5122), signed into law on October 17, 2006. Its Section 1076, “Use of the Armed Forces in major public emergencies,” permitted the President to activate the armed forces “to restore public order and enforce” US laws “when, as a result of a natural disaster, epidemic, or other serious public health emergency...or other condition” the President determines that “domestic violence has occurred to such an extent that the constituted authorities of the State or possession are incapable of maintaining public order.” This suspension of Posse Comitatus was entirely repealed in 2008. Bending or breaking Posse Comitatus in the coronavirus pandemic would be categorically unacceptable.

We Need to Put Coronavirus in Context With the Global War on Terror and Domestic Militarism

The dominant media largely treats coronavirus as if it is an isolated viral pandemic which emerges from a vacuum. It quarantines the COVID-19 crisis, dehistoricizing and distancing it from its own present-day context—except to address the economic ramifications of the pandemic and some limited impacts on our Presidential election.

The present conversation on how our government should respond to COVID-19 is dominated by militarist rhetoric across the political spectrum. We need to speak up in cross-spectrum media to dispel the myth that more military involvement in coronavirus response will make our country safer.

We need to put the COVID-19 pandemic in context with the US-led Global War on Terror, which in reality has only stoked more “terrorism,” as well as in context with domestic US militarization—of our society, our economy, our schools, and our healthcare system (Stampnitzky, 2014). Each of these socio-political arenas are profoundly contoured by US militarism: the massive Department of Defense budget, funded by our tax dollars, swallows up many billions of dollars a year which could otherwise put our children through good schools and provide us adequate healthcare.

Thus far, US militarism is only escalating in response to coronavirus. As reported on March 20th, “a group of lawmakers are urging Congress to approve the purchasing of 19 more F-35 fighters than the Pentagon requested as part of the battle against the disease.” In light of this escalation, we urge you to demand that your representatives in Congress cease funding war machines instead of properly funding civilian public health. The lawmakers who argued for the excess F-35s were: Reps John Larson (D-Conn), Mark Veasey (D-Texas), Martha Roby (R-Ala), and Mike Turner (R-Ohio). Because, as About Face member Ramon Mejía writes, “doing the military-industrial complex’s bidding is a bipartisan endeavor.”

As Tobita Chow explains on social media, we are “getting outflanked by the right. Across the media, China is blamed more than Trump” for COVID-19 running rampant all over the world. This pandemic has been profoundly racialized from the very beginning: its origins are unduly pinned on the Chinese population and government. Both are also scapegoated for the global scope of the pandemic, although world leaders like Trump knew about the virus—yet did not act—as of December 2019. Chow continues, “the hardcore nationalist right is using this crisis moment for radical political realignment (trying to turn the GOP into a combination of violent nationalism plus a semblance of social democracy, also known as national socialism). Are we doing the same?” We need to do the same to shift the national conversation towards our human values, via media work which is rooted in our core values of global anti-racism in solidarity with international peoples of color, demilitarization, and genuine security.

We Need to Take a Stand on Coronavirus Capitalism

Coronavirus Capitalism, as articulated by Naomi Klein (Klein, 2020), addresses the common political slippage which comes with a state of emergency. The Trump administration is already talking about enacting policies it has long had under the table but has lacked the political will or public circumstance to impose.

Coronavirus Capitalism is Klein's (2020) adaptation of her own breakthrough work on disaster capitalism (2007). Our memory of disaster capitalism is still fresh from the immediate post-9/11 days, weeks, and months, during which the USA PATRIOT Act (2001) was codified into law and our military immediately invaded Afghanistan. These emergency responses remain codified for the long-term; they stick with us far beyond the end of the crisis in which they opportunistically emerged. We see this with the PATRIOT Act and the US-led War in Afghanistan: both continue to be in effect 19 years after their invention during the 9/11 emergency.

We need to, as activists say, "sound the alarm" on what we know becomes suddenly politically feasible during a state of emergency. We know these ideas as clearly *unreasonable* during times of relative normalcy. Posse Comitatus is a prime example of a federal regulation which could be broken down in a state of emergency—and has been in recent memory. By sounding the alarm, we can effectively predict the very near future we face as an American public, which for us includes every person who is currently in this country. We can already see that this future will bring us broader militarization of pandemic response. When Retired General Stanley McChrystal spoke on CNN on March 17th, he said "this is a time when *every single asset* in the United States military that *could be of use in any way* should be made available. We shouldn't be *tripping over rules* and what-not." We need to press the question of the military and its civilian overseers: which rules are you planning to sidestep?

We know the military's domestic and international playbook intimately, because as veterans and their civilian allies, we've been on both the giving and receiving ends of their tactics for decades. We need to sound these alarms.

We Need to Demand That the Department of Defense Adequately Protect Its Active, Guard, and Reserve Military Personnel From Contracting Coronavirus

As of this writing, the Pentagon is already reporting 124 known cases of coronavirus within the Department of Defense (DoD) (Macias, 2020). Yet, the Navy's Indo-Pacific Command refuses amidst the epidemic to postpone or cancel the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) international war games, which it hosts every two years across the Hawaiian archipelago (Letman, 2020). RIMPAC is the largest international military maritime exercise in the world. With each new iteration, RIMPAC expands to include more countries and more service-members per country (Mahadzhirm, 2020). It brings thousands of soldiers, sailors, and airmen from militaries around the world to the Hawaiian islands, to "practice" live-ammunition training and simulation exercises. It also causes extreme social disruption in Hawai'i, as service-members run amok in the streets during R&R hours, perpetrating violence against Hawaiian residents—especially women (Compoc & Muneoka, 2014).

The Pentagon has also reported its first personnel death due to coronavirus. As of this writing, all DoD military and civilian employees are still reporting to work—DoD has not moved to only essential personnel operations, as many other agencies and businesses across the world have. DoD has already activated 2,050 National Guard troops in 27 states, as well as placing an untold number on alert, in its quickly evolving COVID-19 response.

An About Face member in Virginia reports that all active-duty Navy sailors there are going to work in close quarters with one another, without proper personal protective equipment (PPE). This is also being widely reported across the country. The poverty draft means that our active-duty ranks are full of economically vulnerable and racially targeted folks; now, once again, their commands are unnecessarily endangering their safety.

It is critical for the public to understand that the combination of (a) poorly equipped and cared-for military personnel, and (b) concentrated military presence in communities with the most vulnerable infrastructure and resource impoverishment, creates dangerous conditions that are likely to exacerbate

community harm. We cannot stress enough that the highly organized, efficient, and thoroughly well-equipped military operations shown in movies and TV are fictitious portrayals—which contrast starkly with the often disorganized, irresponsibly bureaucratic, and under-equipped military operations of reality.

DoD's Northern Command (NORTHCOM) is the “global integrator for all of DoD efforts and entities” in dealing with the novel coronavirus, as Defense Secretary Dr. Mark Esper reported. DoD does have a plan in place for dealing with coronavirus within the ranks. However, the ongoing history of GWOt-era active-duty and veteran healthcare systems is neglectful and abusive to US service-members, veterans, their families, and communities. We documented this in-depth in our 2014 publication, *Operation Recovery: Fort Hood Service-Members and Veterans Testify on the Right to Heal*.

This ongoing history warns us against blind faith in our military healthcare systems and directives. We need to critically examine and comment on DoD actions and plans for dealing with COVID-19 as they evolve. The Pentagon just paused deployments to Afghanistan to protect troops from coronavirus, and it needs to do much more.

We Need to Act in Solidarity With Indigenous International Communities

We need to make solidarity an active verb. Solidarity, particularly with the Indigenous Peoples of the world, is necessary—not from a moralistic or charity-driven sense of goodness—but because we understand that militarism is the enforcement mechanism that colonial states use to maintain systems of oppression and control.

This means that the relationship between colonialism and militarism is not only theoretical, it is physical. It is visceral, fundamental, and tangible. We must act at the root of these systems' synergy. We do not have to unseat the entire system of settler-colonial control in order to demilitarize our responses. But we have not truly demilitarized our responses if we don't acknowledge and account for the fact that we are working in a settler-colonial reality. When we hold this lens, we are able to more readily identify practical ways to diverge from the underlying logic of the State and ensure we aren't simply replicating systems of oppression in ad hoc form. We need to take collective action which follows the lead of international communities such as those in the Hawaiian Kingdom (HK), atop Maunakea, other Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island, and communities worldwide enduring the ongoing US-led Global so-called War on Terror. It is indeed a War of Terror.

US activists are currently promoting a petition to US commercial airline pilots, and their unions, as planeloads of international tourists continue to flood the HK. Hawai'i's state government refuses to ban tourist travel to the HK. Hawaiian state and county governments rely so heavily on the tourist industry for their economic stability that they currently refuse to ban tourists temporarily to flatten the coronavirus pandemic curve. However, the reality is that not banning tourists right now will have far longer, and far more devastating, effects on the Hawaiian economy, which will be felt hardest by residents, as they always are. Each day that passes in Hawai'i wherein tourists are allowed complete freedom to arrive and roam means COVID-19 spreads wider into the resident population.

Activists around the world are also acting in solidarity with Iranians and Venezuelans to demand that the brutal US sanctions regimes against Iran and Venezuela be lifted amidst the coronavirus crisis. We are calling on the US Treasury Department to lift its deadly sanctions on Iran. Join us online in fighting to #EndCOVIDSanctions and give Iranians what experts say is critically needed: 120 days of sanctions relief. Time is of the essence here, as it is regarding each of this statement's critical action areas. Sign up here to #EndCOVIDSanctions for Iran. Syria, Yemen, and Palestine are also under extreme international sanctions at a time when world supply chains are in crisis, thus being even more vulnerable to the impacts of coronavirus than they were previously. Iran is a global epicenter of the pandemic, yet cannot buy medical supplies on the global market due to these harsh sanctions — this is “literally weaponizing the coronavirus.”

CONCLUSION

We need to listen to the global medical community. We are facing a virus, not a military foe. While we live in a country which defaults to military solutions for tough problems, there is no effective military solution which can eradicate a novel virus. Community and public health support structures, from local to global, will do so. Access to medical evaluations and treatment, financial support for the most vulnerable among us, enabling people to feed themselves, shelter themselves, clean themselves, and educate themselves on how to stay well, are all crucial. Communities who are often left out of these conversations must be included when planning interventions, as they know best how to support their local communities.

What we need now is not military or law enforcement interventions, but rather, community-based interventions rooted in compassion. This is not a time for military direction from a Commander in Chief, this is a time for practical medical guidance and access to medical care. Choosing a national lockdown using military or law enforcement interventions will only bring about violence and chaos.

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