

Cut the bloated military budget

BY ERIC STONER
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The bold call by Black Lives Matter activists to defund police has profoundly reshaped the national conversation, but it is only the start of the movement's sweeping vision for public safety.

To reduce our reliance on policing and prisons, racial justice leaders are urging that resources devoted to law enforcement be used instead to address the root causes of violence, such as the lack of affordable housing, health care, education and jobs.

Making the necessary investments in our basic social safety net, however, will require redirecting far more than the \$115 billion spent annually on policing.

The Pentagon, which was granted a whopping \$740.5 billion by the Senate on July 23, should be next on the chopping block.

At the same time, the Senate rejected an amendment put forward by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, to cut 10% of the military's budget,

despite being supported by a majority of American voters.

This would have been a small but needed step in the right direction. However, it would not even have rolled back the increase in military spending since President Donald Trump took office.

In the House, Rep. Barbara Lee, D-California, introduced a far more ambitious nonbinding resolution, which calls for \$350 billion in cuts to the Pentagon. Similarly, the Breathe Act – championed by Reps. Ayanna Pressley, D-Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib, D-Michigan – recommends “dramatically” reducing the Department of Defense's budget.

While many would dismiss the idea of defunding the armed forces as beyond the pale, some perspective is needed. The Pentagon's bloated budget could, in fact, be lopped in half, and the United States would still have the largest military in the world, by far.

These legislative proposals are following the lead of the Poor People's Campaign, which has identified \$350 billion in

cuts to the Pentagon, and the Movement for Black Lives, which for years has called for an even larger, 50% reduction in military spending.

Organizers have the Pentagon in their sights for good reason. Though police officers kill roughly 1,000 people each year, the death toll of the so-called War on Terror is exponentially higher.

According to Brown University's Costs of War Project, at least 800,000 people have died directly from violence in the U.S.-led wars since 9/11, and tens of millions have been displaced – virtually all of whom are people of color.

The Pentagon also plays a critical role in fueling the militarization of police. Thanks to the Defense Department's 1033 program, which the Senate failed to curb this month, more than \$7 billion of military-grade equipment has been funneled from battlefields abroad to local police departments in recent decades. From drones and mine-resistant armored vehicles to flash-bang grenades and tear gas, these weapons of war are now being turned on nonviolent protesters.

Defunding the Pentagon would also provide a much-needed boost to our economy, which is

reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. Take our historic unemployment crisis, for example. With more than 40 million Americans newly out of work, studies have shown that government spending on education, health care and clean energy creates far more jobs than the Pentagon.

Cutting military spending would be a boon for the environment as well, since the Pentagon is the single largest consumer of oil, and the largest source of greenhouse gases, on the planet.

If we learn anything from these unprecedented and interconnected crises, it should be that war, police and our cruel carceral system do not make us safe. What makes people safe is having a stable climate, a decent place to live, access to medical care and meaningful work.

Now is the time to fundamentally rethink what security means, and to follow the inspiring vision that Black Lives Matter has given us.

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