The inadequate response of both the federal and state governments to the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the United States, creating what could only be called a national security crisis. More than 200,000 Americans are dead, approximately half of them people of color. Yelp data show that more than 132,000 businesses have already closed and census data suggest that, thanks to lost wages, nearly 17% of Americans with children can’t afford to feed them enough food.

In this same period, a number of defense contractors have been doing remarkably well. Lockheed Martin, the Pentagon’s top contractor, reported that, compared to 2019, its earnings are actually up—yes, up! The company’s success led the financial magazine Barron’s to call it a “pandemic star.” And those profits are only likely to grow, given the Trump administration’s recent approval of a 10-year deal to sell $62 billion worth of its F-16s to Taiwan. And Lockheed Martin is far from the only such outfit. As Defense One reported, “It’s becoming abundantly clear that companies with heavy defense business have been able to endure the coronavirus pandemic much better” than, for instance, commercial aerospace firms. And so it was that, while other companies have cut or suspended dividends during the pandemic, Lockheed Martin, which had already raised its gift to shareholders in late 2019, continued to pay the same amount this March and September.
The spread of COVID-19 has created one of the most significant crises of our time, but it’s also provided far greater clarity about just how misplaced the priorities of Washington have been all these years. Americans—the Trump administration aside—are now trying to deal with the health impacts of the pandemic and struggling to figure out how to safely reopen schools. It’s none too soon, however, to start thinking as well about how best to rebuild a devastated economy and create new jobs to replace those that have been lost. In that process, one thing is crucial: resisting the calls—and count on it, they will come—to “rebuild” the war economy that had betrayed us long before the coronavirus arrived on our shores, leaving this country in a distinctly weakened state.

A NEW BUDGET DEBATE?

For the past decade, the budget “debate” in this country has largely been shaped by the Budget Control Act, which tried to save $1 trillion over those 10 years by placing nominal caps on both defense and non-defense spending. Notably, however, it exempted “war spending” that falls in what the Pentagon calls its Overseas Contingency Operations account. While some argued that caps on both defense and non-defense spending created parity, the Pentagon’s ability to use and abuse that war slush fund (on top of an already gigantic base budget) meant that the Pentagon still disproportionately benefited by tens of billions of dollars annually.

In 2021, the Budget Control Act expires. That means a Biden or Trump administration will have an enormous opportunity to significantly reshape federal spending. At the very least, that Pentagon off-budget slush fund, which creates waste and undermines planning, could be ended. In addition, there’s more reason than ever for Congress to reassess its philosophy of this century that the desires of the Pentagon invariably come first, particularly given the need to address the significant economic damage the still-raging pandemic is creating.

In rebuilding the economy, count on one thing: defense contractors will put every last lobbying dollar into an attempt to convince the public, Congress, and whatever administration is in power that their sector is the country’s major engine for creating jobs.

As TomDispatch regular Bill Hartung has shown, however, a close examination of such job-creation claims rarely stands up to serious scrutiny. For example, the number of jobs created by recent arms sales to Saudi Arabia are now expected to be less than a tenth of those President Trump initially bragged about. As Hartung noted in February, that’s “well under .03% of the U.S. labor force of more than 164 million people.”

As it turns out, creating jobs through Pentagon spending is among the least effective ways to rebuild the economy. As experts at the University of Massachusetts and Brown University have both discovered, this country would get significantly more job-creation bang for the bucks it spends on weaponry by investing in rebuilding domestic infrastructure, combating climate change, or creating more alternative energy. And such investments would pay additional dividends by making our communities and small businesses stronger and more resilient.
Oversight where I work, I spend my days looking at the many ways the arms industry exerts disproportionate influence over what’s still called (however erroneously in this COVID-19 moment) “national security” and the foreign policy that goes with it, including this country’s forever wars. That work has included, for instance, exposing how a bevy of retired military officers advocated buying more than even the Pentagon requested of the most expensive weapons system in history, Lockheed Martin’s F-35 jet fighter, while failing to disclose that they also had significant personal financial interests in supporting that very program. My colleagues and I are also continually tracking the many officials who leave the Pentagon to go to work on the boards of or to lobby for arms makers or leave those companies and end up in the Pentagon and elsewhere in the national security state. That’s known, of course, as the military-industrial complex’s “revolving door.” And as President Trump recently noted, it helps ensure that those endless wars never end, while stoking an ever-increasing Pentagon budget. While his actions on behalf of the arms industry don’t back up his rhetoric, his diagnosis of the problem is largely on target.

And yet, as familiar as I am with the damage that the weapons industry has done to our country, I still find myself shocked at how a number of those companies have responded to the current crisis. Almost immediately, they began lobbying the Department of Defense to make their employees part of this country’s “essential critical infrastructure,” so that they could force them to return to work, pandemic or not. That decision drew a rare rebuke from the unions representing those workers, many of whom feared for their lives.

And mind you, only then did things become truly perverse. In the initial COVID-19 relief bill, Congress gave the Pentagon $1 billion to help respond to the pandemic. Such aid, as congressional representatives imagined it, would be used to purchase personal protective equipment for employees who still had to show up at work, especially since the Department of Defense’s own initial estimate was that the country would need to produce as many as 3.3 billion N95 masks in six months. The Pentagon, however, promptly gave those funds to defense contractors, including paying for such diverse “needs” as golf-course staffing, hypersonic missile development, and microelectronics, a Washington Post investigation found. House appropriators responded that money for defense contractors “was not the original intent of the funds.”

And now those defense contractors are asking for yet more bailouts. Earlier this summer, they successfully convinced the Senate to put $30 billion for the arms industry in its next coronavirus relief bill. As CQ Roll Call reported, the top beneficiaries of that spending spree would be the Pentagon’s two largest contractors: Lockheed Martin and Boeing.

The pandemic has certainly resulted in some delays and unexpected expenses for such companies, but the costs borne by the weapons industry pale compared to the devastation caused to so many businesses that have had to close permanently. Every sector of the economy is undoubtedly facing unexpected costs due to the pandemic, but apparently the Department of Defense, despite being by far the best-funded military on the planet, and its major contractors, among the richest and most successful corporations in America, have essentially claimed that they will be unable to respond to the crisis without further taxpayer help. The chair of the House Armed Services Committee and the lead Democrat for the Senate’s defense appropriations subcommittee recently pointed out that, even though contractors across the federal government are facing pandemic challenges, no other agency has asked for additional funds to cover the costs of the crisis. Instead, they have worked on drawing from their existing resources.

It’s laughable to suggest that the very department that already has by far the most resources on hand and is, of course, charged with leading the country’s response to unexpected threats can’t figure out how to adjust without further funding. But most defense contractors see no reason to adapt since they know that they can continue to count on Washington to bail them out.

ON A GLIDE PATH TO DISASTER?

There are signs, however, that someday such eternal winners in the congressional financial sweepstakes may finally be made accountable thanks to the pandemic. This summer, both the House and the Senate for the first time each considered an amendment to cut the Pentagon’s budget by 10%. Such efforts even received support from at least some moderates, including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), although it went down to defeat in both houses of Congress. Although Democratic vice presidential candidate Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) refused to support the specifics of the amendment, she did at least express her agreement with
the principle of needing to curtail the Pentagon’s spending spree during this crisis. “As a member of the Senate Intelligence and Homeland Security Committees, I’m keenly aware of the global threats facing our country,” she said in a statement she released after the vote. “I unequivocally agree with the goal of reducing the defense budget and redirecting funding to communities in need.”

The first real test of whether this country will learn any of the right lessons about national security from this ongoing pandemic moment will undoubtedly come in next year’s budget debate when the question will be: Is everything finally going to be on the table? As I previously wrote at TomDispatch, giving the Pentagon trillions of dollars in these years in no way prepared this country for the actual national security crisis of our lives. In fact, even considering the Pentagon’s ridiculously outsized budget, prioritizing funding for unaffordable and unproven weapons systems over healthcare hurt its ability to keep the military and its labor force safe. No less significantly, continuing to prioritize the Pentagon over the needs of every other agency and Americans more generally keeps us on a glidepath to disaster.

A genuinely new discussion of budget priorities would mean, as a start, changing the very definition of “security” to include responding to the many risks we actually face when it comes to our safety: not just pandemics, but the already increasing toll of climate change, a crumbling infrastructure, and a government that continues to disproportionately benefit the wealthy and well-connected over everyone else.

At the simplest level, the “defense” side of the budget ledger should be made to reflect what we’re really spending now on what passes for national security. That means counting homeland security and veterans’ benefits, along with many other expenses that often get left out of the budget equation. When such expenses are indeed included, as Brown University’s Costs of War Project has discovered, the real price tag for America’s wars in the Greater Middle East alone came to more than $6.4 trillion by 2020. In other words, even to begin to have an honest debate about how America’s other needs are funded, there would have to be a far more accurate accounting of what actually has been spent in these years on “national security.”

Surprisingly enough, unlike Congress (or the Pentagon), the voting public already seems to grasp the need for change. The nonprofit think tank Data for Progress found that more than half of likely voters support cutting the Pentagon’s budget by 10% to pay for domestic priorities like fighting the coronavirus. A University of Maryland poll found bipartisan majorities opposed to cutting funding generally with two notable exceptions: Pentagon spending and agricultural subsidies.

Unfortunately, those in the national security establishment are generally not listening to what the American people want. Instead, they’re the captives of a defense industry that eternally hyps new Cold War-style competition with China and Russia, both through donations to Washington think tanks and politicians and that infamous revolving door.

In fact, the Trump administration is a military-industrial nightmare when it comes to that endlessly spinning entrance and exit. Both of his confirmed secretaries of defense and one acting secretary of defense came directly from major defense contractors, including the current one, former Raytheon lobbyist Mark Esper—and the Biden administration seems unlikely to be all that different. As the American Prospect reported recently, several members of his foreign policy team have already circumvented ethics rules that would restrict lobbying activities by becoming “strategic consultants” to the very defense firms aiming to win more Pentagon contracts. For example, Biden’s most likely secretary of defense, Michèle Flournoy, became a senior adviser to Boston Consulting Group and the first three years she was with that company, it increased its Pentagon contract earnings by a factor of 20.

So whoever wins in 2020, increased spending for the Pentagon, rather than real national security, lies in store. The people, it seems, have spoken. The question remains: will anyone in Washington listen to them?
The U.S. military fights racism the same way it fights wars. There are platoons of PowerPoint planning, battalions of buzzwords, and squads of staff officers. The military created and deployed the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute to the fight nearly 50 years ago. But, just like in Afghanistan, victory against racism in the ranks remains a distant dream.

In a military that is 43% racial and ethnic minorities, why did it take until 2020 for there to be a Black officer confirmed to head a military service? On August 6, Air Force General Charles Brown Jr. became the first. Why, in an active duty military made up of 1.3 million men and women, are only two of its 41 four-star officers—the highest rank—Black?

As someone who has covered the military for more than 40 years, I know that things are a lot better than they used to be. But racial animus remains salted through the U.S. military. More than a third of active duty troops—and most racial minorities in uniform—said in a Military Times survey last year that they have witnessed racism in the ranks. It’s like a constant white noise, ranging from racist talk and discrimination, to the exchange of Nazi-style salutes, to swastikas and Ku Klux Klan decals affixed to troops’ cars.

It indicated things don’t seem to be improving: Those saying they have witnessed racism jumped from 22% in 2018 to 36% in 2019. Respondents said they see white nationalism as a greater national security threat than either Islamic-linked domestic terrorism or immigration.

But it’s worse than racist language and bumper stickers. There has been a steady stream of such attitudes laced with violence. There were two incidents in June. On June 6, an active duty Air Force sergeant working as a security officer at a California base was arrested for the murder of a California sheriff’s deputy, a week after he allegedly killed a federal security officer as he guarded a federal building in Oakland during a protest against George Floyd’s killing. The suspect has been linked to the extremist right-wing “Boogaloo” movement, whose goal is to trigger a second U.S. civil war. On June 10, an Army soldier was arrested for sharing classified military information with an “occult-based neo-Nazi” group as part of a deadly plot against his own unit.

The U.S. military has a long history of treating racism and racists in uniform with a wink and a nod, and as long as that remains true, the military will continue to attract members of their ilk. The death of George Floyd under the knee of a police officer in Minneapolis on May 25 seemingly caused the military to finally take a hard look at itself. Until then, the military had generally patted itself on its back when it comes to racial tolerance. “The Army is the only institution in America where whites are routinely bossed around by blacks,” the late Charlie Moskos, perhaps the top military sociologist of the past century, said in 1995. Typifying the U.S. military’s attitude, a 2002 Pentagon report said blatant racism had been eliminated due to Defense Department rules. “Most would agree that overt racism and racial discrimination generally do not exist in the Armed Services given the current regulations, instructions, guidelines, and zero tolerance policies,” said the

Racism in the Ranks
Could the U.S. Military finally be changing?

www.pogo.org/cdi | 5
study, Historical Overview of Racism in the Military. It whitewashed the low-hanging fruit—"overt racism and racial discrimination"—like a freshly-painted barracks. But, just beneath that gleaming surface, termites are still turning wood into sawdust.

That's because the Pentagon's congratulatory tone is largely just words, in black and white. To trace true progress, check out this white-and-white photograph from last fall (below), when the nation’s high command stopped by the White House to have dinner with President Donald Trump:

All of the nation’s most senior officers pictured are white (and male). That might be acceptable if, for example, those men had won a war recently, or brought in a weapon system on time and under budget. But their performance in both realms has been markedly less than stellar.

So why does the U.S. military brass remain a largely white-male-only club?

Recent testimony by the Government Accountability Office offered a pernicious insight into the problem. At first glance, the GAO’s reporting would seem to show bias, if not racism, in the military-justice system. “Black and Hispanic servicemembers were more likely than White servicemembers to be the subjects of recorded investigations in all of the military services, and were more likely to be tried in general and special courts-martial in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Air Force,” Brenda Farrell, the agency’s director of defense capabilities and management, told the House Armed Services Committee on June 16.

That’s bad enough. But what she said next is actually worse: “In the military services that maintained complete punishment data—the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Air Force—we found that minority servicemembers were either less likely to receive a more severe punishment in general and special courts-martial compared to White servicemembers, or there were no statistically significant differences in punishments among racial groups.”

Bottom line: Troops who are racial minorities were more likely to be suspected of and investigated for wrongdoing, but ended up being convicted and punished less or at about the same rate as white troops. In other words, there apparently is some insidious bias in how the military initiates investigations into wrongdoing that leads to more charges than warranted against racial minorities. Either that, or commanders are cutting white troops slack when initiating investigations. Given human nature, it’s probably some of both. While such inves-
tigations don't necessarily translate into fewer opportunities for racial minority members of the U.S. military, the fact that they are hauled before courts martial and other judicial proceedings at a higher rate than white service members suggests the system is somehow rigged against them.

Why? Well, don't count on the military for answers. “Officials from DOD and the military services acknowledged that they do not know the cause of the racial disparities that have been identified in the military justice system,” the GAO’s Farrell explained. “This is because they have not conducted a comprehensive evaluation to identify potential causes of these disparities and make recommendations about any appropriate corrective actions to remediate the cause(s) of the disparities.”

That is a striking statement about the U.S. military, which has long had a pathological need to document everything.

“While my experience tells me that we have an extraordinarily healthy system of justice, I also recognize that we simply do not know what we do not know,” Lieutenant General Charles Pede, the Army judge advocate general (a white man), told lawmakers at the same hearing. “We are developing a framework this very week and last week to figure that out,” he added.

He said that 71 years, 10 months and 21 days after President Harry Truman signed an executive order on July 26, 1948, desegregating the U.S. military, Congress is also readying legislation to help fill this information vacuum. Better late than never.

Something changed following George Floyd’s death. In recent weeks, top Pentagon officials are speaking bluntly and candidly about the scourge of racism in their ranks. The military has a checkered history here. While the Tuskegee Airmen and other racial minority units excelled in wartime, too often they faced discrimination back home after their service. But it’s not all due to explicit racism. Part of the reason Black service members have lagged in the higher ranks is because they have tended to make their military careers in support roles like logistics, supply, and transportation. The good news is that such jobs teach skills that are easily transferred to the civilian world once a uniform is put away. The bad news is that promotions to the highest levels favor war-fighters, from infantry to fighter pilots, where white service members are over-represented.

But that hasn’t stopped the Pentagon from talking a good game. The military has created a lot of things to rid the service of racism. Here’s one example, from one service, covering only a five-year span: The Army established the Army Diversity Office in 2005, which led to the creation of an Army Diversity Working Group, which spun its wheels, according to an official Army account. In 2007, the service created the Army Diversity Task Force. But bureaucratic turf wars thwarted mission success. To smooth things out, in 2010, the Army Diversity Office was moved into the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Within that office, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Equal Opportunity and Civil Rights was renamed the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Diversity and Leadership. Later that year, the Army Diversity Office was combined with the Equal Employment Opportunity Civil Rights Office and the Equal Employment Opportunity Compliance and Complaints Office to form the Diversity and Leadership Office.

The U.S. military fights racism the same way it fights wars. But, just like in Afghanistan, victory against racism in the ranks remains a distant dream.

Whew.

That does sound a bit like the 19-year-long war in Afghanistan, where Pentagon officials regularly say the U.S. has fought 19 one-year wars, churning through troops and strategies that change with every new commander’s arrival.

On June 18, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said he was—wait for it—creating another new outfit to deal with the challenge. The Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion in the Military will ultimately become the Defense Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, and will be charged with increasing the share of racial minorities among senior officers … just like all those that have come before.

Yet the military retains biases against its minority members, as Esper acknowledged in a June 18 video message to the nation’s troops. “We know this bias burdens many of our service members, and has direct and indirect impact on the experiences of our minority members, the cultural and ethnic diversity of the force, and representation in our officer ranks,” he
and Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in tow. That double thunderclap outraged much of the nation. And it has unleashed a torrent of reflection from senior U.S. military leaders. “I am George Floyd,” Chief Master Sergeant Kaleth Wright, a Black man and the Air Force’s top enlisted official, wrote the same day as that Lafayette Park expedition. “I am Michael Brown, I am Alton Sterling, I am Tamir Rice,” he said, naming a trio of Black males killed by police. “Just like most of the Black Airmen and so many others in our ranks ... I am outraged at watching another Black man die on television before our very eyes.” Wright said racism’s “demons” remains a persistent stain on the U.S. Air Force. “I believe that we have not made much progress in this area of racial injustice and diversity among our ranks.”

The next day, Wright and General David Goldfein, the Air Force chief of staff, sat for a video chat. “We are not immune to the spectrum of racial prejudice, systemic discrimination, and unconscious bias,” said Goldfein, the service’s top officer. Wright elaborated on the concerns he had expressed a day earlier. “The fear I have when I’m driving down whether it’s the Beltway or any street and I see blue lights, because I think it doesn’t matter if I’m the chief or whomever,” Wright said during the conversation, which went out to the Air Force’s 321,618 troops, 46,741 of them Black (15% of the force). “And my greatest fear is not for myself. It’s that I wake up one day and one of our airmen will be George Floyd.”

On June 3, the Army, Marines, and Navy joined the chorus, saying the services reflected the American public from which they draw their soldiers, Marines, and sailors. “Over the past week, the country has suffered an explosion of frustration over the racial divisions that still plague us as Americans,” the Army’s three senior leaders declared. “And because your Army is a reflection of American society, those divisions live in the Army as well.” General David Berger, the Marine commandant, told his leathernecks that “current events are a stark reminder that it is not enough for us to remove symbols that cause division—rather, we also must strive to eliminate division itself.” And Admiral Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, told his sailors that “we can’t be under any illusions about the fact that racism is alive and well in our country. And I can’t be under any illusions that we don’t have it in our Navy.”

Brown, the Black officer who now commands the Air Force, spoke up two days later. “I’m thinking about my mentors, and how rarely I had a mentor who looked like me,” he said. He is the second Black man to serve as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Colin Powell was the first, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs from 1989 to 1993. “I’m thinking about the pressure I felt to perform error-free,” Brown added, “especially for supervisors I perceived had expected less from me as an African-American.”

The Army wanted to show it was willing to make a significant change. On June 8, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy—the service’s top civilian—said he was “open” to the idea of renaming 10 Army posts whose names currently honor Confederate officers. It’s an issue that has been festering for several years. Pentagon eyebrows raised when Esper agreed. But then Trump decided to double down on racist appeals to his base.

“I believe that we have not made much progress in this area of racial justice and diversity among our ranks. Just like most of the Black Airmen and so many others in our ranks, I am outraged at watching another Black man die on television before our very eyes.”

CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT KALETH WRIGHT, THE AIR FORCE’S TOP ENLISTED OFFICIAL
“My Administration will not even consider the renaming of these Magnificent and Fabled Military Installations,” he tweeted June 10.

But make no mistake: The military, slowly but surely, seems to be moving beyond Trump’s reluctance to deal with racism. So is Congress. Don’t bet that traitorous names like Benning, Bragg, and Hood are permanent.

There is much that needs to change. “The department has taken a softball approach to the challenge—as illustrated by the fact that it doesn’t treat membership in white supremacist organizations as a sole rationale for discharge,” retiring Air Force Colonel Mike “Starbaby” Pietrucha, an F-15 pilot, wrote three weeks before Floyd’s death at the War on the Rocks website.

He zinged the Army for tolerating those posts honoring Confederate officers, and the Navy for naming two aircraft carriers after “unrepentant segregationists”—Representative Carl Vinson of Georgia (the USS Carl Vinson was commissioned in 1982) and Senator John Stennis of Mississippi (the USS John C. Stennis was commissioned in 1995). The pair signed the 1956 Southern Manifesto aimed at thwarting integration, especially in schools. “The message that’s sent to American soldiers today is that white supremacy is something that the Army and Navy are proud of,” Pietrucha adds. “The last message, perhaps unique to the Navy, is that white supremacy is excusable if there is some form of offsetting behavior: specifically, funneling huge piles of taxpayer cash to the fleet.” Ouch! (In January, the Navy announced it will name one of its new carriers the USS Doris Miller, in honor of a Black mess attendant aboard the USS West Virginia who heroically manned a machine gun against Japanese attackers at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.)

The U.S. already knows what it needs to do to wipe out racism. Esper mentioned it in passing in that June 18 video message. The U.S. military has “reached this level of excellence because we attract the best America has to offer,” he said. “Young men and women across the land and beyond our shores who not only love our country and share these values, but who also represent a wide range of creeds, religions, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and other attributes that not only distinguish us as individuals, but also make us stronger when combined together.”

Of course, fear that gay or lesbian troops would hurt “unit cohesion” was the argument the U.S. military made for decades to try to keep them from openly serving. “Unit cohesion” has always been a requirement for a top-notch military, which makes the Pentagon’s boot-dragging on racism, dating all the way back to Truman’s integrating order, perplexing.

In 1999, I wrote about the brutal murder of a soldier by a comrade who suspected he was gay, back when openly gay troops were barred from serving, and homophobia seethed in the ranks. The U.S. military brass contended that openly gay troops would unleash discord among those in uniform. Those already serving would quit in droves, and recruiting would become more difficult because young Americans would refuse to share a foxhole, or a barracks, with a gay person.

But 12 short years later, I was inviting a gay Air Force pilot to write as “Officer X” in Time Magazine about the end of the ban on openly gay people serving in the U.S. military. He wrote numerous articles, and even came out in his final one.

So what had changed that made him comfortable about so publicly writing about his experiences? Very simply, the world had changed. Yet the predicted explosion of openly gay men and women who were now allowed to serve didn’t detonate when the ban disappeared in 2011, and the tidal wave of turmoil the military predicted never happened.

U.S. society changed dramatically between 1999 and 2011, finally forcing action by the government and the military. The outstanding question about racism in the ranks is whether the government and military will act on it as they did with homophobia. Will U.S. military leaders follow their recent rhetoric with concrete actions? ■
Over the years, Congress has made several attempts to limit and even end what have come to be known as America’s “Forever Wars.” After initially gaining some steam, yet another promising effort in the halls of Congress failed to make it beyond committee consideration, thus ensuring that the legislative branch will continue to take a back seat to the executive branch in determining where American troops have to fight.

Congress retains the sole authority to declare war, according to Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution. The 107th Congress effectively surrendered its authority in the case of the post-9/11 wars when it passed the first Authorization for Use of Military Force, or AUMF, three days after the attacks. The law gave the president the authority to use military force anywhere against anyone the White House determined to be connected to the September 11 attacks. At that time, most people expected the United States to attack Afghanistan, although it is doubtful that anyone would have anticipated people born that year would later be deploying for the war that was then just beginning. It is also doubtful that anyone anticipated the government would use that same law to send troops to Djibouti or any of at least 18 other countries besides Afghanistan.

A bipartisan coalition of House members—Representatives Anthony G. Brown (D-MD), Abigail Spanberger (D-VA), Tom Cole (R-OK), Don Bacon (R-NE), Jimmy Panetta (D-CA), Francis Rooney (R-FL), Jason Crow (D-CO), Ted Yoho (R-FL), Jared Golden (D-ME), and Rob Woodall (R-GA)—recently introduced legislation that would place strict limits on the Authorization for Use of Military Force that three administrations have used to send troops all over the world. The “Limit on the Expansion of the Authorization for Use of Military Force Act” would have required the president to obtain Congress’s approval to send troops to a country where the U.S. is not already engaged. Brown, the bill’s lead sponsor, stated in a press release that the bill would “reassert Congress’ Constitutional role in the declaration of war.”

Of the 98 senators who voted for the original AUMF, only 18 still hold their seats.

While this bill held a measure of promise for increased accountability, it would have been only an incremental step toward ensuring that those in power today are held to account for our overseas military adventures.
Very few of the elected officials in Washington played a part in the passage of the 2001 law that’s been used to send young Americans into harm’s way. Of the 98 senators in the 107th Congress who voted for the original AUMF (2 abstained and none voted against), only 18 still hold their seats. As of July 2020, more of the senators who had the opportunity to vote for the law have died—21 of them—than still serve. In the House, only 67, or a mere 15%, of the current 435 members had an opportunity to vote on the AUMF. Fifty-four representatives of the 107th Congress have since died. The current Congress must take responsibility for our forever wars and exercise its constitutionally mandated war powers.

The proposed legislation, which would have been an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, did not lack for critics. One scholar believed it did not go far enough by failing to list the countries where the United States is already engaged, which is a key to defining exactly where the current authority ends. While that was true, practical realities must be taken into account. It is unlikely that any president would look favorably on an effort to curtail their power and authority. Adding this legislation to the National Defense Authorization Act would have greatly increased its chances of passage, and held the possibility of creating the veto-proof majority it will likely need in order to become law.

Congress should still make its primary goal the repeal of both the original AUMF passed just after the September 11 attacks and the second one passed the following year for the Iraq War. These authorizations have more than served their purpose. Had the American people known at the time of passage that these laws would still be used to justify military deployments to Syria and Oman in 2020, lawmakers may have faced more questions about why Congress was signing away its war powers.

Now, at the very least, the current Congress should, as Brown says, reassert itself in the process. Each new Congress, as one of its first acts, should have to vote on whether to reauthorize the Authorization for Use of Military Force. It is the only way for those in power today to be held personally responsible for our current wars.

This piece was first published in July 2020. The original can be found at pogo.org/congress-dodges.

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Navy leaders announced in February 2020 that they want to retire the first four Littoral Combat Ships, which aren't even teenagers, a move that signals an admission of the failure of the program and the waste of billions of taxpayer dollars. Much has been written (including by us) about the overall folly of the Littoral Combat Ship program; the cancellation of the program proves the larger folly of concurrency, showing why the Pentagon should not purchase large numbers of weapons before the design is complete or its effectiveness is proven through testing.

At the program’s inception, Navy leaders projected each ship would cost $220 million. To no one’s surprise, the costs more than doubled so that each of these ships cost taxpayers approximately $600 million to build. The Navy included the first four Littoral Combat Ships produced—Freedom, Independence, Fort Worth, and Coronado—on its list of ships to be decommissioned in the coming months. The first ship, the USS Freedom, entered service on November 8, 2008, while the USS Coronado was commissioned on April 5, 2014. The Coronado completed its only operational deployment to the Pacific in 2017.

Under the Navy’s current plans, the four Littoral Combat Ships will take their place in the mothball fleet on March 31, 2021. The Navy’s budgeteers decided the costs to retrofit these ships into something resembling a combat-ready configuration were too high. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michael Gilday said the upgrades would cost $2 billion over five years.

The Littoral Combat Ship program’s demise should be a surprise to no one, because of the numerous conceptual flaws. Navy leaders and their industry partners intended for the ships to be modular with the ability to be configured in different ways. This would have made them a versatile class of ships capable of performing several critical combat and maritime support roles. Its most important planned role was to hunt enemy mines. The Navy’s minesweeping capability has eroded...
significantly in recent years, despite the fact that sea mines remain one of the most serious threats the surface fleet faces. The Navy currently has only 11 Avenger-class minesweeping ships and 29 MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopters to protect a fleet of 300 commissioned warships and more than 250 support vessels. The failure of the Littoral Combat Ship program means that these already limited and aging assets will have to be stretched even further to protect the growing fleet. Navy leaders failed to select a single design despite the original plan to do so, and instead purchased two largely incompatible variants. The Navy abandoned the concept of making the ships reconfigurable when it couldn’t get the mission modules to work properly despite sinking $7.6 billion into the project.

The Littoral Combat Ship program serves as a cautionary tale for the insidious Pentagon practice of concurrency: the overlap between weapon development and production. Just as consumers should test drive a car before buying it, the Pentagon should sail a fully developed ship before buying a bunch of them. Concurrency poses significant risks to the taxpayers. Weapons purchased before the development process is completed often require extensive modifications at great expense to incorporate design changes devised after testing. Sometimes, as in the case of the first four Littoral Combat Ships, the costs to modify underdeveloped weapons are so great that the effort is abandoned and the weapons become “concurrency orphans,” having never provided useful service. While the Navy leaders are right in their decision to decommission the four ships and to cancel the program, the taxpayers will be left with $2.4 billion worth of Littoral Combat Ship concurrency orphans.

It remains to be seen if the Navy will actually be allowed to carry out its plans to mothball the ships in question. House appropriators have questioned the Navy’s rationale for the retirements, calling the plan “shortsighted.” Lawmakers take issue with the Navy’s penchant for buying new ships rather than taking care of and upgrading those already in the fleet. As a general rule, it is right to ask such questions. In the case of the failed Littoral Combat Ship program, however, the more prudent course of action would be to scrap the ineffective ships in favor of simpler designs based on realistic operating principles and proven technology.

The Navy plans to make up for the smaller Littoral Combat Ship fleet by buying 20 new frigates. The ships themselves will be built by Fincantieri Marinette Marine and based on an existing Italian design, which will reduce some of the risks hazarded by the Littoral Combat Ship program. Lockheed Martin was awarded the contract to kit out the new frigates with their actual warfighting systems. In that contract, the Navy designated Lockheed Martin as the lead systems integrator for the frigate’s combat systems.

The Congressional Research Service has warned in the past that using a private-sector lead systems integrator cedes responsibilities normally carried out by the government to the contractor and reduces the program’s transparency. According to a 2010 Congressional Research Service report, “[Lead Systems Integrators] can have broad responsibility for executing their programs, and may perform some or all of the following functions: requirements generation; technology development; source selection; construction or modification work; procurement of systems or components from, and management of, supplier firms; testing; validation; and administration.” This arrangement creates potential conflicts of interest. The contractor could design requirements for the program tailored to its own products or by favoring vendors selected from the contractor’s own subsidiaries.

The Navy estimates the new frigate will cost $940 million per copy. The Government Accountability Office has warned that the program is already not following best practices by failing to confirm that estimate through an independent analysis. So while the new frigate may be an improvement over the Littoral Combat Ship on the conceptual level, it will likely be anything but a bargain for the taxpayers.

The following piece was first published in July 2020. The original can be found at pogo.org/littoral-combat.

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Over the last three decades, the militarization of policing in America has grown exponentially, transforming an already troubled culture in many parts of law enforcement for the far worse. The result of this militarization—where local police take on the appearance, armament, and behavior of soldiers at war—is that the public is both less safe and less free. And those who encounter militarized police, whether in their daily lives or at a demonstration, are far more likely to end up dead or injured as a consequence of an officer’s militarized mindset.

Militarization did not kill George Floyd, the unarmed Black man killed by Minneapolis police officers in May, but it undoubtedly contributed to the mindset that has seemingly overcome many American policing organizations. And as the American public reacts to police violence, a vicious cycle unfolds: The police use more violence to quell protests of police brutality, which results in more death. This dynamic has played out dramatically across the country in recent weeks. But it is not new.

As police officers drape themselves in the trappings of a military force, they increasingly look like members of an army prepared to go to war against unarmed civilians, escalating tensions between the police and peaceful protesters. And as a 2017 study showed, in law enforcement agencies that use military equipment, officers are more likely to display violent behavior and are more likely to kill the civilians they are supposed to protect and serve.

The numbers are jarring: In 2019, police killed over 1,000 people in the United States. That number has consistently been over 1,000 in each of the last seven years. Nearly 24% of the victims last year were Black, even though Black Americans make up just 13% of the population. Many of the victims were unarmed, some were experiencing a mental health crisis, and some were children. America’s rate of police violence far outstrips that of any other western democracy.

The streets of America are not some far-off battlefield, and our police are not an occupying force.

Continue reading at pogo.org/militarized-police

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Video: How Police Look Like the Military (and Shouldn't)

Over the last three decades, the militarization of America’s police has grown exponentially. By increasingly deploying SWAT raids and rolling out tanks to police protests, some law enforcement departments are beginning to look more like the armed forces than community police officers.

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