There is no such thing as a green war – A calls for a merger of anti-war, climate and refugee solidarity movements

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The military industrial complex is a major contributor to climate change — this calls for a merger of anti-war, climate and refugee solidarity movements.

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In June, the Costs of War Project at Brown University's Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs released a report titled "Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War." Echoing previous reports on the link between the US military and climate change, the paper outlines the various ways in which the Pentagon is "the world's largest institutional user of petroleum and correspondingly, the single largest producer of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world."

While this is not necessarily news, it never hurts to have a reminder, and the paper's detailed data on issues such as fuel usage and greenhouse gas emissions make for a shocking read and eye-catching headlines. In 2017 alone, for example, "the Pentagon's greenhouse gas emissions were greater than the greenhouse gas emissions of entire industrialized countries such as Sweden or Denmark."

Still, although the paper clearly links the US military to climate chaos, the soft conclusion and the handling of the military industrial complex with kid gloves leaves some gaping holes in what could otherwise be a powerful commentary on intersectionality and the need for systemic change.

It is not enough to academically trace a red thread between issues. Recognizing the connections that tie climate chaos to war to imperialism to the growing refugee crisis demand solutions founded on that real-world intersectionality. We need an active solidarity that erases the demarcations of single-issue movements and builds a power that reflects the reality of our place and time. Likewise, we must be wary of soft reforms, greenwashing and capitalism's unending affinity for shaming people.

CLIMATE CHAOS AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Soft reforms are often linked with greenwashing in a sort of shot and chaser combo, made to placate the mind and ultimately uphold the status quo. Naturally, such a false solution typically comes wrapped in language that says much and means little — sounding logical without actually employing logic.

For instance, the paper concludes that "by reducing the use of greenhouse gas-emitting fuels (coupled with emission reductions in other sectors) the Pentagon would decrease its contribution to the associated climate change threats to national security." This reminds me of those SAT sentences that used long, circular logic inanities to say essentially nothing. Basically, the Pentagon could stop creating national security threats if it stopped creating national security threats.

Furthermore, the overall conclusions made in the report push us to look at climate chaos through the lens of national security rather than the destruction of millions of species, arable land, potable water, breathable air and a livable future in general.

It is reminiscent of Senator Elizabeth Warren's tweet in mid-May which lamented that "Climate change is real, it's worsening by the day, and it's undermining our military readiness. More and more, accomplishing the mission depends on our ability to continue operations in the face of floods, drought, wildfires, desertification, and extreme cold." But by god, we must accomplish the mission! Even if that means going green!

Of course, the idea of an eco-friendly war is as ridiculous as it sounds. Our so-called national security is based on unprovoked invasions, gross human rights violations, economic warfare, regime change and overt terrorism. It is a modernized imperialism that cares just as little for people as it does for the ecosystems in which we live.

The paper does make valid and important points about reducing our reliance on oil, which includes tapering operations in the Middle East, scaling back bases and spending military budget cash on "more economically productive activities." However, neither Senator Warren nor the Watson Institute paper dig to the root and ask whether or not the military and its violent imperialism is necessary, just whether or not it is green enough. Thereby, they miss the central paradox that in a sick cyclical death spiral, our military uses climate change and the impending destabilization as reasons to ramp up the military budget, thereby creating a self-fulfilling — and accelerating — homicidal prophecy.

One might argue that it is perfectly understandable why a paper dealing with the fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions of the military is not discussing systemic change. However, conclusions are meant to analyze the preceding data, and without analyzing the overarching destructive and oppressive nature of the US military, any conclusions we make within or without a report will fail to address the necessary systemic change involved in combating climate chaos.

This is the same reason why Senator Warren's co-sponsored bill to reduce the Pentagon's carbon footprint is a non-starter. Even if it passes, it will merely greenwash the blood soaked facade of an imperialist war machine. For instance, rather than demanding the closure of any of our almost 1,000 military bases around the world, Warren wants to make sure they are ready to withstand extreme weather.

Meanwhile, these bases that she wants to save are environmental catastrophes. Dozens of US military bases are listed as Superfund Sites by the EPA, a classification used for toxic and hazardous waste dumps that are dangerously contaminated and require special cleanup. Back in 2014, Newsweek reportedthat "about 900 of the 1200 or so Superfund sites in America are abandoned military facilities or sites that otherwise support military needs."

Around the world, US bases leach toxic chemicals such as depleted uranium, oil, jet fuel, pesticides and defoliants like Agent Orange and lead into soil and groundwater. For years, local communities have protested US bases on the grounds of cultural and environmental destruction from Okinawa to Guam to the Galapagos to the Seychelles.

Truly, the most eco-friendly thing you could do would be to close *all* US military bases and effectively dismantle the imperialist military industrial complex as a whole. Incidentally, this would also be the biggest boost to our beloved national security, not just with regards to climate, but forced migration and displacement as well.

THE INTERSECTION OF OUR MOVEMENTS

While climate change is a newcomer to the national security conversation, the fear of refugees and/or immigrants tarnishing our city upon a hill is practically an American pastime. Since this settler colonialist nation was established, the US has always been anti-immigrant, and that paradigm has held strong despite the fact that these days, it is directly our fault that people are migrating. Yes, irony is also as American as apple pie.

A recent report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reveals that "the number of refugees worldwide is now the highest it's ever been since the UN began keeping records, with more than 70 million people seeking refuge after being forced from their homes." According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, "on average, 26 million people are displaced by disasters such as floods and storms every year. That's one person forced to flee every second."

Climate change is expected to create tens of millions of refugees in the coming decade. The Middle East and Africa will see perhaps the most severe effects of climate change in the coming decades — predominantly via drought and extreme heat. It is worth noting that the Middle East, Africa and South-Central Asia are not only where most of the world's refugees are coming from, but also where most of the refugees are being hosted — yet another instance of breaking, taking and leaving disasters in our wake.

And as the War on Terror continues in the Middle East, the less discussed new scramble for Africa, AFRICOM hides imperialist jockeying for natural resources behind yet another "national security threat" lie. In short, our national security is threatened everyday by our push for national security: vis-à-vis our need to drill, spill, extract and burn which is inextricably tied to the military's push to destabilize, destroy and displace.

Just as there is no such thing as a green war, there is likewise no way to confront climate change unless we confront the war machine, and vice versa. There is no way to confront the refugee crisis, unless we confront climate change and the war machine. In order to break that aforementioned self-fulfilling, and accelerating, homicidal prophecy, we have to look at the intersections of our movements and recognize that at these points lie our collective power, the potential to build collaborative, far-reaching movements that really strike at the root — at the core of the system itself.

As an organizer, I have seen so many niche movements fall apart from overwork and exclusion. It is in fact a gift to the powers that be that we often draw such deep lines of demarcation: the environmental movement is here, the refugee and migrant rights movement is there, the anti-war movement is here, and never the three shall meet. But take, for instance, the recent protest in Bath, Maine where activists blocked traffic outside a naval battleship construction site demanding money for climate solutions, not endless war.

At the asset management firm BlackRock's annual shareholders meeting on May 23, a multitude of groups — from the National Indigenous Organization of Brazil to Code Pink — came together to call out BlackRock's CEO and the entire company on their massive and grotesque investments in death and destruction via climate chaos and war. Many climate justice and direct action communities have

long made these connections, literally flying the flag of anti-capitalism in solidarity with struggles around the world.

These intersectional endeavors are sources of inspiration, power and ideas. They build upon the tenets of collaboration, solidarity and respect, antitheses of the violent capitalist system. And as they crush the divide-and-conquer paradigm we have too often fallen for, they also highlight the inherent problems with the "personal choices" trend.

LOCK, PROTEST, SIT-IN, STAND-UP, LAY DOWN, LOCK DOWN

With the rise of green capitalism (as much an oxymoron as green war), the misconception that we can save the planet by buying a tote bag or two has risen in parallel. I call it the "green me fallacy." If everyone just recycled, if everyone just got solar panels and a reusable water bottle with Namaste written on the side. If everyone bought a Tesla.

But this thinking is just another manifestation of the divide and conquer strategy of a capitalist system based on extraction and destruction. It shames people who cannot afford or have access to new technologies or green choices and further cleaves our potential at unification along the lines of greenwashed purchasing power. As neighborhoods fall to tsunamis of gentrification, eco-chic, tech trendy and hipster green industries roll in, looking down on and pushing out those who cannot afford their consumerist wares, all the while making bank and ignoring the handful of companies and the war machine that is really to blame for this worsening climate crisis.

A recent joke post on social media read: "you'd do more for the climate if you ate an oil executive than if you went vegan." It is not only funny, but it also makes a good point. Rousseau may just have been ahead of his time in prescribing a foundation for a climate change revolution: "When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich…"

Sure, go vegan if you have the privilege to do so. But let us not conflate that personal choice with the actions that are necessary to dismantle the machine that profits off of animal torture.

Yes, activists will often drive to remote sites of a pipeline fight or a logging project. Yes, people will shop at Wal-Mart because they lack the financial privilege to shop elsewhere. If everyone so eager to shame folks for these choices instead would have stepped up to the front lines of a pipeline fight, dirty energy would have thousands to contend with, rather than a handful of inestimably strong-willed activists.

When people say "everyone can do something," I agree. But a mere commitment to recycling is not it. Sure, because some 91 percent of plastic isnot recycled, I still think we should work to institute better waste management practices and demand recycling facilities. We should use public transportation whenever we can. We should also brush our teeth regularly, not drink too much alcohol and avoid processed foods.

In other words, the so-called greening of your personal life should not be viewed as acting for the climate. It should be viewed as another facet of being an adult in today's world. Acting for the climate, that "something" that everyone can do should actually mean *acting* for the climate. It should mean that you block, protest, sit-in, stand-up, lay down, lock down or in some way lend your time, energy, body and mind to a pointed systemic struggle. It should mean organizing in your community to draw connections between our various issues — from gentrification to imperialism to food sovereignty to public health to systemic racism, all of which are linked to climate chaos.

It should mean targeting the system rather than each other, decoupling our power from our green purchasing power and not turning the class war in on ourselves. It should mean educating and engaging on the foundations of anti-oppression, anti-imperialism, and anti-capitalism. It should mean dreaming and doing and building communities and networks that exist outside the confines of the capitalist system we all suffer under.

There's no definitive blueprint for this work. True solidarity and real intersectionality means reaching outside of our comfort zones and stepping into spaces we do not know, in ways that go beyond theory. Environmentalists will need to address the climate chaos inherent in a racist, imperialist war machine. Anti-war activists will need to consider the importance of climate justice in their work.

Folks most impacted will not only need a seat at the table but will need real solidarity and respect for their life experiences. We will all need to look sharply at the dangers of entertaining false solutions from on high, greenwashing, and the shaming of those who do what they have to in order to survive. As we reach across the divide, and conquer the narrative of our own future, we will have to learn to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, to go beyond the prescribed progress of a regressive system.

It seems daunting, it feels impossible — but we are not alone, unless we choose to be.

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P.S.

• ROAR, July 5, 2019:
https://roarmag.org/essays/there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-green-war/