

The Pentagon Rules America: Militarism and the Crisis of the Civilian Economy

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“Have we as a nation gone mad, waging war in the Persian Gulf while society crumbles?” Seymour Melman asked rhetorically when I interviewed him for *The Progressive* 19 years ago.

Even though Melman, a *professor emeritus* at Columbia University’s school of industrial engineering, departed this life in 2004, his question still haunts our society, as the American War Machine since then has only gained in momentum, immensity, universality and cruelty.

To answer Melman: “Yes, we *have* gone mad.” That’s because presidents and Pentagon chiefs start new wars even before they finish fighting the old ones! Who can recall a time in our history when the U.S. *initiated* aggressive wars against five nations (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen)?

Between 1947 and 1989, Melman said, the U.S. spent \$8.2 trillion (in 1982 dollars) on the military. When I said I couldn’t grasp a figure that large, Melman replied, “Think of it this way: In 1982, the total money value of all America’s manufacturing, industry and its infrastructure amounted to \$7.3 trillion. *You could have replicated the largest part of everything made by people in this country with what the military got.*” (Everything made by everybody? All the houses? All the highways? All the schools? All the hospitals? *A new America? Everything?*)

Melman went on to say, “Half of every dollar you pay in Federal taxes goes into the military account. Pentagon contractors are awash in billions while the infrastructure that underpins our economy collapse around us and human misery spreads everywhere.”

Fast-forward: Today, the Pentagon *still* gets roughly half of every tax dollar. The War Resisters League estimates 54% of the pie goes to the military compared with 30% for all human resources, 11 percent for general government and 5% for physical resources..

Defense contractors are awash in profits while lines lengthen at soup kitchens, foreclosed families sleep in shelters, 20 million are jobless or underemployed, food stamp use sets records, summer jobs for teens have vanished, and President Obama appears willing to rat out the elderly on Social Security and Medicare as too costly while he authorizes new CIA drone attacks on Pakistan.

The Pentagon budget does more than absorb tax dollars. It punishes the civilian sector in many ways. For instance, it has siphoned off so much scientific talent the U.S. has long since fallen behind Japan and Germany in innovative technologies. “We’re paying the price for

building colossal military power,” Melman said. “It’s set in motion a process of technical, industrial and human deterioration. We’re losing millions of productive jobs because U.S. firms with U.S. factories can’t even hold our home markets against foreign competition.”

“While the Pentagon turns out B-2 bombers at \$865 million a copy, foreign creators are flooding our markets with cars, bikes, tape recorders, shoes, machine tools, movie cameras, calculators, TV sets, and integrated microcircuits.” Melman said that 19 years ago and it holds true today.

One reason the U.S. fell behind, Melman explained, is that “about 30 percent of the nation’s engineers, scientists and technicians work directly or indirectly for the military. The loss to the civilian economy is incalculable.” Consumer electronics, he said, “declined dramatically while the Government employs thousands of electronic engineers in its military labs.”

That was true when Melman spoke and it is true today. We have an army of death scientists toiling away in germ warfare labs (\$50 billion wasted on this nauseating research alone since 9/11), in space warfare labs, in nuclear warfare labs, in electronic warfare labs, as well as in labs specializing in conventional ways to kill people.

Melman said one reason for the continuing dominance of the MIC is that the U.S. “is now a military form of state capitalism in which top managers of the military forces and their economy have dominant power—economic, political and military.” Translation: the Pentagon rules!

Today, Melman might add the Pentagon spends more for war than all 50 states spend for all peaceful purposes; that the Pentagon’s armed forces are bigger than the next dozen countries combined; that the Pentagon leads the world in arms sales; and that the Pentagon operates 800 overseas bases for “defense” when, in fact, they are used, like Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, for aggression.

As of Jan. 1 of this year, the National Priorities Project of Northampton, Mass., says, the Pentagon has spent \$445 billion to wage war in Afghanistan and \$815 billion for Iraq, for a total of \$1.26 trillion. This at a time when the American Society of Civil Engineers reckons \$2.2 trillion is needed to restore our infrastructure. Example: 33% of all roads are in poor or mediocre condition. Does the Pentagon need to spend \$19.3-billion on atomic energy when the same sum could pay 295,000 elementary school teachers?

Cutting the Pentagon down to size and converting to civilian economy will require “a new coalition of working people, professionals, trade associations, mayors—all suffering from the prosperity of the military-industrial complex, all needing a turn away from militarism.” “What we need,” Melman concluded, “is a political opposition that would take down the entire military system.”

We saw the faintest stirrings of hope for change in June when the U.S. Conference of Mayors passed a resolution to spend at home the \$125 billion the Pentagon is wasting this year waging wars in the Middle East. In depressed Detroit, the unemployment level is 38% and Rep. John Conyers(D-Mich.) blames the White House’s lack of leadership for the lack of job creation. Given our infrastructure needs alone, why isn’t there a job or job-training for every person who is willing to work?

To support President Obama’s medieval war-making is what Professor Melman would rightly

have called “mad.” It fits the dictionary definition of insanity as “utterly senseless” and “irrational.” It also fits the view of insanity which observes that the insane repeat their mistakes over and over. That’s today’s war machine, bigger and deadlier than ever. Welcome to the United Loony Bin of America.#

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