

The Militarization of America's Youth

US Army Experience Center (AEC): Training Kids to Kill

By [David Swanson](#)

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"This is so cool! This is so cool!" a thirteen-year-old boy repeated as he squeezed rounds from a real M-16, picking off "enemy combatants" in a video game while perched atop a real Army Humvee. "I just came to the mall to skateboard but everyone said this was pretty cool. I just had to try it and it's great!"

The person reporting on this youthful enthusiasm was Pat Elder, who serves on the Steering Committee of the National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth. Elder also described young teenagers congratulating each other for "killing ragheads" and "wiping out hajis."

All of this fun went on at the Army Experience Center (AEC), a 14,500-square-foot "virtual educational facility" in the Franklin Mills Mall in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The U.S. Army opened the center in August 2008 and planned to run it for two years as a pilot program. If the center proved able to recruit as many new soldiers as five ordinary recruiting stations, the Army planned to build them nationally. The AEC cost more than \$12 million to design and construct, but of course the Army spends several billion dollars a year on recruitment.

Peace activists and concerned citizens from the surrounding area and up and down the East Coast quickly formed a campaign dubbed "Shut Down the AEC" (shutdowntheaec.net). Through a series of nonviolent protests and demonstrations, some of them involving arrests, protesters raised concerns and generated a flood of negative media attention for the Army's latest recruitment tool. As a result, the Pentagon called on Donna Miles, a writer for the American Services Press Service, the Pentagon's propaganda arm. Miles had already published soothing articles following scandals at Abu Ghraib, Walter Reed, and various incidents involving civilian casualties. As Elder points out, "Either Miles is incredibly prolific, with 229 articles attributed to her this year, or she's a pseudonym for several under the employ of the Pentagon."

Miles reported on the AEC thusly: "Thirteen-year-old Sean Yaffee, for example, doesn't see himself joining the military. But he's becoming another regular at the center, where he can play the same computer games he has at home, but in the company of his buddies. Yaffee said he's learned a lot about the Army at the center. 'It just tells you about the Army experience, but it doesn't pressure you,' he said. 'I'm really just here to have a good time.'"

Sweet, but the public wasn't buying it and the protests continued. On September 12, 2009, a crowd of 250 activists marched to the AEC in opposition to the use of public dollars to teach children—in a quasi-public-space—that killing can be fun, while also recruiting

eighteen-year-olds to engage in the real thing. This time, police arrested six protesters and one journalist. The journalist, Cheryl Biren, wasn't with the protesters but was picked out of the crowd, apparently because of her professional camera.

Days prior to this long-planned and publicly announced protest, the Army preemptively announced that it would likely close the AEC and not open any others in shopping malls, as had been planned. The reason? Are you ready to hear this?

By their own admission, the Army doesn't need any more recruits because the bad economy has driven up recruitment significantly.

Now, the truth is that the economy is lousy, unemployment is rising, and the military has cut back on other recruitment expenses, the stated reason being the rise in recruitment that comes with a lousy economy.

The whopper of a lie is that the Army could ever be satisfied with its recruitment numbers. And the glaring omission was the protests. While the Army is cutting back in recruitment on some areas, it's still spending billions of dollars per year, and it is spending those billions where they'll be most effective, which means, in part, where they will generate the least opposition and negative attention. Early reports, prior to the protests, were that the AEC was succeeding in its recruitment goals. Following the protests, the AEC mysteriously became ineffective.

Stories in the Associated Press and other news services reported the Army's likely decision and transcribed the Army's explanation, noting the protests as an afterthought lower in the reports. Media outlets that support the spread of democracy, as opposed to the spread of militarism under the banner of democracy, would have told this story quite differently and used it as a lesson showing that citizens can have an impact on what their government does.

The Army won't announce our victories for us. We have to claim them. We the people drove Alberto Gonzales out of town, made the Iraq War illegal by turning the United Nations against it, and we may have scared George W. Bush away from pardoning his subordinates' crimes. We the people have turned many Americans against wars of empire, and we have made the Army Experience Center a bad experience for the Army.

Seven people were arrested on September 12, six of whom were risking arrest: Debra Sweet, Elaine Brower, Sarah Wellington, Joan Pleune, Beverly Rice, and Richard Marini. The seventh was Biren, who was covering the event for OpEdNews. She didn't have a shirt or a sign or anything associated with the activists. She made it clear that she was a journalist. Then she and the other five women spent the night in the Roundhouse, the central jail in Philadelphia, from which they were released into the street at 5 a.m. the next morning, denied permission to use their cell phones until after the doors had slammed behind them.

Biren told me: "The images that are most critical to me as a photographer and reporter are those at the end, of protesters being arrested. Trying to prevent me from (or punishing me for) taking them reminds me of Bush not allowing photos of the caskets of dead bodies coming home from war. The way in which they try to prevent us from recording this kind of news in the making is shameful. It's anti-democracy."

The reporter continued: "The action against me was violent and vengeful. A police officer

rushed me from the side suddenly...and pulled me forcefully into the line of protesters. Later, another officer had to physically pull this officer off of me because he was so incredibly aggressive and enraged. I'm convinced it was because I was taking pictures of the arrests."

An arraignment for charges of criminal conspiracy and failure to disperse was scheduled for September 23 for the six women. Restoration of our rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and press hangs in the balance. But we can nonetheless chalk up a victory against the mighty war machine.

David Swanson is the author of the new book, *Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union*, by Seven Stories Press and of the introduction to *The 35 Articles of Impeachment and the Case for Prosecuting George W. Bush* by Dennis Kucinich. In addition to cofounding AfterDowningStreet.org, he is the Washington director of Democrats.com and sits on the boards of a number of progressive organizations in Washington, DC.

David Swanson is the author of the new book "Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union" by Seven Stories Press. You can order it and find out when tour will be in your town: <http://davidswanson.org/book>.

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