

The Military: Closer to You Than Your Family

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Two blocks from my house in a nondescript little building on the edge of our residential neighborhood is an office with a small sign reading “DVBIC of Charlottesville” which turns out to mean “Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.”

Now, I’m in favor of caring for people with brain injuries. I wish we had universal comprehensive health coverage like other countries do. But it disturbs me how difficult it is in this country to get any distance away from the military. It’s almost certainly closer to you than your relatives’ homes.

What author Nick Turse calls the military industrial technological entertainment academic media corporate matrix is even closer than that. I am typing this on an Apple computer, and Apple is a major Pentagon contractor. But then, so is IBM. And so are most of the parent companies of most of the retail chains around the country. Starbucks is a major military supplier, with a store even in Guantanamo. Not only are traditional weapons manufacturers’ offices now found alongside car dealers and burger joints in suburban strip malls, but the car dealers and burger joints are owned by companies taking in huge amounts of Pentagon spending. A \$4,311 contract back in 2006 went straight to Charlottesville’s Pig Daddy’s BBQ.

Almost no neighborhoods lack members of the military and military supporters, Marine Corps flags and Army bumper stickers. If you wanted to get away from it, where would you go? (Please don’t shout “Leave the country!” The U.S. military has troops in the majority of the nations on earth.) When one family tried to get away from jet noise in Virginia Beach by moving to a rural farm, the military quickly opened a new base right next to them. There is no escape.

Charlottesville is not “a military town” except in the sense that every town in the United States is now. Other towns in Virginia have big bases; men and women in uniforms are a common sight. But look more closely, and Charlottesville is the home, as almost everywhere is, to some obscure branch of the military — in this case the “National Ground Intelligence Center.” We’re also home to a university. Most universities these days are huge recipients of military contracts, and UVA is no exception. In fact, the University of Virginia has built a research “park” adjacent to the aforementioned “intelligence” center. There’s a Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center attached to UVA Law School as well.

Back in March, the New Yorker magazine noted that the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) “invited interested literary theorists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and related ‘ists’ to the Boar’s Head Inn in Charlottesville, Virginia, last month to answer a question frequently posed to junior-high-school students:

‘What is a story?’” DARPA is the same agency that has moved on from mechanical killer elephants and telepathic warfare to exploding frisbees, cyborg wasps, and Captain America no-meals and no-sleep soldiers.

Many people in Charlottesville, as elsewhere, aren’t asking “What is a story?” so much as “Where do I get a job?” But most of the jobs paying anything above poverty wages that can be found at local job fairs are military industry jobs. This includes both jobs supporting the U.S. military and jobs providing weapons to dictatorships and democracies alike all over the world. The United States is far and away the leading seller of weapons to others. The two sides in the Libyan War can exchange parts in their weapons, because both have weapons made by us.

I’ve seen local job ads for the National Guard, and for work “researching biological and chemical weapons” at Battelle Memorial Institute, and for work producing all kinds of weaponry at Northrop Grumman. Then there’s Teksystems, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and Pragmatics, and Wisser, and many others with fat Pentagon contracts. Employers also recruit here for jobs in Northern Virginia with Concurrent Technologies Corporation, Ogsystems, the Defense Logistics Agency, BAE Systems, and many more. BAE, by the way, paid a \$400 million fine last year to the U.S. government to settle charges of having bribed Saudi Arabia to buy its weapons — just the cost of doing business.

From 2000 to 2010, 161 military contractors in Charlottesville pulled in \$919,914,918 through 2,737 contracts from the federal government. Over \$8 million of that went to Mr. Jefferson’s university, and three-quarters of that to the Darden Business School. And the trend is ever upward. The 161 contractors are found in various industries other than higher education, including: Nautical System and Instrument Manufacturing; Blind and Shade Manufacturing; Printed Circuit Assembly; Computer Systems Design; Real Estate Appraisers; Engineering Services; Recreational Sports Centers; Research and Development in the Physical, Engineering, and Life Sciences; Commercial and Institutional Building Construction; Analytical Laboratory Instrument Manufacturing; Sporting Goods Stores; Professional and Management Development Training; Research and Development in Biotechnology; New Car Dealers; Internet Publishing; Petroleum Merchant Wholesalers; and on and on and on. I think I mentioned Pig Daddy’s BBQ.

What could be wrong with so much socialistic job creation? Well, just this: investing money through the military actually produces fewer and lower paying jobs than investing the same amount of money in most other industries, or even in tax cuts for working people. It’s worse economically than nothing, and yet it’s all Washington wants to do. We are putting over half of every dollar of federal income tax and borrowing into the military. We could cut this by 85% and still be the top-spending nation in the world militarily. Meanwhile we are failing to invest in infrastructure, green energy, education, housing, jobs, and care for our young, old, and ill. The current trend will ruin us economically, as well as in terms of civil liberties, representative government, environmental destruction, social cohesion, hostile blowback, and weapons proliferation. Reining in the military industrial complex has become a matter of survival.

Our current unpopular but unending wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and Somalia, and our smaller military operations in over 100 other countries are part of what President Eisenhower warned of 50 years ago in speaking of the military industrial complex. No nation has tried anything like this before, and it’s not clear we can survive it. We’re

shortchanging everything else to fund wars and overseas bases that make us less safe. There's a crisis in our towns, but in the midst of a phony budget crisis in Washington, the House this summer passed the largest military budget ever seen on the planet.

On September 16-18, 2011, in Charlottesville, a conference called "The Military Industrial Complex at 50" (<http://MIC50.org>) will welcome over 20 prominent speakers, strategists, and organizers. Plans will be developed to move money from the military to human needs.

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