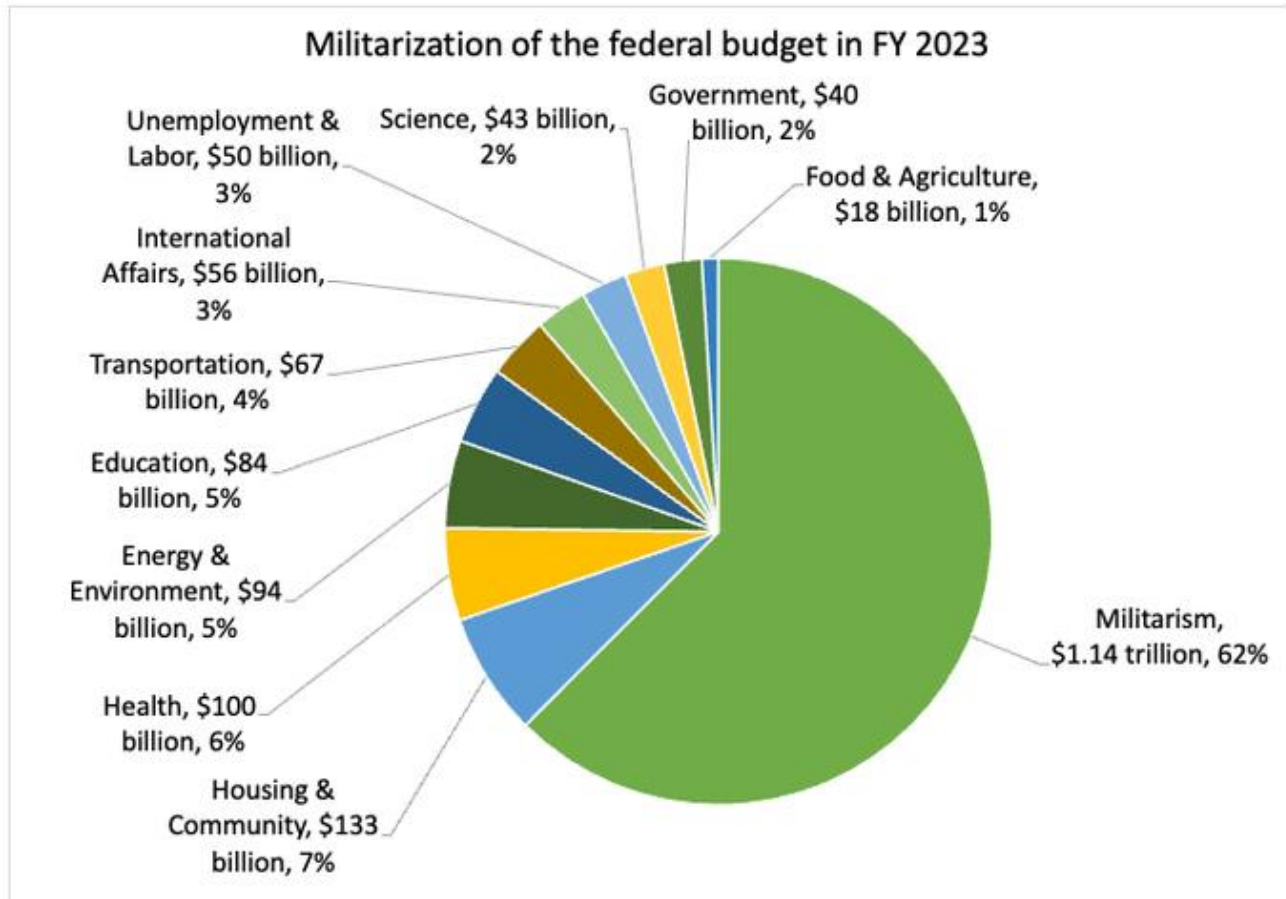


The Military Vampire Economy

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Ancient Witness: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-9

It goes without saying, but the views expressed from this pulpit do not necessarily reflect the views of this congregation. Freedom of the pulpit is a treasured aspect of our tradition. I'm certainly not here to change or convince anyone of anything, only to share my own view of the truth. But I do believe that hearing someone else can trigger an inner dialogue, and we are changed by that.

It was about 18 years ago, now, in late September of 2005, when we piled into buses and headed to Washington, D.C. for an anti-war rally. My bus was filled with enthusiastic students from Xavier University.

It was about a month after hurricane Katrina, and we all still had the tragically inadequate response fresh in our minds. Reports of the diversion of funding to complete the work on the

levees in order to funnel more and more money into the military machine provided a symbol as stark as one could ever be.

This inspired me and others to bring homemade T-shirts that said, "Make Levees Not War." Many of us said that not only was the Iraq war unjust, counterproductive and wrong, it also represented a vast drain upon the commonwealth and social fabric of our nation.

Since then, things have only intensified. The stock market crashed; families lost their savings; pension and college funds dissipated; we have experienced massive unemployment; and millions have lost their homes through foreclosure.

Since then, things have only gotten worse financially. Social needs have increased, but the government's resources have dwindled, decreasing its ability to respond to those needs of the people. State, city and county governments have been forced to cut vital services such as libraries, schools and programs for the poor.

Tax cuts also went into effect since that march in Washington, primarily for the very top wage earners in this country, removing about \$1.8 trillion in revenue. All of this on top of \$1 trillion to bail out the Wall Street investment firms.

And during the pandemic, average families lost even more ground, while billionaires and large corporations raked in record profits.

And so in the past two decades the level of pain in this country has increased, while our precious public resources have decreased along with our ability to respond to that pain.

And there is one other aspect to all of this that has not been given nearly the attention it deserves. And that is military spending.

As people of faith, this issue should have an urgency, it seems to me. But frankly, the silence has been deafening, especially in the churches. In recent years there has been a lot of clamor against deficit spending, but what is seldom mentioned is that the deficits have been caused largely by 1) deregulation and speculation that led to an economic meltdown and the loss of tax revenue and greater expenses for rising social needs, 2) tax cuts for corporations and the economic elite, 3) the bailout of the big banks, and 4) unfunded wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the post-9/11 response that cost more than \$8 trillion dollars.

And year after year we hear threats to shut down the government unless there are cuts in: Medicaid, education, unemployment benefits, aid for women, infants and children (WIC), Headstart, disaster relief (FEMA), public housing, special education, CDC, FDA and national parks. Even earned benefits such as Social Security and Medicare are threatened.

It was over 50 years ago that President Dwight Eisenhower uttered these prophetic words:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children...

This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

And in his farewell address, he famously said

We must guard against acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex.

Now I remind you that this is former five-star general, chief of staff and Republican President *Eisenhower*, and no bleeding heart liberal, who now sounds so prophetic to our ears. We need to talk about this “theft” that Eisenhower was talking about. For far too long, military spending has been taking the lion’s share of our national budget. The numbers are staggering.

Since the end of World War II, military spending has steadily increased. And it is devouring our nation; it is sucking the life blood of the country.

There were huge spikes in spending during the Korean War, the Viet Nam War, the Reagan administration. After these spikes there were decreases, but the decreases were never as much as the increases, so the spending has been increasing steadily over time.

The U.S. military budget is currently \$920 billion, higher than the next 10 countries’ combined, much of it going to defense contractors who spend millions of this public money lobbying for even more money! And the militarism in the federal discretionary budget that includes this plus veteran’s programs, homeland security (without FEMA) and federal law enforcement was over \$1.1 trillion, or 62% of the 2023 budget. Militarism is now twice its level in 2001, and for every dollar that non-militarized spending grew, militarized spending grew by \$2.

What does our faith say about this? How does our spiritual sensibility address this? Some people have rightly pointed out that the federal budget is a *moral document*, that is, it reflects our nation’s *moral values*. So it seems to me that we need to ask ourselves, what is this document saying about us?

It was Jesus who said,

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)

What more appropriate statement for us, is there, as we examine our national budget? Looking at it, where is our heart as a nation?

And so the baseline of Pentagon spending has remained high and increased ever since Eisenhower’s warning that has gone largely unheeded.

When will our endless war economy end?

From my own Christian perspective I am not a pacifist (although I respect those who are). I acknowledge the occasional need to meet violence with violence. (I am not advocating that we reduce the military portion to zero.) But we have chosen this option too often and too easily. And we have made preparing for war such a priority that it is bankrupting this nation.

Look, there are many ways to measure the costs of war. There is the moral cost that is chronically underestimated, a cost that must be justified by the good to be accomplished. This includes the death of thousands U.S. soldiers, thousands of enemy combatants, and tens of thousands civilians, known abstractly as “collateral damage.” Over 4.5 million people died during Afghanistan and Iraq. This cost also includes all those who are wounded, the lives that have been irreparably damaged, the destroyed lives of families on all sides. Spending for physical and mental health of veterans tripled since 2001 following repeated deployments for 3 million who served. It includes the damage to our own souls when we engage in violence and hatred and fear. And the cost includes the perpetuation of the hatred and violence, the long term legacy of war, which no one seems to acknowledge. We are providing a breeding ground, it seems to me, for more enemies, pouring gasoline on a fire. Invading countries is not the method to deal with terrorism. Like cutting off the head of the hydra, only more heads will grow in its place.

And finally, we can measure the cost of these ineffective wars by the “theft” from the people and the well-being of this nation that Eisenhower warned us about. The bombs we produce are falling upon the heads of our own children, women and men because of this theft. Military spending is like a vampire, sucking out the life-blood of this nation.

You may agree with me or not—that’s o.k.—but I believe that the costs of the Afghan war, like the Viet Nam and Iraq wars before it, were too great, and the endless war economy needs to end.

You will recall that the preamble to the U.S. Constitution commits this nation to promoting the *general welfare*. That is, the budget should reflect a commitment to what the Bible calls the *common good*.

In his letter to the captives in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah told them not to fight, not to put their resources and energy into that, but to “build homes, plant gardens, and pray for the well-being of the land” and common good for all. Now you have to remember, they were enslaved. He wanted them to contribute and look out for the general welfare even for those who imprisoned them!

He stated, “seek the welfare of the city.” And that is a message to us all—to seek the welfare of the city, the state, and the nation. “For in its welfare,” said Jeremiah, “you will find *your* welfare.” As spiritual people, we see ourselves inside the Big Picture and find our welfare and security connected to the welfare and security of others.

Spending in things like education, job training, health care, housing, food assistance, environmental protection—all these and many others promote the general welfare and common good. But they have been neglected (like the levees in New Orleans) largely because of excessive military spending, and our true security has been undermined.

The way I see it, we need less waging war and more waging peace.

For violence alone cannot solve our problem of terrorism give us security. Violence and war are negative forms of power that can be used against other greater negative forms. But ultimately the solution involves something positive, a positive force, such as diplomatic initiatives and true humanitarian aid. As Lincoln said, “The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend.” We need to be about the business of making friends and waging peace.

It was Martin Luther King Jr., that true American prophet, who said,

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.
Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence...
The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.*

I’m saying that our national budget that says so much about us needs to reflect more love and more light to strengthen the social fabric of our nation and build up our general welfare and true security. And we should seek our welfare in the welfare of our cities and even the cities of our enemies. As King also said,

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.

And so if we have a deficiency, it is in waging peace—promoting the common good—both at home and in the world. Daniel Berrigan talked about our weak and partial efforts to wage peace:

There is no peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as making of war—at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake.

If anyone was aware of the limitations of violence and war, it was Jesus, the one many of us profess to follow. And he warned, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Even if we don’t actually use it.

Because the cost to produce it at the expense of other vital things can be just too much. It’s too much. And we’ve been converting our precious plows and pruning hooks into swords and spears instead of the other way around.