

Pandemic and Militarism

A Statement by Upstate Drone Action

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The coronavirus pandemic has now killed over 100,000 in the U.S. and over 400,000 worldwide. Unemployment rates have risen to Great Depression levels. The protests, looting, and police brutality (as well as instances of police solidarity with protesters) which have followed the murder of George Floyd have shaken most cities across the nation. Both events have revealed the fragility of our economic and political systems. Many long for a return to normal. And yet, the normal operation of our society has led to this crisis. We can't return to normal.

These events should lead us to ponder three questions:

What is essential work? The pandemic has made us conscious of what work is essential to our society and what work is not. Clearly, the most essential work providing food, shelter, health care, and compassion. That is what we need to survive and flourish, as persons and as a society. The murder of George Floyd has revealed the kind of work that is not essential to our society. Healing is essential work. Killing is not.

What is heroism? For all our lives, military valor has been held up as the epitome of heroism. Today, the pandemic has shown us a very different face of heroism - a face which is almost always masked - the face of nurses, doctors, hospital staff, custodians, grocery store clerks, first responders - who literally risk their health and lives to preserve the lives of others. We need this new vision of heroism. The old vision of violence as heroism has failed - it has led to the murder of George Floyd and countless other killings of unarmed Blacks by our police forces. The new vision entails risking our lives to save others, not to mangle and destroy them. This new vision refuses terms like "collateral damage" and treats every human life as valuable, as worth saving.

What is National Security? Traditionally, national security has referred to protecting the nation from military threats, real or imagined. The military, with some help from the CIA, Homeland Security, etc., has been the institution entrusted to deal with the issue of "national security." Increasingly, some have come to see that not all threats to our national security are military in nature; in fact, the greatest threats to our national security do not require a military response. These include: Climate change, racism, extreme economic inequality, hunger, homelessness, destruction of our natural environment, including safe air, soil and water. And, as we now realize, pandemics. Even within the narrow frame of military national security, the pandemic reveals how mistaken our priorities have been. Had this pandemic been due to a biological weapons attack, we

would have been no better prepared to respond to it than we have been for this natural occurrence.

Environmental destruction and pandemics dwarf any military threat short of nuclear war. And yet, the government has for over half a century allocated way too much to the military and far too little to environmental protection and health care. Just as a rough indicator, Health and Human Services has never accounted for more than 8.3% of the discretionary federal budget (7.4% in 2019). The Environmental Protection Agency has accounted for less than 1% since 2009 (0.7% in 2019). But the Department of Defense has regularly consumed more than 50% of the discretionary budget (50% in 2019), and is projected to rise to 56.7% by 2025.

In the midst of the global pandemic, the Pentagon is asking for a \$705,400,000,000 budget for 2021. This budget request is a threat to our real national security, as well as being a theft of resources. As a nation, we have been putting our resources in the wrong places, leaving us vulnerable to pandemic and environmental disaster.

Our nuclear weapons and drones are powerless to protect us from the ravages of the pandemic. How many life saving ventilators or masks could have been bought with the money spent on these killing machines? Disturbingly, a Customs and Border Patrol Predator drone operated by Air and Marine Operations was used to track the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Minneapolis. The Predator, an "elder cousin" of the Reaper drones piloted out of Hancock Air National Guard Base, is, like the Reaper, capable of deploying Hellfire missiles. Presumably the one flown over Minneapolis was not armed; however, the use of weaponizable drones in matters of domestic unrest, combined with President Trump's statements about using the military to "dominate" the streets of America's cities, should raise red flags for all who are concerned about freedom of speech in this country.

Out of these traumas, let us create a new society within the shell of the old. We implore the U.S. to abandon its commitment to economic and military domination of the planet. That commitment to global domination opened up the disease vectors which made the US the epicenter of the pandemic. That commitment shows its face domestically in the militarized policing of America's cities. The choice is between a society which values life and a society which requires death to maintain its imperial mode of living.

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Upstate Drone Action, founded in 2010, is a coalition of peace activists from various upstate New York cities, including Syracuse, Buffalo, Ithaca, Rochester, Albany, Binghamton, as well as smaller communities including Arkport. We are dedicated to nonviolent resistance against weaponized drones, with particular focus on the MQ-9 Reaper drones piloted out of Hancock Air National Guard Base and Niagara Falls Air Force Base. Our website is upstatedroneaction.org.