Is Climate the Worst Casualty of War?

The money misspent on the Iraq War—a war for oil, let's not forget— could have purchased the planetary conversion to renewable energy. Just sit with that a moment.

by
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"The cost of America's post-9/11 wars is approaching $6 trillion," writes Bannerman, "and the price tag will continue to climb right along with sea levels, temperatures, atmospheric CO2, and methane, a particularly potent greenhouse gas." (Photo: Debra Sweet/flickr/cc)

How do you clear a room of climate activists? Start talking about war. It's not just environmentalists that leave; it's pretty much everyone. Mission accomplished by the Bush Administration, which sent the military and their families to war and the rest of the country to an amusement park. The military-civilian divide has been called an "epidemic of disconnection." But the biosphere doesn't see uniforms, and the environmental devastation caused by bombs, burn pits, and depleted uranium cannot be contained to a combat zone. We haven't counted the massive carbon footprint of America's endless wars because military emissions abroad have a blanket exemption from both national reporting requirements and the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change. There will be no exemptions in the coming climate collapse. We've all got skin in the war game now.

The cost of America's post-9/11 wars is approaching $6 trillion and the price tag will continue to climb right along with sea levels, temperatures, atmospheric CO2, and methane, a particularly potent greenhouse gas. We can look forward to an escalation in global food insecurity, climate refugees, and the release of long-dormant, potentially highly lethal bacteria and viruses. Research published in the journal Pediatrics in May, 2018, revealed that "children are estimated to bear 88 [percent] of the burden of disease related to climate change." Nevertheless, public health agencies don't discuss what war costs our climate when they discuss what climate change will cost our children.

Religious communities are mobilizing on the behalf of the healing and protection of the planet. But with few exceptions, such as MLK's Poor People's Campaign resurrected by a trio of ministers, the topic of America's literal war on the world is still off the table. Although he surely knows creation is God's cathedral, His Holiness Pope Francis spent only a handful of words on the ecology of war in the beautifully rendered *Laudato Si: On Care For Our Common Home*. And the big environmental organizations seem to have tacitly agreed that the U.S. military is the entity we won't talk about when we talk about the biggest contributors to climate change.

The Pentagon uses more petroleum per day than the aggregate consumption of 175 countries (out of 210 in the world), and generates more than 70 percent of this nation's total greenhouse gas emissions, based on rankings in the CIA World Factbook. "The U.S. Air Force burns through 2.4 billion gallons of jet fuel a year, all of it derived from oil," reported an article in the Scientific American. Since the start of the post-9/11 wars, U.S. military fuel consumption has averaged about 144 million barrels annually. That figure doesn't include fuel used by coalition forces, military contractors, or the massive amount of fossil fuels burned in weapons manufacturing.

According to Steve Kretzmann, director of Oil Change International, "The Iraq war was responsible for at least 141 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MMTCO2e) from March 2003 through December 2007." That's more CO2e than 60 percent of all countries, and those figures are only from the first four years. We downsized the war in December of 2011, but still haven't left, so the U.S. invasion and 15 years of occupation has likely generated upwards of 400 million metric tons of CO2e to date. The money misspent on that war—a war for oil, let's not forget— could have purchased the planetary conversion to renewable energy. Just sit with that a moment. Then stand up and get back to work, please.

We've got wind farms to build and pipelines to stop. We've got solar panels to install and water to protect. We need torchbearers from every tribe and nation to walk the green path and light the Eighth Fire. But to do so while continuing to feed the fossil-fueled military beast chewing up nearly 60 percent of the national budget is energy inefficient and environmentally self-defeating. We cannot cure this man-made cancer on the climate without addressing underlying causes. In order to achieve the massive systemic and cultural transformations required for mitigating climate change and advancing climate justice, we're going to have to deal with the socially sanctioned, institutionalized violence perpetrated by U.S. foreign policy that is pouring fuel on the fire of global warming.

The Department of Defense (DOD) has the largest carbon footprint of any enterprise on the planet. The DOD is the single greatest manufacturer and disseminator of tools and toxins like Agent

Orange and nuclear waste that are inherently destructive to ecosystems. Nearly 70 percent of U.S. environmental disasters classified Superfund sites by the EPA have been caused by the Pentagon, which is a primary polluter of U.S. waterways. There should be no surprise, then, that at least 126 military bases have contaminated water, causing cancer and birth defects in service-members and their families. (So much for supporting the troops.)

We have to replace the flawed patriotism desperately clinging to the idea that we can't win without war (all evidence to the contrary) with a bipartisan paradigm so powerfully devoted to liberty and justice and freedom for all that creating an intelligent, muscular peace becomes a national priority. If we do not, we will never become the America we have said that we are. In the end, it's what we haven't included in the cost of war that may end up costing the most.

We simply cannot continue the moral, spiritual, fiscal, or environmental policy of benign neglect that underwrites the decimation of land, air, and water around the world. That, my green friends, is the single most unsustainable policy on this nation's books.

I know a lot of folks have decided not to speak out about war in order to avoid being labeled a traitor, or accused of being anti-military. If we learn nothing else—and it seems we have not—from the Iraq War, we learn that silence is a luxury we cannot afford when lives are on the line. The hands of the Doomsday Clock are two minutes from midnight. *Life itself* is on the line. It is time to find your voice.

We have to de-frock the sacred cow grazing at the Pentagon, because climate may be the worst casualty of all. My whole existence was a casualty of the Iraq War, and too many of my friends have gotten a Gold Star. I don't use the word "casualty" lightly. When I tell you the pain of losing everything you love because of war is a pain *you do not want*, I beg you to believe me. We have to keep working to "Keep it in the ground," but if we don't get serious about stopping the United States War Machine, we could lose the biggest battle of our lives.