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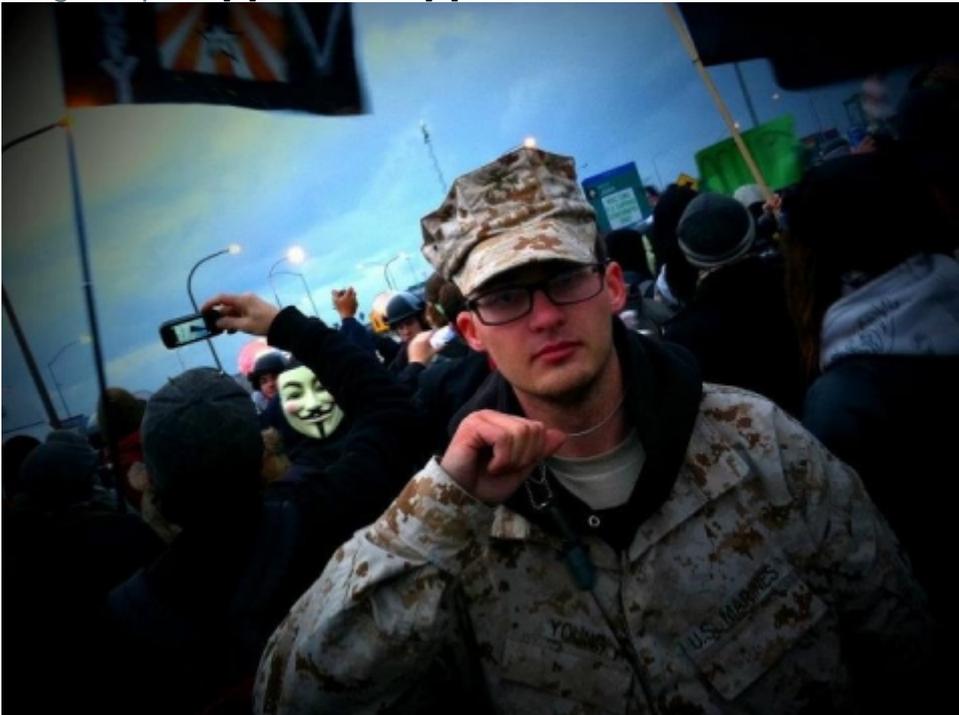
## Time to Demilitarize: Vets and Civilians are Done with War

### Issue:

Spring 2012 - Issue 16: Occupy the Economy [1]

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The last combat troops have left Iraq. Mission Accomplished! So let the ticker tape parade begin. With all the sacrifices veterans made over the last eight years in a valiant effort to protect our freedoms “over there” so we wouldn’t have to defend them “here”, shouldn’t people be lining the streets in jubilation? Despite the war and the ever-expanding “war on terror” having proven to be extremely profitable for defense industry corporations (such as Halliburton, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman), the tolls the war has inflicted on the largely poor American and Iraqi families are so vast and severe that Americans are reticent to participate in any reminder of it.

In Baltimore City alone, over \$1.6 billion in local taxes has been allocated for warfare over the past decade. But one does not need to know the details of bureaucratic budgeting to see the domestic price of war. It is apparent in many other ways: It can be seen in the decaying public school system that continues to have its budget slashed every year. It is obvious in the predator drones that now circle our border. It is felt by the hard-working immigrants who find themselves detained in private prisons run by former military contractors. It is apparent in the military tactics and weapons used by police forces on protesters. Such militarization comes at the cost of funding alternative models of community development. For instance, maintaining our bloated and needless

nuclear weapons stockpile costs more than providing a 4-year college education for over 3.5 million Americans, annually.

With that said, over the past decade our losses were hidden to ensure our complacency for as long as possible. Our off-budget wars were placed on America's credit card only to be rolled into debt discussions and kicked around like a political football. Those of us at home who had the capacity to question took our time to build effective opposition. Meanwhile the government's Vietnam-esque decision to discontinue honoring our lost comrades by displaying their returning flag-draped caskets obscured the inevitable sacrifices a nation makes when it chooses to go to war.

But the harsh reality of war cannot be hidden from veterans, the brave men and women of our US military, who, in many cases with great misgivings over the politics of their mission, literally gave all. No amount of Orwellian spin can remove the graven images of death and destruction from their minds. No political platitudes can give them back the time lost with loved ones. No empty promises can assure them that the "conditions on the ground" will ever really improve. Nor will any yellow ribbons help the one in three women suffering from Military Sexual Trauma or the one in four veterans enduring Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And indeed, no ticker tape parade can rectify our government's lies and deceit regarding the "liberation" of the Iraqi people as Iraq has been left in shambles, with over 200,000 dead, 70% of Iraqi children suffering PTSD, and a decimated infrastructure. Meanwhile, back at home, arcane and misguided policies like the Patriot Act and the expanded National Defense Authorization Act have drastically rolled back our civil liberties. Thus, it is no surprise that many veterans have returned to discover their fight for liberty and justice for all continues here at home.

Apart from the traumas of war, mismanagement of the US economy by Washington plutocrats has pillaged the "land of opportunity." The unemployment rate for young veterans is 20%, double that of the national average, while Congress is now considering proposals that would slash military medical and retirement benefits. With diminishing hope and little opportunity for sustainable employment, many vets have turned to protest and community organizing. They have formed organizations such as Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and Civilian Soldier Alliance (CivSol), and many are now participating in the Occupy movement in order to address their grievances.

## **VETS OCCUPY WALL STREET AND BECOME ORGANIZERS**

As hundreds of thousands of Occupy protesters took to the streets in 2011, many veterans saw them as the personification of the ideals they were told they were fighting for. Wrapped in the patriotism of military participation in civil disobedience, which dates back to the Revolutionary War mutinies and the Bonus Army Occupations after World War I, many veterans continue to stand with Occupy. Their acceptance into the Occupy community has contributed to the movement's political legitimacy by demonstrating how members of the very institutions of control and warfare are standing against militarism and acknowledging the perversion of the status quo. Examples include Marine Shamar Thomas' shaming of NYPD officers who defended Wall Street against demonstrators protesting the massive income and wealth inequality in our society, and veteran Scott Olsen being severely, and unjustly, injured for peacefully attending a demonstration. This resulted in Occupy Oakland's successful shutdown of the ports, led in part by local members of Iraq Veterans Against the War.

On a more personal and healing level, veterans are finding places to speak freely about the unjust nature of America's current wars without being branded treacherous malcontents, which often comes from individuals who never served a day in their lives. Inside the current protest movements, these veterans found people who do not judge but rather listen; people that understand the nature of their sacrifice and the lack of said sacrifice by the nation as a whole; people who believe that you can be simultaneously against a war and not the troops; people who welcome them home and offer them a shoulder to cry on. In short, they have found friendship, and that is worth more than any ticker tape parade. For not only are these growing bonds inspiring, they are essential to the movement's success.

There is no doubt about the coalescing of shared goals between civilians and veterans, and the Occupy encampments have not been the only spaces where this is well demonstrated. In 2010, veterans from IVAW and civilians from CivSol and other ally organizations came together to launch Operation Recovery: Stop the Deployment of Traumatized Troops. Since its launch, the campaign has successfully raised awareness of the need to provide adequate care for the tens of thousands of troops, who are suffering trauma but are receiving inadequate care or no treatment whatsoever. By doing so, they are demonstrating the consequences of a decade of misguided warfare. Local organizers throughout the country, both civilians and veterans alike, have worked together to perform outreach at Veterans Affairs (VA) centers, coordinated pro bono therapy for vets who have yet to receive medical care, spoken out about the costs of war, and protested military and financial institutions responsible for this madness.

Since June, 2011, IVAW and CivSol members have also engaged in a sustained organizing effort in Fort Hood, Texas, one of the largest military bases in the country with one of the highest suicide rates in the nation. The joint campaign brings in volunteer organizers from throughout the country to help with active duty outreach, while also supporting healing and activism workshops organized by Under the Hood, a local anti-war coffee shop. Organizers then return to their own local chapters to share their lessons and further strengthen antiwar organizing. In 2012, outreach efforts have expanded to Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state. A growing number of experienced veteran and civilian organizers have exchanged their skills and experience with related social justice movements, including the growing Occupy movement, which have aimed to draw attention to how various injustices relate to the socio-economic inequalities that permeate our nation.

As we continue to challenge injustices throughout our country, organizers across the country continue to recognize that ensuring an active resistance to the corporate militarism which perpetually creates, enforces, and accelerates these disparities is essential. Major General Smedley Butler, one of the most decorated Marines in US history, made it clear: "War is a racket. It is the only one international in scope. It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives." And with half of the federal budget going directly into the military and defense industry, there is little doubt of the effects of the war economy at home.

## **DEMILITARIZE THE ECONOMY**

In order to protect the continuously rising profits of defense contractors and the growing Homeland Security complex, politicians continue to espouse that war is essential to our economy. For example, chairperson of the House Armed Services Committee, Howard McKeon (R-CA), has argued that "cutting our military—either by eliminating programs or laying off soldiers—brings grave economic costs." But this line of thinking fails to account for how using these funds in

socially constructive means, such as on education or healthcare, actually results in a much stronger economic outlook.

As former President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961) predicted, our economy's dependence on military spending for job creation has rendered defense cuts as politically untenable. This false dependence has been used by politicians to sell unnecessary wars to the public—wars that have created profit windfalls for defense industries, while leaving us with less funding to improve our infrastructure or ensure basic social services.

President Obama tapped into the country's growing awareness of the domestic costs of war as part of his theatrical performance in the lead up to his election: "When Iraq is costing each household about \$100 a month, you're paying a price for this war." But that was in March, 2008. As we begin 2012, such pandering to public opinion is losing its effectiveness given the lack of actions backing it up. Thus, the Obama administration has increased military spending, while threatening military intervention in Iran, expanding drone attacks overseas, and ensuring troops stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, as referenced in his recent State of the Union speech.

The question now is: What are we going to do about our debilitating dependence on military spending? Geoff Millard of the DC chapter of IVAW believes that the answer lies in demilitarizing our economy. This past October, while attending a national conference of poor-people's movements hosted by Baltimore's United Workers, he said:

We are militarizing our police force, we are militarizing our youth by sending them into the military because there are no opportunities for them, job-wise, in their communities. If we can demilitarize our communities we can make sure that our war economy doesn't continue to grow into our sole economy.

Demilitarization will only come through a sustained and joint effort by civilians and veterans, between old and new poor. As the recession wrecks havoc at home, military recruitment continues as folks fearing the lack of job opportunities decide participating in our own demise is a stronger out. There is no reason for this, save for the failure of their communities and, as a result, of our country, to reach out to them with support and alternatives. But such alternatives, as demonstrated over the past year from Wisconsin to New York, from Oakland to Baltimore, indeed, from coast to coast, have finally begun to develop. It is time for us to work together to make them a reality.

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