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Abolish national security

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Introduction

While the Covid-19 pandemic raged in 2020, at least fifteen million people participated in Black Lives Matter actions across the US.¹ This movement represented a coming to terms with the US's history of racist violence. The generation derided as "woke" has begun to understand that war, prisons, and borders do not advance the well-being of the majority of people in the US, that turning the US into an "armed lifeboat" is no solution to climate crisis and zoonotic pandemics, and that there is no trickle down of wealth under racial capitalism, even for most white people. Those who have come of age in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008/9 are moving on from the false image of an exceptionally virtuous US.

As with any movement, within it there are various motivations and orientations. Of particular note is the abolitionist approach that has shaped much recent Black-led mass struggle, influenced by Black feminist politics and queer organizing – and the radical notions of care that these traditions embody.² Abolitionism is a mode of political thinking and practice that has emerged from twenty years of organizing against the prison-industrial complex by groups such as Critical Resistance.³ Abolishing prisons and defunding the police are its most prominent aims but opposition to border violence and militarism has also been important. Abolitionism locates policing and incarceration within a broader set of structures that includes borders and military violence deployed abroad. Fifteen years ago, one of the leading thinkers on abolitionism, Angela Davis, called for anti-prisons organizing work to expand to take on the global imprisonment networks of the War on Terror.⁴ Today, groups such as Dissenters are organizing against the entirety of the US's national security infrastructure from a Black abolitionist perspective.⁵

At the core of abolitionist politics is an attempt to reconceptualize the notion of security.

The logic that dominates the criminal-legal system, argue abolitionists, involves thinking of harm as a problem that can be solved through officially sanctioned punitive violence. This has two consequences. First, it means that the criminal-legal system intensifies rather than reduces the circulation of violence, giving rise, in turn, to demands for more police and more prisons – a perpetual motion of criminalization. Second, it means that attention is diverted from examining the underlying social and economic causes of what we call "crime." Prisons instead serve to screen off the social problems that result from the "unmanageable political economy" of global capitalism.⁶ But in doing so, those problems are worsened. The massive expansion in the number of prisons and the militarization of law enforcement are not responses to increased crime but an integral part of neoliberalism, which involves declaring large numbers of people as "surplus." Prisons are ways of hiding such people from view and forgetting about the social questions they invoke; racism is essential to this process.

In such circumstances, abolitionists argue, calls to reform prisons and police forces to make them more humane can do more harm than good. So, too, do calls to differentiate more effectively between those who deserve to be incarcerated and those who do not. Such calls avoid a reflection on the root causes of the problems that prisons and police pretend to solve. Instead, **abolitionism proposes the creation of an "array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to prison, thereby helping to render the prison obsolete."**⁷ This broader sense of security would involve meeting educational, childcare, housing, and healthcare

needs as well as decriminalizing drug use, sex work, and migration. By also creating a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance, there would ultimately be no need for prisons.⁸

Of course, achieving that goal is not an immediate possibility. For now, the question is how to push for reforms to the criminal-legal system that move in the direction of defunding and disbanding. The answer will depend upon local context and the balance of political forces. As well as building power through grassroots organizing, electoral initiatives will also play a role. The Movement for Black Lives coalition's Electoral Justice Project, for example, has proposed the Breathe Act, legislation that would defund federal incarceration and law enforcement, abolish the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), fund community-led, non-punitive approaches to public safety, retroactively decriminalize drug use, invest in education, healthcare, housing, and environmental justice, and extend workers' rights.⁹ The work of imagining alternatives to the criminal-legal system is ongoing.

What is striking, however, is the generative possibilities of applying an abolitionist approach not only domestically within the US but also to its agencies of global security. In this, abolitionism draws upon the legacies of a Black internationalist politics in the US. For the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the late 1960s, for example, the Black freedom struggle in the US was one element in an international movement for liberation, from Vietnam to Puerto Rico and Palestine.¹⁰ As SNCC chair H. Rap Brown put it: "There is no difference between Harlem and Puerto Rico, or Harlem and Vietnam."¹¹ In other words, there is an overlap between the structures of police violence at home and the structures of military violence abroad. Like its criminal-legal system, the US's military actions abroad spread rather than reduce violence, in ways that are often organized through racism. And they distract us from addressing the

social and ecological problems the planet faces. Abolitionism implies that framing discussion on US military actions in terms of which kinds of "intervention" are legitimate and which are not is a limiting horizon that hides from view the structural drivers of endless war. Likewise, discussing who should be constrained by borders and who should not means avoiding reflection on the role that borders play in our social and economic systems and what the alternatives might be.



An abolitionist framework entails understanding that genuine security does not result from the elimination of threats but from the presence of collective well-being.

An abolitionist framework entails understanding that genuine security does not result from the elimination of threats but from the presence of collective well-being. It advocates building institutions that foster the social and ecological relationships needed to live dignified lives, rather than reactively identifying groups of people who are seen as threatening. It holds that true security rests not on dominance but on solidarity, at both the personal and the international levels. Only from an internationalist perspective can security problems like climate change and pandemic diseases be addressed.

In the long term, it is illusory to achieve security for one group of people at another's expense.¹² In policy terms, an abolitionist approach would imply a progressive defunding and shrinking of the US's bloated military, intelligence, and border infrastructure, and the construction of alternative institutions that can provide collective security in the face of environmental and social dangers.

In the following pages, it is argued that a politics of abolitionism offers the best approach to overcoming the failures of US national security policy. More than calls to abolish individual national security agencies, abolitionism offers a conceptual framework within which the concept of security can be rethought and actions taken towards a deep transformation of policy-making. This study begins by analyzing the dominant racial security logic that has shaped US policy and some of the defensive reflexes that have blocked efforts to bring about change. It then applies an abolitionist analysis to the Biden administration's emerging national security policies. While national security is currently organized in response to a range of threats – such as Russia, cyber-attacks, “failed states,” and nuclear proliferation – this study focuses in particular on China and the far Right as new threat narratives. The limitations of the US's securitized approach to climate and pandemic crises are then discussed. Finally, some suggestions are made as to how an alternative security politics might emerge in the US.

The US's racial security logic

The US currently spends over US\$1 trillion a year on national security. This amount, spread across military, intelligence, and border agencies, is over twice what it would cost to provide both COVID-19 vaccines to everyone in the world and a global safety net to prevent anyone from falling into poverty because of the virus.¹³ The Department of Defense budget alone comprises more than half of all federal discretionary spending each year. The US military deploys 2 million men and women across at least 800 military bases in 90 countries

and territories around the world. It conducted covert military operations in 154 countries in 2020.¹⁴ It maintains an estimated arsenal of 3,800 nuclear warheads and, in the coming years, plans to spend roughly \$100 billion to purchase 600 more nuclear missiles from defense corporation Northrop Grumman.¹⁵ The US military is the world's single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases. In 2017, the Pentagon was responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than entire countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Portugal.¹⁶ Beyond the military, the present-day US national security system includes agencies that were forged in the early Cold War, such as the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council, as well as more recent creations of the Wars on Drugs and Terror, such as the Drug Enforcement Agency and the Department of Homeland Security. With global frameworks like the War on Terror and War on Drugs, involving relationships of intelligence sharing, training, arms exports, and financial assistance, the US is able to draw other states into its security machinery, driving spirals of conflict across Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. The United States remains the world's largest arms exporter, with its share of arms exports rising to over a third of the global total in the last five years.¹⁷



The scale of this infrastructure is almost completely accepted as the taken-for-granted background to US foreign policy-making. To question it is to place oneself outside of what is considered legitimate opinion in elite US politics.

In the neoliberal era, the national security system has incorporated a web of private security corporations involved in weapons manufacturing, military logistics, the provision of mercenaries and other armed personnel, cyberwarfare, border fortification, and surveillance technology. At one remove from these corporations is the array of Wall Street investors who profit from the taxpayer-funded national security system.

Threaded through this consensus is an ideological process that involves identifying and dominating “bad actors” – whether they are embodied in nation-states or insurgent movements. The frameworks through which these “bad actors” are conceived have foundations in the racial and colonial history of the US. Today, they have a global reach. From the frontier wars of the colonial period to the War on Terror, the construction of threats to security has involved what Michael Rogin calls the “fantasy of savage violence,” the fear that racially subordinated groups would inflict their barbarism on the civilized.¹⁸ Rebellions against racial and colonial domination are the indispensable emergencies around which US security policy and practice has usually been organized. Some of these emergencies are real, some exaggerated, and some entirely imagined. Their racial elements might be explicit or submerged. In any case, they provide opportunities for the mythic heroes of US expansion to exact racial revenge or rescue.¹⁹ This involves what Franco Fornari describes as “the incredible paradox that the most important security function is not to defend ourselves from an external enemy, but to *find a real enemy*.”²⁰ In a sense, the US has never stopped fighting “savages” at its frontiers, even as the frontier expanded to the global battlefields of the Cold War, War on Terror, and War on Drugs.²¹ The enemy in each case is characterized by an ascribed inherent failure to follow “civilized” rules of conflict. To conservatives, the enemy is of necessity alien to the values of Western civilization; to liberals, the enemy fails to uphold democracy and human rights.

But these political differences conceal an implicit solidarity: with few exceptions, conservatives and liberals agree that national security means absolute domination over less civilized enemies. In this way, the US national security system proclaims its own innocence and virtue while it is, as Martin Luther King, Jr., pointed out in 1967, “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.”²²

In the first decades of the twentieth century, observes Robert Vitalis, “international relations meant race relations.”²³ Over the course of the century, the US increasingly fought “wars without end, made on false promises of security and waged against ever shifting spectral enemies, driven by ideologies of order and counter-insurgency and by policies to contain and quarantine the effects of global poverty,” as Avery Gordon has written.²⁴ At the same time, a directly racial security calculus was refined into an ideologically and criminologically defined conception of threats: communists, terrorists, rogue states, Islamic extremists, drug cartels, and illegal immigrants. Yet the traces of racial categorization remained. The techniques of surveillance and propaganda increasingly deployed by the US security system were first cultivated in an organized way in the US colonial administration of the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century. They were then brought back to the US and applied domestically with the wave of “red scares” after World War I. Alfred McCoy writes that: “After years of pacifying an overseas empire where race was the frame for perception and action, colonial veterans came home to turn the same lens on America, seeing its ethnic communities not as fellow citizens but as internal colonies requiring coercive controls.”²⁵ In the Cold War, racism played a critical role in the ideological production of an image of communism as the enemy.²⁶ The Soviet system was understood to be not a product of European history but “traditional Oriental despotism plus modern technology.”²⁷ To the FBI of the 1920s, immigrant Jews were agents of anarchist and communist subversion; to the

FBI of the 1960s, Black liberation was a hidden communist plot; to the FBI of the 2000s, Muslim political association was a precursor to terrorism.²⁸

Alongside its official rhetoric of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency, the War on Terror conjured the ghosts of Jim Crow segregation and settler colonialism. When celebratory photos of tortured prisoners at Abu Ghraib emerged, there was an unmistakable resemblance to postcards of lynching parties from a century before. For Iraq war advocate Robert Kaplan, “The war on terrorism was really about taming the frontier.” Yale University professor of military history John Lewis Gaddis argued that the war on Iraq had its origins in the wars that cleansed the US frontier of “native Americans, pirates, marauders, and other free agents.” And when Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo wrote his 2003 memo seeking to justify torture, it was to an 1873 case of Modoc Indian prisoners that he turned for a legal precedent. Not for nothing was the operation to kill Osama bin Laden known as Geronimo.²⁹

But the weight of history does not fully explain the modalities of US national security policy and practice in the neoliberal era. Neoliberalism depends upon racially coded global divisions of labor that render vast swathes of the human population superfluous to capitalist production. Projects of racist policing, mass incarceration, border militarization, and counter-terrorism are directed at managing this “surplus” humanity under neoliberalism – from the dramatic expansion in border regimes, with their huge death tolls in the deserts to the south of the United States, and their warehousing of millions of refugees in camps conveniently far from the West, to the global infrastructures of counter-insurgency, such as the War on Terror and War on Drugs, each causing the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands.³⁰ This, in turn, provides a material basis for recurring upsurges of nationalism and racism that flourish in the ruins of neoliberalism’s dismantling of collective democratic action.³¹

This emphasis on security under neoliberalism has offered a new basis for the legitimacy of government itself. As former Chair of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, told the Zürich daily *Tages-Anzeiger* in 2007, “thanks to globalization, policy decisions in the US have been largely replaced by global market forces. National security aside, it hardly makes any difference who will be the next president.”³² In other words, because economic policy is usually subsumed in global markets, neoliberal governments find it hard to derive consent from claiming to increase citizens’ material well-being; instead, it is easier to legitimize themselves through claims of protecting citizens from myriad terrible dangers – namely “national security.” Racially marked populations who have been dispossessed by neoliberalism are then cast as new sources of danger, in the form of terrorists, migrants, or criminals.³³ Neoliberal political contest becomes a matter of parties competing over the identification of threats and the implementation of spectacles of violence in response. The result is a political culture bent out of shape: national security has an overbearing presence in policy-making circles but one that mainly sustains a fantasy of domination and avoids any coming to terms with the structural failures of neoliberalism.

Mourning for America

Such a situation is not unique to the US but is a tendency wherever neoliberalism dominates. However, the US context is distinguished by an ideological attachment to the fantasy of a never-ending 1990s, when, in the aftermath of the Cold War, US exceptionalism seemed to have made possible a stable, US-dominated world order, before China’s twenty-first century ascent to superpower status. The delusion of returning to the US “primacy” of the 1990s has long since become obsolete as a viable means of providing national security. Yet in the Washington policy-making process, alternatives to such a strategy are simply not credible.³⁴ By not facing up to the irreversibility

of its geopolitical decline and the environmental and social challenges it now confronts, the US is putting off a collective mourning for the loss of an America that was loved but no longer exists. This failure to grapple with the early end of the American century finds expression in liberal calls for a return to a “rules-based international system” – code for 1990s-style globalization – as much as in Trump’s call to “make America great again.” Refusing to come to terms with the collapse of a fantasy of American omnipotence produces a melancholic paralysis in the face of social and environmental dangers, even as the US national security system lashes out against the current list of targets: China, Russia, Venezuela, and Iran.³⁵

To fully confront the passing of the US’s unchallenged dominance would also have to mean recognizing the various forms of injustice – white supremacy, settler colonialism, and imperial warfare – through which that dominance was established. But there are powerful forces working hard to ward off the knowledge that the US’s history of racial conquest and violence is morally indefensible. This requires increasingly elaborate defensive mechanisms that aim at suppressing awareness of this violence or else locating its origins elsewhere.³⁶ One such mechanism is to acknowledge that the US’s power rests on a vast capacity for military violence but present it as a necessary reaction to a dangerous world of terrorists, drug traffickers, and rogue states. US violence is thus projected onto the personalities of fanatical racial enemies, enabling the US to maintain a self-image of innocence and beneficence. Another mechanism is the manic disavowal of calls for a reassessment of the US’s place in the world. That disavowal is imposed all the more forcefully when dissent comes from people of African, Asian, Latin American, or Middle Eastern origin who bring a knowledge of the catastrophic effects of US foreign policy in these regions. For conservatives, the changing ethnic make-up of the US population raises the question of whether a majority in the future will instinctively uphold a patriotic idea of American virtue or instead feel

loyalties to countries of origin that have been on the receiving end of US violence. Minnesota Democrat Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, for example, has criticized Israeli settlements and military attacks, called for a reduction in US military bases, and challenged the record of the US foreign policy establishment, questioning Trump appointee Elliott Abrams on his earlier support for the US’s enabling of the mass killing of civilians in El Salvador in the 1980s.³⁷ In response, she has attracted a flurry of Islamophobic attacks, from claims that she supports terrorism to allegations that she married her brother for immigration purposes.³⁸ The conservative rage at Omar projects onto her all the repressed discomfort at the truths about US violence that she has articulated.

Liberals defended Omar but the way they tended to do so points to a different defense mechanism. They argued that, because her Somali family chose to come to the US, she ought to be seen as an embodiment of the US’s values of inclusion that enable immigrant success rather than as a symbol of Islamic extremism. In doing so, the discussion is reframed as a question of diversity – who legitimately belongs within US elites – rather than a question of what kinds of foreign policies those elites implement. This becomes another mechanism for containing Omar’s message and turning her instead into an ideal figure to help liberals manage their own anxieties: her story becomes one of racial adversity overcome, affirming the imminence of the US’s redemption. Images of elite diversity then are another way of postponing a confrontation with the deeper structures of the US’s racial security logic. The emphasis the Biden administration has placed upon appointing persons of color to senior positions – proposing the most diverse cabinet in US history – reflects this.³⁹ President Biden has made restoring liberal notions of American virtue a major plank of his platform but the self-doubt that accompanies such notions cannot be easily suppressed. The liberal claim that Trump does not represent America co-exists uneasily with the suspicion that, in his racism,

sexism, and crass flaunting of law and decency, he really does. Only when the full violence of the US's racial security logic has been forced to the surface and come to terms with can a true process of reconciliation begin.

The coming dangers

The gap between the official US narratives of national security and the actual security needs of ordinary people has become palpable. Over the coming decades, there will be three major dangers to human and other life on the planet: the climate crisis, zoonotic pandemics, and the social breakdowns resulting from unabated racial capitalism. Unless these interlocking dangers are addressed, ever larger numbers of people will be rendered deeply insecure, facing disease, destitution, and displacement; the logic of the "free market" will continue to hollow out the capacity to achieve democratic change; and the distribution of resources and violence will be shaped by burgeoning racisms and nationalisms.

The consequences of the fossil fuel economy's heating of the planet are cataclysmic. A sixth mass species extinction episode has already begun, what one study calls "biological annihilation" of the ecosystems essential to human well-being.⁴⁰ The oceans, absorbing a third of carbon dioxide emissions, are acidifying at a rate that exceeds any known change in ocean chemistry for at least 800,000 years, destroying the coral reefs that have served as "cradles of evolution" throughout the Earth's biological history.⁴¹ Not since the dinosaurs became extinct have so many land and ocean species and populations died out so fast.⁴²

The North Pole, which has existed as floating ice for millions of years, has melted by around 15 per cent since the 1970s. We are a few decades away from the Arctic sea ice disappearing entirely in the summer months. Glaciers, which respond to long-term temperature change rather than single warm years, are also melting at a dramatic rate.

Tree stumps and even human remains that have been preserved in ice for thousands of years are being revealed while the great rivers that originate in glaciers, such as the Indus and Ganges in India, are changing course, putting millions of people at risk of flooding. Across the world, there are now six times as many disasters caused by floods and windstorms as there were in the 1960s. Rising sea levels have already forced inhabitants to abandon islands in the Pacific. Over the coming decades, large parts of major cities worldwide will be flooded and the 100 million people who currently live less than one meter above sea level will likely see their homes become uninhabitable.⁴³ Even modest global warming could expose large fractions of the human population to unbearable heat waves. If current trajectories continue, entire regions of the planet will be too hot for humans and other mammals to survive.⁴⁴ The World Health Organization estimates that, between 2030 and 2050, approximately a quarter of a million people will die each year due to climate change-related increases in heat exposure in elderly people, as well as increases in diarrheal disease, malaria, dengue, coastal flooding, and childhood stunting.⁴⁵



An average US citizen causes as much carbon to be emitted into the atmosphere as at least 500 citizens of Ethiopia, Chad, Afghanistan, Mali, Cambodia, or Burundi.⁴⁶ Emissions within the US also vary substantially by social class: household emissions in affluent suburbs are 15 times higher than nearby less well-off neighborhoods.⁴⁷ Yet global heating will have its largest effects on the poor, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South

Asia, where environmental devastation is overlaid on longstanding histories of colonial dispossession. Reductions in rainfall and increasing drought will severely affect agricultural production in these regions, adding substantially to the numbers who go hungry.⁴⁸ Even in the wealthier countries, the poor will be the most vulnerable to annual coastal flooding, heat waves, and the depletion of ecosystems.

The heating of the planet is itself one of the underlying causes of zoonotic pandemics, such as Covid-19, along with environmental destruction caused by land clearing, deforestation, intense agriculture, and the trade and consumption of wildlife. A panel of the world's leading experts in epidemiology, zoology, public health, and disease ecology has warned that pandemics represent an existential threat to the health and welfare of people across the planet and that they are becoming more frequent. "Without preventative strategies," they write, "pandemics will emerge more often, spread more rapidly, kill more people, and affect the global economy with more devastating impact than ever before."⁴⁹ At the time of writing, in May 2021, 3.3 million people have lost their lives to Covid-19 around the world.⁵⁰ In the US, over half a million have died, the equivalent of a 9/11 attack repeated 190 times.⁵¹

Interlocking with the climate crisis and the emergence of pandemics is the form of unabated capitalism – neoliberalism – that has become dominant since the 1970s. Over this period, corporations have had free rein to inflict environmental destruction on an epic scale, causing climate breakdown and an increase in zoonotic pandemics. Moreover, neoliberalism's politics of market individualism have squeezed the ability to act collectively through democratic institutions to solve social and environmental problems.⁵² Among the consequences of this are the ongoing political failure to prevent environmental threats to human life, the weakening of the public healthcare systems needed to mitigate the consequences of environmental destruction, and a return to gilded age levels of economic inequality.

In the United States, the national security system has utterly failed to deal with these three dangers and instead continues to pursue the fantasy of securing itself through the unchallenged domination of the world. The general pattern is that US policies exacerbate the insecurities they are ostensibly designed to minimize. It is a record of failure that can only be described as pathological.

The United States must make a choice: either ever deepening chaos and disorder as the forces of environmental and social destruction continue to ravage or a transition to a new mode of security politics that addresses the drivers of catastrophe.

Collective amnesia

President Biden's administration does not represent a fundamental break with the logic of racial security so much as an attempt to reverse the visible excesses of the Trump period and embed new notions of threat in the policy-making process, particularly in relation to China and the far Right. His ending of the Muslim ban, returning the US to membership of the World Health Organization, and rejoining the Paris climate accords point back to the Obama period. Some of the Trump-era counter-terrorism policies are being amended but there is no prospect of a deeper reevaluation.⁵³ Like Trump and Obama before him, President Biden campaigned on an end to the "forever wars;" it is probable that he will likewise fail to follow through on this pledge. He has continued policies of devastating sanctions on Iran and Venezuela, and his support for Israeli aggression is not tempered with even the rhetorical condemnation of settlements that marked presidential statements before Trump.⁵⁴

On immigration policy, a flurry of executive orders signal a break with Trump policies but the bipartisan border industrial complex will remain in place. The major shift will be the growing deployment of “smart borders” that Democratic Party-donating security corporations have been pushing for. The US-Mexico border will be less like a single fortified line on the map and more like a dispersed system of surveillance technology with violence outsourced to the Mexican side. The violence that borders perpetrate will continue but it will more often be hidden from view.⁵⁵

Aside from the specifics of its national security policies, the Biden administration is orchestrating a transition to a new repertoire of threat narratives. The major paradigm of the last two decades, the War on Terror, is no longer able to mobilize public consent for the national security infrastructure. Donald Trump’s proposal for a Muslim ban in the 2016 presidential election campaign made explicit what had been implicit throughout the George W. Bush and Barack Obama years of the War on Terror – that Muslims should be suspected of extremism by virtue of their religious identity. But anti-Muslim sentiment barely registered in Trump’s 2020 re-election campaign.



The tendency is for a purposeful forgetting of the War on Terror’s devastating toll and catastrophic failures. Collective amnesia is always a feature of such transitional moments in which old threats evaporate and new ones are forged into public culture.

If its aim was to reduce the number of lives lost to terrorism, then the War on Terror has been monstrously counter-productive: the number of people worldwide who died from terrorist activity increased ninefold between 2000 and 2015, according to a mainstream definition of terrorism.⁵⁶ No-one knows the exact number but over a million men, women, and children probably died needlessly as a result of the US’s wars fought as part of the War on Terror.⁵⁷ Rather than reducing violence, the War on Terror intensified conflict. This was because its architects never grappled with the root causes of “jihadist” political violence: the US’s propping up of authoritarian regimes such as in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt; support for Israel’s military occupation of Palestine; and US direct warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and so on. Instead, they preferred to remove these political factors from their understanding of their adversaries and instead rely upon a superficial but convenient formula of radicalization by extremist religious ideology.⁵⁸

Moreover, within the US, the War on Terror dramatically expanded the organized racial suspicion and demonization of Muslims, expressed most intensely through law enforcement surveillance, targeting, and prosecution.⁵⁹ The US now intends to move on from this grim legacy. No lessons will be learned. None of the planners and cheerleaders for the industrial slaughter of the poor in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa will be held to account. In this transition, the security infrastructure of the War on Terror is not being dismantled. The US military prison at Guantánamo Bay remains

open: its prisoners, unconvicted of any crime, are destined to spend the rest of their lives caged as walking memorials to a now forgotten security project. The statute books still contain authoritarian counter-terrorism legislation – for example, enabling overreaching “material support” charges that criminalize Islamic speech and association.⁶⁰ The global deployment of military force in the name of the War on Terror continues: the US conducted counterterrorism operations in 85 countries between 2018 and 2020.⁶¹

So long as the root causes of conflict remain unaddressed, the cycle of violence that we call “terrorism” and “counter-terrorism” will continue.

Moreover, the anti-Muslim racism that was fueled by the War on Terror is still with us.⁶² Indeed, the logic of the War on Terror has enabled distinctive incarnations of anti-Muslim racism to appear in Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India, where Muslims have been scapegoated for the spread of Covid-19. In China, the import of the War on Terror paradigm has led to the intense surveillance of religious identity, the closure and demolition of mosques, and the mass internment of Muslims in de-radicalization camps in Xinjiang. These methods have been accurately described as an “extension of Western methods.”⁶³ With an irony that is rarely noted, the same networks of think-tanks, journalists, and court intellectuals who developed the War on Terror security regime, which China subsequently adopted, are now hailing authoritarianism in Xinjiang as one of the reasons why the US must center its national security policy upon the threat of China.

The hubris of the US’s China policy

The idea of a Chinese threat has long roots in US security culture, running through late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century racist campaigns against Chinese immigrants, and through to the anti-communism of the early Cold War. In the 1990s, US neoconservatives argued that the focus of US “strategic competition” would shift in the twenty-first century from Europe to East Asia, where a militarily and economically rising China threatened to become a “great-power competitor” of the US or tie the West into a deep and long “clash of civilizations.”⁶⁴ However, the dominant assumption in US policy in the 1990s and 2000s was that China was peacefully integrating into the US-led international system, symbolized by its application to join the World Trade Organization in 1995. It was thought that the entry into the world economy of hundreds of millions of low-wage Chinese workers would enable US corporations to restrain their labor costs. At the same time, the dollars China acquired through its exports would be reinvested with US banks and government bonds, providing the capital for a credit boom in the West. This “globalization” was meant to provide incentives for China to accept US hegemony while the size of the US military remained a deterrent to any challenge to its dominance. Moreover, it was assumed that the more China’s economy developed, the more it would become dependent upon US consumption and investment, and therefore the less it would be a potential threat.⁶⁵

By the late 2000s, it was clear that the China policy had been based on an illusion. Globalization now looked less like a means of securing US hegemony and more like a decentering of the West, as East Asia threatened to overtake the US and Europe as the most important region of the capitalist system. Rather than China open the doors to US corporations, Google and Facebook were barred. China enjoyed tremendous growth from its

manufacture of goods for Western consumers and, when the US's credit-fueled consumption collapsed with the financial crisis of 2008/9, China's model of state-led industrial development appeared more resilient than US-style free markets. China was not emulating the US but pursuing its own form of modernization that fuses state planning and global capitalism. That fusion does not offer a single model for other ruling elites to adopt but its success in China has nevertheless encouraged countries to develop alternatives to Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism. Even in the West, it is now commonplace for states to pursue massive fiscal stimulus, active industrial policies, and other interventions to secure market positions for local enterprises in a tightly-competitive global environment.

As it became obvious that the US's China policy was not having the intended effects, a transformation in elite thinking ensued. President Obama's 2012 "pivot to Asia" strategy sought to contain China's rise through strengthening military alliances with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. The new mood of disappointment was summed up in a widely read 2018 article in *Foreign Affairs* by Kurt Campbell, architect of the Asia pivot policy and now President Biden's senior official for Asia policy, and Ely Ratner, who was nominated by Biden to be the Pentagon's principal adviser on China. They wrote: "The assumption that deepening commercial, diplomatic, and cultural ties would transform China's internal development and external behavior has been a bedrock of U.S. strategy. Even those in U.S. policy circles who were skeptical of China's intentions still shared the underlying belief that U.S. power and hegemony could readily mold China to the United States' liking." But that assumption collapsed, the authors noted. The "liberal international order has failed to lure or bind China as powerfully as expected. China has instead pursued its own course, belying a range of American expectations in the process."⁶⁶ The current conception of China as engaged in a "great power competition" with the US – as the 2017 National Security Strategy put it – stems from this disappointment with the

earlier more co-operative policy.⁶⁷ President Trump's apparent obsession with the threat of China was mocked by liberals during the 2016 presidential campaign. Yet his policy of steadily escalating a trade war – causing a drop in trade between the two countries of \$100 billion – enjoyed bipartisan support.⁶⁸ The last few years have seen a speedy and dramatic shift in the foreign policy elite's views on China. As a result, Trump's more hostile China policy was one of the only aspects of his agenda that had Democrat support in Congress.⁶⁹

On the right, Republican Senator Tom Cotton has proposed "a strategy of targeted decoupling," in which the US would seek to undo its economic integration with China by restoring domestic manufacturing.⁷⁰ Meanwhile Frank Gaffney, of the Center for Security Policy, who has been a key figure promoting anti-Muslim conspiracy theories in the War on Terror over the last two decades, has joined forces with Steve Bannon, President Trump's former chief strategist, to mobilize for strong sanctions against Chinese state-owned enterprises, with the aim of denying them access to US capital markets.⁷¹ Former CIA officers and the pro-Trump Claremont Institute are active in their new organization, the Committee on the Present Danger: China.⁷² While "America first" conservatives like Bannon and neoconservatives like Gaffney see the Chinese Communist Party as an entirely rogue entity, liberal DC policy-makers advocate returning it to the subordinate and co-operative role it had in the world system in the 1990s and 2000s. For example, a study recently published by the Atlantic Council, a mainstream think-tank historically associated with NATO, argues that the most important challenge facing the US is "the rise of an increasingly authoritarian China under President and General Secretary Xi Jinping." Prior to Xi, the report argues, "China aimed to join the existing international order, not to remake it in China's own image. Now, however, the mission for US China strategy should be to see China return to its pre-2013 path — i.e., the pre-Xi

strategic status quo." This return to the illusions of 1990s-style globalization is supposed to be achieved through an ideological attack on the Chinese model, maintaining military and technological superiority, and offering incentives to Asian allies to form an anti-Chinese alliance.⁷³

Perhaps the last person in DC's policy circles to get hawkish on China was President Biden. He began his election campaign as a supporter of co-operation. China is "not competition for us" he stated and boasted of the hours he had spent with Xi Jinping as vice-president. But through 2020 he was "reprogrammed" on China, according to an advisor.⁷⁴ By the end of the campaign, Biden had called Xi a "thug" and released a China-bashing video.⁷⁵ Then, when the Biden administration's secretary of state Tony Blinken was appointed, he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that President Trump "was right" to take a tougher tone against China.⁷⁶ Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer has reportedly been working on legislation that seeks to counter China's rise through bolstering US manufacturing and supply chains, among other measures.⁷⁷ Today, a consensus pervades both party leaderships that China is the pre-eminent threat to US interests. The infrastructure of US foreign policy focus upon China that has been built up in recent years will largely remain in place – new tariffs, new sanctions, and new intelligence units, such as the "China initiative" at the Justice Department, which racially profiles scientists of Chinese descent.⁷⁸ Meanwhile Congress is supporting the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, a massive Pentagon effort to counter China with more military resources in the Indo-Pacific area.⁷⁹ Once again, the US is conjuring the specter of an uncivilized enemy that is rebelling against its allocated place in the global racial hierarchy.

The broad mobilization against China among US foreign policy-makers is striking for two reasons. First, the conflict with China is playing out primarily in a struggle over who determines the rules of and controls the infrastructure of global trade,

especially in relation to the new circuits of digitized data, such as broadband cellular networks. This is a quite different form of conflict from either the Cold War or earlier "great power" competition in Europe. China is entangled with the global economy in a way the Soviet Union never was – notions of a new Cold War miss the mark. Nor is it a conflict of escalating trade barriers that points towards national economic isolation. Rather, trade barriers are paradoxically one weapon that states are using to shape the growth in global trade in their favor. The US's recent ban on China's Xinjiang cotton, for example, was justified by citing human rights violations against Muslims in China's Xinjiang region. But it has also apparently increased global demand for US cotton.⁸⁰ In fact, the measures being taken by the US to constrain China are all designed to benefit US corporations that operate globally.⁸¹ This is why Wall Street, while instinctively nervous of trade barriers, has not actively opposed the US's measures against China.

Second, there is the unquestioned assumption that the US should prevent China from matching the US's military or economic strength, even if measured solely within the East Asian region. Neoconservatives, "America first" conservatives, and elite liberals all remain attached to the belief that the US can and should attain the level of dominance it enjoyed at the end of the Cold War. But the triumph of the US-led "liberal international order" in the 1990s was the product of a fleeting and unusual set of circumstances – not a stable endpoint to the logic to history. The long-term trend is of US relative decline. China's rise is not a product of the last decade but reflects a century-long tendency of the ebbing of Western power, beginning with Japan's defeat of Russia in the war of 1905, the first time in the modern era that an Asian country had fought off a European power. Since then, Western geopolitical power has been gradually eroded through a mixture of anti-colonial nationalisms, state-led industrialization, and export-driven growth. Capitalism continues to mediate social life around the world but its

universalism has rendered it multicultural and no longer a signifier of Western expansion. China already has a larger number of people than the US among the wealthiest 10 per cent of the world population.⁸² Militarily, the US remains absolutely dominant but the defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq indicate the practical limits of that power in the twenty-first century.

The US will be unable to reverse the trend of decline through trade wars, sanctions, military spending, or “battles of ideas.” The more these measures are applied, the more they will simply encourage China to reduce its dependence on exports and limit the access of US corporations to the Chinese market. If the rule of the Communist Party comes to an end in China, it will be due to internal factors – especially the growing assertiveness of its workers – that US corporations have as much of an interest in discouraging as the Chinese Communist Party does. In the end, the US’s China policy is based on the fantasy that, if only the right policies can be found, the US’s predominance can be restored and sustained indefinitely.⁸³ Nevertheless, the China policy is having real effects: in East Asia, the risk of military conflict is increasing and trade and diplomatic relations are being reshaped in ways that are hard to predict; in the US, defense and security corporations are profiting through the ramping up of military spending, accruing resources that could otherwise be spent on addressing health, housing, and educational needs; and anti-Asian racism has been exacerbated.⁸⁴

There is an urgent need for progressives in the US to oppose the emerging policy on China before it leads to an unnecessary, unwinnable, and wasteful conflict. It will be necessary to advocate from a third space between the camps of Washington and Beijing, rather than fall into the bad faith position of defending the Chinese Communist Party as the wronged party.

Progressives should demand that trade and territorial disputes be resolved through the mediation of multilateral institutions like the United Nations and call upon the governments of the world’s two largest economies to strengthen multilateral approaches to climate and pandemic crises. Alongside such demands, progressives in the US should forge solidarity with those in China fighting for democratic rights, minority rights, and workers’ rights.



The war on terror brought home

Apart from China, the other threat narrative that has emerged as especially significant in this moment is the far Right. In this case, there is no doubt that the far Right is a genuine danger to democracy in the US. Moreover, the attention being paid to this threat is not the result of a process of racial demonization but appears to be the opposite: an attempt to counter white supremacy in the US. However, there are good reasons to pause and reflect more carefully before embracing the newly emerging agenda of tackling white nationalist groups as a form of domestic terrorism.

The US far Right is a gun-carrying mass movement consisting of hundreds of armed militia groups spread evenly across the country.⁸⁵ The Oath Keepers, just one such group, is thought to have 25,000 participants.⁸⁶ There is no reliable figure of the total number of armed participants in far-Right groups in the US but it is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands.⁸⁷ Beyond its active participants, the movement appears to enjoy the support of around ten per cent of the US adult population: approximately 30 million people believe the individuals who stormed the Capitol on January 6 were protecting democracy.⁸⁸ This far-Right support base is not the “white working class” but made up of small- and medium-sized business owners, the fairly wealthy self-employed, and former and current law enforcement, immigration, prison, and military personnel.⁸⁹ It is over-represented in Congress by the 147 Republicans who voted to overturn the 2020 presidential election result after the Capitol attack.⁹⁰ Apart from the racist attacks the far Right in the US carries out, including at the border, it has also targeted the infrastructure of the Black freedom movement. In 2019, for example, the far Right burnt down the main building of the Highlander Center in Tennessee, a key institution of the civil rights movement. Decades worth of historical documents, speeches, artifacts, and other memorabilia were destroyed.⁹¹

By the time Congress pursued the second impeachment of Donald Trump in January 2021, over ten thousand National Guard troops were in place at the Capitol in anticipation of far-Right violence. A US soldier and veteran of the Iraq war who was deployed to defend the Capitol asked a reporter: “Are we really in the US or are we overseas on duty?”⁹² He was onto something. Kathleen Belew has demonstrated that the rise of the far Right in the US is strongly connected to the US’s wars abroad. After the Vietnam war, a white power movement came together among veterans, uniting the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other activists. Since then, the movement has thrived in

the backwash of the US’s endless but unsuccessful wars.⁹³ To its participants, this far-Right movement offers an explanation for US military defeats: it says the US has been weakened by succumbing to hidden global forces and through demographic change – what it calls the “great replacement” of whites by others. It also proposes a course of action for anyone who knows how to use a weapon: bring the war home to fight the domestic enemies responsible for undermining the US.

The War on Terror has supercharged this process. It has renewed official approval of the notion that racial enemies need to be surveilled, tracked, and dominated through violence.

By declaring the whole world a global battlefield, it has blurred the boundaries between war abroad and policing at home, encouraging the idea of a war to be fought within the US. Above all, the War on Terror reactivated settler-colonial furies of American exceptionalism and expansionism.

When those furies met military defeat abroad, they had nowhere to go except inwards to find new enemies within the US itself and at its borders.⁹⁴ In this sense, the far Right today is the War on Terror returning home. No wonder the US security agencies that propagated the War on Terror spent decades ignoring the far Right. On the rare occasion that a unit within the Department of Homeland Security produced an intelligence report on the far Right, four months after President Obama took office in 2009, the reaction from conservatives was so vitriolic that the report was repudiated and the unit was effectively blocked from doing any further monitoring work.⁹⁵ Instead, over the following

decade, the FBI investigated a small number of violent far Right activists but they were generally seen as loners or marginal figures carrying out inexplicable acts of violence.⁹⁶

In the last two years, a new analysis has emerged, shaped by the context of the Trump presidency. In 2019, the FBI Agents Association, which represents more than fourteen thousand active and former Bureau agents, called upon Congress to make domestic terrorism a federal crime. Democrat Adam Schiff, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, also proposed a Domestic Terrorism Act, citing the need to tackle white supremacist attacks.⁹⁷ Both proposals involved extending the infrastructure of the War on Terror to target white supremacist violence. Then, in the days after the January 2021 far-Right attack on the Capitol, commentators repeatedly drew analogies to the War on Terror. Democrat Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island compared the day to 9/11, when the Capitol was also evacuated.⁹⁸ The *New York Times* reported that the assault “resulted in one of the worst days of injuries for law enforcement in the United States since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks”.⁹⁹ The *Times*’s opinion writer Elliot Ackerman wrote that the Capitol attack reminded him of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁰⁰ Robert Grenier argued that the counterinsurgency techniques he had deployed as director of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center and station chief in Pakistan and Afghanistan ought to be applied domestically to the far Right.¹⁰¹ The implication was clear: like 9/11 before it, the Capitol attack would provide a new rationale to justify the national security system’s inflated budgets and exceptional powers of surveillance and criminalization. Under President Biden, the Director of National Intelligence, the National Security Agency, the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI are all involved in new assessments of the threat of “domestic violent extremism” and developing a comprehensive response.¹⁰² The main part of that response will involve criminalization but it is possible there will also be measures to identify extremist radicalization

through community surveillance – modeling the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies that emerged in the War on Terror.

This approach to the problem of the far Right is both superficial and dangerous. It assumes that the solution primarily lies in the criminalization of far-Right individuals involved in acts of political violence. In fact, no new legal powers would be needed to prosecute such individuals.¹⁰³ But there is a danger in redefining the problem of a mass, armed far-Right movement in the US as a problem of extremist individuals who are marginal to society. Thinking of those individuals as disconnected from the mainstream social and political processes that shaped them – including the War on Terror itself – means the underlying drivers of far-Right violence will not be tackled. And then, given the extent of popular support for the movement, for every person arrested, a new recruit will be found. The effort to criminalize the far Right’s “hate crimes” will end up as a spectacle of liberal progress, reassuring elite progressives that the federal government is fighting white supremacy, while leaving its structures intact. Moreover, a narrow criminalization approach puts the national security infrastructure at the center of the fight against the far Right.

There is a complete failure to recognize that the national security agencies who now offer themselves as the solution to the problem of the far Right were, with their endless wars, themselves responsible for fueling the problem.

As a new, well-funded infrastructure of federal laws, policies, and initiatives emerges to tackle the far Right, it will begin to use its power to shape public discussion about white supremacy. Black, Indigenous, and other communities who have developed their own strategies for confronting the

far Right will find their agendas squashed by the weight of the federal policy process, even as it is fronted by persons of color. New definitions that suit the national security system will be enshrined.

Terms like “terrorism,” “extremism,” and “radicalization” will become mainstream ways of talking about racist violence, even though they frame the problem in a way that erases the major source of racist violence – the state itself.

In a society like the US, organized through structures of racial capitalism, the state is not a neutral space that defends society from various kinds of extremism on its flanks. Rather, the state creates the material conditions within which movements of the far Right flourish. Its capacities for border, carceral, police, and military violence are organized and coded in racial terms, giving official legitimacy to the far Right’s racist rhetoric. Moreover, these capacities will only be strengthened by the newly emerging domestic terrorism agenda. If agencies like the FBI have their counter-terrorism budgets expanded and are granted new powers, they will use them to increase the criminalization of racially subordinated groups. This is what happened after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, carried out by Timothy McVeigh, a Gulf war veteran and participant in the white power movement.¹⁰⁴ In response to the bombing, President Clinton signed into law the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which included a ban on “material support” to terrorism, a legal provision that subsequently became the main instrument for criminalizing Muslims and targeting supporters of the Palestinian struggle in the US.¹⁰⁵ Today, when agencies call for resources to tackle “domestic terrorism,” it is commonly understood as part of the effort to tackle white supremacist groups. But “domestic

terrorism” is a term that will also be deployed to target the Black Lives Matter movement, oil and gas pipeline protestors, and groups organizing *against* the far Right – all recent targets of FBI counter-terrorism agents.¹⁰⁶

The proposals to use CVE measures to identify and prevent far-Right “radicalization” are misguided for the same reasons. Such an approach assumes that community organizations, educators, and mental health professionals can identify individuals displaying “the early signs of radicalization” to far-Right ideology, who might then be monitored by law enforcement agencies or engaged to change their beliefs.¹⁰⁷ But such an approach assumes an analytical model in which ideological indicators of radicalization can plausibly be interpreted as signs of future violent behavior. No such model exists, in part because far-Right ideology cannot be neatly separated from mainstream social norms. The two blur into each other to such an extent that any project of identifying far-Right “radicalization” will either be so narrowly conceived as to be redundant or so broadly drawn that the law enforcement agencies involved in the policy will have to categorize themselves as extremist organizations in need of de-radicalization.

Like the War on Terror before it, the new mobilization against the far Right fails to fully confront the problem it ostensibly seeks to solve. The root causes of the far-Right movement lie in long-term processes of racial capitalism, from the militarization of the border to the War on Terror itself. Whereas the problem of Muslim political violence in the US has been greatly overstated, the problem of the far Right has been understated. Even after the attack on the Capitol in January 2021, no government agency has acknowledged the scale of the problem of the far Right movement, with its likely hundreds of thousands of participants, let alone produced a compelling plan to address it. There is no prospect of such a strategy in the foreseeable future.

To adequately tackle the danger the far Right poses will require reckoning with the ways that the far Right is not an adversary of the national security state but its adjunct.

As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes, for the US far Right's "words, rhetoric, and desired future differ little from those ... who actually control the federal institutions and many of the state governments. White nationalists are the irregular forces – the volunteer militias – of the actually existing political-economic order. They are provided for in the Second Amendment."¹⁰⁸

An armed, far-Right mass movement presents a dilemma for an abolitionist framework. On the one hand, abolitionism recognizes the limits of any solution centered upon granting greater powers and resources to law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, it is hard to see how the violence of the far Right could be reduced except through criminalization. But the dilemma can be overcome by understanding the far Right as an adjunct to the national security infrastructure. The far Right appears then not simply as a problem of crime but as a movement that indirectly derives its capacity for violence from broader structures of power, such as the military and law enforcement. The issue is disarmament and disbanding rather than criminalization. The implicit support that the national security infrastructure provides the far Right will need to be rolled back. Ending the US's "forever wars" abroad, for example, would remove a major driver of the far Right's growth. And, because the far Right's power rests to a large degree on its weaponry, building the movement to remove weapons of war from US society will also be essential. Only this kind of broader demilitarization of the US and beginning the process of dismantling the structures of racial capitalism will make it possible to disarm and disable the threat of far Right violence.

Disaster nationalism

The climate and pandemic crises would seem to be naturally unsuited to a concept of security defined in terms of eliminating "bad actors." They appear instead to imply a principle of human solidarity and require responses involving collective action to advance shared human interests. These dangers are challenges to the logic of racial security and to neoliberal states that have for decades reduced their ability to act in the name of the public interest to no more than policing and warfare. This is one reason why there is a tendency in neoliberal culture to insist that these dangers simply do not exist, in spite of the overwhelming scientific evidence. But alongside straightforward denialism, there is also a "disaster nationalism" that involves acknowledging environmental collapse but then seeing it as a pretext to draw lines of national or racial demarcation between those who will be protected and those who will be abandoned.¹⁰⁹ This in turn offers a basis for incorporating policy responses to Covid-19 and the heating of the planet within the nexus of national security.

For some time, the Pentagon has folded climate crisis into its regular threat assessment models. There are three main concerns: that rising sea levels and wildfires might destroy military infrastructure, that alternatives to fossil fuels might have to be found to power the military, and that, as climate change unfolds, new security threats will arise, such as conflicts over resources and mass migrations. Since at least 2003, the Department of Defense has been preparing an "armed lifeboat" response to climate change that involves the use of military violence to ensure certain privileged groups are saved while others are sacrificed to the forces of environmental destruction and social disorder.¹¹⁰ By 2014, the Department of Defense was integrating climate change considerations into all its operations, training, and strategic planning. A Pentagon study produced that year described a scenario of "climbing sea levels and more extreme weather events" producing a future of "food and water shortages,

pandemic disease, disputes over refugees and resources, and destruction by natural disasters in regions across the globe.” In response, the Pentagon states that the military’s “unique capability to provide logistical, material, and security assistance on a massive scale or in rapid fashion may be called upon with increasing frequency.” And the “uprooting and displacing” of large numbers of people will contribute to “an avenue for extremist ideologies and conditions that foster terrorism.”¹¹¹ The picture is of a world threatening to collapse into chaos and the US military as a necessary source of order. Of course, the solution to these problems that the Pentagon offers is more military resources, which itself literally fuels the problem.

The Biden White House has said it will take aggressive action to tackle climate change, pursuing what it calls a “clean energy revolution” instead of a Green New Deal. It has also stated it will “center the climate crisis in US foreign policy and national security considerations.” The Director of National Intelligence is preparing a report on the security implications of climate change and the Pentagon has been asked to conduct a new analysis that can be incorporated into “modeling, simulation, war-gaming, and other analyses.”¹¹² John Kerry has been appointed as a special presidential envoy for climate and also given a seat on the National Security Council, a sign that climate crisis is a national security matter. This heralds a world in which, as the effects of climate change intensify, the US military acts with a self-ascribed global sovereignty to police protest, social collapse, and the mass movement of refugees, all in the name of a planetary emergency. In such a scenario, the US military, itself the world’s single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases, will cast the world’s poor in South Asia and Africa, the primary victims of climate change, as threats to be kept off the “armed lifeboat” that the US tries to launch.¹¹³

The US response to the Covid-19 pandemic has also been distorted to fit a logic of racial security. A global public health problem that requires a well-resourced international response through a global body like the World Health Organization, acting in the interests of the health of humanity as a whole, has instead been seen as an issue of nation-state antagonism.

The conspiracy theory that the virus was an act of war by China has become a political force. The idea of a deliberate biological attack originating from a Wuhan virus lab has circulated not only among the online far Right but also in Fox News headlines.¹¹⁴ Members of Congress have suggested punishments that include sanctioning Chinese leaders, cutting Chinese drug manufacturers out of supply chains and withholding debt payments.¹¹⁵ More generally, an image of Chinese culture as overly deferential to authority and barbaric in its culinary tastes has been linked to the emergence of Covid-19.

It is of course true that the virus originated in China and that authorities there initially withheld information about the virus from the public. But an explanation of the origins of Covid-19 has to take into account how, as Andreas Malm puts it, “China could become the cradle of this disease only because global tendencies were present in concentrated form.”¹¹⁶ The wet markets that were possibly the vector for Covid-19’s emergence were not manifestations of Chinese tradition but had been transformed into luxury shopping experiences for the new rich, whose demand for wildlife had increased dramatically with the neoliberalization of China. More fundamentally, the deforestation that causes pandemic-inducing zoonotic spillover is not explicable in terms of Chinese culture so much as the demand among wealthy consumers in cities like London and New York for products

grown in the tropics.¹¹⁷ Additional factors were the deterioration of public healthcare in China and the severe air pollution in Wuhan, which were not the result of a distinctly Chinese authoritarianism but of China's embedding in global capitalism.¹¹⁸

The theory that China deliberately released Covid-19 from a lab and the belief that the virus somehow emanates from Chinese culture offer the US comforting collective delusions at a time when the US has struggled to find culturally acceptable ways to collectively mourn the deaths of over half a million people. The dead have been disproportionately older, and therefore regarded as "unproductive," and more likely to be Black, immigrant, or poor care workers.¹¹⁹ Nurses of Filipino descent, for example, comprise four per cent of the workforce but nearly a third of registered nurse deaths due to Covid-19.¹²⁰ Their deaths are not legible as national sacrifices in the way those who died on 9/11 or fighting US wars have been mourned. Displacing the problem onto China makes it possible to avoid thinking too hard about the difficult questions the pandemic ought to induce: why the pandemic occurred and why certain groups were especially vulnerable to the havoc it caused. Any truthful response to these questions would have to include pointing out, with Mike Davis, that "capitalist globalization now appears to be biologically unsustainable in the absence of a truly international public health infrastructure."¹²¹ But that is to speak the unspeakable. Instead, anti-Chinese theories are structured around a disavowal of such inconvenient truths. The increasing frequency of anti-Asian racist violence is an inevitable symptom of that disavowal.

Once vaccines had been developed, the US government could claim to save its citizens from the virus without having to address the underlying factors that generated the pandemic and exacerbated the inequalities in its effects. The global governance of vaccine distribution was organized through Covax, a group closely affiliated with the World Economic Forum, in order to deliberately bypass accountability through

multilateral bodies like the United Nations and the World Health Organization, enable conditions to be imposed on poorer countries receiving vaccines, and uphold the commercial interests of pharmaceutical corporations.¹²² By early 2021, it was clear that a global vaccine apartheid was emerging, in which only a tiny percentage of people in the global South would be vaccinated, while rich countries bought enough doses to vaccinate their populations three times over.¹²³ This portends a future in which wealthy nations seek to isolate their vaccinated populations from the rest of the world through a border regime of travel corridors and vaccine passports. Salim Abdool Karim, the chair of the South African government's coronavirus advisory panel, has pointed out that this is ultimately self-defeating. "Fundamentally, there's a mistaken belief by some countries that they can vaccinate their populations and they'll be safe. It simply is not true. In this world that we live in, with this coronavirus, no-one is safe until everyone is safe."¹²⁴

Seize the time

In the aftermath of the Trump presidency and Covid-19, old certainties have been thrown in the air. A new national security imaginary has yet to form, providing an opportunity for alternatives to be popularized. Given the forces weighed against change, there is no easy optimism to be found. **But there are cracks in the dominant security logic that could be prized open.** US public opinion is skeptical of the endless wars. Around two-thirds think the 2003 Iraq war was a mistake and over half think the US should not have deployed military force in Afghanistan or Syria. Veterans are just as likely to oppose these wars as anyone else.¹²⁵ In both the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections, the winning candidate stood on a platform of military withdrawal (even though Presidents Obama and Trump both subsequently increased military deployment). Not only is there opposition to the US fighting specific wars but there is also support

for defunding the national security infrastructure as a whole: a clear majority in the US favors cutting the defense budget by a tenth and reallocating those resources to disease control and other public services.¹²⁶ Despite its popularity, legislation introduced to achieve this defunding was easily defeated in Congress.¹²⁷

The body of opinion in favor of military defunding lacks the momentum and energy that comes from grassroots organizational power – the only force capable of overcoming the vested interests and ideological barriers that have stood in the way of coming to terms with US violence. Fifty years ago, when progressive movements in the US were last at a peak of organizational power, in the shadow of the Vietnam War, Congress did take steps to reduce the power of the national security infrastructure. The ninety-third Congress, from 1973 to 1975, was, according to Greg Gandrin, perhaps the “most anti-imperial legislature in United States history.” In this period, Congress gave itself the power to review and reverse White House decisions to fight wars; made intelligence agencies more accountable; abolished two national security entities, the Un-American Activities Committee and the Office of Public Safety; and banned US military support to authoritarian groups and governments in Angola, Chile, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey.¹²⁸

*Today, once again, a generation of young people is on the streets. Abolitionist demands, such as the call to abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement and defund police forces, are central to these movements. Grassroots organizations in Muslim and Palestinian communities have called for the abolition of the War on Terror and its resources to be reinvested in structures of community care.*¹²⁹

Campaigners in San Francisco, Oakland, and Portland have succeeded, at least for a time, in pushing local law enforcement agencies to withdraw from Joint Terrorism Task Forces and to cease sharing information with them – a step towards a broader dismantling.¹³⁰ At the same time, a Left flank has been opened up in the Democratic Party providing space to articulate implicitly abolitionist demands. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for example, has called for the Department of Homeland Security to be disbanded.¹³¹ Pressure is building in Congress from the Left for the US to entirely cease its support for Saudi Arabia’s war on Yemen, which has caused approximately a quarter of a million direct deaths and placed an estimated 13.5 million Yemenis in a food emergency.¹³² There is no immediate prospect of these developments leading to a deep transformation in national security policy-making. But they are the building blocks for a possible future process of change in which the US begins to move away from the fantasies of domination that currently shape national security policy-making. It is no longer plausible to believe that there is simply no possible alternative to the current security logic.

Three broad areas of engagement will be necessary for an alternative approach to be realized. **First, there will need to be intensified efforts of grassroots organizing, informed by an abolitionist perspective applied to the US’s global infrastructure of violence.** Deciding



how best to organize and what specific issues to confront will be a matter for individual initiatives and campaign groups. For one group, the focus might be US sanctions policies, for another, it might be the War on Drugs in Latin America, for another, nuclear disarmament. Despite fighting on different fronts, these various campaigns will all be oriented towards a horizon of national security abolitionism.

Second, there will need to be a push to achieve whatever is possible through electoral and policy advocacy means. First steps might include demands to reduce the number of US military bases around the world, canceling new weapons systems, and disbanding the United States Africa Command. A fuller agenda would include dismantling the infrastructure of the War on Terror and the War on Drugs: legalizing drug use, halting US financial and logistical support for militarized violence carried out by other governments in the name of countering terrorists or narcotics traffickers, repealing authoritarian counter-terrorist legislation, and closing down the prison at Guantánamo Bay. Add to this a halting of US arms exports and other forms of security assistance and funding to governments that carry out severe human rights abuses, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Diverting resources from the US military would not only reduce one of the drivers of conflict and cut carbon emissions but would also free public resources and political space to address the structural causes of the problems the US military claims only it can solve.

What security alternatives might be pursued would vary by context. At the level of foreign policy, there would need to be a commitment to focusing upon sustaining peace and development through

conflict resolution, debt relief, and reparations programs that empower local communities rather than make financial aid conditional on acceptance of US counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, or migration control initiatives. The US should also renew its commitment to the international systems of collective security established after World War II with the creation of the United Nations. The US itself drafted the elements of international law that limit the use of force across borders to self-defense in response to an imminent or ongoing armed attack. With US encouragement, this principle was incorporated into the United Nations Charter, drawn up at San Francisco in 1945. Whatever the institutional weaknesses of the United Nations, its founding principles remain a valid basis for a system of international collective security in a world where several states have expansionist aims.¹³³ At the local level, the withdrawal of US and US-funded military power could enable alternative institutions of public safety to be developed. These might draw upon experiences of community-based security cultivated in locations where the state has failed to protect its citizens. Raúl Zibechi has, for example, written about how in Colombia, in the shadow of the War on Drugs, Indigenous peoples in the department of Cauca have successfully protected themselves and their land from paramilitaries, guerrilla forces, and multinational corporations by forming unarmed guard units. Unlike police forces, these involve all community members taking turns as guards, are accountable to local assemblies, and aim at restorative justice.¹³⁴

Third, there will need to be a struggle to remove the ideological barriers to a reckoning with the US's history of racial violence and to come to terms with the US's declining power. Acknowledging and commemorating the injustices of the past, from settler colonialism to the War on Terror, will be a crucial part of this process. One way such an acknowledgement can be achieved is to take down symbols that celebrate past racist violence, as protestors have sought to do in recent years. Another is through forms of restorative justice. In

2016, for example, four thousand veterans came to Standing Rock in North Dakota, where Indigenous people were fighting the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline. The veterans met with a group of Sioux leaders to apologize for the colonial violence of their military units and offered their political solidarity in the struggle against the pipeline.¹³⁵ At the national level, a progressive step would be the construction of a landmark monument to the lives lost to US military violence, from Wounded Knee to Waziristan.

Twice before in US history, there has been a major opportunity to overcome racism, prioritize care over killing, and embrace the reciprocity that constitutes humanity – first, in the era of reconstruction after the abolition of slavery, and then in the heyday of the Black freedom and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. As a third such opportunity begins to become a possibility in the United States – with climate and pandemic crises looming – we must once again seize the time to fulfill the promise of those earlier moments.

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