



The **Warfare** State

*How Funding for Militarism
Compromises Our Welfare*

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National Priorities Project
a project of the Institute for Policy Studies

Cover design and layout by Sarah Gertler,
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Key Findings

- In FY 2023, out of a \$1.8 trillion federal discretionary budget, \$1.1 trillion — or 62% — was for militarized programs that use violence or the threat of violence or imprisonment, including war and weapons, law enforcement and mass incarceration, and detention and deportation.
- Less than \$2 out of every \$5 in federal discretionary spending was available to fund investment in people and communities, including primary and secondary public education, housing programs, child care programs, federal disaster relief, environmental programs, and scientific research.
- Compared to 2001, the U.S. has added \$2 to the discretionary budget for militarism for every \$1 added to invest in communities.
- The U.S. spent \$16 on the military and war for every \$1 that was spent on diplomacy and humanitarian foreign aid. The vast majority of militarized spending was for weapons, war and the Pentagon, at \$920 billion. Only \$56 billion was spent for international affairs, diplomacy, and humanitarian foreign aid.
- The U.S. spent \$51.1 billion for homeland security, approximately half of which goes to ICE (\$8.8 billion) and CBP (\$17.4 billion), the agencies responsible for deportations, family separations, and violent apprehension at the southern border. That's nearly three times spending on substance abuse and mental health programs (\$7.5 billion), even as opioid use remains a major cause of death.
- The U.S. federal budget allocated twice as much for federal law enforcement, which includes federal prisons, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies (\$31 billion), as for child care and early childhood education programs (\$15 billion).
- Spending on care for veterans nearly tripled since 2001, following twenty years of war, repeated deployments for the 3 million veterans who served in the post-9/11 wars, and rampant physical and mental health needs of returning veterans.
- Spending on homeland security (excluding FEMA) has more than doubled since 2001, and spending on the military and nuclear weapons has grown by 80 percent, in inflation-adjusted terms.

Militarism Mania

The U.S. military budget is currently \$920 billion¹, the [highest level on record during peacetime](#), and higher than the [next 10 countries'](#) military spending combined. U.S. military spending also accounts for [more than half](#) of the federal discretionary budget that Congress allocates each year.

The [discretionary budget](#) also provides the vast majority of federal spending for most federal programs, including those for housing, K-12 education, childcare, public health, clean air and water, food and drug safety, medical research, and more. These priorities – with major exceptions being Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and SNAP (food stamps) – must all vie for funding from the same federal discretionary pot.

In the discretionary budget, military spending is complemented by a host of other programs that accomplish similar ends with similar means – those that enforce official U.S. preferences and laws through violence or the threat of violence. Militarism in the federal government comprises the military and war, so-called “homeland security,” including border and immigration enforcement, federal law enforcement, and the downstream effects of militarism – namely a sprawling, if necessary, apparatus to care for U.S. military veterans.

At the time of this writing, the country’s economy faces a dire threat from the majority in Congress who are demanding [deep cuts](#) to the discretionary budget, in exchange for raising the nation’s legislated debt limit. Without timely resolution, the nation could default on its debts. Consequences could include a devastating recession, and the sudden cessation of everything from [Social Security checks to military pay](#). It is not the first time, and likely not the last, that lawmakers on the right have wielded this threat.

And yet, the same legislators who have demanded billions in savings from the discretionary budget also promised to [exempt the single largest portion of that budget](#), military spending, from any cuts. Some have indicated that military spending, veterans’ programs, and homeland security should even receive increases, shifting the burden of cuts further onto human needs programs. These are three of the largest segments of the federal discretionary budget.

All told, militarism in the federal discretionary budget – including the military itself, veterans’ programs, homeland security (excluding the Federal Emergency Management Agency), and federal law enforcement accounted for \$1.1 trillion, or 62 percent, of the \$1.8 trillion total discretionary budget in FY 2023. The vast

¹ Including the Department of Defense, nuclear weapons in the Department of Energy, foreign military aid and related expenses categorized as defense by the federal government.



majority of that was for the military, including the Department of Defense, nuclear weapons in the Department of Energy, foreign military assistance, and other related expenses.²

Figure 1. Militarism in the Discretionary Budget Totaled \$1.1 Trillion in FY 2023

Program	FY 2023 Budget
Military	\$920.8 billion
Veterans	\$135.4 billion
Homeland security	\$51.1 billion
Federal law enforcement	\$31.5 billion
Total Militarized	\$1.14 trillion

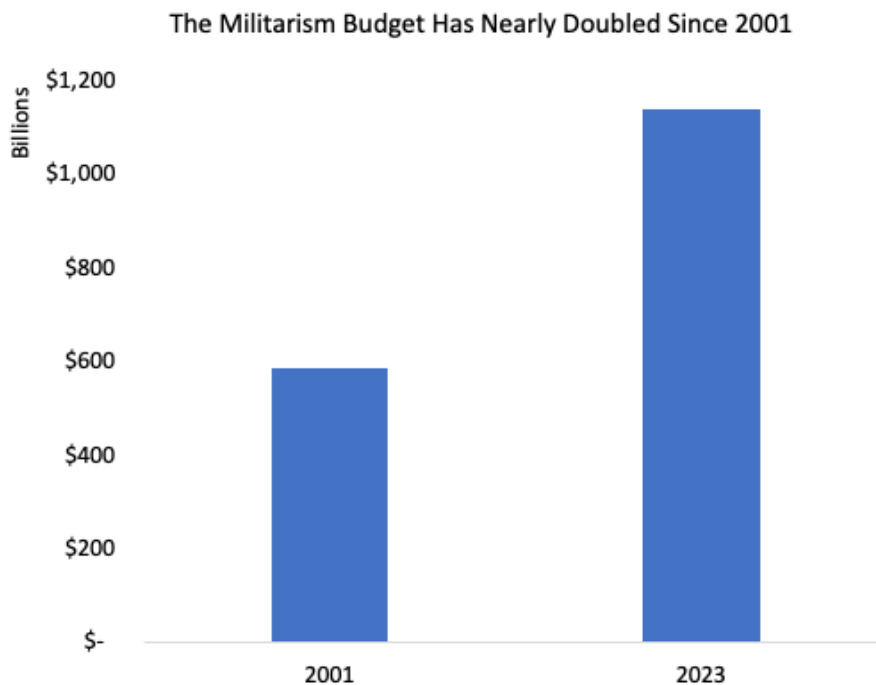
Source: Office of Management and Budget

Militarism in the federal discretionary budget is now nearly twice its level in 2001 (a 94 percent increase), adjusted for inflation. In inflation-adjusted terms, military spending has grown by 80 percent since 2001, homeland security spending (excluding FEMA) has more than doubled (214 percent), and discretionary spending on veterans' programs has nearly tripled (299 percent). During this time period, militarized spending increased by \$552 billion, while non-militarized spending increased by just \$273 billion, meaning that for every \$1 that non-militarized spending grew, militarized spending grew by \$2.

² Military spending follows the definition of federal national defense spending (budget function 050), plus foreign military assistance (subfunction 152).



Figure 2. The Militarism Budget Has Nearly Doubled Since 2001



All figures are in 2023 Dollars. Source: Office of Management and Budget.

Figure 3. Militarism has grown by \$2 for every \$1 in non-militarized spending

Program	2001	2023	Change
Military	\$510 billion	\$921 billion	80%
Veterans	\$34 billion	\$135 billion	299%
Homeland Security (except FEMA)	\$16 billion	\$51 billion	214%
Law enforcement	\$27 billion	\$32 billion	18%
Total militarized	\$587 billion	\$1.1 trillion	94%
Non-militarized	\$412 billion	\$685 billion	66%

All figures are in 2023 Dollars. Source: Office of Management and Budget.



Redefining Security

Spending on the military and homeland security has too often failed to meaningfully contribute to security. Future funding decisions must recognize these failures.

The U.S. exited a twenty-year war in Afghanistan that is widely recognized to have [been a failure](#). The Iraq war was [based on false premises](#) and ran nearly as long. Together, those wars and the larger post-9/11 U.S. response cost more than [\\$8 trillion](#) and contributed to a horrific [death toll of 4.5 million people](#) in affected regions.

But the failures go even deeper than that. Promises that U.S. military spending and prowess would guarantee security in Europe [failed to deter](#) a Russian invasion of Ukraine, and so far, tens of billions of dollars in military aid and a gargantuan U.S. military budget that [outspent Russia by more than 10 to 1](#) have failed to end the Russian war in Ukraine.

These are matched by the failures of the military's many [private contractors](#), who account for roughly half of the Department of Defense's budget in any given year. The department's largest contractor, Lockheed Martin, took in [\\$75 billion in government funds](#) in FY 2020, a budget larger than most federal agencies. Lockheed is also responsible for the boondoggle F-35 jet fighter, a weapons program that has run billions over budget and is still plagued by serious problems despite [22 years in development](#). Further examples, like the [Littoral Combat Ship](#) (another Lockheed project) that the Navy is seeking to retire early in its career due to its many failures, add to the expense.

And there is the failure of the Department of Defense to pass an audit. With its \$848 billion budget in FY 2023, the Department of Defense recently failed its [fifth audit](#) in a row. It is the only [major federal agency](#) never to pass a financial audit. In an example of the Pentagons' failure to account for its nearly trillion-dollar budget, in May 2023 it was reported that the Pentagon had made a [\\$3 billion "accounting error"](#) that affected the weapons it was able to send to Ukraine. The Pentagon does not know where its money goes.

Veterans' programs are a simple necessity as a byproduct of twenty years of war. Spending on veterans' services has grown as a result of a U.S. military conveyor belt through which as many as [3 million veterans](#) have served in the post-9/11 wars. Twenty years of war characterized by constant deployments mean that many veterans have complex and long-term economic, physical, and mental health needs, [driving costs up](#). Care for those veterans should rightly be a non-negotiable responsibility of the federal government. At the same time, further cost increases



should be controlled by ending wars of choice and reducing overreliance on the military to further U.S. politicians' geopolitical aims.

The department and programs coined as “homeland security” by the second Bush administration have fared no better than the U.S. military apparatus. At a cost of [\\$1.4 trillion](#) over its first twenty years, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been responsible for the deportations of [five million people](#), most of whom broke no law other than by simply being present on U.S. soil.

The recent end of Title 42, the pandemic-era program that turned away migrants regardless of their legal eligibility for asylum, has so far been characterized by [modest numbers of border crossings](#), contrary to sensational predictions made by immigration opponents. Nevertheless, the end of the program has fed into the militarization of the southern border as the Biden administration surged [1,500 military troops to the southern border](#) and has [continued Trump-era immigration detention and deportation policies](#).

The “homeland security” approach also bears responsibility for the rampant growth of racism and fear-mongering in U.S. immigration policy. Those policies range from the Trump-era [“Muslim ban”](#) on travelers and immigrants from certain countries, to the Bush-era [“special registration”](#) programs that likewise promulgated Islamophobic approaches that substituted profiling and discrimination for real security. Even though immigration enforcement makes up one-third of the department's budget (see figure), nothing in its portfolio is capable of addressing the challenges posed by migration in the 21st century. Neither is the department succeeding at stemming the opioid crisis that continues to claim [tens of thousands](#) of U.S. lives each year, despite drug trafficking being a primary focus of the department.

Here the DHS is joined by the Department of Justice (DOJ), whose [war on drugs](#) has been decades in the making and is also widely regarded as a failure. U.S. law enforcement agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration and FBI also [routinely operate outside U.S. borders](#), blurring the line between military and domestic law enforcement. DOJ forces often work closely with the law enforcement agencies at the heart of “homeland security.”

The U.S. has the [highest incarceration rate of any country in the world](#). DOJ's role in [mass incarceration](#) (one-third of the DOJ budget is for prisons) and aid to state and local police forces (14 percent of the DOJ budget) undermines its role in federal accountability for [racist carceral practices](#) and [police killings and brutality](#) that have increasingly sparked soul-searching and protest over the past ten years.

Figure 4. Militarism in the discretionary budget: Where the money goes

Program	FY 2023 Budget
Military	\$920.8 billion
Department of Defense	\$848.8 billion
Nuclear weapons	\$31.6 billion
Foreign military aid	\$29.5 billion
Other (intelligence, etc.)	\$10.9 billion
Veterans' Benefits	\$135.4 billion
Veterans Health Administration	\$123.7 billion
Income and other supports	\$11.7 billion
Homeland security	\$51.1 billion
Customs and Border Protection	\$17.4 billion
Coast Guard	\$11.2 billion
Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	\$8.8 billion
Transportation Security Administration	\$6.5 billion
Other	\$7.2 billion
Federal law enforcement	\$31.5 billion
Prisons and detention	\$10.8 billion
Federal Bureau of Investigation	\$5 billion
Law enforcement grants (state, local & tribal)	\$4.5 billion
Drug Enforcement Administration	\$2.6 billion
Prosecutors	\$2.6 billion
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives	\$1.7 billion
U.S. Marshals	\$1.7 billion
Other	\$2.6 billion
Total Militarized	\$1.14 trillion

Source: Office of Management and Budget

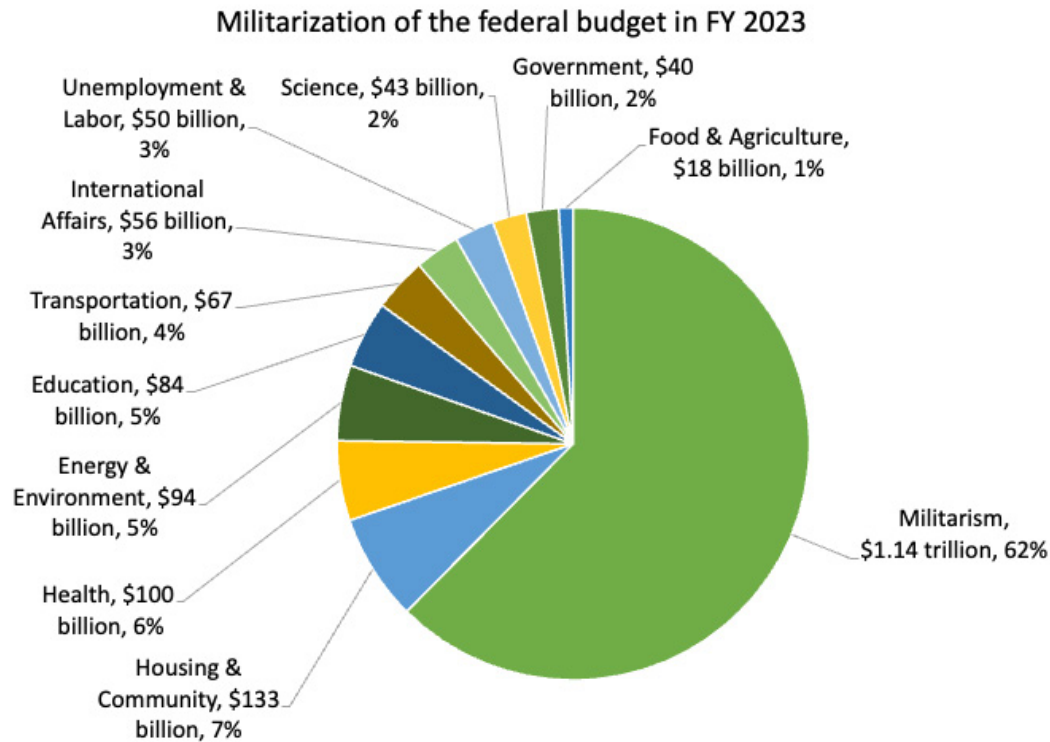
Yet Congress continues to fund these militarized programs – the military, homeland security³, and federal law enforcement – nearly as a matter of faith. Together with veterans' programs, which have spiraled in cost in recent years in large part due to the past 20 years of war, these programs account for 62 percent of the \$1.8 trillion federal discretionary budget.

³ This definition of militarism in the federal budget exempts the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is housed within DHS. While counterterrorism is part of FEMA's mission, the majority of spending in recent years has been in response to natural disasters.



By contrast, less than \$2 out of every \$5 in discretionary spending went to programs that provide economic or social security, including primary and secondary education, affordable housing, public health, child care, clean air and water protection, emergency responses to floods, wildfires and storms, and medical research.

Figure 5. Militarism Accounts for 62 Percent of Discretionary Spending



Source: Office of Management and Budget

The harm these programs have done is compounded by the parallel failure to invest in other urgent needs and crises. The Department of Homeland Security received more than [seven times](#) the funding for the Centers for Disease Control over the past 20 years, contributing to the underpreparedness that allowed the U.S. to reach [1.1 million deaths](#) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. has also failed to meaningfully address the climate crisis. For what the U.S. spent on our military during the 9/11 wars, we could have invested in a fully renewable national electric grid to slow the effects of climate change – nearly [four times over](#).

Likewise, road, rail and air traffic safety programs show signs of underinvestment, as became apparent during the [FAA system outage](#) that grounded thousands of

flights, or the toxic threat created by a [train derailment](#) in East Palestine, Ohio.

And many K-12 public schools that are already facing [staffing shortages and a student mental health crisis](#) are dependent on federal aid to provide a bulwark against the heavily local, unequal funding provided by cities and states.

Even without proposed cuts to non-militarized discretionary spending, programs that provide security in health, housing, education, international affairs and environmental safety are badly lagging in funding:

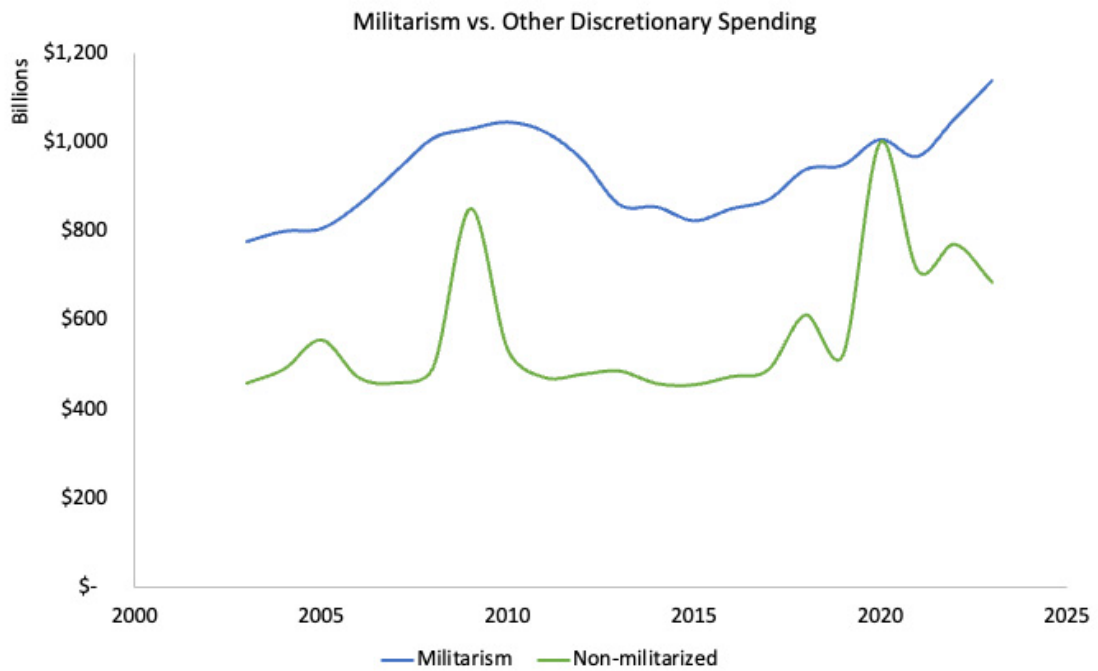
- Less than \$2 out of every \$5 in federal discretionary spending was available to fund investment in people and communities, including primary and secondary public education, housing programs, child care programs, federal disaster relief, environmental programs, and scientific research.
- The U.S. spent \$16 on the military and war for every \$1 that was spent on diplomacy and humanitarian foreign aid. The vast majority of militarized spending was for weapons, war, and the Pentagon, at \$920 billion. Only \$56 billion was spent for international affairs, diplomacy, and humanitarian foreign aid.
- The U.S. spent \$51.1 billion for homeland security, approximately half of which goes to ICE (\$8.8 billion) and CBP (\$17.4 billion), the agencies responsible for deportations, family separations, and violent apprehension at the southern border. That's nearly three times spending on substance abuse and mental health programs (\$7.5 billion), even as opioid use remains a major cause of death.
- The U.S. federal budget allocated twice as much for federal law enforcement, including federal prisons, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies (\$31 billion) as for child care and early childhood education programs (\$15 billion).

In fact, in the past twenty years, the only time that discretionary funding for non-militarized programs equaled the militarism budget was at the height of the COVID pandemic, when Congress enacted billions to stem the dual health and economic crises. Congress has now ended those programs, ranging from the extension of the Child Tax Credit that was responsible for [nearly halving child poverty](#), to pandemic aid to K-12 schools.⁴ Even the government stimulus passed to aid recovery for the Great Recession did not come close to equaling militarized spending in the discretionary budget.

⁴ Part of the negotiation over extending the debt limit and funding the federal government hinges on whether to “claw back” [unspent COVID aid](#).



Figure 6. Non-militarized spending trails militarism in the discretionary budget



All figures are in 2023 Dollars. Source: Office of Management and Budget.

Recommendations

To end the practice of funding militarism to the detriment of other programs and the U.S. public, these steps could reduce spending on militarism and allow for reinvestment in other priorities, ranging from affordable housing and anti-poverty programs to public health, education, climate change, clean air and water, and more.

1. Immediately reduce the budget for the Pentagon and nuclear weapons by \$100 billion or more, and reinvest the savings in non-militarized discretionary priorities. There are multiple paths to achieve these savings while keeping the U.S. safe:
 - a. The Congressional Budget Office found that the U.S. military could achieve [\\$100 billion in savings](#) without changing the country's national security strategy. The military budget has grown substantially since this estimate, meaning real potential for cuts could be greater.
 - b. A Department of Defense study found [\\$125 billion](#) in unnecessary back-office expenses that could be trimmed. (Interestingly, the Pentagon buried the report.)
 - c. Military experts, including Pentagon leaders, have called for divesting from weapons programs that are wasteful, ineffective, unnecessary, or even dangerous. These include but are not limited to the [F-35 jet fighter](#), the [Littoral Combat Ship](#), and planned reinvestment in [nuclear weapons](#). Savings could reach trillions of dollars over the next several decades.
 - d. The U.S. has more than [750 military installations](#) in more than 80 countries around the world, many dating as far back as World War II. Closing bases that support authoritarian governments, those that are opposed by local residents, and those that serve questionable security purposes could save billions.
 - e. Reduce reliance on contractors, who account for [half of the Pentagon budget](#) each year. Over the ten-year period from 2011-2020, Pentagon contractors took in [\\$3.4 trillion](#) in public funds. Studies have shown that Pentagon contractors provide the [same services at a higher cost than government workers](#).



2. Make any future Pentagon spending increases contingent on the Department of Defense passing an audit. The Department of Defense is the only [major federal agency](#) never to pass an audit, and has [failed its audits for the past five years](#).
3. Increase congressional oversight to make it harder for the U.S. to go to war and accrue war debt. Two [military force authorization votes](#) in the early aughts led the U.S. into twenty years of war, at a cost of [\\$8 trillion](#), and cost many veterans and their families their stability and health. As of today, those military authorizations still stand, and one of them has provided the legal justification for [ongoing military missions](#) as part of the post-9/11 wars. Congress must not abdicate responsibility for current U.S. military actions by allowing decades-old military authorizations to stand.
4. Restructure the country's immigration system to support robust legal immigration and current undocumented residents – and cut spending for structures that are built to deter immigration and deport immigrants, including Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These two agencies, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), are responsible for the deportation of 5 million people over the past 20 years and have a combined budget of \$26 billion in FY 2023. The vast majority of those deported had committed no crime besides their presence in the country, and many had jobs and families.
5. End federal support for racist and counterproductive carceral and policing practices, including the war on drugs. In a country with the highest incarceration rate in the world, one-third of the Department of Justice budget is for prisons and policing, and billions more goes toward supporting state and local law enforcement and fighting the war on drugs. Reinvest in alternatives including anti-poverty programs, community support and mental health services, and substance use support programs.

Rewriting Priorities

The failures of U.S. militarism in the 21st century have been vast. They include the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the high suicide rate among military veterans; the faltering U.S. immigration system that relies on deportations and force instead of humane and deliberate immigration management; a failed war on drugs and a law enforcement system that reinforces legacies of racism in policing and mass incarceration.

Protecting these programs at the expense of investments in housing, education, public health, clean air and water, climate change, and more is a regressive and self-defeating approach that throws good money after bad. The alternative is a world where the U.S. pays more than lip service to the idea of prioritizing diplomacy and humanitarian outreach over military might; recognizes the cultural, personal and economic contributions of immigrants as integral to the vibrancy of this country; and embraces social and community investment over racist carceral and policing practices.