



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The True Cost of the U.S. Military in Hawai‘i

A comprehensive analysis of the economic,
environmental, strategic, and social impacts
of the U.S. military presence in Hawai‘i



'Āina Aloha
ECONOMIC FUTURES



Costs of War



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This report examines the full scope of the costs of the U.S. military presence in Hawai'i across nine research areas: historical land use and sovereignty; strategic doctrine; public health; environmental contamination; economic impact; employment; housing affordability; land valuation; and base conversion. Together, the findings challenge prevailing narratives about the military's role in Hawai'i and present a case for demilitarization. The expiration of military leases on Public Lands around 2029 presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redirect this land toward sustainable and peaceful uses under Native Hawaiian stewardship.

CO-SPONSORED BY

Institute for Policy Studies · Sierra Club of Hawai'i · 'Āina Aloha Economic Futures · 'Īlio'ulaokalani Coalition · Costs of War Project · Transition Security Project

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KEY FINDINGS BY CHAPTER

Land, Sovereignty and Historical Context

Hawai'i is both a casualty of U.S. imperialism and an instrument of it. The military's large footprint is built primarily on Crown and Government Lands (public lands) acquired through the 1893 illegal overthrow and contested annexation. Military land use records lack transparency, preventing accurate public assessment and accountability.

Strategic Doctrine and Security Risk

The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, which assumes that deterring China requires a forward, offensive posture with capacity for deep strikes into Chinese territory and possible nuclear war, is both dangerous and unnecessary because it intensifies the security dilemma with China, places Hawai'i at direct risk as a military target, and may be premised on overstated threat assessments. Instead, a strategy of deterrence and defense by denial—built on resilience, defensive capabilities, and geography—would lower risk, reduce regional tensions, and make possible a substantially smaller U.S. military footprint in Hawai'i.

PFAS Contamination

Decades of military use of PFAS (“forever chemicals”), including aqueous film-forming foam in firefighting drills, have created a contamination legacy with generational consequences. PFAS have been detected in soil, groundwater, nearshore waters, fish, and human blood far beyond installation boundaries. Superficial remediation at just three installations—Mākua, Schofield, and Bellows—is conservatively estimated at \$493 million, yet even this investment cannot fully eliminate PFAS from Hawai'i's environment. Indirect costs, including drinking water filtration, elevated cancer rates, and losses in food production and tourism, could cost billions of dollars. The military has not committed to any meaningful remediation; therefore, any broader discussions about military economic contributions and lease renegotiations must account for these

largely unaddressed environmental liabilities.

Public Health Consequences

Military land use in Hawai'i has contaminated air, water, and soil with neurotoxins and carcinogens and has displaced Native Hawaiian communities from ancestral lands and food systems. This has created cascading public health consequences disproportionately borne by Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and low-income residents. Communities near military bases are more likely to self-report poor health and less access to resources. Greenhouse gas emissions from military installations also accelerate climate change impacts on the islands' fragile ecosystems, to the detriment of public health. Addressing these health inequities requires recognizing land return and remediation as a critical public health intervention that repairs historical harm while creating the environmental and cultural conditions for communities to thrive.

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Economic Impact

The military's economic benefits are significantly overstated. While the Pentagon, State, and aligned economic, political, and military institutions claim approximately \$10 billion in annual contributions to Hawai'i's economy, the real economic impact is \$7.2 billion, nearly 30 percent less. This represents 6.4 percent of Hawai'i's GDP, not the purported 9.2 percent, and is consistent with the State Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism's own estimate of 6 percent. The military is not one

part of a supposed “three-legged stool” supporting Hawai‘i’s economy; five industries —real estate, accommodation and food services, state and local government, retail, and health care—represent larger shares of the state’s GDP than the military.

Employment Effects

Dollar for dollar, military spending generates far fewer jobs than investment in civilian sectors. Every \$1 million in military spending creates approximately 5.3 jobs, whereas the same investment in health care, education, housing, food production, or energy efficiency creates an average of 12.3 jobs. A \$1 billion shift from military to civilian spending would yield a net increase of approximately 7,000 jobs. Military employment also tends to export income out of state, as many service members are temporary residents who retire elsewhere. Redirecting federal spending toward sectors that directly service Hawai‘i residents would strengthen the local economy.

Housing Affordability

Military demand for housing is a significant driver of Hawai‘i’s housing crisis. In 2024, military personnel occupied 10.3 percent of O‘ahu’s rental units, and the Pentagon spent an estimated \$1.1 billion on housing allowances for active-duty members on O‘ahu alone. This demand inflated rents by an estimated 7.1 percent, costing non-military tenant households an additional \$234.8 million in rent, equivalent to \$1,848 per renter household per year.

Land Valuation

The economic harm extends to the value of the military-occupied lands, which were leased for a token \$1 around 1964. This report calculates the actual value of the leased lands using unpaid back rent formulas, employing an existing methodology designed to determine the value of U.S. military base land worldwide. While the value of ‘āina/land cannot be measured in dollar terms alone, unpaid back rent reaches up to \$133.7 billion in 2025 dollars (not including the costs of cleaning up the military’s

environmental damage). By providing these figures, this chapter does not advocate for new leases but instead provides financial context; it highlights the magnitude of the state and federal governments’ mismanagement of these lands. The future of land in Hawai‘i is for Native Hawaiians and the residents of Hawai‘i to decide.

Base Conversion

Hundreds of military bases across Hawai‘i and globally have successfully converted to housing, schools, hospitals, parks, farms, cultural sites, and renewable energy projects. Nearly 300 ‘āina-based organizations already operate across the islands, representing a growing movement that centers community and ecological well-being. A future rooted in aloha ‘āina—love of the land—and guided by Native Hawaiian governance offers an economic model that is place based, intergenerational, and resilient.

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About the Co-Sponsoring Organizations

‘Āina Aloha Economic Futures (AAEF) is a Native Hawaiian-led organization launched in 2020 to ensure that Native Hawaiian voices and values shaped Hawai‘i’s post-pandemic economic recovery. Its core vision is a regenerative, equitable economy rooted in ancestral knowledge that stewards the land and supports the many rather than the few. Through engagement with over 3,000 individuals and organizations, the initiative produced a values declaration, an action agenda, and a policy playbook

with 26 concrete proposals for transforming Hawai'i's economy.

‘Ilio‘ulaokalani Coalition is a Native Hawaiian political advocacy organization made up of loea hula (master practitioners and educators) and other cultural practitioners, founded in 1997 to champion the protection of Native Hawaiian rights, culture, and land. The coalition has been a leading voice on issues of Native Hawaiian intellectual property rights, hosting conferences which produced the Paoakalani Declaration affirming the Native Hawaiian people's collective rights over their traditional knowledge. The coalition also actively mobilizes cultural practitioners and hālau hula in support of broader Native Hawaiian causes, such as the protection of Maunakea from development.

Institute for Policy Studies is the nation's oldest multi-issue progressive research organization. With over 60 years of groundbreaking public scholarship, we've partnered with virtually every major social justice movement — including movements for peace, civil rights, LGBTQ and gender equality, economic justice, global human rights, and the climate. We've advised policy makers at the highest levels, worked hand in hand with grassroots organizers, and mentored generation after generation of progressive scholars and activists.

Sierra Club of Hawai'i, the Hawai'i Chapter of the Sierra Club, was formed in 1968 and has over 20,000 members and supporters working throughout the islands to stop climate change, ensure climate justice for all, and protect Hawai'i's unique natural resources. Its past accomplishments include establishing Hawai'i's beverage container deposit (HI-5) and curbside recycling programs, advocating for the state's 100% renewable energy goals, and building and maintaining numerous well-known hiking trails. The chapter pursues its goals through grassroots advocacy, an outings program, and public interest litigation, operating through island groups on O'ahu, Maui, Hawai'i Island, and Kaua'i.

The Costs of War Project conducts and publishes

research about the ongoing consequences of the United States post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere; the costs of global U.S. military operations; and the domestic effects of U.S. military spending. Created in 2010 and housed at Brown University, the Costs of War project builds on the work of over 70 scholars, experts, human rights advocates, and physicians from around the world who aim to raise awareness and foster public debate by providing the fullest possible account of the human, economic, political, and environmental costs of U.S. militarism, laying the foundation for better informed U.S. foreign and domestic policies.

Transition Security Project investigates the US and UK military industrial complexes as economic, climate and geopolitical threats. Jointly founded by Common Wealth and Climate and Community Institute, Transition Security Project produces research and analysis to support organising. Working alongside trade unions, grassroots movements and policymakers, we design alternatives that prioritise everyday, universal safety over the profits of military contractors.

Contributor Bios

Christine Ahn is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies. She is the co-founder of Women Cross DMZ, Korea Peace Now!, and the Feminist Peace Initiative.

Wayne Chung Tanaka is the Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Hawai'i. A licensed attorney and an engineer, he previously served for a decade in the Public Policy Program at the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

Neta C. Crawford is Professor of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. She is a Co-Founder of The Costs of War Project and a member of the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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Laurel Mei-Singh is Assistant Professor of Geography and Asian American Studies at University of Texas at Austin. She produced the award-winning film MĀLAMA MĀKUA.

Omar Ocampo is a researcher for the Program on Inequality and the Common Good at the Institute for Policy Studies. His work focuses on income and wealth inequality, housing affordability, and private aviation.

Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio is the Dean of Hawai'inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. His recent publications include *The Value of Hawai'i: Knowing the Past and Shaping the Future*, which he co-edited and authored, and *Dismembering Lāhui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887*.

Heidi Peltier is a Senior Researcher at the Watson School of International and Public Affairs at Brown University, where she is Director of Programs for the Costs of War Project.

Davis Price is the Senior Domestic Policy Strategist at the NDN Collective. A licensed attorney, he is a co-founder of the 'Āina Aloha Economic Futures Initiative and former First Nations Futures Fellow with Kamehameha Schools and Stanford University.

Brag Selvarajan is an independent consultant at Selvara Strategy with more than 10 years of experience in market assessment and statistical analysis.

David Vine is a political anthropologist and author of *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (Metropolitan/Henry Holt, 2015), *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia* (Princeton University Press, 2009), and *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (University of California Press, 2020).

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