

The Antiwar Movement No One Can See

Peace activism is rising, but that isn't translating into huge street demonstrations, writes Allegra Harpootlian.

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When Donald Trump entered the Oval Office in January 2017, Americans took to the streets all across the country to protest their instantly endangered rights. Conspicuously absent from the newfound civic engagement, despite more than a decade and a half of this country's fruitless, destructive wars across the Greater Middle East and northern Africa, was antiwar sentiment, much less an actual movement.

Those like me working against America's seemingly [endless wars](#) wondered why the subject merited so little discussion, attention, or protest. Was it because the still-spreading war on terror remained shrouded in government secrecy? Was the lack of media coverage about what America was doing overseas to blame? Or was it simply that most Americans didn't care about what was happening past the water's edge? If you had asked me two years ago, I would have chosen "all of the above." Now, I'm not so sure.

After the [enormous demonstrations](#) against the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the antiwar movement disappeared almost as suddenly as it began, with some even openly [declaring](#) it dead. Critics noted the long-term absence of significant protests against those wars, a lack of political will in Congress to deal with them, and ultimately, [apathy](#) on

matters of war and peace when compared to issues like health care, gun control, or recently even climate change.

The pessimists have been right to point out that none of the plethora of marches on Washington since Donald Trump was elected have had even a secondary focus on America's fruitless wars. They're certainly right to question why Congress, with the constitutional duty to declare war, has until recently allowed both presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump to wage war as they wished without even consulting them. They're right to feel nervous when a national poll shows that more Americans think we're fighting a war in Iran (we're not) than a war in Somalia (we are).

But here's what I've been wondering recently: What if there's an antiwar movement growing right under our noses and we just haven't noticed? What if we don't see it, in part, because it doesn't look like any antiwar movement we've even imagined?

If a movement is only a movement when people fill the streets, then maybe the critics are right. It might also be fair to say, however, that protest marches do not always a movement make. Movements are defined by their ability to challenge the status quo and, right now, that's what might be beginning to happen when it comes to America's wars.

What if it's Parkland students condemning American imperialism or groups fighting the Muslim Ban that are also fighting the war on terror? It's veterans not only trying to take on the wars they fought in, but putting themselves on the front lines of the gun control, climate change, and police brutality debates. It's

Congress passing the first War Powers Resolution in almost 50 years. It's Democratic presidential candidates signing a pledge to end America's endless wars.

For the last decade and a half, Americans – and their elected representatives – looked at our endless wars and essentially shrugged. In 2019, however, an antiwar movement seems to be brewing. It just doesn't look like the ones that some remember from the Vietnam era and others from the pre-invasion-of-Iraq moment. Instead, it's a movement that's being woven into just about every other issue that Americans are fighting for right now – which is exactly why it might actually work.

A Veteran's Antiwar Movement in the Making?

During the Vietnam War of the 1960s and early 1970s, protests began with religious groups and peace organizations morally opposed to war. As that conflict intensified, however, students began to join the movement, then civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. got involved, then war veterans who had witnessed the horror firsthand stepped in – until, with a seemingly constant storm of protest in the streets, Washington eventually withdrew from Indochina.

You might look at the lack of public outrage now, or perhaps the exhaustion of having been outraged and nothing changing, and think an antiwar movement doesn't exist. Certainly, there's nothing like the active one that fought against America's involvement in Vietnam for so long and so persistently. Yet it's important to notice that, among some of the very same groups (like veterans, students, and even

politicians) that fought against that war, a healthy skepticism about America's 21st century wars, the Pentagon, the military industrial complex, and even the very idea of American exceptionalism is finally on the rise – or so the polls tell us.

Right after the midterms last year, an organization named Foundation for Liberty and American Greatness reported mournfully that younger Americans were “turning on the country and forgetting its ideals,” with nearly half believing that this country isn't “great” and many eyeing the U.S. flag as “a sign of intolerance and hatred.” With millennials and Generation Z rapidly becoming the largest voting bloc in America for the next 20 years, their priorities are taking center stage. When it comes to foreign policy and war, as it happens, they're quite different from the generations that preceded them. According to the Chicago Council of Global Affairs,

“Each successor generation is less likely than the previous to prioritize maintaining superior military power worldwide as a goal of U.S. foreign policy, to see U.S. military superiority as a very effective way of achieving U.S. foreign policy goals, and to support expanding defense spending. At the same time, support for international cooperation and free trade remains high across the generations. In fact, younger Americans are more inclined to support cooperative approaches to U.S. foreign policy and more likely to feel favorably towards trade and globalization.”

Although marches are the most public way to protest, another striking but understated way is simply not to engage with

the systems one doesn't agree with. For instance, the vast majority of today's teenagers aren't at all interested in joining the all-volunteer military. Last year, for the first time since the height of the Iraq war 13 years ago, the Army fell thousands of troops short of its recruiting goals. That trend was emphasized in a 2017 Department of Defense poll that found only 14 percent of respondents ages 16 to 24 said it was likely they'd serve in the military in the coming years. This has the Army so worried that it has been refocusing its recruitment efforts on creating an entirely new strategy aimed specifically at Generation Z.

In addition, we're finally seeing what happens when soldiers from America's post-9/11 wars come home infused with a sense of hopelessness in relation to those conflicts. These days, significant numbers of young veterans have been returning disillusioned and ready to lobby Congress against wars they once, however unknowingly, bought into. Look no further than a new left-right alliance between two influential veterans groups, VoteVets and Concerned Veterans for America, to stop those forever wars. Their campaign, aimed specifically at getting Congress to weigh in on issues of war and peace, is emblematic of what may be a diverse potential movement coming together to oppose America's conflicts. Another veterans group, Common Defense, is similarly asking politicians to sign a pledge to end those wars. In just a couple of months, they've gotten on board 10 congressional sponsors, including freshmen heavyweights in the House of Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar.

And this may just be the tip of a growing antiwar iceberg. A

misconception about movement-building is that everyone is there for the same reason, however broadly defined. That's often not the case and sometimes it's possible that you're in a movement and don't even know it. If, for instance, I asked a room full of climate-change activists whether they also considered themselves part of an antiwar movement, I can imagine the denials I'd get. And yet, whether they know it or not, sooner or later fighting climate change will mean taking on the Pentagon's global footprint, too.

Think about it: not only is the U.S. military the world's largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels but, according to a new report from Brown University's Costs of War Project, between 2001 and 2017, it released more than 1.2 billion metric tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere (400 million of which were related to the war on terror). That's equivalent to the emissions of 257 million passenger cars, more than double the number currently on the road in the U.S.

A Growing Antiwar Movement in Congress

One way to sense the growth of antiwar sentiment in this country is to look not at the empty streets or even at veterans organizations or recruitment polls, but at Congress. After all, one indicator of a successful movement, however incipient, is its power to influence and change those making the decisions in Washington. Since Donald Trump was elected, the most visible evidence of growing antiwar sentiment is the way America's congressional policymakers have increasingly become engaged with issues of war and peace. Politicians, after all, tend to follow the voters and, right now, growing numbers of them seem to be following

rising antiwar sentiment back home into an expanding set of debates about war and peace in the age of Trump.

In campaign season 2016, in an op-ed in *The Washington Post*, political scientist Elizabeth Saunders wondered whether foreign policy would play a significant role in the presidential election. “Not likely,” she concluded. “Voters do not pay much attention to foreign policy.” And at the time, she was on to something. For instance, Sen. Bernie Sanders, then competing for the Democratic presidential nomination against Hillary Clinton, didn’t even prepare stock answers to basic national security questions, choosing instead, if asked at all, to quickly pivot back to more familiar topics. In a debate with Clinton, for instance, he was asked whether he would keep troops in Afghanistan to deal with the growing success of the Taliban. In his answer, he skipped Afghanistan entirely, while warning only vaguely against a “quagmire” in Iraq and Syria.

Heading for 2020, Sanders is once again competing for the nomination, but instead of shying away from foreign policy, starting in 2017, he became the face of what could be a new American way of thinking when it comes to how we see our role in the world.

In February 2018, Sanders also became the first senator to risk introducing a war powers resolution to end American support for the brutal Saudi-led war in Yemen. In April 2019, with the sponsorship of other senators added to his, the bill ultimately passed the House and the Senate in an extremely rare showing of bipartisanship, only to be vetoed by President Trump. That such a bill might pass the House, no less a still-Republican Senate, even if not by

a veto-proof majority, would have been unthinkable in 2016. So much has changed since the last election that support for the Yemen resolution has now become what Tara Golshan at [Vox](#) termed “a litmus test of the Democratic Party’s progressive shift on foreign policy.”

Nor, strikingly enough, is Sanders the only Democratic presidential candidate now running on what is essentially an antiwar platform. One of the main aspects of [Elizabeth Warren’s](#) foreign policy plan, for instance, is to “seriously review the country’s military commitments overseas, and that includes bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan and Iraq.” Entrepreneur Andrew Yang and former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel have [joined](#) Sanders and Warren in signing a pledge to end America’s forever wars if elected. [Beto O’Rourke](#) has called for the repeal of Congress’s 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force that presidents have cited ever since whenever they’ve sent American forces into battle. [Marianne Williamson](#), one of the many (unlikely) Democratic candidates seeking the nomination, has even proposed a plan to transform America’s “wartime economy into a peace-time economy, repurposing the tremendous talents and infrastructure of [America’s] military industrial complex... to the work of promoting life instead of death.”

And for the first time ever, three veterans of America’s post-9/11 wars – Seth Moulton and Tulsi Gabbard of the House of Representatives, and South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg – are running for president, bringing their [skepticism](#) about American interventionism with them. The very inclusion of such viewpoints in the presidential race is bound to change the conversation, putting a spotlight on America’s wars in

the months to come.

Get on Board or Get Out of the Way

When trying to create a movement, there are three likely outcomes: you will be accepted by the establishment, or rejected for your efforts, or the establishment will be replaced, in part or in whole, by those who agree with you. That last point is exactly what we've been seeing, at least among Democrats, in the Trump years. While 2020 Democratic candidates for president, some of whom have been in the political arena for decades, are gradually hopping on the end-the-endless-wars bandwagon, the real antiwar momentum in Washington has begun to come from new members of Congress like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Ilhan Omar who are unwilling to accept business as usual when it comes to either the Pentagon or the country's forever wars. In doing so, moreover, they are responding to what their constituents actually want.

As far back as 2014, when a University of Texas-Austin Energy Poll asked people where the U.S. government should spend their tax dollars, only 7 percent of respondents under 35 said it should go toward military and defense spending. Instead, in a "pretty significant political shift" at the time, they overwhelmingly opted for their tax dollars to go toward job creation and education. Such a trend has only become more apparent as those calling for free public college, Medicare-for-all, or a Green New Deal have come to realize that they could pay for such ideas if America would stop pouring trillions of dollars into wars that never should have been launched.

The new members of the House of Representatives, in particular, part of the youngest, most diverse crew to date, have begun to replace the old guard and are increasingly signalling their readiness to throw out policies that don't work for the American people, especially those reinforcing the American war machine. They understand that by ending the wars and beginning to scale back the military-industrial complex, this country could once again have the resources it needs to fix so many other problems.

In May, for instance, Omar tweeted, "We have to recognize that foreign policy IS domestic policy. We can't invest in health care, climate resilience, or education if we continue to spend more than half of discretionary spending on endless wars and Pentagon contracts. When I say we need something equivalent to the Green New Deal for foreign policy, it's this."

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– Ilhan Omar (@IlhanMN) May 28, 2019

A few days before that, at a House Committee on Oversight and Reform hearing, Ocasio-Cortez confronted executives from military contractor TransDigm about the way they were price-gouging the American taxpayer by selling a \$32 "non-vehicular clutch disc" to the Department of Defense for \$1,443 per disc. "A pair of jeans can cost \$32; imagine paying over \$1,000 for that," she said. "Are you aware of how many doses of insulin we could get for that margin? I

could've gotten over 1,500 people insulin for the cost of the margin of your price gouging for these vehicular discs alone."

And while such ridiculous waste isn't news to those of us who follow Pentagon spending closely, this was undoubtedly something many of her millions of supporters hadn't thought about before. After the hearing, Teen Vogue created a list of the "5 most ridiculous things the United States military has spent money on," comedian Sarah Silverman tweeted out the AOC hearing clip to her 12.6 million followers, *Will and Grace* actress Debra Messing publicly expressed her gratitude to AOC, and according to Crowdtangle, a social media analytics tool, the NowThis clip of her in that congressional hearing garnered more than 20 million impressions.

Not only are members of Congress beginning to call attention to such undercovered issues, but perhaps they're even starting to accomplish something. Just two weeks after that contentious hearing, TransDigm agreed to return \$16.1 million in excess profits to the Department of Defense. "We saved more money today for the American people than our committee's entire budget for the year," said House Oversight Committee Chair Elijah Cummings.

Of course, antiwar demonstrators have yet to pour into the streets, even though the wars we're already involved in continue to drag on and a possible new one with Iran looms on the horizon. Still, there seems to be a notable trend in antiwar opinion and activism. Somewhere just under the surface of American life lurks a genuine, diverse antiwar movement that appears to be coalescing around a common goal:

getting Washington politicians to believe that antiwar policies are supportable, even potentially popular. Call me an eternal optimist, but someday I can imagine such a movement helping end those disastrous wars.

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