



POSITION PAPER:
**DEMILITARIZATION
IS DECOLONIZATION**





“Warriors are not what you think of as warriors. The warrior is not someone who fights, because no one has the right to take another life. The warrior, for us, is one who sacrifices himself for the good of others. His task is to take care of the elderly, the defenseless, those who cannot provide for themselves, and above all, the children, the future of humanity.” - Sitting Bull, Húŋkpap̃ha Lakota

INTRODUCTION

Having a Relative, an uncle, an auntie, a cousin, a grandpa who served in the military is not uncommon in Indian Country. In fact, seeing veteran service hats that read “Vietnam Veteran” or “Native Vet” combined with embroidered feathers or an eagle is a guaranteed sight at any powwow or flea market. We have love for our Relatives that have seen war and came back; we have love for all our Relatives. We know that there are many unique motivations behind the enlistment of Indigenous people in the military, sometimes influenced by a sense of duty to protect our homelands and a long history of warrior culture. Relatives also enlist due to a lack of financial opportunities, lack of secondary education resources, or from familial influence— all examples of [poverty draft](#). Yet NDN Collective’s understanding is that the United States military and the Military and Police Industrial Complex (MPIC) have exploited our circumstances and our connection to warrior culture, and are ultimately pathways for exploitation and destruction of our communities within Turtle Island and internationally. We, as a collective of Indigenous people, stand with all Indigenous people everywhere who face the ongoing effects of colonialism, imperialism, climate change, capitalism, and genocide, in our position for demilitarization and Indigenous liberation as antimilitarist.

DEFEND

We are building a society of warriors who defend our land against the continued resource extraction that poisons our communities and the planet.

THE U.S. MILITARY AND OCCUPATION- LANDBACK

“Although few Americans realize it, the United States likely has more bases in foreign lands than any other people, nation, or empire in history.”

The United States military is the largest military power in the world, investing more than the next twelve military powers [combined](#). The U.S. military also supports 1,000 bases total worldwide; by contrast, France, Britain, and Russia have just 30 overseas military bases, combined. The origin of the US military and police is rooted in the establishment of informal militias composed of newly arrived settlers looking to make money and own land¹. The purpose of these informal militias however was not to keep the police or protect citizens, but to clear the land of as many Natives as possible by killing indiscriminately, and catching runaway enslaved Africans. The directive of these militias was to claim land and resources and to maintain the wealth of white slave owners, today the police and military continue to protect settler wealth and infrastructure, and acquire land and resources globally. When the military is used to invade countries to gain control of resources, it becomes a vehicle of destruction against Indigenous people and the Earth. Militarization and the colonial suppression of Indian Country was the first frontier of this violence: the first lands the U.S. military ever occupied were seized to create bases and to expand into surrounding Native lands. The same system still applies inside the U.S. and internationally where the U.S. military is concerned; this means that the U.S. military is in the explicit business of taking land away from communities all around the world and using their presence on their land to carry out their own agenda for the inhabitants of that area. Violence is fundamental for the U.S. to maintain its presence, and the military is how they establish dominance domestically and internationally, wherever they may be.

DIRECT EXAMPLES OF MILITARIZATION

The heart of the MPIC is the Nuclear Industrial Complex (NIC). The construction of the atomic bomb began on land stolen from San Ildefonso, Santa Clara Pueblo, Jemez Pueblo, and Cochiti Pueblo, in Northern New Mexico. Pennies per acre were offered to tribal leaders for the land the government would take without the consent of any of these Native Nations. The sacred Tewa emergence place, and what is known today as the Bandelier National Monument, was the site of the weapons production facility, and the location of some of the first nuclear dumping [sites](#).

Native people would be the first victims of nuclearism, and this would impact more than Pueblo people, soon uranium mining would begin throughout the [Navajo Nation](#), [He Sápa](#), and Shoshone and Paiute lands used for [testing](#) nuclear bombs. The U.S. has used its nuclear program and arsenal to intimidate the rest of the world and maintain its stronghold, to this day it is the only country to use nuclear weapons on civilian populations. The most nuclear bombed place on earth is the U.S. itself, solely because of the amount of tests that have happened here in the development of nuclear weapons, primarily on Native Lands and U.S. occupied island nations and territories in the South Pacific (such as The Kingdom of Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Guam). For this reason Native people are always implicated in U.S. imperialism. Native people have always been at the forefront of fighting nuclearism and militarism and we have a responsibility to stand with all victims of U.S. aggression.

We can see other important examples of militarism in the [Henoko Bay](#) in Okinawa, Japan, the Marshall Islands, and in [Vieques, Puerto Rico](#) (as mentioned above). Each U.S. military base present in these locales is against the will of the [local population](#). These military bases are actively poisoning the lands and waters where they are located, and the people who live there ultimately pay the price. We know that land and wellness go together. In the case of [Vieques, Puerto Rico](#), the base is a site of multiple naval exercises and a bombing range; the island of Vieques has some of the highest rates of illness in the whole Caribbean. In the case of Henoko Bay, Okinawa the military bases are already severely threatening the ecosystem of the Bay, and introducing new health concerns for those in the surrounding community. Henoko Bay represents but one base in Japan that is off the main island, [where the US military occupies 15 percent of all land](#). In Cuba, the U.S. continues to occupy land where the infamous Guantanamo Bay detention center sits. Despite having an economic blockade on Cuba for over 50 years, the U.S. continues to use Guantanamo Bay as a site to carry out extralegal torture of political prisoners without charges or trial.

We can look to how the military was [deployed](#) on water protectors at Standing Rock; Look at Hawai'i and how many military bases were established and the violence Kanaka Maoli face due to [occupation](#); Look at [Venezuela](#) facing sanctions for nationalizing their resources; Look at [Bolivia](#) and their fight against a U.S.-backed coup, which overthrew an Indigenous-led political party and President. The examples of US military and imperial aggression are multifold internationally and domestically. By continuing to overlook how much land, resources, and destruction the U.S. military enacts on our relatives near and far, is the opposite of what Defending, Developing, and Decolonizing means for us. We must dismantle U.S. militarism and hold accountable the violence perpetuated by the U.S. military that continues to destroy communities fighting against the same war machine that is U.S. imperialism.

THE U.S. MILITARY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The U.S. military is the single largest institutional polluter in the world. They create more greenhouse emissions than 140 other [countries](#) and, if ranked as their own country, would be 47th in the world right behind Portugal. In fact, the U.S. military is the largest consumer of energy in the U.S. (it has consistently consumed around 80 percent of all U.S. government energy consumption) and is the largest consumer of petroleum in the world².

The U.S. military also helps facilitate the extraction of natural resources and the mining of minerals in the locations that they occupy outside of the United States. The U.S. military was central, for example, in transporting and bursering Iraq's fresh water to other countries and also to polluting the areas they occupy, which directly compromises the health and livelihood of local populations, who are often Indigenous communities of their region.

Right now the Earth is on fire. Climate change is happening and we see the effects of greenhouse gases taking its toll right before our eyes. Our elders have seen drastic changes in the landscapes in their lifetimes. If we are committed to curbing climate change, protecting our non-human relatives, and creating a healthy future for the next seven generations, then we must also be about defunding and divesting away from the U.S. military and reallocating those resources into education, healthcare, housing, transportation, and protection of lands and resources.

DEVELOP

We need warriors who are committed to developing Indigenous communities through regenerative and sustainable practices based on our values and connection to land, culture and identity.

CURRENT STATE OF U.S. MILITARIZATION AND NATIVE COMMUNITIES

Referring to Natives, the United States' Declaration of Independence, infamously states, "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." From the very inception of the United States, the state has always framed Indigenous people as less than human, and often as violent vehicles of destruction-which is precisely why many of the transport vehicles the United States military uses are named after Native people (Comanche, Apache, Mescalero, etc.). Another example would be when Seal Team 6, the unit that killed Osama Bin Laden, used the codeword "Geronimo" to name Bin Laden. From inception until now, the military is still affecting our communities in multiple ways. The United States' foundation is literally based on its ongoing war with Indigenous people locally and globally.

Anti-militarism does not have to be seen in our communities as a dichotomy. Yes, we can love our relatives who have served or are serving, and yes, we can be against the MPIC. The two actually go hand-in-hand. The MPIC is the system in which an occupying force, operating on stolen land, reinforces settler dominance, white supremacy, and global imperialism by taking public funds and funneling it into lucrative destructive technologies such as oil pipelines, missiles that target our Palestinian relatives, and military equipment for police officers to use on Black, Indigenous, and Brown people.

And loving our relatives that think of serving or have served is also understanding the system that pulls them into military service. Natives [enlist](#) in the military at a higher rate than any other ethnicity, at 5 times the national average. This rate is dramatic if we're considering that Native people only make up 2.9% of the general U.S. population.

Keeping that percentage of 2.9% in mind, another statistic to consider is that we are more likely to face police violence than any other racial [group](#), and 3 times more likely to be killed by police compared to a [White American](#). On a micro-level, NDN Collective's home state of South Dakota jails more people per capita than any other state despite our relatively sparse population. And although Natives only make up 8.7% of South Dakota's people, we represent roughly half of those jailed in the [state](#). So while we are enlisting in the military at the highest rate, when we come back from deployment, we are more likely to be killed, brutalized, and jailed by police. Standing Rock is another example of when local law enforcement and the North Dakota National Guard were [deployed](#) to attack the land defenders who were gathered to protect sacred Native land from destruction by the pipeline. As in many instances, violent tactics were used against land defenders, including spraying tear gas and spraying water when temperatures were well below freezing. Last summer in Washington, DC, thousands of National Guard troops and police officers with assault rifles were deployed to fight the people who were demanding accountability for the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, and other Black people killed by the police. It was also in the summer of 2020 at He Sápa (The Black Hills) when dozens of land defenders were arrested for rightfully protecting land designated under the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. Land defenders were met with tear gas and excessive force by police in full riot gear and faced egregious charges. And just six months later, we witnessed white supremacists attempt a coup in the U.S. Capitol, yet were met with little to no law enforcement response. Which only spotlighted a double standard in the police response and police violence towards Black, Indigenous, and Brown people.

The killings of our relatives by the police department, or even within [military bases](#) as enlisted service members, are why we must be anti-militarist. Anti-militarism does not mean to shun or disrespect your relatives who have served. Anti-militarism is being a good relative who understands and promises the next generations that there will be other avenues to become warriors and serve their people outside of exploitation and destruction.

DECOLONIZE

We envision warriors that protect the land, water, children, women, LGBTQ2+, and future generations – ones whose rallying cry is to create systems, programs, and avenues for Indigenous people to become more rooted in our values, principles, and spirituality.

THE U.S. MILITARY IS A CULTURE

Demilitarization is decolonization. A reason why U.S. militarism is able to continue on is because the U.S. sees the military as a culture. This, like most things the U.S. has done, is not by accident. The romanticization of the U.S. military has entwined itself in popular culture- as seen in movies, novels, clothing, video games, and social media. This propaganda has allowed the U.S. military to enshrine itself as the end-all-be-all of problems globally. It has allowed the people to give power to the U.S. military to invade countries and lands here to “fix” problems pertaining to the economy, threats to world peace, and freeing of resources. Everywhere but the U.S. sees the U.S. as the main country that directly threatens all these [aspects](#). When we are able to resist, fight, and build beyond what colonizers tell us what is best for the planet, the land, the water, and our communities, then that is when a brighter future is possible for everyone.

PROUD WARRIOR CULTURE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Indigenous people have a long history of being proud warriors, which has manifested as a sense of duty and honor to protect our homelands. Many tribes hold special ceremonies for members who have gone to war, and will honor them for their bravery. These ceremonies have been around for generations. But today, the US military is presented as the only avenue duty to protect our homelands. Native service is often celebrated through our efforts to fight the United States’ wars, a country that inherits the original violences against us, and perpetuates violence against our communities today- even while the purpose and intent to serve in the military may be honorable. We want to reclaim our warrior traditions and celebrate warriors who are not forced to uphold wars on behalf of oil companies and extractive corporations; We also want to create avenues and opportunities for those committed to defending our land, our water, our people, our principles, and our cultures.

The culture within the U.S. military has influenced our ways of understanding what a warrior is. Toxic masculinity, patriarchy, and predatory behaviors that happen within the U.S. Department of Defense have been well [documented](#). These values contradict the values many Native people observe, especially when it comes to women and LGBTQ2+ relatives. In a recent study, it was found that LGBTQ military veterans are twice as likely to experience sexual assault while on active-duty, rather than those who did not identify as LGBTQ. For servicewomen, it is [found](#) that one in four experience sexual assault while in the military. These findings are not isolated from the history that the U.S. military has against women and LGBTQ people from enlisting or serving.

In contrast, many Native people have their own ways of honoring women and LGBTQ2+ relatives. For Diné, there are words for how we identify our women warriors and those that embody both male and female spirits who hold sacred roles in the community: Baa’, Nadleeh, Dilbah, respectively. It’s also been said in ceremonial spaces, that warriors were not ones who wished for war and death, but those who would prevent it from happening. That is what we want to work toward- people who fight for life, who fight for the land, who fight for the protection of water, and fight for a sustainable future. Not ones who embody hatred towards women, LGBTQ2+, or those internationally for their resources. What a future it would be if we could live in a world where men, women, LGBTQ2+ are able to have access to quality education, sustainable infrastructure, clean water, and excellent healthcare without having to enlist in a system that does not honor them or their communities in a meaningful way. We do not want our names on military transport [vehicles](#), we want LANDBACK, water back, and culture back.

NDN COLLECTIVE'S VISION FOR THE FUTURE AND COMMITMENT

It is not enough to be against something; we must be for something. Through our vision of Defend, Develop, Decolonize we are making commitments to defend our communities and relatives fighting against U.S. imperialism and militarism within Turtle Island and globally. That means amplifying struggles as a result of U.S. militarism through our social media, NDN Live, or LANDBACK U. In addition to developing a way for our communities to organize and understand what building a world without U.S. militarism would look like, without also forgetting our relatives who have served/are serving. And finally decolonizing ourselves and our communities so that we can reconnect to what being a warrior means in our respective cultures without the influence of the U.S. military. These commitments are never just for us, but for justice and equity for all people and the planet.

Footnotes:

1 Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. "Culture of Conquest." An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, Beacon Press, Boston, 2015, pp. 35.

2 Crawford, Neta C. pp. 2, Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/Pentagon%20Fuel%20Use%2C%20Climate%20Change%20and%20the%20Costs%20of%20War%20Revised%20November%202019%20Crawford.pdf>.

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