



We Advocate Thorough Environmental Review

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Why Environmental Groups Must Oppose War

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by the Board of Directors of We Advocate Thorough Environmental Review

Should an environment-protecting group like W.A.T.E.R. get involved in issues of international war? Or conversely, should W.A.T.E.R. "stay in its own lane"? More generally, should pro-environmental groups also be anti-war? The US government has been involved with fighting or funding wars for much of the past 80 years, so the question for us, as Americans, is not new. It is particularly pressing now because of the war in Ukraine.

Everyone knows that wars are hugely destructive to both people and the environment; that is indeed the tactical intent of every exploding bomb and lethal projectile. Escalation to nuclear use would be a worldwide humanitarian and ecological disaster. Fighting around nuclear power plants - an especially stupid thing to do - may well lead to catastrophic toxic radioactive waste release spread over huge swaths of land. It is obvious that military action (and preparation for action) itself consumes a huge amount of energy and produces a huge amount of greenhouse gas emissions. According to a 2019 study at Boston and Brown Universities¹, "the DOD is the world's largest institutional user of petroleum and correspondingly, the single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world."

It is also obvious that military contractors are the recipients of tens of billions of dollars in government contracts (i.e., our tax dollars) that could otherwise be used for many useful projects, including environmental protection, cleanup, and transitioning to clean energy, all while creating living-wage jobs.

However the main thrust of this article is a point that rarely makes it into the media or is mentioned by either of the "mainstream" parties. That point addresses *why* the wars are being fought in the first place. Usually, we are told all about "national security", or "defense of democracy", or stopping some crazed irrational power-hungry dictator. However, there is (too often) a deeper geostrategic and economic rationale behind what is going on: a struggle for ownership, control, and access to natural resources, the extraction of which causes tremendous, long-term ecological damage.

For example, an article in a mainstream European business magazine² in July, 2021 (before the Russian invasion of Ukraine) opens as follows: "Kyiv [the capital of Ukraine] will be invited on Tuesday (13 July) to join EU industrial alliances on batteries and raw materials, with a view to develop an entire value chain of the extraction, refining and recycling of minerals in Ukraine to supply the EU market for electric cars and digital equipment." Ukraine is rich in rare-earth minerals, essential in digital electronic devices and displays. Accessible rare earths are indeed rare, and the bulk of them presently comes from China and Russia, which are now targeted as "adversaries". One month after the invasion, a technology business magazine³ noted that, "Both Russia and Ukraine are important rare-earth metal powerhouses, contributing a significant share in the global market."

Apart from rare-earth metals, Ukraine is extremely rich in natural resources for fossil energy, and metal and non-metal minerals, as well as agriculture. And of course, Ukraine also has a great geographical position with year-round ocean access ports on the Black Sea, facilitating export to foreign markets.

A Ukrainian government website, working along with Ukrainian business interests, tries to pull in investors with the following leading statement: "Ukraine has extremely rich and complementary mineral resources in high concentrations and close proximity to each other. The country has abundant reserves of coal, iron ore, natural gas, manganese, salt, oil, graphite, sulfur, kaolin, titanium, nickel, magnesium, timber, and mercury."⁴

History Repeats Itself

The hunger by major powers for transnational extraction of rare and valuable resources of course did not begin with Ukraine. A 2010 New York Times article⁵ headlined "U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan" states that US officials believe that "huge veins of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals like lithium are so big and include so many minerals that are essential to modern industry that Afghanistan could eventually be transformed into one of the most important mining centers in the world" and that "Afghanistan could become the 'Saudi Arabia of lithium', a key raw material in the manufacture of batteries for laptops..." This could explain why the losing cause of the US invasion of Afghanistan hung on for so long, until 2021. The US claims it did not have any inkling of this treasure until 2004, a couple of years after its invasion of that country. But it is also acknowledged that the USSR did know of the treasure as early as 1979. Assuming that espionage worked back then as it was intended to work, the treasure was known by both invaders, the USSR first in 1979 and then the US in 2002.

Going back in time to the US invasion of Iraq - a major oil producer that had no capability of attacking the US and was thereby invaded under (what are now known to be) false pretenses - Noam Chomsky had this succinct comment about the rigid but false doctrine bandied in the mainstream media: "The (officially promoted) doctrine, to oversimplify, is that we have to believe the United States would have so-called liberated Iraq *even if its main products were lettuce and pickles*. ... But anyone with a functioning brain knows that that's not true—as all Iraqis do, for example. *The United States invaded Iraq because its major resource is oil*. And it gives the United States, to quote [Zbigniew] Brzezinski, "critical leverage" over its competitors, Europe and Japan."⁶ General John Abizaid, CENTCOM commander from 2003 to 2007, said of the Iraq war: "... of course it's about oil, it's very much about oil and we can't really deny that".⁷

Going even farther back, to before the 1961 US invasion of Vietnam, a nation which had no airforce, no navy, and had no capability nor intent to attack any US territory, President Eisenhower was asked, at a 1954 news conference, why the US was funding the French colonial power in Vietnam.⁸ Eisenhower said, "First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs ... (and) two of the items from this particular area that the world uses are tin and tungsten. They are very important. There are others, of course, the rubber plantations and so on." As a result, the US spent the next couple of decades spraying toxic poisons (like Agent Orange) all over the landscape (and on our own troops), while killing 2+ million Vietnamese whose only unavoidable error was being born there. The most recited rationale for the US war in Vietnam was that it was to prevent the spread of Asian communism, the so-called "domino theory", which predicted Western economies

would be denied access to Vietnam's natural resources. This "theory" proved to be untrue—Vietnam eventually became a major US trading partner in spite of the US military defeat there.

So it is clear that history has linked the issues of militarism with issues of environmental destruction. For environmental groups to recognize that linkage is not a choice: it is the recognition of reality and a moral responsibility.

The Anti-War Imperative

Economic interests in Ukraine in no way excuse the Russians (or any aggressor) for their invasions. Rather, those interests simply make those aggressions predictable. Russia - and the US - are capitalist countries in which the super-rich have an inordinate amount of influence and power over the foreign policy of their governments. For such capitalist countries, corporate economics is a major factor in instigating wars, with moral claims about protecting democracy and the "national interest" providing thinly veiled covers. Warmongers always speak solemnly of how peace is their deep moral goal. (Or, as George W. Bush put it, "I just want you to know that, when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace."⁹). In reality, peace-seeking morality takes a back seat to global corporate interests.

Of course, global corporate interests go far beyond the immediate bottom line of any individual enterprise, and integrating those interests together into "policy" is the job of the military and diplomats. The end result, called "geopolitical strategy", sounds very sophisticated and understandable only by deep-thinking academic and think-tank "experts". But at its core, geopolitical strategy is still all about how major corporate players and their subservient governments jockey for control of the resources, markets, cheap labor, and financial dealings of the world, and thereby ensure private corporate profits.

How do ordinary people in the public fit into all this? One of the most comforting things about a short memory in the public - the same public which is pressured to pay for, fight, and die in these wars - is that it is easy to forget the humiliating fact that we the people have *always* been lied to. Governments depend on that short memory to whip up public support for the most recent war. They tell us that our overt and covert foreign invasions and our feeding and funding wars of attrition (such as in Ukraine) are motivated by the need to protect suffering people, to protect "democracy", to respect self-determination, etc. They expect us to believe these falsehoods, every time. Unfortunately, we often do.

But if the public had more "say" in questions of war and peace, and the corporate class had much less say, then conjuring up support for vicious war-making ventures would not be so easy. In an effort to oppose the corporate motivation for war, W.A.T.E.R. (as well as many others) has endorsed "Move-to-Amend" (MTA), which aims (through a Constitutional amendment) to rein in corporate political power by asserting elections must not be bought by money under the guise of free speech, and that people, not corporations, have Constitutional rights.¹⁰ MTA has written a succinct summary of the economic corporate interests in Ukraine.¹¹

The innocent people of Ukraine, both the generally pro-Russian population in the east and the generally pro-Western population in the west, are suffering greatly and are the main immediate victims of the international inter-ruling class contention that lies at the root of this war. This contention is destructive to both human lives and the environment. Environmental destruction is long lasting. Radioactive contamination is very long lasting. And death is permanent. As environmentalists, we must actively support bottom-up anti-war organizing within all the countries involved (including ours), because that activism will have the longest-lasting positive impact upon human and environmental health and toward world peace.

1. <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>
2. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/circular-economy/news/eu-ukraine-to-sign-strategic-partnership-on-raw-materials/>
3. <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2022/03/rare-earth-metal-prices-will-skyrocket-as-ukraine-russia-tensions-continue>
4. <https://ukraineinvest.gov.ua/industries/mining/>
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html>
6. <https://chomsky.info/20060109/>
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sd2JseupXQ&t=1227s>, time mark 21:15
8. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v13p1/d716>
9. George W. Bush, remarks at Department of Housing and Urban Development, Jun. 18, 2002. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPS9iBY_oFU
10. www.movetoamend.org; House Joint Resolution 48, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-joint-resolution/48>
11. https://www.movetoamend.org/war_is_still_a_racket