Addressing the Militarization of Youth

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Since 2001 the United States has been involved in two of the longest armed conflicts in its history: Iraq (2003–2011) and Afghanistan (2001–present). And since military conscription ended in 1973, an all-volunteer force has waged U.S. wars. It is difficult, of course, to recruit soldiers during wartime, and the Army alone has to enlist upward of 70,000 new soldiers every year. How do they do it? In trade publications like Recruiter Journal, the men and women tasked with supervising soldiers consistently point to high school students—especially 17-year-olds—as their “target market.” Indeed, the United States is virtually alone among Western nations in allowing military recruiters to ply their trade inside educational institutions; this is not to say that schools elsewhere lack a military presence. There has been a significant increase in the level of military involvement in European schools, a trend War Resisters International has recently been tracking. As compared to the United States, however, where involvement in public education has been steadily evolving since the 1970s, the military presence in European schools appears negligible.

In Germany, a growing network of schools has refused to allow representatives of the German armed forces to hold events on campus. In contrast, U.S. public schools are required by law to allow military recruiter visits; if they do not, they risk losing precious federal funding. Military recruiters use this policy, contained in a section of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), as an excuse to make weekly visits to schools, volunteer to coach sports, and chaperone at school dances—all in bid to achieve what they refer to as “total school integration” and “school ownership.” Based on reports in the U.S. Army Recruiter Journal, some recruiters are such a fixture on high school campuses that they have their own offices in a school and enjoy de facto faculty status. Further, the Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC), a paramilitary course of study in high schools, operates in 3,000 U.S. schools, enrolling more than 400,000 students, some as young as fourteen years old. The American military also sees schools as a convenient location for administering the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test; military
recruiters use ASVAB results to essentially customize their recruitment sales pitch with young people.

Without doubt, America is a global leader in militarizing its schools. Of significance, this trend of militarization has spawned a formidable grassroots resistance: the small, but strategically sophisticated, counter-recruitment movement. Counter-recruitment (CR) takes a variety of forms in the United States. Activists (counter-recruiters, or CRs) visit schools to undermine recruiters’ message with information on non-military alternatives; counter-recruiters make it harder for military recruiters to operate in schools; and counter-recruiters mentor youth to become involved in these activities. Although the counter-recruitment movement is relatively small—around seventy-five grassroots groups, many consisting of just a few members—we believe it is an important phenomenon that emerged 40 years ago, one worthy of further study. As more Western nations begin relying on all-volunteer armies, we will likely see a growth in school–military partnerships. And in an age of invisible wars, visible forms of protest (rallies and marches) often lack the strategic supremacy they once enjoyed. Rather, activists themselves need to work behind the scenes to stop wars where they start: in schools that normalize young people to a culture of ceaseless war. Counter-recruitment provides a template for such activism, a powerful means of preventing future wars. In this essay we draw on interviews with dozens of CR activists in more than 20 communities across the United States. We examine the strengths and challenges of the U.S. counter-recruitment movement, and offer suggestions for linking this activism to other global anti-militarism efforts.

Some of those involved in counter-recruitment see this work primarily as an anti-war organizing strategy. Military recruiters are required to produce a certain number of enlistees every month. Indeed, the vitality of an all-volunteer military depends on recruiters meeting their monthly enlistment quotas. The anti-war goal of counter-recruitment, then, is to make it harder for recruiters to meet their enlistment targets, which in turn will undermine U.S. attempts to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. It appears that this aim was once widely embraced, particularly by younger activists. To understand this it is worth noting that, between 2004 and 2009, the counter-recruitment movement experienced tremendous growth. During that time the number of activists attending national-level, counter-recruitment conferences grew from two dozen to more than two hundred. As the former head of the Youth and Militarism Program at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) told us in an interview, this was “a time where . . . it was sexy to do counter-recruitment. Suddenly it became something that not just old Vietnam Vets did in schools.” College students, many affiliated with the College Anti-War Network, represented a healthy portion of the newcomers, and some (including one of the authors) became radicalized upon reading the first book on counter-recruitment, Army of None. The authors of this activist handbook,
Gulf War conscientious objector Aimee Allison and community organizer David Solnit, gave one of the clearest expressions of this objective of counter-recruitment. Counter-recruitment could remove a key “pillar of support” for war: the supply of troops sent to battle. “A hundred thousand marching one day every six months,” they maintained, “is not as effective as one thousand people talking to students every day.”

While reducing military recruitment is an important goal, this tactic has limited value. Linking counter-recruitment strategy to a particular war means that organizing energy wanes once that war ends. This phenomenon occurred in the wake of the Iraq War, as groups became less active and it became harder for organizers to raise money or attract new volunteers to the work. In order to grow and maintain the broad network of support needed for long-term strategizing, the counter-recruitment movement must jettison the obsession with specific wars that characterized past campaigns. Also, a problem with trying to drive down enlistment is that when military recruiters fail to “fill enough boots,” they simply change the rules of the game. For example, in 2006 (a year of unprecedented recruiting difficulties for the Army) the U.S. Army Recruiting Command raised the maximum age of enlistment from 38 years old to 42. A fight with the Pentagon is not a fair fight, nor is it one that counter-recruiters are likely to win.

There are some CR groups, particularly those working in rural or conservative areas, which avoid the label of “counter-recruitment” and instead describe their effort as “truth in recruitment.” Such a shift in framing facilitates activists’ access to high schools, since they emphasize their ability to help students make “informed choices” about whether to join the military. We describe this goal as the consumer advocacy approach to counter-recruitment, as it seeks to “empower” youth with the knowledge to make decisions about whether or not to enlist. Jim, a Vietnam veteran working with a group of older activists in Oregon, spoke of his support for this goal: “We never approach the kids as being anti-military. We approach them as advocates for them who want to make certain that they are completely informed.” This advocacy aspect of counter-recruitment is made necessary by the fact that military recruiters often fail to convey to students a basic piece of information: that military service may entail significant risk of injury or death.

This goal also aims to contest what Matthew Friesen has called the “vocational visions” offered by military recruiters. Since the end of conscription in 1973, U.S. military recruiting advertisements have heavily promoted opportunities for career-advancement found in the armed forces. Not surprisingly, given the current economic climate, military recruitment continues to emphasize vocational and educational opportunities, along with financial incentives to potential recruits. The consumer advocacy form of counter-recruitment is achieved primarily by setting up literature tables at a given high school as
often as once a month (or at least once a semester). On other occasions activists might have the opportunity to be present at a school’s career fair. No matter what form this outreach takes, counter-recruiters contest the military’s advertising claims by pointing out that few military occupations have viable counterparts in the civilian sphere, making employment upon discharge problematic; or despite their promises, military recruiters cannot guarantee an enlistee will receive the occupation or training of their choice. Moreover, activists seek to highlight the diverse array of non-military paths to obtaining career education and college funding.

Our assessment of counter-recruitment as consumer advocacy is mixed. It has the potential to give activists a reliable way to gauge progress. A major weakness of the counter-recruitment movement is the lack of agreed-upon means of measuring success. Not surprisingly, counter-recruiters’ self-assessments tend to be impressionistic and subjective. During our interviews, many activists told us that they “just know” when they have “reached” a student, or that they see a “light bulb going off” in the mind of a young person during a one-on-one interaction. One of the few measurements that local groups do have at their disposal is, however, the amount of literature they distribute each year at schools and other community events and their level of contact with students each year.

The consumer advocacy approach is thus a strategic asset because it allows counter-recruiters to be visible and available to young people. Activists in Texas and California have noted that simply having a regular presence in certain schools is part of their goal as an organization. In Fort Worth, Texas, for example, one counter-recruiter told us that it was through tabling and talking with students that her group learned about the ways military recruiters were violating school district policy on recruiter access to high school students. This aspect of counter-recruitment also seems to be more gratifying. In an interview, one activist—a combat veteran who served in Iraq with the Oregon National Guard—noted that working with students gave him a sense of “personal satisfaction.” Knowing that “there is no other voice for alternatives to military service,” he believes he has an important role to play in the lives of young people.

The consumer advocacy approach to counter-recruitment rests on the assumption that there are an abundance of non-military alternatives to the job training, health care, and college funding that youth can take advantage of through military service. Pablo Paredes, an Iraq War resister and current organizer with the AFSC, believes, however, activists must recognize that for many young people there simply are few options besides the military. Paredes suggests that counter-recruiters, in order to be most effective and achieve their goals in the long term, must get serious about building community. That means
doing something about the “hellish conditions” that characterize life in some American cities and which make military opportunities seem an appealing escape for youth. Further, Paredes notes, while it is easy to measure the amount of literature distributed each year, it is difficult to evaluate its impact on students. In the end, overreliance on the consumer advocacy approach runs the risk of converting counter-recruitment into just another form of propaganda aimed at youth. Young people, in Paredes’s view, typically will not listen to another group of adults trying to “scare them straight.”

A third goal of counter-recruitment seeks to develop critical consciousness in youth—to introduce the concept of militarism and help them think critically about the role the military plays in their lives. Militarism, as defined by the Turkish anthropologist Ayse Gül Altinay, is a “set of ideas and structures which glorify norms and practices associated with the military.” In the words of one interviewee, militarism “teaches conformity. It teaches people that dissent is something to be afraid of and something to either oppose or at least dismiss.” In contrast, once students develop the ability to think critically about the military and its presence in their schools, they possess the critical consciousness needed to question other dominant ideologies that influence their lives. Critically conscious youth, in this view, are also more inclined toward activism and will be better advocates for change in their communities.

We have identified two distinct paths to developing critical consciousness. One, the less resource-intensive and thus more common approach, emphasizes public education campaigns that combat what Matthew Friesen calls the “heroic military narrative.” This refers to the dominant ideology endorsed by military recruiters and reinforced by military recruiting advertisements and the mass media. In short, it promotes the notion that serving in the military can be a thrilling adventure, a chance for young men to prove their toughness, and an opportunity for young women to show that they can be just as brave as men. As a counterpoint to this narrative, counter-recruiters organize with veterans’ groups to deliver classroom presentations; most of their talks address “what the military is really like.” One activist from Oregon remarked that rather than give presentations on abstract topics—how military culture is patriarchal, for example—she relates the very personal story of how she was repeatedly raped while serving in the Army for four years.

While military veterans have been a critical part of many local CR groups, activists believe that youth often respond best to other youth. Integrating students into counter-recruitment organizing therefore allows young adults to serve as peers and mentors to other youth. This is the second path of building critical consciousness, one that has been used to good effect in New York City, Chicago, and California. We found an example of this approach in San Diego, where for several years Latina/o activists organized for the demilitarization
of Mission Bay High School. Students formed their own group to address the growing military presence in their school and received guidance and resources from adult allies, one of whom was a nationally known organizer in the counter-recruitment movement. Through leafleting and peer education, over time the youth were able to drive down enrollment in the school’s Marine Corps JROTC unit. In 2012 the unit was abolished, a significant victory given that JROTC rarely bends to activist pressure. As important, two student leaders told us a year later that this campaign changed the course of their lives: both plan to attend graduate school and pursue careers as organizers.

We believe that activists have been effective at teaching youth to think critically about the military, but also suggest that success in this respect is hard to measure. According to one interviewee, classroom presentations are difficult to assess. Although activists might feel they are making a difference when they talk with students, “at the end of the day, that’s [only] 45 minutes out of the students’ school year.” While it may be possible to gauge success in terms of the number of students taking a leadership role in organizing campaigns, student activists have few means of knowing whether they have made a lasting impact on their peers. A key challenge facing activists in public outreach, therefore, is that extensive outreach to classroom teachers and students is needed to maintain school access and ensure that counter-recruitment presentations are welcomed in the future. Maintaining youth involvement is likewise complicated by the problem of student turnover. But as noted below, when student activism is successfully sustained over several years, schools can be effectively de-militarized.

Aside from tactics described above, counter-recruiters also rely on community organizing aimed at blunting the impact of militarism in schools. Often working with coalition partners, activists have achieved significant victories over the past ten years. Examples range from local campaigns to establish policies that limit recruiter access and state-level initiatives like the Maryland ASVAB law in 2010 that prevents schools from automatically rendering student test results to military recruiters.

Of all the counter-recruitment approaches we believe this form is most effective. The goal of demilitarization holds the most promise of producing tangible, lasting change in schools. There is no more concrete sign of success than to go from a “total access” school—where recruiters visit as often as they like and go wherever they please on campus—to one where meaningful restrictions are placed on recruiter access. In addition to putting such policies in place, demilitarization campaigns can have a lasting effect on school climate and provide positive reinforcement to students. In Oakland, California, one organizer told us that youth activists had effectively “normalized a military critique within the [city’s] youth movement” and “shifted the culture” in the Oakland Unified School District.
This is a more promising approach to CR organizing for a second reason: for a movement struggling with volunteer attrition and sustainability, demilitarization campaigns may have the potential to energize more diverse and younger constituencies. An informant in San Diego noted, “[a]fter winning something against JROTC, the youth who were involved in that campaign will ‘own’ that victory. It’s theirs.” It is equally important, he added, that activists strategically target schools and build coalitions in Latino and African-American communities where military recruiters have a bigger presence. Two students who were involved in the San Diego anti-JROTC campaign suggested that since militarism “is part of our everyday lives,” the issue might be easier to identify with and understand than more abstract arguments about the effects of neoliberalism. In terms of organizing in schools where students are predominantly Latino, the objective, they told us, will be to highlight “militarism’s impact on our school, our neighborhoods and our raza.”

We note two challenges that face organizers undertaking demilitarization campaigns. To paraphrase a New York City organizer, getting a specific policy passed related to the presence of the military in schools is the easy part. The more difficult task is ensuring that a vast school bureaucracy will actually implement such rules. Doing so requires monitoring both the school system and military recruiters. In addition, it is vital that activists properly frame their public message: rarely do campaigns succeed on a strict anti-militarist plank. Pat Elder, architect of the 2010 Maryland ASVAB law and coordinator of the National Coalition to Protect Student Privacy, believes that student privacy is the “hook” that can draw in diverse coalition partners to counter-recruitment work. Elder found that his group’s successful statewide campaign boiled down to message control: “We never allowed anybody to suggest that we were anti-war people.” Variations on this sentiment were heard from other activists we interviewed across the United States.

Counter-recruitment has tremendous potential to be a proactive, community organizing strategy not only for peace, but also for broader social change. Yet activists will need to address certain challenges before the movement’s power can be fully realized. Most CR groups are severely limited in the kinds of strategies they can pursue because of a lack of volunteers; outreach efforts must improve to ensure that the movement can consolidate or even expand the gains it has made over the past ten years. Several activists reported indifference to their work on the part of foundations that previously funded other forms of peace activism. The issue of school militarism, according to one activist, is “not as tangible and immediate” to potential funders. “They can’t project to see how the militarization of schools today will become a bigger issue in the future.” Also, CR groups need to develop better ways of measuring success. We do not suggest a universal yardstick for counter-recruitment; because of
the local nature of such efforts, defining impact will depend on the community context. What matters is that groups have some means of assessing their work.

Many of those involved in counter-recruitment told us that they often feel isolated, and that even CR groups in neighboring cities rarely communicate with one another. Clearly, better coordination is essential both to exchange information on campaign strategies and to mitigate the feeling of isolation that comes with efforts to challenge militarism. Counter-recruiters would also do well to reach out to their European colleagues. Involving teachers in counter-recruitment has been difficult for many in the United States, but educator participation is notably strong in Europe. For example, Forces Watch, a non-profit organization that advocates for a ban on military representatives in schools in the United Kingdom, won the support of English and Scottish teachers unions. And German educators have been actively opposing a military presence in their schools for years. Methods of outreach could be as simple as monitoring the websites and publications of groups in Europe, or as ambitious as initiating a “sister organization” relationship with an anti-militarist group overseas. At a time of increasingly global war, U.S. counter-recruiters must find innovative ways to build connections with their international allies and keep in mind Susan Sontag’s dictum that “all struggle has a global resonance. If not here, then there. If not now, then soon.”

RECOMMENDED READINGS


