

Report reveals massive pro-war propaganda campaign

Military spectacle and American sport

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Anyone who has attended a professional sporting event in the United States over the last fifteen years is accustomed to the uncomfortable ritual of militarism that precedes each first pitch, kickoff or puck drop.

Those looking to enjoy an afternoon at the ballpark are first made to suffer through the unfurling of field-sized American flags, the blaring of the national anthem, and the marching of the honor guard to present the colors between the pitcher's mound and home plate.

During pre-game “fly-overs,” sports fans are exposed to the chilling sight of the underbellies of the same stealth bombers used to decimate entire cities and villages in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. Baseball fans must now endure the tired song “God Bless America” after singing along to the amusing traditional tune of “Take Me Out To The Ballgame.” National Guard and Army officers have booths set up next to snack vendors in an attempt to recruit middle school and high school students with the lure of tuition grants.

A report published this week by Republican Arizona Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake revealed that these pageantries of patriotism are the product of a multimillion-dollar US government propaganda campaign carried out with the collusion of the corporate sports world.

The report, titled “Tackling Paid Patriotism,” shows that the Pentagon paid sports teams across the country millions of dollars for allowing the military-intelligence agencies to carry out hundreds of displays of pro-war, pro-military propaganda.

From 2012 to 2015 alone, the US government spent \$53 million “on marketing and advertising contracts with sports teams,” the report notes. “The majority of the contracts—72 of the 122 contracts we analyzed—clearly show that DOD [Department of

Defense] paid for patriotic tributes at professional football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer games. These paid tributes included on-field color guard, enlistment and reenlistment ceremonies, performances of the national anthem, full-field flag details, ceremonial first pitches... DOD even paid teams for the ‘opportunity’ to perform surprise welcome home promotions for troops returning from deployments.”

The list of propaganda tools employed by the military in the 146-page report goes on and on. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were paid for the military branding of “rally towels,” patriotic-themed in-game video presentations, “battle ceremonies,” “military appreciation days...”

One report from a Chicago Bears football team’s “designated *Salute to Service* home game” gives a sense of the pageantry: “A member of the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division sang the National Anthem while 100 members from various branches of the military unfurled a large American flags [sic]. A soldier led the team onto the field while carrying an American flag [sic] and military members were Honorary Captains. Halftime featured a re-enlistment ceremony and after, Bears partners Boeing and Chase created a video showcasing fan appreciation for the military community.”

This sick spectacle captures something about contemporary life in the United States: sports fans are forced to watch as the US military pays a sports team to enlist unsuspecting young people to fight in wars that have resulted in the deaths of over one million people. In the background, a video from a bank and a weapons manufacturer gives a big “thank you!” on the Jumbotron scoreboard. The playwright Harold Pinter captured something of this spectacle in his coarsely

worded poem “American Football.”

The purpose of such rituals is part propaganda, part intimidation. On the one hand, the nauseating paeans to “our warriors” who “keep the homeland safe” is an attempt to justify the fact that the US has been in a state of permanent war for a quarter of a century, with trillions of dollars wasted on the wars of corporate plunder. On the other hand, the pro-war, pro-military hysteria is supposed to drown out, isolate and shame all oppositional antiwar sentiment. One dare not remain seated during the national anthem.

Of course, sport has long been fertile territory for mass distraction and used as a mechanism to release social pressure. Under the for-profit system, sport—for example, European football—has been employed to stoke the most right-wing national, regional and ethnic prejudices.

But the present militarist propaganda campaign in the US is almost without precedent, paralleling only the 1936 Berlin Olympics, held to glorify a rearmed German imperialism under fascist rule.

After the fall of the Roman Republic, the term “bread and circuses” was coined to describe the use of extravagant spectacle as an attempt by the bankrupt ruling class to pacify and distract the population while providing them with certain basic needs. A variation on the term—“guns and butter”—was employed in the 1960s to depict the attempts of the American ruling class to combine war abroad with social programs at home.

The present propaganda campaign combines the worst of both slogans. The ruling class today provides the working class with neither “bread” nor “butter.” As a result, their program is now one of “guns and circuses”!

Fifteen years after the beginning of the so-called “War on Terror,” no facet of life in the United States—political, legal or cultural—has escaped the dark shadow of the American military-intelligence apparatus. Everything is subordinated to the needs of the state. Personal communications are intercepted and stored, protests are monitored and school curricula are manipulated. Hollywood works with the CIA to produce films like “Zero Dark Thirty” to justify the government’s illegal torture program, and a worker can hardly take his or her family to the ballgame without being inundated with pro-war lies and propaganda.

Senators McCain and Flake are two pro-war

politicians who are opposed not to pro-war propaganda displays but only to the fact that sports teams received payment for allowing the government to put on their shows. It is interesting, to say the least, that two senators whose campaigns are supported by the weapons manufacturing industry are taking the moral high ground in opposition to war profiteering.

Nevertheless, their report reveals the vast chasm that separates the vast majority of the population from government officialdom, expressed through the military, the corporate media, the Democratic and Republican Parties, the trade unions, and the professional sports industry.

Contrary to the official portrayal, the United States is not a country in which broad support exists for the military-intelligence apparatus and its wars of exploitation. After all, there would be no need for propaganda if opposition did not exist. In other words, the military rituals surrounding professional sports are not the product of popular support for war. To the contrary, the ruling class feels the need to stoke Potemkin patriotism with increased ferocity precisely because they fear that the poison pill of American nationalism is wearing off.



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