NYU's Washington DC campus: Academia aligns with the Department of Defense

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Earlier this year, the IYSSE published a three-part series exposing New York University's vast ties to the Democratic Party, Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. There remains much to be uncovered regarding the university's undeniable ties to New York real estate, Wall Street speculation, and the military-industrial complex.

Long before US President Donald Trump's political rise, NYU made its turn to Washington. In 2004 the university became a founding member of the Homeland Security-Homeland Defense Education Consortium (HSDECA) under the US military's Northern Command as part of the so-called global war on terror. Eight years later in 2012, amid US-backed wars in Libya and Syria, the university opened the "Constance Milstein and Family Global Academic Center" in Washington, D.C.

A 75,000 square-foot academic, research, and housing facility located blocks away from the White House, the center was established as part of then-NYU President John Sexton's Global Network University (GNU) program along with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, which were widely criticized for the university's collaboration with authoritarian regimes. In contrast, the D.C. campus—established by wealthy liberal donors working to recruit and train students for work in government agencies and think tanks—was given little attention.

An Intention of Teaching "National Priorities and Values"

The D.C. location bares the distinct mark of US militarism. The location is directly named after its largest donor Constance Milstein, daughter of real estate mogul Seymour Milstein, who contributed $10 million to the establishment of a campus in the nation's capital.

Milstein, according to her web site, is the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army (CASA), where she works to "enhance the relationship between the United States Army and the civilian community." An Army press release on Milstein's acceptance of this position bluntly states "CASAs are usually business or civic leaders who possess a keen interest in the welfare of the Army and their communities." Milstein founded and sits on the board of Blue Star Families, the largest support organization for US military spouses and family.

The real estate heiress has played an instrumental role in providing a bridge between the military and sections of the Democratic Party. She has previously worked as Treasurer and Counselor to the Chairman of the Democratic Governors Association (DGA)—an organization whose mission is supporting the election and reelection of Democratic governors— "where she instituted a program to bring high-level military and national experts in direct dialogue with Governors."

Ronald Abramson, the second largest contributor, donated land valued at $5 million for the establishment of the Washington location. Abramson has undoubtedly benefited from the military-industrial complex as a lawyer and shareholder for the law firm and lobbying group Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney, where he also serves on the Board of Directors.

According to the firm's web site, they "represented major defense companies as they worked with the federal government," including "a defense-related emerging technology corporation during its entry into the federal marketplace," and "assisted in securing an extended contract with the Department of Defense for a client whose protective armor product is used by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps."

The third main donor for the site is Catherine B. Reynolds, who gave $1.5 million for the center's establishment. According to her web site, her wealth was made by developing a "privately-funded supplement to government student loan programs," which in only one decade "revolutionized student lending and spawned a multibillion-dollar industry." Servus Financial Corporation, a private education loan company Reynolds started, was sold to Wells Fargo Bank for more than $150 million in 2000.

Reynolds also serves on the Board of Directors of General Dynamics Corporation. General Dynamics, headquartered in Washington, D.C.'s Virginia suburbs, is an American defense corporation, the third largest contractor of the US federal government according to the US General Services Administration's 2017 Top 100 Contractors Report ($15.3 billion). The corporation is the creator of the Tomahawk missile, used in every US war since the first assault on Iraq in 1991.

All three donors sit on NYU's Board of Trustees, which oversees the university's work and "fulfillment of its academic mission." The decision to invest in a location in the center of US imperialist planning following the launching of the war on terror is indicative of the school's priority to align itself with American foreign policy.

As outlined by Sexton, NYU president from 2002-2015 and lifetime member of the Council on Foreign Relations, at the founding of the D.C. location, the campus was an "indispensable addition to NYU's global network" and would provide students the "opportunity to study government, policy-making, and

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international relations and national security close-up and in real time." He further stressed that it would allow students an "unrivaled opportunity to understand the United States, its government, and its national priorities and values."

Ray Suarez, an NYU alum and former journalist at Al Jazeera and NPR, delivered the keynote address at the grand opening, sounding the same themes as Sexton. Suarez noted the new campus's proximity to the halls of power, "the defense establishment" as well as "7 of the 10 richest counties in the United States." Suarez proclaimed the start of a "tremendous" relationship between NYU and Washington.

In comparison to the school's leadership, many faculty members questioned the academic purpose of the rapid expansion of the university, particularly since the faculty was excluded from any management of the GNU program.

A "Multidisciplinary Effort to Support Discussion, Research, and Outreach on Military Policy"

In April 2015, NYU's D.C. campus hosted a Vietnam War commemoration, "The Vietnam War Then and Now," sponsored by the Department of Defense (DoD). "The U.S. Department of Defense is sponsoring an official Vietnam War Commemoration to honor veterans of the war and highlight the service of the armed forces, while also paying tribute to the contributions of people on the home front during that long and difficult period of American history." The conference was held to examine the historic defeat of US imperialism amid covert operations in Syria, which confronted similar conditions of guerrilla warfare to the Vietnam War.

In February 2015, a panel discussion took place called "Boots on the Ground: The Role of Veterans in Government" featuring government officials with backgrounds in the military. The event was billed as "part of a growing multidisciplinary effort at New York University to support discussion, research, and outreach on veterans and military policy."

The bipartisan panel included Illinois congressman and Air Force Major Adam Kinzinger; California congressman Scott Peters; Hawaiian congresswoman and Army National Guard Major Tulsi Gabbard; Special Forces Army Officer Colonel Patrick Mahaney Jr, serving as the Director of the Chief of Staff of the Army's Strategic Studies Group; and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Michael D. Lumpkin. The panelists focused on questions such as: "How does the role of a veteran policymaker shape a person's ability to affect military policy?" "What is the proper role of technology in warfare and how can policy keep up with innovation?" and "In what ways can veterans influence policy, and take an active role in electoral politics?"

Last year, a talk sponsored by Center for a New American Security (CNAS)—a think tank specializing in national security, with close connections to the Democratic Party—was given on "New Terrorism Threats and Counterterrorism Strategies." According to a description of the event, "NYU Washington, D.C. welcomed CNAS and the Center on Law and Security at NYU School of Law for this public conference on new terrorism threats and counterterrorism strategies." The keynote speaker was Nicholas Rasmussen, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center at the time.

Since these events, the nexus between the political establishment and the military-intelligence apparatus has developed even closer. The Democratic Party is running dozens of candidates with backgrounds in the state, military and intelligence agencies in the 2018 congressional midterm elections. These candidates, whom the WSWS has dubbed the "CIA Democrats," are using their backgrounds in militarism and government spying as their primary qualifications for office.

The NYU campus offers many student internship opportunities at major Washington think tanks, including the Center for a New American Security (CNAS); the CATO Institute—a top Libertarian think tank; the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)—a bipartisan international relations think tank; the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC)—a conservative foreign and defense policy think tank; and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—a neoconservative public policy think tank.

An advertised internship at AEI—"Defense Planning and U.S. Global Strategy"—aims to "Conduct research into the future direction of American foreign policy, which will include an exploration of emerging global threats to U.S. national security." The position requires an "emphasis on the actions of foreign militaries" and suggests language fluency in "Arabic, Farsi, Russian, or Mandarin."

The institute also promotes internships at the DoD, the Department of Homeland Security, the National Defense University, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Higher Education Institution as Defense Contractor

For NYU's services, the university has been paid handsomely. According to NYU's 2017 Report on Federal Awards, the DoD paid a total of $15 million directly to NYU for Research and Development Expenditures while $3.7 million passed through NYU to other universities, corporations, and think tanks, such as Columbia University, BAE Systems, IBM, and SRI International. This 2017 total of $18.7 million in DoD funding is more than double 2016's $8.8 million total.

The fusion of higher education with institutions of US imperialism and major military contractors poses a serious danger to academic freedom with every aspect of a university's operations subordinated to the interests of American militarism and wealthy donors.

The blurring of the line between academia and the state deserves critical attention and active opposition in a time when universities are not ashamed of these ties. Students who are concerned about these developments should contact the IYSSE and become engaged in our campaign to oppose the militarization of higher education.

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