

Amazon HQ2's campus connection

# The marriage of militarism, big business and academia in Northern Virginia

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Amazon's decision to withdraw construction plans for its second headquarters in New York City last month has left intact its plans to build a corporate headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The decision to place its headquarters, dubbed "HQ2," next to the Pentagon and US federal government in the suburbs of Washington DC reflects the web technology and commerce giant's increasing strategic alignment with the forces of US militarism.

Within hours of Amazon announcing its pullout from New York, officials in Northern Virginia released public statements gloating of their abilities to retain the web corporation. "It highlighted a particular community dynamic in a region that has its act together," said Christian Dorsey, Arlington County Board chairman, in a statement quoted by the *New York Times*. The company will station its offices on a miles-long stretch of land bordering the Pentagon while the neighborhoods Amazon will occupy are to be renamed "National Landing" in honor of its arrival.

In addition to a \$550 million tax giveaway for the company to settle in Virginia and hire over 25,000 workers, with \$200 million more promised for exceeding that number, state-funded colleges have set up the equivalent of multi-million dollar feeder programs for the corporate giant.

Virginia Tech announced the creation of a \$1 billion, one-million square foot "innovation" campus in the nearby Potomac Yards neighborhood, along the border of the cities of Arlington and Alexandria. "The Virginia Tech Innovation Campus will be focused on computer science and software engineering, with specializations in areas including artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and data analytics," states the *Washington Post*. According to a school press release, Virginia Tech's "comprehensive higher education package... was cited as a key reason Amazon selected Virginia for a new headquarters site."

Not to be outdone, George Mason University announced a brand new "Institute for Digital Innovation" to be housed on its Arlington campus, also nearby. The school's website

declares that it plans to invest more than \$250 million over five years to develop its Arlington campus, which stands "adjacent to the New Amazon headquarters."

Both GMU and Virginia Tech's new "innovation" facilities will share state money, with over \$375 million in "performance-based" subsidies coming from the government. In addition, Democratic Governor Ralph Northam has pledged a \$50 million public investment over 20 years in school technology courses in order to feed the growing Virginia intelligence-tech industry. GMU will also partner with Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) on a new academic program titled ADVANCE, aimed "to help develop future tech talent" in the region, according to the InsideNOVA web publication.

"Virginia's biggest employment growth opportunity in the years ahead will be in tech—from artificial intelligence to cloud computing to cybersecurity, and everything in between," stated Stephen Moret, president and CEO of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership to *Virginia Tech News* of the state's purpose in luring more technology corporations.

Amazon's November announcement for HQ2 represents a major escalation in the deepening integration of the state with academia and private corporations.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously revealed the extremely close relationship that Amazon maintains with the United States intelligence community. As early as 2013, Amazon Web Services (AWS), the company's subsidiary providing cloud computing services, inked a deal with the United States intelligence community to host a \$600 million cloud service for the US spy agencies, called the Commercial Cloud Service (C2S). In the words of then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, the program aims to "improve the ability to securely and efficiently discover, access, and share information within the IC [intelligence community]."

AWS, which facilitates a significant portion of the

world's internet traffic through its data centers located in the Washington DC suburbs of Northern Virginia, where nearly 70 percent of the world's web traffic flows, is already closely integrated with the Department of Defense. Regarding the AWS partnership with the military, an Amazon blog in March 2016 noted :

“Adoption of cloud computing is critical to maintaining our military's technological advantage. Our nation's warfighters deserve the most innovative and secure solutions at the tactical edge—whether on land, in air, or at sea. The AWS Cloud provides secure, scalable, and cost-efficient solutions that help agencies meet mandates, drive efficiencies, increase innovation, and secure mission-critical workloads across the US Department of Defense.”

Amazon's announcement for HQ2 comes amid a bidding war between the technology giant as well as Google and Microsoft for rights to the DoD's Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure (JEDI) project, which will see the winning company gaining control of the internet cloud service housing a number of US military computing needs, a contract worth nearly \$10 billion.

In September, Amazon CEO and owner of the *Washington Post* Jeff Bezos appeared as the keynote speaker for the US Air Force Association's annual conference.

Speaking from the US National Harbor, located across the Potomac River from his company's soon-to-be headquarters, Bezos' speech was dedicated to laying out the integral relationship between the US military and intelligence agencies and the private web technology corporations. A report published by the Department of Defense a month earlier calls for a closer integration between the “US Warfighter” and “a... diverse network of private sector companies, R&D organizations, academic institutions, and government-owned facilities to develop and produce the technologies enabling U.S. military dominance and ensuring national security.”

A highly significant aspect of the academic response to HQ2 is that the institutions responding most strongly to the “Amazon challenge” are those whom already enjoy an extraordinarily close relationship with the US military-intelligence apparatus. According to a 2015 investigation by *Vice*, GMU, Virginia Tech and NVCC all rank among the top 20 most militarized colleges in the United States.

Both GMU and NVCC have established AWS feeder courses. NVCC, the second largest US two-year college and a founding member of the US National Cyberwatch Center with close ties to the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security, introduced a cloud service “apprenticeship” last year, training a class comprised entirely of US military veterans on its first run.

According to GMU, its ADVANCE program “works in

collaboration with Northern Virginia employers... to fulfill critical workforce needs, a strategy that is on point with [George] Mason's partnership with Amazon.” A list of the university's local employment “partners” includes organizations such as the US Marines along with military contractors Boeing, L3 Communications, BAE Systems and others.

In addition, George Mason hosts numerous “Centers of Excellence” for cybersecurity, criminal law and other pursuits connected to the state. Staff at GMU's Center of Excellence for Command, Control, Communications, Computing and Intelligence and Cyber Security (C4I) regularly participate in forums and panel discussions at events funded by Northrop Grumman, Boeing, Raytheon and other federal contractors tied to the US military and intelligence agencies.

Virginia Tech was a member of the Coalition for National Security Research, in addition to conducting classified work both with state intelligence services and military contractors. The university's Northern Virginia branch in Arlington houses the Ted and Kathryn Hume Center for National Security and Technology, which “leads Virginia Tech's research, education, and outreach programs focused on the challenges of cybersecurity, autonomy, and resilience in the context of national and homeland security.”

The Hume Center's Twitter account has regularly tweeted its support for HQ2, including calling on January 23 for “a pipeline starting K-12” to “close [the] cyber workforce gap.” The tweet mentions Amazon by name.

The integration of US imperialism, academia and corporate America raises the need to expropriate massive companies like Amazon and place them under democratic control so their technology can be harnessed not for war and surveillance but to improve the lives of billions of people.



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