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U.S. Marine Corps recruits complete obstacles at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island in South Carolina on February 21, 2019. The total number of heat-strokes and cases of heat exhaustion suffered by active-duty service members rose by 60 percent between 2008 and 2018. Warrant Officer Bobby J. Yarbrough/U.S. Marine Corps

The Pentagon is staring down the barrel of what could become the longest, hottest war in U.S. history. This titanic clash pits the largest military the world has ever seen against an omnipresent opponent that can marshal resources like no enemy it has ever encountered.

That opponent is climate change, and according to a [joint investigation](#) by [NBC News](#) and [In](#)

[sideClimate News](#)

, the extreme heat it brings is already generating military casualties. But soldiers like [Sgt. Sylvester Cline](#) are not dying where you might expect, such as scorching, oil-rich targets like Iraq, where Cline served during a lie-tainted war. Unlike the overwhelming majority of Uncle Sam's [long list of military conflicts](#), this war is also being waged on U.S. soil. Sadly, the Arkansas-based sergeant was just one of "at least 17 troops to die of heat exposure during training exercises at U.S. military bases since 2008."

In fact, the total number of heat-strokes and cases of heat exhaustion suffered by active-duty service members rose by 60 percent between 2008 and 2018 (from 1,766 to 2,792). Forty percent of these incidents occurred in the Southeastern United States in places like Fort Benning (Georgia), Camp Lejeune (North Carolina) and Fort Polk (Louisiana). Over that same period, the Southeast region has experienced average summer temperatures that were the nation's hottest on record, and a staggering 61 percent of major Southeast cities show the effects of these worsening heat waves, according to the [Fourth National Climate Assessment](#) released in 2018.

Although the Pentagon both [believes in climate change](#) and is [actively planning for it](#), the Defense Department has been [criticized](#) for failing to properly adjust to these new, climate-stoked "[black flag](#)" conditions. It's perplexing because the sun-baked Southeast is home to many of the 46 bases the Defense Department currently identifies as "[threatened by climate change](#)." But, as the *NBC News/InsideClimate News* collaboration [pointed out](#), the inadequate response often reflects the fact that "many U.S. military leaders fought in the intense heat of Iraq and Afghanistan and want their troops to be able to do the same." As former Army captain Augusto Giacomani [explained](#), " ... if you want to be prepared for a fight in the heat, you have to train in the heat under the same conditions you'll encounter."

Obviously, he's referring to the sweltering conditions U.S. troops "encounter" in the Middle East. And when we talk about fighting in the Middle East, we're really talking about the central

organizing principle of U.S. empire — and that's oil. Ironically, the Pentagon's [regional command](#) for the Middle East was aptly dubbed CENTCOM (Central Command) [when it was created](#) under President Ronald Reagan in 1983. The oil-dominated region has been the literal and figurative “center” of a globe-spanning empire largely built on the production and transmission of oil. That's the same oil now catalyzing the climate-based “counter-attack” threatening U.S. troops and bases. And like so many of the United States's recent foes, it is an enemy of its own making.

As Brown University's Costs of War research project [recently pointed out](#), the Defense Department “remains the world's [single largest consumer of oil](#) — and as a result, one of the world's top greenhouse gas emitters.” British researchers at Durham University and Lancaster University [published](#) a corroborating report detailing the profuse use of hydrocarbons to fuel U.S. military adventurism. They astutely pointed out the dilemma of attempting to confront “the effects of climate change while remaining the largest single institutional consumer of hydrocarbons in the world.” They see the Pentagon “locked into” this situation “for years to come because of its dependence on existing aircraft and warships for open-ended operations around the globe.” But that's not the only catch-22 bedeviling an empire comprised of [800 military bases and installations](#) that cost over [a trillion dollars per year](#) to maintain. Far more vexing is the fact that the climate crisis is itself a byproduct of 70 years of U.S. interventionism and empire.

How Empire Brought the Heat

Since President Franklin D. Roosevelt extended the United States's nascent post-World War II [protectorate](#) over Saudi Arabia in a [1945 deal with King Saud](#), U.S. empire has been devoted to securing and protecting transmission routes for oil, creating oil-based client states through intervention and coups, protecting and selling arms to client petro-states, and punishing non-compliant petro-states that run askance of the U.S.'s oil-based imperium. In essence, the petroleum-fueled global economy has been underwritten by the full faith and credit of the U.S. military since the end of World War II.

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When we talk about the U.S. as the “world’s policeman,” much of the beat Uncle Sam walks is paved with oil. The Persian Gulf, the Niger River Basin Region of Africa, the Horn of Africa, the South China Sea, Central Asia, Venezuela and Libya are all places of U.S. “national interest” because U.S. policymakers are *really* interested in preserving the dominant role of hydrocarbons in the global economy.

Why else would the U.S. Navy base its [Fifth Fleet](#) in Bahrain? Or how about the [U.S. base](#) in Djibouti or the [increasing tempo](#) of [deadly kinetic operations](#) in Somalia? Both have everything to do with the [Bab el-Mandeb Strait](#), strategically located between Djibouti and war-torn Yemen. Along with the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal, it’s one of the Middle East’s [three major oil transmission points](#).

Now, just imagine if ExxonMobil or Chevron was forced to sustain a private fleet of warships to keep these two straits open? What would happen if Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates couldn’t rely on U.S. patrols of the Persian Gulf or [continued U.S. support](#) for its bloody war to control Yemen and, therefore, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait? Or, imagine that the Suez wasn’t controlled by Egypt, a dutiful, [dictatorial client](#) of the United States?

The climate crisis is not only a byproduct of empire, but it’s becoming a rationale for even more empire.

It’s hard to imagine, because every year the U.S. political system reflexively funds a [world-dominating](#) defense budget that directly benefits the oil industry, client states and the entire

hydrocarbon-based economy. Basically, it's a global protection racket that generates [huge profits](#) for defense companies that sell weapons to the Pentagon. And the [U.S. government](#) also [pushes arms sales abroad](#), particularly to [oil-rich clients](#) like those in the Middle East. All of those arms sales sustain [thousands of jobs](#) in states and congressional districts around the U.S. That, in turn, creates constituencies for members of Congress who collect millions in campaign contributions from both the [defense](#) and [oil](#) industries to make sure they can maintain *de facto* subsidies for their weapons and their oil. Taxpayers and consumers complete the circuit through their "contributions" to the empire's public-private partnership: They get to keep on buying oil, gas and plastic, while paying taxes for the military. It's a perpetual ATM fueled by oil.

Meanwhile, U.S. citizens fill the ranks of the military services that guarantee the continuation of a hydrocarbon system that's now cooking them alive as they train on U.S. soil. It's the ghoulish internal logic of the oil-driven imperium, one that generates its rationale for being through its continued existence.

Funding the Pentagon, Fueling the Fallout

Now this self-perpetuating system threatens to engulf the thawing Arctic, which is becoming a [new frontier](#) for untapped oil and gas. Of course, there'd be no scramble for the Arctic's once-impenetrable hydrocarbon resources without the unprecedented melting caused by our hydrocarbon-driven climate crisis. But that sad irony was purposefully ignored by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a recent meeting of the eight-nation [Arctic Council](#) in Finland. Unsurprisingly, the [Rapture-ready](#) Pompeo [refused to sign](#) the meeting's

[joint accord](#)

because it mentioned the climate crisis now devastating the Arctic's ecosystems. Instead, Secretary Pompeo

[extolled](#)

the

[supposed benefits](#)

of the big melt that's rapidly altering the pristine landscape of the ever-less frozen frontier:

The Arctic is at the forefront of opportunity and abundance. It houses 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil, 30 percent of its undiscovered gas, an abundance of uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, diamonds, and millions of square miles of untapped resources, fisheries galore.

It's a predictable statement from an [oil-obsessed administration](#) that salivates at the prospect of [drilling, baby, drilling](#) in the

Arctic. At the same time, Secretary Pompeo put the world on notice,

[stating](#)

that the region has become an "arena of global power and competition." Without irony, he

[warned](#)

Russia and "

[non-Arctic](#)

" nations like China against "

[aggressive](#)

" behavior. Actually, China is

[already there](#)

and

[drilling](#)

in cooperation with Russia in

[a](#)

[de facto](#)

[alliance](#)

around the issue of the opening Arctic, a fact that is likely to become

[budgetary catnip](#)

for U.S. empire. Competition for this new frontier is quickly becoming the latest oily justification to pour money into yet another theatre of operations. In other words, the climate crisis is not only a byproduct of empire, but it's becoming a rationale for even more empire.

Actually, it's already started.

If we are not careful, the same forever war mentality that has continually shifted from one

enemy to another will find yet another reason to exist.

The troops sent to the border to “[assist](#)” U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and to “[build](#)” Trump’s wall are, like Sergeant Cline’s heat-related death, a harbinger of things to come. They are not only

[seeing](#)

firsthand the desperation of people willing to

[walk up to 2,000 miles](#)

to flee the fallout from

[decades of U.S. interventionism](#)

in Central America, they are witnessing the start of a

[widely predicted](#)

climate migration crisis. A brutal mix of prolonged drought, water scarcity and deforestation is exacerbating the suffering in

[El Salvador](#)

,
[Guatemala](#)

and

[Honduras](#)

. As

InsideClimate News

[noted](#)

, Honduras typifies the unfair paradox of the climate crisis because “like so many developing countries” it “has contributed relatively little to the greenhouse gas emissions,” but “projections suggest it is especially imperiled by climate change.”

Low-emission countries like [Bangladesh](#), [Mozambique](#) and [Fiji](#) are already feeling the heat of the climate crisis. And, as U.S. troops suffer from heat waves in the Southeast, the impact of climate crisis is also being felt acutely in the U.S. in places like the

[Alaskan village of Newtok](#)

, which requested and was

[finally granted](#)

Federal Emergency Management Agency money to flee the relentless march of climate-caused erosion. Obviously, the crisis is not 50-75 years away, as Environmental Protection Agency Administrator and former hydrocarbon lobbyist Andrew Wheeler

[smugly proclaimed](#)

— and

[the Pentagon knows it](#)

Unfortunately, the longer the U.S. continues to garishly fund the Pentagon and its oil-based protection racket, the harder it will be to deal with the massive ecological and human fallout

caused by the hydrocarbon economy. Ultimately, it might be impossible to halt or even mitigate the climate crisis without also ending empire. And if we are not careful, the same forever war mentality that has continually shifted from one enemy to another will find yet another reason to exist — this time as a bulwark against the escalating impacts of a climate crisis it helped to create in the first place.

The U.S. could become a garrison state, pulling back to within its borders like a paranoid survivalist, armed to the teeth with high-tech weapons and ready to gun down anyone and everyone fleeing their storm-ravaged homes and collapsing ecosystems. In many ways, this transition has already begun.

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