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MILITARY WASTE: THE UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES OF PERMANENT WAR READINESS

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In *Military Waste: The Unexpected Consequences of Permanent War Readiness* (2019), Joshua O. Reno delivers a compelling ethnographic examination of the long-retired physical residues of the U.S. Military–Industrial–Congressional complex and how their afterlives shape communities far removed from formal theaters of war. This study contributes meaningfully to global debates on the social, political, and environmental consequences of militarism, drawing attention to how war's detritus—material, psychological, and ecological—continues to configure everyday life.

Reno's work resonates strongly within contemporary conversations about the environmental footprint of U.S. military power. In recent years, global headlines have underscored the startling scale of American military emissions, with some reports noting that the U.S. armed forces emit more greenhouse gases than several industrialized nations. Scholars such as Oliver Belcher and colleagues have described the "hidden carbon costs" of the "everywhere war," pointing to the geopolitical ecologies of hydrocarbon extraction, global supply chains, and the logistics of sustaining an immense military presence worldwide. With an annual defense budget surpassing the combined spending of the next seven largest military powers, the environmental imprint of American militarism is correspondingly vast. Between 2001 and 2017 alone, the U.S. Department of Defense[1] is estimated to have emitted as much as 1.2 billion metric tons of greenhouse gases, making it one of the world's leading institutional emitters.

These broader debates form an important backdrop to Reno's ethnography. Rather than focus on wartime emissions or battlefield destruction, Reno turns to the quieter, but no less consequential, afterlives of the debris left behind: toxic soils, contaminated landscapes, obsolete hardware, and the dispersed remnants of America's permanent war footing. He contends that the United States' geographically unbounded military empire—shaped by an enduring attachment to hardware, dual-use technologies, and a persistent readiness for conflict—has generated a distinctive landscape of environmental harm. From nuclear testing sites and abandoned bases to fuel spills, radiation leaks, and the militarization of outer space, the U.S. military has become, in Reno's apt phrase, "a vector for the spread of toxicity" with consequences that ripple across oceanic islands, coastal ecologies, and local communities.

[1] Now Department of War.

Reno's analysis of America's permanent war economy extends beyond material waste to the political and cultural imaginaries that sustain it. He argues that national anxieties about falling behind real or imagined enemies help maintain the vast expenditures required for unmatched military dominance. This logic of preparedness fuels what he calls "private enrichment from public investment," as weapons manufacturers and defense contractors benefit disproportionately from public funds. The book's discussion here aligns Reno with thinkers such as Chalmers Johnson as well as Coyne and Hall, who argue that militarism abroad reshapes domestic institutions, norms, and practices at home. The entanglement between foreign intervention and internal transformation—evident in phenomena such as domestic surveillance, the militarization of policing, and a political culture steeped in fear and armed self-defense—forms a broader milieu within which Reno situates military waste.

Yet Reno's narrative is not solely one of decay or critique. He also highlights the creativity, entrepreneurialism, and ecological imagination that emerge in response to military debris. Through the experiences of conservationists and local actors, he illustrates how derelict military apparatus—such as sunken ships used for reef restoration—can become sites of environmental renewal. These "ruin-scrapes," as he describes them, offer unexpected possibilities for restoration and reinterpretation, challenging us to rethink the value and potential afterlives of military materials in nonviolent directions.

Importantly, Reno's study also opens several promising avenues for further research. His work gestures toward larger questions about the global distribution of military waste, the environmental burdens borne by marginalized communities, and the international dimensions of America's ecological footprint. Scholars might further investigate how the toxic residues of militarism disproportionately affect Indigenous groups, island communities, and working-class laborers, or how the environmental legacies of U.S. bases compare with those of other world powers. Moreover, Reno's insights encourage deeper interdisciplinary engagement across environmental studies, international relations, and security studies, particularly regarding how militarized landscapes shape social life long after conflicts subside.

While *Military Waste* is a theoretically dense and academically oriented text, it stands as a valuable contribution to ongoing conversations about sustainability, militarism, and global security. Reno offers an incisive diagnosis of the material and moral contradictions of America's permanent war readiness. Although the book would benefit from more sustained engagement with policymakers, its analytical strength lies in exposing the complex web of effects produced by military waste and in highlighting the imaginative possibilities for repurposing these remnants toward ecological restoration. Ultimately, Reno provides readers with a rich, provocative account of an underexamined dimension of U.S. power—one that forces us to confront the lingering traces of militarism embedded in landscapes, institutions, and collective life.

