

US Weapons at War **by Frida Berrigan**

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“The only force powerful enough to stop the rise of tyranny and terror, and replace hatred with hope, is the force of human freedom...[and] America will stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

These words, delivered by President George W. Bush in his 2005 State of the Union address, drew cheers and applause. But shaping this noble rhetoric into concrete policies will mean reversing a decades-long policy of selling weapons and providing military aid to some of the world’s worst tyrants and dictators. Under President Bush’s leadership, this trend has accelerated and freedom and democracy have suffered as a result.

Can arms sales and military aid - two major tools in Washington’s tool box - help President Bush in his pledge to “end tyranny in our world?”

A report from the Arms Trade Resource Center says no. The report, *US Weapons at War 2005: Promoting Freedom or Fueling Conflict?* finds the US policies of arming and aiding friendly nations are at odds with the goals of democratization and furthering human rights throughout the world.

US arms sales are often justified by pointing to what we get in return - secure access to overseas military facilities or coalition allies in conflicts such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - but these alleged benefits can come at a high price. Often, US arms transfers fuel conflict, arm human rights abusers, or fall into the hands of US adversaries. US arms sometimes go to both sides in long brewing conflicts, ratcheting up tensions and giving both sides better firepower with which to threaten each other, as in the recent decisions to provide new F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan, while pledging comparable high-tech military hardware to its rival India. Far from serving as a force for security and stability, US weapons sales frequently serve to empower unstable, undemocratic regimes to the detriment of US and global security.

The United States transfers more weapons and military services than any other country in the world. Between 1992 and 2003, the United States sold \$177.5 billion in arms to foreign nations. In 2003 alone, the Pentagon and State Department delivered or licensed the delivery of \$5.7 billion in weaponry to countries which can ill afford advanced weaponry - nations in the developing world saddled with debt and struggling with poverty.

Despite having some of the world’s strongest laws regulating the arms trade, almost half of these weapons went to countries plagued with ongoing conflict and governed by undemocratic regimes with poor human rights records. In 2003, \$2.7 billion in weaponry went to governments deemed undemocratic by the US State Department’s Human Rights Report, in the sense that citizens of those nations “did not have a meaningful right to change their government” in a peaceful manner. Another \$97.4 million worth of weapons went to governments deemed by the State Department to have “poor” human rights records.

It is not enough to condemn tyranny and terror. President Bush must act to remove the tools of repression from the hands of tyrants and terrorists. Al-Qaeda and other non-state actors are real threats. But, for many, the central source of tyranny and terror is their own government.

The United States provides the military hardware and know-how, and then all too often turns a blind eye as governments suppress rights, squash legitimate dissent and sustain repression. In all, four of the five top US arms recipients in the developing world had major issues, ranging from undemocratic governments, to poor human

rights records across the board, to patterns of serious abuse.

Does US policy of providing military aid and selling weapons contribute to fighting the war on terrorism? Is it a sound policy for strengthening democracy and self-reliance, as US documents purport? Or does this policy conflate terrorism with human rights abuses and repression by putting more money and high-tech weaponry into the hands of leaders who violate human rights, repress their citizens and wage war on their neighbors?

Weapons at War

For many, war is synonymous with Iraq or Afghanistan, but our research enumerates 25 ongoing conflicts throughout the world. In the last decade, the US has transferred some \$8.7 billion in arms and military services to these war zones, \$970.5 million in 2003 alone. During that year (the last for which full data is available) the United States transferred weapons and military hardware into 18 of 25 conflict zones. This is despite the fact that these transfers appear to violate the spirit (if not the letter) of the Arms Export Control Act and the Foreign Assistance Act, which bar the transfer of US-origin military equipment into active areas of conflict.

The 1976 Arms Export Control Act stipulates that arms transfers can only be used by the recipient nation for self-defense, internal security and in United Nations sanctioned operations. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 bars military aid and arms sales to countries that demonstrate “gross and consistent” patterns of human rights abuses. And the Export Administration Act, passed in 1979, regulates the sale of “dual-use” items that could have civilian or military application.

While some arms transfers are relatively small - a few hundred thousand dollars - they carry significant political weight. A transfer of \$301,000 in weapons to Angola, for example, does more than provide military hardware. It suggests that Luanda is an ally and that Washington supports or acquiesces in the actions of their military.

In the case of conflict zones like the Philippines or Colombia, where tens of millions of dollars worth of weapons are sold, Washington supplements military hardware with deployment of US troops, advisers, military aid, or training programs, representing an even greater level of US involvement in these wars.

Military Aid

In times of crisis, like the tsunami that killed more than 100,000 people in the last days of 2004, the American people are very generous. And they assume their government is as well. While the United States doles out billions in foreign aid every year, Washington tends to favor military aid and weapons sales over other forms of aid, deprioritizing humanitarian, health or development aid, even though these types of foreign aid have long-term constructive impact.

Since the beginning of the war on terrorism, foreign military aid has increased precipitously. The Pentagon’s largest military aid program, the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program, increased by more than one-third (34 percent) between 2001 and 2005, jumping from \$3.5 billion to \$4.6 billion over that time period. President Bush is requesting \$4.5 billion in FMF for 2006.

Many countries previously barred from receiving US military aid, because of nuclear testing, human rights abuses, or their harboring of terrorists, began to receive aid in 2001. Two dozen nations, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Uruguay, either became first-time recipients of FMF during this period or were restored to the program after long absences. As a result, the number of countries receiving FMF assistance increased from 48 to 71 between 2001 and 2006 - a 47.9 percent increase.

In that same time period, ten countries saw their aid at least triple, and seven had their FMF assistance increase by

five times or more. The biggest gainers in FMF assistance in dollar terms were Jordan (+\$127 million), Pakistan (+\$300 million) and Afghanistan (+\$396 million). None of these countries are democracies that fully respect human rights, according to the State Department's Human Rights Report.

The Canadian-based Project Plough-shares calculates that there are 36 armed conflicts being waged in 28 countries and defines armed conflict as “political conflict in which armed combat involves the armed forces of at least one state (or one or more armed factions seeking to gain control of all or part of the state), and in which at least 1,000 people have been killed by fighting during the course of the conflict.”

Arming undemocratic governments all too often helps to enhance their power, frequently fueling conflict or enabling human rights abuses in the process. These blows to the reputation of the United States are in turn impediments to winning the “war of ideas” in the Muslim world and beyond, a critical element in drying up financial and political support for terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda.

Last but not least, in all too many cases, US arms and military technology can boomerang, ending up in the hands of US adversaries, as happened in the 1980s in Iraq and Panama, as well as with the right-wing fundamentalist “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan, many of whom are now supporters of al-Qaeda.

As a first step towards a more sound arms trade policy, it is time to impose greater scrutiny on US arms transfers and military aid programs. The superficial assumption that these are just tools in the foreign policy toolbox, to be used to win friends and intimidate adversaries as needed, must be challenged in this new era in US security policy. A good starting point would be to find a way to reinforce and implement the underlying assumptions of US arms export law, which calls for arming nations only for purposes of self-defense, and avoiding arms sales to nations that engage in patterns of systematic human rights abuses, either via new legislation or Executive Branch policy initiatives. Equally important, the automatic assumption that arms transfers are the preferred “barter” for access to military facilities or other security “goods” sought from other nations should be seriously re-considered. Economic aid, political support and other forms of support and engagement should be explored as alternatives whenever possible.

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