

University Investments: Divesting from the Military-Industrial Complex

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The rage and protest against Israel's campaign in Gaza, ongoing since the October 7 attacks by Hamas, has stirred student activity across a number of US university campuses and beyond. Echoes of the Vietnam anti-war protests are being cited. The docile consumers of education are being prodded and found interested. University administrators and managers are, as they always tend to, doing the bidding of their donors and funders in trying to restore order, punish the protesting students where necessary and restrict various forms of protest. Finally, those in the classrooms have something to talk about.

A key aspect of the protest centres on university divestment from US military companies linked and supplying the Israeli industrial war machine. (The pattern is also repeating itself in other countries, including Canada and Australia.) The response from university officialdom has been to formulate a more vigorous antisemitism policy – whatever that means – buttressed, as was the case in Columbia University, by the muscular use of police to remove protesting students for trespassing and disruption. On April 18, in what she [described](#) as a necessary if “extraordinary step”, Columbia President Minouche Shafik summoned officers from the New York Police Department, outfitted in riot gear, to remove 108 demonstrators occupying Columbia's South Lawn. Charges have been issued; suspensions levelled.

Students [from other institutions](#) are also falling in, with similar results. An encampment was made at New York University, with the now predictable police response. At Yale, 45 protestors were arrested and charged with misdemeanour trespassing. Much was made of the fact that tents had been set up on Beinecke Plaza. A tent encampment was also set up at MIT's Cambridge campus.

The US House Committee on Education and the Workforce has also been pressuring university heads to put the boot in, well illustrating the fact that freedom of speech is a mighty fine thing till it aggrieves, offends and upsets various factional groups who wish to reserve it for themselves. Paradoxically enough, one can burn the US flag one owns as a form of protest, exercise free speech rights as a Nazi, yet not occupy the president's office of a US university if not unequivocal in condemning protest slogans that might be seen as antisemitic. It would have been a far more honest proposition to simply make the legislators show their credentials as card carrying members of the MIC.

The focus by students on the Israeli-US military corporate nexus and its role in the destruction of Gaza has been sharp and vocal. Given the instinctive support of the US political and military establishment for Israel, this is far from surprising. But it should not be singular or peculiar to one state's warring machine, or one relationship. The military-industrial complex is protean, spectacular in spread, with those in its service promiscuous to patrons. Fidelity is subordinated to the profit motive.

The salient warning that universities were at risk of being snared by government interests and, it followed, government objectives, was well noted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his heralded 1961 [farewell address](#), one which publicly outed the "military-industrial complex" as a sinister threat. Just as such a complex exercised "unwarranted influence" more broadly, "the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity." The nation's academics risked "domination ... by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money".

This has yielded what can only be seen as a ghastly result: the military-industrial-academic complex, heavy with what [has been described](#) as "social autism" and protected by almost impenetrable walls of secrecy.

The nature of this complex stretches into the extremities of the education process, including the grooming and encouragement of Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) students. Focusing on Lockheed Martin's recruitment process on US college campuses in his 2022 [study](#) for *In These Times*, Indigo Olivier found a vast, aggressive effort involving "TED-style talks, flight simulations, technology demos and on-the-spot interviews." Much is on offer: scholarships, well-paid internships and a generous student repayment loan program. A dozen or so universities, at the very least, "participate in Lockheed Martin Day, part of a sweeping national effort to establish defense industry recruitment pipelines in college STEM".

Before the Israel-Gaza War, some movements were already showing signs of alertness to the need to disentangle US learning institutions from the warring establishment they so readily fund. [Dissenters](#), for instance, is a national movement of student organisers focused on "reclaiming our resources from the war industry, reinvest in life-giving services, and repair collaborative relationships with the earth and people around the world."

Such aspirations seem pollyannaish in scope and vague in operation, but they can hardly be faulted for their intent. The Dissenters, for instance, took to the activist road, being part of a [weeklong effort](#) in October 2021 comprising students at 16 campuses promoting three central objects: that universities divest all holdings and sever ties with "the top five US war profiteers: Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and General Dynamics";

banish the police from campuses; and remove all recruiters from all campuses.

Demanding divestment from specific industries is a task complicated by the opacity of the university sector's funding and investment arrangements. Money, far from talking, operates soundlessly, making its way into nominated accounts through the designated channels of research funding.

The university should, as part of its humane intellectual mission, divest from the military-industrial complex in totality. But it will help to see the books and investment returns, the unveiling, as it were, of the endowments of some of the richest universities on the planet. Follow the money; the picture is bound to be an ugly one.

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Featured image: Organizers began setting up early Monday morning on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene. They say the encampment isn't intended to interfere with campus activities or classes. (By Nathan Wilk / KLCC)

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