

Faith Leaders Oppose F-35 Fighter Jets

We, the undersigned faith leaders, wish to publicly raise our voices in opposition to the basing of an F-35A Joint Strike Fighter Force in the Madison community. For a number of reasons, we find this deployment morally offensive and feel compelled to speak out against it.

First, the F-35 is not only the most expensive weapons system in history. It is also a critical component of our country's new nuclear strategy. This plane is sometimes called the most dangerous weapon in our nuclear arsenal because it is designed to carry the B61-12 guided nuclear bomb, a bomb small enough to be considered "usable" in the minds of some war planners.

Starting with Barack Obama and continuing with Donald Trump, the horrifying idea of a "winnable" nuclear war has been revived as official policy. The F-35 is at the heart of this nightmare notion. Defense analyst Pierre Sprey points out that the F-35 was mentioned eight times in the Nuclear Posture Review released by President Trump and the Department of Defense in 2018. (See *Nuclear Posture Review*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, February 2018)

The Air Force has assured us that the jets coming to Madison will not be equipped with nuclear weapons. Sprey, who helped design two previous jet fighters, said that, while no F-35s are currently equipped for nuclear bombs, all may be in the future. One year ago, Sprey addressed the state legislature in Vermont, where residents were also assured that their airbase would have no nuclear mission. The F-35 "will be the first weapons system deployed with this whole new emphasis placed on small nuclear weapons," he told the legislators. "The F-35 is the opening wedge for the small nuclear warhead and the supposed ability to fight a small nuclear war, and that will be coming here." (See *Public Testimony by Pierre Sprey*, Vermont Senate Government Committee Hearing, May 7, 2018 and Vermont Senate Resolution 5 adopted by Vermont Senate, May 23, 2018.)

We find the F-35 to be a morally offensive weapon system not just because it threatens the planet and its people but also because it claims funds desperately needed to address urgent human and environmental needs. As Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis of the Poor People's Campaign and Stephen Miles of Win Without War wrote recently, "funneling trillions of dollars into institutions designed to violently protect the status quo – be they police or military – does not make ourselves, our loved ones, or our communities safer. As cities and states face budget crises, education and healthcare find themselves on the chopping block while police budgets are protected and even increased. This makes us less, not more secure.

"As demands to demilitarize the police and redistribute funds to programs of social uplift gain traction across the country," they added, "we call to similarly reimagine our approach to national security. To create real security, we must slash the Pentagon budget, dismantle the war economy, and invest instead in meeting everyone's basic human needs."

We also oppose this project because it will have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income people, people of color, and children, groups whose well-being is one of the highest priorities of our faith communities. The Air Force itself made this clear in its final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). It admitted F-35s will bring more air and noise pollution to parts of the north and east side of Madison, home to significant populations of the poor and people of color.

These residents have long fished in Starkweather Creek and Lake Monona, some for subsistence. Their children play in the creek, now one of the most polluted bodies of water in Wisconsin. Their health is at risk because the creek, the groundwater (and some of our drinking water) has been contaminated with Per and Polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and other toxins related to Truax Field.

We are also concerned about the noise the F-35s will bring. There has been much debate about the severity of this noise, but two things are clear: the noise from the current F-16s is nearly intolerable now for those living under the flight path. The noise from the F-35s is likely to be considerably worse.

There is a growing body of evidence, including that cited by the Air Force EIS reports for Vermont and Madison, that the negative impact of noise on children is far greater than on adults. Heightened noise interruptions for children – in school, on the playground or at home – can lead to delayed speech development, reduced attention and impaired concentration. It can also cause long-term memory problems and decreased math and reading comprehension. (See Dr. Elizabeth Neary, pediatrician, "If We Care About Children, We Should Oppose F-35s in Madison, guest column, *Capital Times*, October 31, 2019; Public Health Madison & Dane County, *Noise Exposure: Health Effects & Equity*, flyer, September, 2019; Anne Tigan, RN, *Letter to School Board & Brief Bibliography*, September 22, 2019).

Rev. Scott Anderson, pastor, Presbyterian Church (USA)
Annie Bachman, Madison Tao Shiatso Center
Rev. Mary Kay Baum, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)
Rev. Ann Beaty, pastor, First Congregational United Church of Christ
Rev. Peter Beeson, lead pastor, St. John's Lutheran, ELCA
Vicki Berenson, Society of Friends (Quakers)
Rabbi Jonathan Biatch, Temple Beth-El, Reform Judaism
Rev. Winton Boyd, pastor, United Church of Christ (UCC)
Timothy Cordon, First Unitarian Society Social Justice Ministry
Rev. Cindy Crane, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Dr. Jerry Folk, pastor, ELCA, Interfaith Peace Working Group
Rabbi Betsy Forester, Beth Israel Center
Rev. Kristin Gorton, pastor, Memorial United Church of Christ
Rev. Phil Haslanger, pastor, United Church of Christ
Rev. Eldonna Hazen, pastor, First Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. John Helt, pastor, United Church of Christ
Rev. Sonja Ingebritson, Community of Hope UCC
Jane H and Vince Kavaloski, Society of Friends (Quakers)
Linda Ketcham, United Church of Christ
Dr. Paul Knitter, Emeritus Prof. of Theology and Religion, Union Theological Seminary, New York
Dr. John Leonard, PhD, Professor of Religious Studies, Edgewood College

There are approximately a dozen K-12 schools and 15 childcare centers in the vicinity of Truax Field, where the sound will be the greatest. According to a 2018 neighborhood study by the City of Madison, kids in the Truax area are struggling even before they start school, with only 48 percent considered "kindergarten ready." (See *Neighborhood Indicators Project*, City of Madison Planning Division, 2018 Edition.) One of the schools destined to suffer the worst noise impacts is Hawthorne Elementary, where most children are low-income and of color. In a city struggling to overcome persistent racial disparities, flying an obnoxiously noisy fighter jet over our elementary schools is likely to intensify these disparities.

Some people say the sound of fighter jets is "the sound of freedom." But in fact, for children around Truax, the sound of fighter jets is a horrific noise signifying a threat to health and a barrier to learning. For children in countries that the U.S. bombs or countries bombed by their own governments with jets and bombs provided by the U.S., the sound of fighter jets is the sound of danger, oppression, fear and death. For many people who care about peace, justice and the health of our planet, the sound of a fighter jet is a sickening sound.

Finally, we oppose the F-35 for ecological reasons. The U.S. military is the world's worst polluter. In 2014, a Pentagon official reported that her environmental program office had to contend with 39,000 contaminated areas spread across 19 million acres in the United States alone. Almost 900 of nearly 1,200 Superfund sites in the U.S. are abandoned military facilities or sites that support military needs, not counting military bases themselves. The Pentagon has stated that 651 military sites are contaminated with toxic PFAS substances. (See Whitney Webb, *U.S. Military is World's Biggest Polluter*, *MintPress News*, May 15, 2017 and *Pentagon Report 250*, *New Sites Are Contaminated with PFAS*, *Military Poisons website*, March 19, 2020.)

The Air Force and Air National Guard at Truax have been polluting the water and soil in Madison for a half-century or more. When the Air Force proposed a major demolition and construction project for Truax Field in early 2019, the EPA instructed the Air Force to describe how the proposed project might affect water bodies listed as "impaired" by the Wisconsin DNR and to document the presence of what it called "legacy pollution" (PFAS and other chemicals), and how it proposed to address these problems. The agency also recommended that the Air Force "ensure that the project would not have disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and/or low-income populations." (See *Environmental Assessment for Construction and Demolition Projects at the 115th Fighter Wing Installation*, Dane County Regional Airport, Madison, Wisconsin, March 1, 2019 and Letter from Kenneth A. Westlake, Chief NEPA Implementation Section, Environmental Protection Agency). The Air Force quietly completed its environmental assessment (EA) process and basically ignored all these issues.

So far, the military has declined to clean up the mess it has made. The Department of Defense does not accept responsibility for its destructive environmental behavior and the Air Force has even claimed in federal courts that "federal sovereign immunity" allows it to disregard any state's regulations pertaining to PFAS contamination. The refusal of the military to clean up the environmental mess it makes is understandable since its mission is not environmental stewardship but expansion and protection of U.S. domination, often pursued through violence and war.

In closing, we believe it is worth noting that our last two concerns, for the most vulnerable among us and for the environment, are deeply intertwined, since the people who most often bear the brunt of environmental deterioration and destruction are the poor and people of color. This has been the case for so long there is now a term for it: *environmental justice*. When the Air Force proposed their demolition and construction project for Truax Field in early 2019, the U.S. EPA advised them that "communities with environmental justice (EJ) concerns are located near Truax Field."

With all these concerns in mind, we call on U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin to reverse her position on the deployment of the F-35 at Truax and to oppose the Air Force's plans to station the F-35s in Madison. Likewise, we call on Congressman Mark Pocan, Senator Ron Johnson, Governor Tony Evers and Wisconsin Adjutant General Paul Knapp to inform the Air Force that they oppose this project.

We ask the citizens of Madison to contact these public officials, urging them to oppose the deployment of the F-35 at Truax and to insist that the Wisconsin Air National Guard at Truax be assigned a new mission more in keeping with the humane values of peace, equity, sustainability and concern for the health and security of our community.

Yours in Peace

Rev. Lex Liberatore, pastor, Lake Edge United Church of Christ
Rev. Thomas F. Loftus, pastor, ELCA
Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Executive Director, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Sr. Maureen McDonnell, O.P., Interfaith Peace Working Group
Sr. Reg McKillop, O.P. Peace and Justice Promoter, Sinsinawa Dominicans
Fr. Jim Murphy, pastor, Roman Catholic Church
Rev. Kenneth Pennings, Associate Pastor, Orchard Ridge UCC
Dr. Carmen Porco, pastor, American Baptist Church
Carl Rasmussen and Catherine Crow Rasmussen, United Church of Christ
Rev. Franz Rigert, Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference, UCC
Rev. Dr. Larry Sexe, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; President, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Rev. Valerie Showalter, pastor, Mennonite Church, USA
Rev. Bryan Sirchio, pastor, United Church of Christ
The Sisters at Holy Wisdom Monastery
Rev. Frederick R. Trost, pastor, UCC, Interfaith Peace Working Group
Rev. Nick Utphall, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman, Congregation Shaarei Shamayim

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