Faith Leaders Oppose F-35 Fighter Jets

We, the undersigned faith leaders, wish to publicly raise our voices in opposition to the deployment of F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets 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 weapon 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 B-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 "usable" nuclear weapon has been reviewed as official policy. The administration of the current president has cancelled the nuclear test ban treaty. In an internal memo, Secretary of Defense James Mattis has signaled a return to a "first use" posture for nuclear weapons.

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, all may be in the future. One year ago, Sprey addressed the state legislature in Madison, where residents were also assured that their aircraft would have no nuclear capability. The F-35 will be the first weapon 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 weapon and the supposed ability to frighten a small nuclear war, and I wish to come here today to see and hear this." (See Public Testimony by Peter Sprey, Vermont Senate Government Committee Hearing, May 7, 2018 and Vermont Senator Resolution 5 adopted by Vermont Senate, May 10, 2018)

We find the F-35 to be a morally offensive weapon system just because it threatens the planet and its people and 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 Michaelle Williams of Witness Without War wrote recently, "funneling trillion of dollars into institutions designe[d] violently to protect the status quo — be they police or military — does not make our lives or our communities safer. As cities and states face budget crises, education and healthcare shrivel themselves on the chopping block while police budgets are propped up 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 asked, "will we continue to argue that our approach is constitutional. To create real security, we must slash the Pentagon budget, dismantle the war economy, and invest instead in meeting everyone's basic needs."

We also oppose this project because it will have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income people, people of color, and children, 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 lobbied in Sterktawbear 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 Polyfluoronyl substances (PFAS) and other toxins related to Truax Field. We are also concerned about the noise and 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 not tolerable 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 delays in development, reduced attention and impaired concentration. It can also cause long-term memory problems and decreased mental and emotional comprehension. (See Dr. Elizabeth Healy, preface to "If We Care About Children, We Should Oppose F-35s in Madison," guest co-host, Capital Times, October 11, 2019, Public Health Madison & Dane County, Noise Exposure: Health Effects & Policy, September, 2010, Anne Tinger, RA, Letter to Scott Harf/Scott幸福and June 2, 2010.)

The F-35s are also a threat to the environment. 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 report 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 these schools decided 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 notoriously noisy fighter jet over our elementary schools is likely to intensify these disparities.

Some say the point of fighter jets is "the sound of freedom." But in fact, for children around Truax, the sound of fighter jets is a horrid noise signifying a threat to a health and to a learning. For children in the U.S. who can afford or can afford for their children's education, this noise adds to the overcompensating for the education of the poor and people of color. This has been the case for so long there is now a term for it: environmental justice. Where the Air Force proposes their deployment 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 identified 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: Construction and Demolition Projects on the F-16 "Fighter Wing Installations, One County Regional Airport, Madison, Wisconsin, March 1, 2015 and Letter from Kenneth A. Westlie, Chief NEPA Implementation Section, Environmental Protection Agency). The Air Force in its environmental assessment (EA) process and basically ignore all of 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 protection but expansion and protection of U.S. dominance, often pursued through violence and war.

In conclusion, 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 must 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. Where the Air Force proposes their deployment and construction project for Truax Field in early 2019, the EPA declared that "communities with environmental justice (EJ) concerns are located near Truax Field."

With these concerns in mind, we call on U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin to reverse her position on the deployment of the F-35s 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-35s at Truax and to insist that the Wisconsin Air National Guard at Truax be assigned a new mission more in keeping with the human values of justice, equity, sustainability and concern for the health and security of our community.

Yours in Peace

Rev. Scott Anderson, pastor, Presbyterian Church (USA)
Rev. Thomas F. Loffo, pastor, ELCA
Rev. Mary Kay Baum, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)
Rev. Ann Bentley, 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 Bacht, Temple Beth El, Reform Judaism
Rev. Whiton Boyd, pastor, United Church of Christ (UCC)
Timothy Corden, First Unitarian Society Social Justice Ministry
Rev. Cindy Crone, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Dr. Jeff Foll, pastor, ELCA, Interfaith Peace Working Group
Rev. Elnada Haten, pastor, First Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. John Helt, pastor, United Church of Christ
Rev. Sonja Ingebrigtsen, Community of Hope UCC
June H and Vico Kawasaki, Society of Friends (Quakers)
Linda Ketchem, United Church of Christ
Dr. Paul Krotter, Emeritus Prof. of Theology and Religion, Union Theological Seminary, New York
Dr. John Leonard, PhD, Professor of Religious Studies, Edgewood College

Rev. Lex Liberatore, pastor, Lake Edge United Church of Christ
Rev. Thomas F. Loffo, pastor, ELCA
Rabbi Bonnie Margolis, Executive Director, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Sr. M. McDermott, O.P., Interfaith Peace Working Group
Sr. Reg Mekijlip, O.P. Peace and Justice Promoter, Simonis
Dominicans
Sr. Jim Murphy, pastor, Roman Catholic Church
Rev. Kenneth Penning, Associate Pastor, Orchard Ridge UCC
Dr. Carmen Porco, pastor, American Baptist Church
Carl Rasmussen and Catherine Crow Rasmussen, United Church of Christ
Rev. Franco Rigert, Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference, UCC
Rev. Dr. Larry Sese, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Rev. President, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Rev. Valarie Showalter, pastor, Menomonee Church, USA
Rev. Bystone Sinh, pastor, United Church of Christ
The Sikhs at Holy Wisdom Monastery
Rev. Frederick R. Trust, pastor, UCC, Interfaith Peace Working Group
Rev. Nick Jaggard, pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman, Congregation Shaarei Shalom

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