

# How the Pentagon Thinks About the Climate Crisis

**Professor and author Michael T. Klare explores how the U.S. Military is preparing for climate change in his new book “All Hell Breaking Loose”**

By Rick Carp – Rolling Stone, September 23, 2019



*Debris litters Tyndall Air Force Base following Hurricane Michael on October 17, 2018 in Panama City, Florida. Many U.S. military bases are in locations vulnerable to storm damage and sea-level rise.*

*Scott Olson/Getty Images*

There is a strange contradiction at the heart of our federal government and its response to [climate change](#). While most of Washington has been woefully neglectful of the crisis or outright denying its existence, what is arguably our most conservative institution — the U.S. military — has begun taking the crisis very seriously. GOP legislators might make nonsensical [statements](#) about how “sea level rise” is a “left-wing term,” but the Pentagon is well aware of the dangers that climate change — which it [refers](#) to as a ‘threat multiplier’ — poses for its installations and mission. After all, you “can’t fight a war unless you’ve got a place to leave from,” [noted](#) General Gerald Galloway, formerly of the Army Corps of Engineers. As many as 46 U.S. military bases were recently [deemed](#) threatened by the heightened risk of flood, drought, and wildfire brought on by climate change.

Diving into the armed forces’ response to the climate crisis, Michael T. Klare “found they had some very interesting things to say about it.” Klare, 76, recently retired from Hampshire College, where he was the Five College Professor Emeritus of Peace and World Security Studies. (“Well, now I work even harder,” he laughs.) The author of 15 previous books and the defense correspondent for *The Nation*, Klare spoke with *Rolling Stone* about his forthcoming release, [All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon’s Perspective on Climate Change](#), which is due out this November from book publisher Metropolitan. The book synthesizes the latest government papers, statements and presentations by officials, along with personal interviews, to

give the most up-to-date perspective on climate as viewed through the lens of those tasked with defending America from threats of all types.

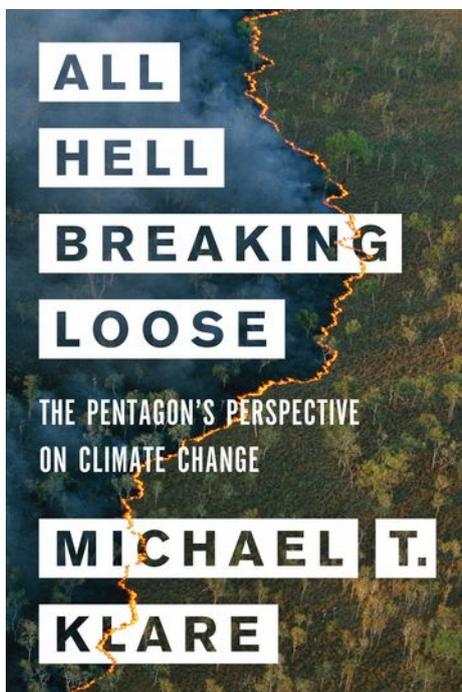
Klare's project began because he was "studying the intersections of climate change, resource scarcity, and conflict" and realized that the military's take on global warming was a "vision of climate change that is not a part of the public discussion." While environmentalists point out the ecological issues involved, like habitat destruction and mass extinctions, "the military focuses on the threat to human institutions and communities," he says. The armed forces "see the greatest threats from climate change being state collapse and mass migrations that are going to create chaos around the world" and lead to a lot of dangerous tasks that "they would prefer not to have to undertake."

The military began making some reforms to address climate change under the Obama administration, utilizing cleaner technologies through the Army's [Operation Dynamo](#), the Marines' [Experimental Forward Operating Base](#), and the Navy's [Great Green Fleet](#). Obama had [put through](#) an executive order in 2013 requiring all parts of the federal government to prepare for climate change, but Trump [rescinded](#) it in 2017. The various military branches continue to build toward '[net zero](#)' installations and the ability of each base to be self-reliant. "At some point, [military] officers who view national security as a sacred obligation will have no choice but to confront those who persist in climate denial," writes Klare.

The president may [think](#) climate change is a hoax created by the Chinese, but Klare's latest book shows that the Pentagon plans to stay the course in attempting to green its facilities, juggle multiple catastrophes at a time, and prepare for the possibility of, well, all hell breaking loose.

**The idea of 'All Hell Breaking Loose,' in the title of your book, what does that mean for the military?**

They see their job as defending this country from foreign threats and that is what they are trained to do. 'All Hell Breaking Loose' is a condition they fear in which they will be unable to conduct that mission, to do their job, because they will be so caught up in protecting this country against climate change threats or addressing its impacts on other countries around the world that are collapsing because of the effects.



**Can you quickly walk us through the 'Ladder of Escalation' model that you use for this book?**

I take this concept from the Cold War era of nuclear escalation that says we go from small-scale events to increasingly serious ones. The military sees that with climate change as well. They *already* see an increase in extreme storm events that affect their allied countries and require a military response providing aid — and in the U.S. itself, like in Florida or Puerto Rico. But they look into the future and see increasingly severe events like extreme droughts bringing about the collapse of entire nations. They see that happening potentially in places like Nigeria and Pakistan, leading to mass chaos spreading across continents. They see that beginning in what we once called the Third World but spreading to more privileged and wealthier parts of

the world like Europe, and bringing about upheaval there, leading eventually to conflict among the great powers as climate change advances. Perhaps in the [Arctic region](#), for [example](#).

**You write that the Pentagon began planning for what disaster experts call “complex emergencies” after the East Coast was walloped by Hurricane Sandy, and that it was the triple-assault of Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Harvey — combined with massive wildfires in the west — that “made the nightmare palpable” for officials. What is a complex emergency, and what do they mean to the Pentagon?**

The U.S. Military has always played a role in the aftermath of emergencies, providing food, water, supplies, helping rescue people and more. That’s nothing new. But they find that as climate change advances and increases in intensity, these emergencies will become more complex. The electrical grid will collapse. There will be chemical spills that produce all kinds of health effects. The health system itself will collapse. The police services will collapse. And so the military will have to play a *much greater* role than they ever have before, stepping in and playing the various roles of governments and having to deal with lawlessness like looting.

In Puerto Rico, after Hurricane Maria, the systems of government basically crashed in many places. There was no electricity or communications available and the military came in and had to provide *all* of those services. There is a fear that in the future these kinds of emergencies, complex emergencies, will increase in severity and in number — and could occur simultaneously — requiring a vast commitment of military forces at a time when maybe those forces are needed elsewhere.

**The book talks about how water systems will come under pressure because of climate change, which could give way to conflict. Any areas we should be particularly leery about?**

Places like the countries of northern Africa are already suffering terribly and we see that currently with localized conflicts. But as climate change advances, even bigger and more wealthy and powerful countries will feel the effects. I think water is the area where this will play itself out — water shortages — and where two or more countries share the same source of water: the Nile River, the Indus River and so on.

One that has caught my attention is the Brahmaputra River. It originates in the Himalayas and travels hundreds of miles through China and Tibet and then crosses into northern India, where it continues for hundreds more miles and then finally crosses into Bangladesh, joins with the Ganges River and empties out into the Indian Ocean. This is one of the biggest and most important rivers in the world for agriculture — hundreds of millions of people depend on it for growing their food. This river is threatened by climate change because it derives from the Himalayan glaciers, which are going to disappear, and the river will likely diminish in flow. Meanwhile, China is threatening to dam the river upstream and divert its waters to parts of the country that are already suffering from water scarcity. And India says that that could be a cause for war because that river is so essential to the survival of their country that they won’t let it happen. So that is a scenario that worries me deeply.

**What are the ties between the globalization of the economy, a global environmental system, and these complex emergencies? How do those intersections potentially affect things like pandemics?**

First of all, climate change is making pandemics more likely because it improves the conditions for mosquitoes since they like hot, moist weather and that is what global warming is providing them with in large parts of the world — including the southeastern United States. We’re going to see more frequent pandemics in the future. Globalization helps that process due to the ease of airplane travel and whatnot — it can facilitate the spread of infectious diseases. I think this will create fears around the world, which will lead to quarantines, panics, and the militarization of health [services]. We’ve seen that at various stages in the past few years, like borders being sealed off. That attitude will lead to a more militarized response to climate change: fences, walls, and more. I don’t think you can solve climate change or health emergencies in this fashion, but I feel there will be a tendency to respond that way.

**What about other aspects of globalization? Should the migrant caravans be viewed as climate refugees, and how should the U.S. respond?**

This is a major political issue in the United States: How to address these massive migrations of desperate poor people from Central America who are fleeing violence and poverty and seeking refuge in the United States. The claim is that those people are economic refugees and should find refuge in an intermediate country, say Guatemala or Mexico. But it is pretty evident that climate change is a driving factor in their migration because of pronounced drought in much of the area. It's becoming impossible to grow crops there and these are agricultural regions. So, yes, these people are fleeing climate change. I think as time goes on this type of thing can only become a more powerful factor in people's decision to move. And there is going to be hostility to this process everywhere.

**Many activists point out that the military has [garrisoned the planet](#) with bases and is the largest [consumer](#) of oil as a result. Is the government at all self-aware here?**

Of course the military is a big consumer of oil, and that contributes to climate change. But this is something that people in the military are very aware of. They were drawn to this topic originally *not* by climate change but by the strategic implications of being all over the world and depending on a long logistical trail of getting that petroleum there. And that logistical trail is very vulnerable to attack. In Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. oil convoys were attacked all the time. They still are. In many circumstances, more soldiers died defending convoys than died in battle. The military is very determined to reduce their dependence on fuel that may be subject to interference. It is also at risk from climate change because these long supply lines are increasingly going to be struck by severe weather events just like everything else will be.

So even before they had any kind of green consciousness, military leaders were determined to try to reduce the oil consumption of their forces. Now they are also concerned about climate change's impacts on the global security environment, so they are also trying to reduce their own contribution to global warming. And they're making some headway. Can they do more? Yes. They can do a lot more. But I think that they are showing that they're capable of making progress in this direction.

**Many people speak about a World War II-style mobilization to stop climate change through a Green New Deal and the like. But what does it say about our culture that people constantly think in these militarized analogies?**

I think many people have difficulty with that notion, and I'm also ambivalent about whether a military metaphor is the right one. People sometimes do speak about the Apollo Project [the ambitious mission to get to the moon], which I find a more comfortable notion of what we have to do. The U.S. Military, when they speak about what they have to accomplish, *does not* speak in those terms. They say that 'we have a job to do, which is to defend this country against foreign threats' — very real military threats — 'and that's what we want to do.' But climate change counts as an impediment to their real job and they have to address this and overcome it. And that means making its own bases resilient to climate change and reducing their contribution to it. But they recognize it as a global problem and realize they cannot do it alone and have to cooperate with the militaries of other countries in making their own countries resilient. So they see this as an area of military-to-military cooperation. I see it in a more positive light in that sense.

**The now-retired Navy Admiral [David Titley](#) has [mentioned](#) a fear of 'ungoverned spaces' — why are such power vacuums abroad so important to the military and to the domestic security apparatus here at home?**

The military talks about 'ungoverned spaces' as places where state control has vanished. You can think about a place like Somalia where you once had a functioning government that extended throughout the country but has long-since disappeared. You have something that calls itself a 'government.' Its reach doesn't extend much beyond the city limits of Mogadishu. The rest of the country is pretty much ungoverned and you have lots of contending forces — various terrorist groups like Al-Shabab, militias and more. These are areas where groups like that can flourish and hatch plots against the United States.

Will this occur here? Certainly senior military officials in the U.S. fear that in the event of mass environmental catastrophes in the future, local governments will break down and there will be lawlessness in *this* country and the military will be forced to step in. They saw elements of that with Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans where the police force basically disintegrated and vanished.

The military says that with climate change, the number of these ungoverned spaces is going to multiply because states in Africa and elsewhere will not be able to cope with the intense droughts that can lead to mass suffering and starvation, combined with severe weather events, food scarcity, water scarcity and so on. They're just going to collapse under the weight of these pressures, which opens vast areas of the country to militia rule and terrorist infiltration. We see this in Libya, Mali, parts of Nigeria, and, of course, in Afghanistan. This is the future in a world of climate change.

Quelle:

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/how-the-pentagon-thinks-about-the-climate-crisis-887832/>