

Introduction

War, the Military, and American Culture

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If you have grown up in the twenty-first century, you have grown up at war. The United States war in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001, and continues in 2017, making it America's longest war.¹ President Obama declared the Iraq War, which began on March 21, 2003, officially over on October 21, 2011, but the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has led U.S. political leaders to once again commit troops to conflicts in the Middle East.² And while these two countries have occupied much of the news coverage about U.S. military engagements abroad, they are hardly the only two countries where U.S. troops have been active. As the use of drones in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria or the September 2015 revelation that U.S. special forces troops had been active in well over 100 countries makes clear, the United States has not been shy about deploying military power abroad.³

And yet your connection to those wars may seem distant, at best. After all, most Americans don't serve in the military and don't know anyone who does or has. As of 2015, there are about 1.4 million Americans who serve in uniform, but that represents less than one-half of 1 percent of the population.⁴ If you include military dependents—the spouses and children of U.S. service members—that figure increases to 2.1 million Americans—still less than 1 percent.⁵

However, nearly every aspect of American culture, and significant parts of your own everyday life, have been shaped by the histories of war and militarism

in American society. Of course, the military fights in conflicts small and large. And while most Americans are familiar with the largest—the world wars, the Korean War, the War in Vietnam, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and the twenty-first-century Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many of the smaller conflicts are less well-known.⁶ At the behest of its civilian overseers, the United States has deployed troops more than 100 times since 1898, ranging from the well-known to the obscure.⁷ According to historian Mary Dudziak, “the only non-war period after World War II, other than a period of seven months in 1990, was from October 15, 1976, to November 4, 1979.”⁸ Moreover, she explains, examining the “eligibility criteria for combat-service medals and membership in American veterans’ organizations” leads to the inescapable recognition that “these criteria cause wartime to swallow much of American history.”⁹ Following her one example, during the Second World War the United States Army began awarding the Combat Infantry Badge to soldiers in infantry units who come into direct combat with an enemy force. Those criteria are relatively narrow—the soldier must be assigned to a *particular kind* of unit (infantry, as opposed to armor, artillery, aviation, and so on), and she or he must experience a *particular kind* of action (direct combat with the enemy). Since its inception, soldiers have been awarded the Combat Infantry Badge for service in major conflicts like World War II and the Iraq War, as well as in smaller missions like the 1983 invasion of Grenada and the 1993 United Nations mission in Somalia. Yet how widely the U.S. military has been deployed, and that those missions have frequently involved conditions that look a lot like war, comes into sharp relief if you consider that U.S. soldiers have earned the Combat Infantry Badge in lesser-known engagements in El Salvador and the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea.¹⁰

The military also plays an outsize role in American life outside of war. The Obama administration’s budget request for the Department of Defense (DOD) in 2017 amounted to nearly \$583 billion—much more than, for example, the requested \$69.4 billion for the Department of Education or the \$50.1 billion requested to fund the State Department.¹¹ The United States also vastly outspends other nations on defense. China, in second place, spends \$145 billion annually; to equal U.S. spending, it would have to add the totals from the next seven highest-spending countries on defense.¹² And U.S. military spending shows no signs of abating. Following his 2017 inauguration, President Donald J. Trump proposed a \$54-billion increase in the Defense Department’s budget, with that spending offset by cuts to other government departments and agencies.¹³

All of that money goes a long way. The Department of Defense, which oversees the different branches of the military (the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Navy, of which the U.S. Marine Corps is a part) and the various agencies that support it, remains, as it proudly touts itself, “the nation’s largest employer,” with 742,000 civilian employees.¹⁴ It also provides billions of dollars in

contracts to U.S. corporations each year for services that range from designing and building military equipment to considering how the Arctic will be impacted by the changing climate to serving food on U.S. military installations. The military's internal and contracted research has produced a long list of products whose absence from civilian life is almost unimaginable. Military-funded research is responsible for the jet engine technology essential to air travel and the global positioning systems that allow pilots to easily find their destinations.¹⁵ It has provided medical technology ranging from tampon and tourniquet design to the very idea of an emergency medical technician.¹⁶ It has given us the microwave that we use to cook our food and the internet that we use to keep in touch with friends, conduct research, and procrastinate.¹⁷ If you own aviator sunglasses or a navy blazer with brass buttons, your wardrobe owes a debt to U.S. military uniforms, and the next time you reach for duct tape or super glue to fix something, you can thank the researchers who developed them for the military.¹⁸

The DOD is also one of the largest landholders in the United States, with a real estate portfolio of more than 500,000 buildings and twenty-four million acres worldwide.¹⁹ Troops are deployed on every continent and nearly every country. As of 2015, there were 37,704 troops stationed in Germany and 27,558 in South Korea, but troops are almost everywhere the U.S. government operates; for example, in 2011 there were five U.S. service members stationed on the island of Gibraltar.²⁰ By treaty, the United States is obligated to defend both Japan and the countries of NATO in the event of military aggression. The United States Air Force maintains a network of nuclear and antinuclear missiles that stretches from the plains of southwest Wyoming to northern Europe, the United States Navy provides antipiracy patrols that keep the sea lanes open in all of the world's oceans, the United States Marines guard every U.S. embassy, and U.S. Army soldiers regularly train and conduct missions alongside their counterparts from other countries. Like the British Empire of the nineteenth century, it is not an overstatement to say that in the twenty-first century the sun does not set on the Stars and Stripes.

And because the military has always been composed of Americans of all kinds, it has been an important space for thinking about important questions within U.S. culture. Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the military has been the site of pitched battles over social issues. While many African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century viewed military service as a way of demonstrating good citizenship and challenging the assumptions of a segregated country, by the middle of the century many black and Latinx Americans viewed military service as facilitating what they considered an imperialist, genocidal foreign policy.²¹ Women have also used military service as an avenue to achieve greater equity in American culture, most recently surrounding the question of whether women should serve in combat. In the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decades of

the twenty-first, significant legal and rhetorical battles have been waged over the role of gay men and lesbians in the U.S. military.²² Perhaps most significantly, the question of who should serve in the military—of whether military service is an obligation of all citizens or the province of specialized professionals—and whether military recruitment offers opportunity or exploits the most vulnerable among us has persisted from the Vietnam-era draft to today's All-Volunteer Force.²³ The military, meanwhile, has responded to the challenges that each of these issues pose, often fitfully, buffeted by both outside criticism and internal dissent.²⁴

The military and its actions abroad also play a decisive role in American political culture. In many cases, American voters have perceived a candidate's military service as a strong indication of fitness for office, and a lack of military service has sometimes been perceived as suspect. Presidential candidates from Dwight D. Eisenhower to John F. Kennedy to George H. W. Bush, for example, all campaigned on biographies that included wartime heroics. In contrast, Bill Clinton's avoidance of service in Vietnam left him vulnerable to claims that he was a "draft dodger" and thus unfit for the presidency.²⁵ During campaigns, a candidate's attitude toward the military and vision for how the military should be used are crucial bellwethers. Ronald Reagan promised that he would rebuild the U.S. military and, with it, restore American leadership. Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency was founded on his opposition to the Iraq War and promise to extricate the nation from it. As well, concerns about whether a candidate could be an effective commander in chief often shape voters' anxieties. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, for example, had to contend with misogynistic fears that a woman might not be sufficiently dispassionate in a moment of crisis.²⁶ And once a candidate is in office, appropriately "supporting the troops" (whatever that happens to mean in a particular context) and, often, keeping lucrative defense contracts flowing to constituents are crucial criteria for re-election.

And of course the military touches civilian life in another important way—it entertains us. Movies about the military—many times made with its cooperation—are often box-office hits, and anyone with an expanded cable package now has access to several channels devoted to military history.²⁷ Americans read histories of wars, travel to battlefields, and play military-themed video games. In the twenty-first century, it's impossible to watch an NFL or Major League Baseball game without seeing some reference to the armed forces.²⁸ The National Guard sponsors a NASCAR team, while the Navy Seals seek out recruits among competitors at road races and triathlons.²⁹ No other institution can claim as pervasive a presence in our popular culture.

It is no exaggeration, then, that the military intersects with—is shaped by and shapes—nearly every aspect of American culture. To be a well-informed citizen—one capable of engaging in the most important political and cultural debates of our moment—thus requires a nuanced understanding of these

complicated intersections. However, traditional military history has often paid insufficient attention to them. With its focus on tactics, strategy, and leadership, the field has often emphasized the decision making of politicians and generals or the movement of troops on battlefields and the equipment they carry. This approach is valuable, and it certainly has its place in academic study, in college classrooms, and in public debate. But it also has its downsides.³⁰ Because of this approach, many Americans understand “military history” as something that happens elsewhere and military battlefields as both geographically and temporally remote. In this approach, conflicts can seem to happen in a vacuum, and the histories of the people fighting these wars, on all sides, and of the regions themselves often receive short shrift. These conflicts’ intersections with other aspects of American life are often obscured, and sometimes ignored, and “military history” can often be reduced to a timeline of conflicts, a series of leaders’ biographies, and a set of debates about weapons and tactics. And yet, as the preceding paragraphs have made clear, the history of the U.S. military, its conflicts, and its place in American life are much more complicated. We need to acknowledge and grapple with that complexity.

To illustrate what we’re getting at, imagine a traditional timeline of U.S. major military engagements since 1898. It would probably include the War of 1898, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan, and the War in Iraq. One necessary first step to understanding the intersections of the military and U.S. culture would be adding additional, lesser-known interventions, from the occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century to the use of drones in Pakistan and Yemen today.³¹ But we can also imagine a series of other timelines that cover a similar period, each of which tells the story of some important aspect of American culture. One might chart the African American struggle for civil rights. Others might focus on the struggles for equity and representation by women, Latinx, and LGBTQ Americans. Still others might chart the development of technology, business, politics, or the environmental movement in American culture. Yet another might reveal changing patterns of consumption and the evolution of popular culture. On top of those, we might consider similar timelines based on the social, political, or economic developments within all the various regions and countries of the world. The list goes on, but the point is clear: the history of the U.S. military and its activities must be approached in the context of the other histories with which they intersect, that they have shaped, and that have shaped them.

The authors whose essays appear in this volume contend that those histories are not distinct from the history of American military conflicts. Rather, they have often intersected, and the moments at which they have collided have often changed the directions of one or the other or both. To cite one example, in the Second World War, African American newspapers claimed that black Americans should fight fascism abroad in order to secure rights at home, but African American soldiers returned to a country in which segregation rendered them

second-class citizens and rampant racial violence placed their lives at risk.³² In the 1960s, leaders in the Black Power Movement called on African Americans to resist fighting in Vietnam and argued that both black Americans and Vietnamese civilians were the victims of a racist, imperialist U.S. government, while inside the army racial tensions ran so high that some African American soldiers killed white officers whom they considered racist.³³ By the time the United States fought in the Persian Gulf War, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, was an African American four-star general who claimed that his success could only have occurred in the army.³⁴ Over recent years, African American women have joined the U.S. Army in higher numbers than white and Latina women.³⁵ This is a history of what happened inside the military—of African Americans and their military service during five wars, of who served, why they did, and what their experiences were—but it is a history that is shaped by and which intersects with the larger histories of structural racism, civil rights, imperialism, and competing ideas of social mobility and economic opportunity in the United States over the seventy-five-year span from 1940 to 2016. Similar examples can easily be imagined for any other aspect of American life's historical intersections with American militarism.

The essays included in *At War* invite you to consider these intersecting histories. Drawing on the emerging field that has variously been called “New Military History,” “War and Culture Studies,” or “War and Society Studies,” the authors ask how the U.S. military and the conflicts in which it has participated have intersected with issues of race, class, and gender; how the military is an important social actor shaping both the lives of Americans in and out of the armed forces and the social movements that have remade American culture; and how war-fighting and militarism impact the environment and the lives of those who live where U.S. troops are stationed and where the United States projects military force. At the same time, the scholars whose work appears here have not abandoned the more traditional study of diplomacy, intervention, and strategy but use new approaches to ask more nuanced and complex questions.

The collection's seventeen chapters are arranged to introduce concepts sequentially. *At War* is organized thematically, but within most chapters, the authors proceed both thematically and chronologically. This volume is not meant to be comprehensive, but it provides an overview of the defining issues during each conflict, asking how those issues and questions have changed or remained the same over the period. The book begins with topics familiar to traditional military history courses—chapters on war and the law, U.S. imperialism, the domestic politics of war, and the military-industrial complex—and moves to a consideration of topics that are central to the study of “New Military History.” Here you will find chapters that focus on race, class, gender, technology, and environmentalism, among others. These include chapters that address who serves in the military and what their experiences have been like, how war

impacts those who fight and the civilian populations who endure war's violence, and how the environment is impacted when wars are fought, weapons are tested, and bases are built. Before ending with a timeline of key events in U.S. military history, the book examines how Americans have represented and remembered wars, with chapters on visual culture, film, and memorialization.

Each chapter places its topic in a broad historical context, beginning in the late nineteenth century and examining how the issue has evolved over the past 125 years. You will learn, for example, how the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned of has changed over the past sixty-five years, how the twentieth century was marked by competing memorial impulses that served different ideological purposes as Americans sought to commemorate war, and how Americans have confronted the reality that wars significantly damage human bodies. In doing so, these essays place contemporary debates about American militarism, remembrance, and veterans' affairs in a broader historical context. Beyond this historical and thematic overview, each chapter explicitly places contemporary debates in a theoretical and historical context that will allow students to critically engage with and meaningfully discuss them. Should the United States intervene to stop the spread of ISIS or use military force to prevent an unfriendly state from attaining a nuclear weapon? What are the implications for women serving in combat roles? How should the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars be memorialized?

At the end of each chapter, our authors have included tools for discussion and further research. Discussion questions invite you to consider important aspects of these histories and connections across chapters. Suggestions for further reading point you to the best recent, accessible scholarship on the topic. We thus invite you to consider *At War* as the starting point for your consideration of how the histories of the United States military and the conflicts that it has waged are central to, shaped by, and themselves shape the broader history of American life and U.S. global engagement in the twentieth century and beyond.

In that spirit, we encourage you to keep four questions in mind as you read these chapters. They are, of course, hardly the only important questions, but they highlight key issues for the study of war and society in U.S. culture:

1. What is the value of an approach that looks beyond the study of battles and bullets to examine issues of war and militarism from multiple perspectives, taking into consideration the experiences of diverse peoples and intersections with the broader sweep of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture?
2. What types of questions do these writers ask and what types of evidence do they use to answer them? Do you find some approaches and analyses more persuasive than others? Why?
3. What were the defining issues during each conflict? How did those issues and questions change or remain the same over the period?

4. What are the everyday ways in which war and militarism have seeped into domestic life, and what are the ways in which those same everyday experiences have supported or contributed to American militarism and American empire? Why is this important?

Considering these questions, and reading these essays, is more than an academic exercise. In the era of a vast, often-utilized, but all-volunteer military, understanding the myriad ways in which the military and its activities have intersected with and shaped American society more broadly is a way of becoming more fully engaged in one of the central problems of democracy in the contemporary United States.

Notes

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- 8 Dudziak, *War Time*, 30.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 28. What follows builds upon *Ibid.*, 28–32.
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