

Introduction

How Has War Shaped American Democracy?

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How does war and the continuous mobilization for it affect democratic institutions, norms, and practices? What has been the effect of decades of war on the United States? For some years, concerns about the health of U.S. democracy have been reflected in scholarship addressing the decline of democratic norms and institutions and elucidating the concept of democratic “backsliding,” usually in comparative perspective.¹ Annual ratings from numerous domestic and international sources coded the United States as a “deficient” or “flawed democracy” even before the Trump administration’s second term began.² The decline in the quality of U.S. democracy coincided with more than twenty years of war that followed in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Political scientists have noted several factors associated with democratic backsliding: increasing economic inequality, political polarization, a narrowing of the definition of the political community (often reflected in nativist and racist policies), and aggrandizement of executive authority.³ We wondered if war also played a role in the decline of democratic norms and practices.

This project began in late 2023 with a meeting at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that asked these questions comparatively and with a long historical view.⁴ The United States was still a democracy, however deficient or flawed. We intended this volume to be a more focused assessment of the effects of the two decades of the war on terror on U.S. democracy. But events since that meeting led us to ask as well how much the post-9/11 wars weakened or altered democratic norms and practices – and set the stage for the current crisis of democracy. In the months following the second inauguration of Donald Trump, his administration launched an obvious and thorough assault on the democratic institutions, norms, and practices of U.S. democracy. The administration centralized power, ignored or defied the constitutional authority that resides in Congress and the judiciary, and used its sweeping power to arrest, detain, and deport people (including law-

ful residents) without due process because, the administration claimed, they were foreign terrorists or otherwise inimical to U.S. national security. Further, the administration has attempted to suppress free speech by attacking journalism, the legal profession, and higher education. The Trump administration has also dismantled or hobbled elements of the federal government – even those that were authorized by Congress – as part of an agenda both to stifle the administrative state’s power to regulate business and to purge the government of “waste” and employees perceived as disloyal.⁵ The only elements of the administrative state that seemed immune from attack were those tasked with security: the Departments of Defense (which Trump renamed the Department of War by executive order in September 2025) and Homeland Security, and particularly the latter’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

War and military mobilization are on the rise across the globe. After a period of comparative peace in the 1990s, war is increasing in frequency and intensity. Estimates of the death toll in Ethiopia’s war against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front go as high as six hundred thousand, when accounting for starvation and lost access to health care. Even Europe, beneficiary of the so-called Long Peace of the Cold War, has hosted the most destructive conflict since World War II, which began with the Russian intervention in the Donbas and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and escalated to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program reported that in 2022, driven mainly by the Ethiopian and Russian wars, “fatalities from organized violence increased by a staggering 97%, compared to the previous year, from 120,000 in 2021 to 237,000 in 2022, making 2022 the deadliest since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.”⁶ The following year, in response to the Hamas attacks, murders, and kidnappings of October 7, 2023, Israel launched a war against Gaza that has killed at least 67,000 people, displaced hundreds of thousands, and brought nearly the entire population to the brink of starvation, with the greatest risks for children.⁷ A number of states, international bodies, and human rights organizations have argued that by deliberately destroying hospitals, schools, and apartment dwellings, and by attacking refugee camps, humanitarian convoys, and aid distribution sites, the Israeli armed forces were inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the population’s physical destruction – part of the definition of the crime of genocide.⁸ On September 16, 2025, the United Nations Human Rights Council concluded that “the State of Israel bears responsibility for the failure to prevent genocide, the commission of genocide and the failure to punish genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”⁹

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, plus the deteriorating security situation in East Asia, have prompted many countries, such as China, Japan, and India, to raise their military budgets and for military industries to increase their production of weap-

ons for export and domestic purchase. Indeed, every region of the world has experienced an increase in war spending. In response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and doubts about U.S. support of its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), European states have embarked on a major program of rearmament. From 2014 to 2024, world military spending increased year over year, reaching more than \$2.6 trillion in 2024, an increase of 9 percent in real terms from 2023, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.¹⁰

The United States spends more each year on armed forces and war than any other country in the world. In 2024, U.S. military spending was more than twice the combined spending of its main rivals, Russia and China.¹¹ U.S. military forces are deployed on six continents. During the last years of the presidential administration of Joseph Biden, U.S. forces conducted counterterrorism operations in seventy-eight countries, engaged in ground combat in at least eight countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Somalia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), carried out air and drone strikes in at least five (Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen), and continued to run a military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.¹² In the first five months of Donald Trump's second presidency, U.S. forces conducted nearly as many air strikes (529) as during the entire four-year term of his predecessor (555), continuing attacks against the countries the Biden administration had targeted and adding Iran and its nuclear facilities.¹³

How does widespread use – and preparation for use – of armed force influence the quality of democratic institutions and norms at home and the political freedoms that sustain them? Many U.S. leaders, from the founding of the republic on, have believed that war exerts pernicious effects on democracy. In 1795, James Madison warned that “of all the enemies of true liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. . . . No nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”¹⁴ George Washington, in his 1796 farewell address, urged Americans to protect their union and “avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty.”¹⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had warned in his own farewell address upon leaving the presidency of the dangers of a military-industrial complex, continued in retirement to warn of an excessive emphasis on war and war preparation. As he wrote in *The Saturday Evening Post*: “There is no way in which a country can satisfy the craving for absolute security – but it easily can bankrupt itself, morally and economically, in attempting to reach that illusory goal through arms alone.”¹⁶

Scholars have long explored these questions. In 1941, political scientist Harold Lasswell articulated the “possibility that we are moving toward a world of ‘garrison states’ – a world in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society.”¹⁷ Specialists on violence would, Lasswell argued, permeate the

civilian sphere, increasingly acquire the skills associated with civilian functions, mobilize the citizenry for military production and military service, and, most perniciously, decrease civil liberties and sideline democratic processes. He warned that “decisions will be more dictatorial than democratic, and institutional practices long connected with modern democracy will disappear.”¹⁸ In a garrison state, the symbols of democracy would remain, but legislatures and voting would “go out of use.”¹⁹ Lasswell cautioned against the concentration of power that accompanies military mobilization: “To militarize is to governmentalize. It is also to centralize. To centralize is to enhance the effective control of the executive over decisions, and thereby to reduce the control exercised by courts and legislatures. To centralize is to enhance the role of military in the allocation of national resources.”²⁰

Political scientists Elizabeth Kier and Ronald Krebs have pointed out, in a qualification of Lasswell’s dire predictions, that “war’s effects on liberal-democratic institutions and processes are diverse, contradictory, and not always negative.”²¹ Sometimes they have given rise to social movements and contributed to the expansion of civil and political rights.²² “Some wars have triggered waves of democratization,” as sociologist Paul Starr has maintained.²³ Long or costly wars can fracture authoritarian states and cause legitimization crises that create openings for promoting democracy. War can create opportunities for inclusion, as when women achieved the vote in return for their support during World War I. The necessity for mobilization, as during and after both World Wars, can nurture, or at least allow, the expansion of citizenship and the civil rights of minorities, workers, and women.

Political scientist Aaron Friedberg has argued that liberal democracy protects against the garrison state and that despite predictions that Cold War mobilization would lead to increased militarization of the economy and a decline in civil liberties, the United States did not in fact become a garrison state.²⁴ According to Friedberg, the reasons were America’s distinct ideology – valorizing free enterprise, private industry, and low taxes – and the decision to rely on a military strategy of nuclear deterrence that avoided a massive mobilization of conventional forces. Absent the requirement of a highly centralized, militarized economy, argued Friedberg, the United States was spared the fate of a garrison state. By contrast, the Soviet Union did become a garrison state – “one that sapped the nation’s economy, militarized its society and led it ultimately to the brink of collapse and disintegration” – a fact that, for Friedberg, explains the outcome of the Cold War.²⁵

For this volume, we assembled a multidisciplinary group of specialists to examine the influence of constant war and war preparedness on aspects of U.S. politics, economics, and society. The authors explore the relationship between war and the administrative state, judicial and legislative oversight of military policy, the concentration of executive power, popular culture and public opinion, civil-military relations, the effects of military spending on economic

inequality, the influence of military practices on policing and the carceral system, and the gendered and racial consequences of “forever war.” First drafts arrived before the U.S. presidential election of November 2024 and were revised in the early months of 2025 to account for the further deterioration of U.S. democratic norms, practices, and institutions.

The first part of the volume addresses the impact of war on democracy and democratization. In his essay “The State, War-Making & Democratization in the United States: A Historical Overview,” political scientist Robert C. Lieberman considers the impact of the president’s war powers on domestic politics. He argues that “the course of democratization and de-democratization in the United States has long been closely entwined with the American state’s war-making capacity.” He points out that “although the framers of the Constitution were understandably wary of standing armies and military government, the Constitution itself provides for domestic military intervention by the federal government to ensure order and compliance with national law.”²⁶ It empowers Congress to form and deploy militia forces to suppress insurrections and repel invasions, and it gives the president, as commander in chief, the authority to direct the militia when it is called to protect the states against both invasion and domestic violence. But according to Lieberman, the use of armed force domestically has served the cause of democracy only during two periods: in the wake of the Civil War and in the period following World War II, when the federal government deployed the military to enforce civil rights. These periods are what he calls the “two Reconstructions, when the central government pursued a democratizing agenda aimed at overcoming systematic political exclusion from full citizenship” of Black Americans and “military force proved to be a critical and necessary tool to push this agenda forward.” More often, though, “military force has played a decidedly antidemocratic role, whether actively engaging in undermining the key pillars of democracy or more passively failing to stem the progress of backsliding.”²⁷ His examples include multiple interventions in labor disputes on the side of the bosses and suppression of antiwar activism.

In “War & the Administrative State, 1776–1900,” political scientist Stephen J. Rockwell provides a historical overview of the relationship between U.S. wars and the growth of the administrative state, from the founding of the republic to the turn of the twentieth century. The administrative state – often castigated as the “deep state” by conservatives – has become the focus of much of the destructive animus of Donald Trump’s second administration, aided initially by Elon Musk. In Rockwell’s understanding, the administrative state dates to the beginning of the republic and has expanded over time, particularly during U.S. wars. Yet he finds Madison’s warning of 1795 unwarranted. Rockwell points out that the United States was in a state of continual warfare during the “long nineteenth century,” from U.S. military action against Indigenous peoples in colonial expansion in the Ohio Valley to the suppression of rebellion in the Philippines. He finds that

these wars were “prosecuted effectively through the delegation of discretionary authority to unelected officials.” And although keeping such unelected officials accountable to democratically elected leadership has been a challenge since the country’s founding, he argues that “the active participation of unelected officials in decision-making helped maintain and even expand freedom amid continual war.”²⁸ Thus, “the American administrative state effectively extracted resources, coerced populations, and exerted control over its territory, all while avoiding the fatal blows to liberty that Madison had predicted for a nation at continual war.”²⁹ This perspective is rather contrarian even for the long nineteenth century, and certainly different from the other essays in this volume.

In his essay “Concentration of Power in the Executive,” for example, legal scholar Harold Hongju Koh points to “the constant sense of threat that has pervaded much of the twenty-first century” and that has enhanced the role of the executive and undermined the system of constitutional checks and balances that provide the foundation for U.S. democracy. Koh focuses mainly on the implications of executive concentration for the conduct of foreign affairs, and he apportions blame not only to presidents but to the legislative and judicial branches. Emphasis on security threats, in his view, “has given weak and strong presidents alike more reason to monopolize the foreign policy response, a polarized Congress greater incentives to acquiesce, and the courts continuing reason to defer or rubberstamp.”³⁰

The growth of the national security institutions of the administrative state led to an emphasis on foreign-policy instruments resistant to democratic control. Koh observes that during one of his periods in government, working in Barack Obama’s administration, “military action was usually executed with such tools as special operations, artificial intelligence, and cyberweapons, which can be deployed by the executive alone, virtually without congressional oversight.” Keeping with his theme of shared responsibility for the decline of checks and balances, Koh writes that during the subsequent first Trump administration, Congress and the courts “rarely checked, but instead enabled, far-fetched claims of national security emergency to justify unilateral executive action in such traditional areas of congressional authority as immigration, declaring war, international trade, and regulation of cross-border investments.” In Joseph Biden’s administration, as well, “the president operated almost entirely by executive order or national security directive and rarely proposed national security legislation unless it involved appropriations.”³¹

The second section of the volume follows from Koh’s claim that “all three branches have contributed to the concentration and persistent unilateral exercise of foreign affairs power by the executive” and helped set the stage for the second Trump administration’s assault on democracy. Economist Linda J.

Bilmes examines the role of congressional oversight of military spending. The title of her essay – “The Ghost Budget: U.S. War Spending & Fiscal Transparency” – suggests that the executive and legislative branches share responsibility for keeping the impact and purposes of military spending hidden from public accountability. She analyzes the budgets that funded military operations in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and identifies the means by which Congress and the executive hindered transparency and thus accountability. Putting budget requests in the category of “emergency” spending was a common strategy. “Labeling nonurgent spending as emergencies,” writes Bilmes, “had several political advantages. It enabled lawmakers to circumvent congressional political and budgetary dysfunction that may have delayed regular budget appropriations. It also enabled the [George W.] Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations to avoid spending caps, to minimize future deficit projections, and to maintain the illusion that funding was temporary.” Yet emergency spending “decreases transparency and increases overall spending,” owing to “the vagueness of the category and lack of defined reporting requirements.” The combination of reduced transparency and diminished oversight, according to Bilmes, results in “low public engagement, increased potential for corruption, and poor government accountability.” Could the dearth of oversight and engagement with the “emergency” war funding during the Bush and Obama administrations have paved the way for the extraordinary executive discretion over spending that Donald Trump has claimed, including “impounding” funds appropriated by Congress and refusing to spend them?³²

The Supreme Court should also provide a check on executive power. Legal scholar Shirin Sinnar’s essay “The Supreme Court & the Unaccountable Racialized Security State” finds that hope unfounded. Twenty years ago, one might have drawn a different conclusion about the role of the Supreme Court. Starting in 2004, in the midst of U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Court began “doing something that it had rarely done at the height of past wars: rejecting the executive branch’s broad invocations of national security powers, despite the wartime context.” In the wake of revelations about extrajudicial kidnapping and torture of detainees, the Court “ruled that a U.S. citizen detained as an enemy combatant had due process rights to challenge his detention and that noncitizen detainees at Guantánamo could file habeas corpus petitions in federal court.” It then opposed “Congress’ attempts to strip habeas rights, culminating in the 2008 *Boumediene v. Bush* decision holding that Guantánamo inmates had a constitutional right to challenge the lawfulness of their detentions.”³³ The Court claimed that liberty need not be sacrificed to security, but that the two could be reconciled under the law.

Many commentators reacted to the Court’s rulings by declaring “a watershed moment in both the war on terror and with respect to the Court’s willingness to intervene in wartime.” Contrary to its historical deference to the executive branch

in its conduct of foreign and military policy, the “Court was rejecting sharp distinctions between domestic and foreign affairs in determining the judicial role.” As Sinnar points out, however, the Court seems to have reached its limit or even decided that it had gone too far. The degree of deference it has expressed toward the policies of Donald Trump – to whom three of the justices owe their seats – goes well beyond the realm of national security. Trump has been able to pursue a racist, anti-immigrant agenda by expanding the definition of what constitutes a threat to national security, from college students protesting Israel’s war in Gaza to Venezuelan refugees with tattoos. In that respect, his policies – and the Supreme Court’s deference to them – affect not only U.S. foreign policy but fundamental elements of U.S. democracy, such as freedom of speech and the right to due process and habeas corpus.³⁴

The executive, with the backing of the Court, has normalized use of a national security rationale for domestic actions. The Trump administration has been able to pursue its campaign promise of mass deportations by designating drug cartels and gangs as foreign terrorist organizations and claiming that certain tattoos represented membership. It arrested many residents and sent them to prisons in El Salvador and to Guantánamo, sometimes in defiance of explicit court rulings. To justify expulsions of Venezuelans to El Salvador, the administration invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, claiming an “invasion” across the Southern border. The administration has targeted foreign students who expressed criticisms of Israel’s war in Gaza and support for Palestinian rights, revoking their visas and expelling them from the country. Sinnar notes that these policies “radically expanded a ‘global war on terror’ that had never ended.” But even aside from the war on terror, “and prior to Donald Trump’s return to power,” previous administrations had already been militarizing the border and treating “migrants fleeing poverty or gangs as security threats.” She identifies “a broader pattern in which the Court has diminished accountability for immigration and law enforcement agencies” and its “decisions provide little restraint or recourse for individuals or communities ‘otherized’ as threats.”³⁵

In September 2025, the Trump administration went a step further in evoking war to carry out its policies – in this case, attacking boats in the Caribbean Sea and killing the civilian crew members it suspected of smuggling drugs. The administration sent Congress a confidential notice, leaked by *The New York Times*, revealing that it had declared an “armed conflict” against drug cartels, whose members it deemed “unlawful combatants,” subject to armed attack by U.S. military forces.³⁶ Such a blatant usurpation of the congressional war power understandably garnered attention. Less remarked on was that the Obama administration had set a precedent for such attacks in 2009, when it targeted some fifty suspected drug traffickers in Afghanistan on suspicion that they were helping to fund the Taliban insurgency.³⁷ The Obama administration also provided a legal precedent for

Trump's claim that attacks could continue without the congressional authorization required by the 1973 War Powers Resolution because they did not rise to the level of "hostilities." Rejecting the views of top lawyers in the Defense and Justice Departments, Obama maintained that prolonged U.S. military engagement in Libya in 2011 did not constitute "hostilities" and could therefore continue without congressional approval. The White House counsel and the State Department's legal adviser provided the rationale that as long as U.S. service members remained out of harm's way, their attacks against others should not be defined as hostilities. Although the Trump administration did not cite the 2011 Libya precedent, it provides "the closest historical analogue," according to *The New York Times*.³⁸

These earlier cases support Sinnar's contention that U.S. wars, and particularly the "global war on terror," go some way toward explaining the Supreme Court's reluctance to intervene in the Trump administration's assault on due process, freedom of speech, and congressional prerogatives. But restoring U.S. democratic norms and practices requires more than judicial intervention. Broader public engagement is necessary.

The U.S. commitment to high military spending and a militarized foreign policy bears a complicated relationship with public opinion and popular attitudes, the topic of the third section of our volume. Foreign policy in general does not typically play a key role in electoral politics, especially compared, for example, with pocketbook economic issues. Public knowledge about U.S. military engagements, moreover, tends to be low. For instance, many Americans, including members of Congress, were surprised to find out that U.S. forces were operating in Niger when, in October 2017, three soldiers were killed in an ambush there.³⁹ Does public opinion serve as a constraint on U.S. military policy and resort to war? From the other direction, do U.S. policies and the broader culture serve to enhance public support for a militarized foreign policy and the restrictions on freedom at home that often accompany it? One wonders, for example, to what extent the normalization of torture in popular television programs has made the practice more acceptable to the public during the war on terror, or whether Hollywood's collaboration with the Pentagon in its blockbuster movies rendered the public more enthusiastic about, or at least less critical of, the use of armed force.⁴⁰

Political scientist Sarah Maxey's contribution, "Public Beliefs about the Role of Military Force," examines U.S. public opinion during the period following the 9/11 attacks and finds that support for U.S. military interventions – along with the attendant restrictions on civil liberties – was initially high but declined over time. Particularly noteworthy is her observation that even as public support for U.S. wars diminished, the institutions and practices established to carry them out remained. The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), for example, enabled such practices as the imprisonment of captives at Guantánamo without

due process, warrantless wiretaps by the National Security Agency, and numerous military actions unrelated to the original 9/11 attacks. Maxey observes that “public support does not have to change permanently to enable significant and enduring institutional shifts in the scope of executive authority.” Although the public grew weary of forever war, she found it still favored U.S. engagement in world affairs (what she terms “internationalism”) and would support U.S. military action under certain conditions. Public support for humanitarian justifications for military action, in particular, proved resilient, despite the Bush administration’s abuse of such “justifications for U.S. military action in Iraq – especially after weapons of mass destruction were not found.” Maxey argues that “the challenge for American democracy moving forward is not public opinion in and of itself, but how elites strategically misuse or bypass public consent.” She also expresses concern about the gap in public confidence in civilian leaders relative to military leaders, even though trust in both has declined over time. “By increasing the gap in public esteem for civilian leaders and the military,” she argues, the post-9/11 wars “laid the foundation for the growing politicization of military actors, which can threaten democratic norms of civilian control.”⁴¹

In “Paranoid Empire: Forever Wars in Popular Culture,” historian Penny M. Von Eschen examines the role of popular culture – television, movies, and video games – in shaping beliefs about U.S. military policy. Her findings are somewhat counterintuitive. She argues that “popular culture worked figuratively and literally to conscript Americans into support of military intervention,” while discrediting alternative approaches to security, such as diplomacy and international institutions. Yet even as TV producers relied on substantial support from the Pentagon in depicting realistic military operations and equipment, their shows bolstered an enduring “feature of American culture that signals deep suspicion of institutions and glorifies vigilante ‘justice.’” Popular culture reinforced the “standing of America as the indispensable, unipolar global power” in a dangerous world. By valorizing snipers, special operations forces, and mentally unstable double agents, however, the programs suggest a necessity to “go outside of political and military institutional structures to deliver true justice and security.” The viewer is led to believe that “a thorough disregard for institutions, national and international, along with a strong dose of utter insanity, offers the sure road to a restoration of American power.” It is not a hopeful conclusion for U.S. foreign policy or democracy.⁴²

Political scientist Neta C. Crawford and anthropologist Catherine Lutz, in their contribution “Long War & the Erosion of Democratic Culture,” highlight the role of fear and insecurity in U.S. society and their effects on foreign-policy decision-making and domestic politics. “The fact that the United States was in a permanent condition of war and mobilization from September 2001 to September 2021,” they argue, “depended on and deepened fears of ‘others’ – both exter-

nal others and the racial and often immigrant others within.” War and war preparation “erode democratic culture,” in part “by inducing fear of military threat from elsewhere, through the corresponding decline in empathic and respectful response to others, and through the permissions that fear gives the government to exercise increasingly centralized power.” Gender plays an important role in their analysis, as it does in the contributions of several authors. They claim that “belligerent, nonempathetic masculinity” is one consequence of the fearmongering and “othering” – the association of racial and ethnic difference with threats – and that it helps “explain the rise of authoritarianism and the growth of acceptance of violence in domestic politics.”⁴³

The late psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton’s contribution comes in the form of a wide-ranging interview by the editors. He touches on themes of fear and humiliation as motivations for violence at home and abroad. His notion of the consequences of a “lost war” expands the time frame of the volume’s inquiry, not only back to the U.S. war in Vietnam, when his treatment of veterans led to the creation of the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but to the U.S. Civil War. He revisits some of the concepts he introduced from his work with victims of the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan, such as “psychic numbing,” a consequence of trauma that results in an inability to feel. He offers his views on notions others have developed, such as “groupthink” (Irving Janis) or the “garrison state” (Harold Laswell), also addressed by Crawford and Lutz. He explores the relationship between individual trauma and pain and collective societal responses. Uniquely among our contributors, he discusses not only the actual wars in which the United States has engaged but also the ever-present risk of nuclear war and the limits of nuclear deterrence as a means to security.⁴⁴

The United States’ commitment to war-preparedness, continuous through more than eight decades since the U.S. entry into World War II, is bound to have had effects on the U.S. economy, on society at large, and on civil-military relations in particular. The fourth section of the volume treats each of these issues. Because of the enormous size of its economy, the United States has been able to fund its military activities by contributing a smaller proportion of its gross domestic product to the military budget than do many other countries, such as some of the Gulf States and those in the midst of an ongoing war, like Ukraine, Russia, and Israel. Paradoxically, then, the United States has pursued a foreign policy that heavily emphasizes the worldwide deployment and use of military forces, but without sacrificing civilian consumption. Moreover, the expense of wars is effectively hidden from the American people by the government’s reluctance to raise taxes directly to fund the wars it wages, financing the wars through public debt instead.⁴⁵ There are, however, costs to maintaining a high level of fear and security consciousness to justify war budgets. Concern about the public debt,

for example, poses political constraints on how much money Congress is willing to spend to deal with pressing issues such as climate change, poverty, health, education, and deteriorating infrastructure. Rarely is it acknowledged how much the costs of U.S. wars, and military spending more generally, contribute to the debt.⁴⁶

Unlike in centrally planned economies like the former Soviet Union, U.S. military spending does not entail direct trade-offs with civilian production, because, as with any government spending, it contributes to economic growth. Moreover, advocates of military spending have highlighted its ability to spur technological innovation. Many artifacts of modern technology stem from research funded by the Pentagon, most notably through the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). *The Economist* grants DARPA “at least partial credit” for the development of “weather satellites, GPS, drones, stealth technology, voice interfaces, the personal computer and the internet,” as well as Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine.⁴⁷ One might argue that government funding directed specifically at enhancing civilian welfare and targeting issues such as public health, the demand for renewable energy, and environmental degradation might have more efficiently produced technologies than those “spun off” from military research. Nevertheless, the relationship between military spending and economic well-being is undoubtedly more complicated than what President Eisenhower – whose administration created DARPA – once so eloquently described: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”⁴⁸ It bears closer examination.

In her essay “The Relationship between Military Spending & Inequality: A Review,” economist Heidi Peltier investigates the impact of military spending on one of the key elements associated with the decline of democracy: economic inequality. In a thorough review of the relevant literature, she examines whether military spending widens inequality, diminishes inequality, or exhibits no discernable effect. She finds that “the preponderance of both theory and evidence supports the inequality-widening hypothesis: that higher levels of military spending lead to larger gaps in income, wealth, and skills, and that increased military spending may therefore weaken democracy.” One important factor is the type of jobs military budgets create:

In recent years, military spending has become increasingly capital-intensive, as investments and production of digital and information technology products have become a focus of “modern” war. Products such as unmanned spacecraft, artificial intelligence, and other cyber technologies require a highly skilled, highly trained workforce, unlike the low-skilled, labor-intensive occupations and industries that might provide opportunities to reduce inequality. The increasing shift toward information technology in the military further exacerbates inequality.⁴⁹

Peltier also examines the effect of military service on veterans' job prospects. As she points out, "military spending – and military service – can also lead to worsening inequality if the types of skills gained through different occupations in the military are not equally transferrable." Inequality results "if different demographics have different types of jobs within the military (occupational sorting), and if there are different returns to those jobs when they enter or reenter the civilian labor force (occupational returns)." Her analysis suggests that "rather than offering a pathway out of poverty, the military likely reinforces and exacerbates differences in gender, race, and socioeconomic status," thereby worsening inequality.⁵⁰

Aside from the effects of military service on economic inequality, there are political effects relevant to the health of U.S. democracy. The elimination of universal male military service in the wake of the U.S. war in Vietnam has led to an uneven geographical distribution of volunteer service membership and participation in U.S. wars, with the highest per capita figures in the South and Southwest – South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Colorado are among the top six, along with Hawaii and Alaska.⁵¹ The abolition of the draft also contributes to the phenomenon of "intergenerational military service," whereby some "80% of new recruits come from families with at least one parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, sibling or cousin who has also served in the military" and "more than 25% have a parent who is a service member or veteran."⁵²

Military service seems to influence partisanship in that a greater proportion of veterans identify as Republican than among the general population (even though the Democratic Party has been more active in promoting veterans' benefits).⁵³ Unrepresentative service in U.S. wars appears to have a direct impact on political attitudes as well. Scholars have found, for example, that poorer communities disproportionately account for casualties in U.S. armed conflicts, and that among the consequences in those communities is disillusionment with political leaders and government in general.⁵⁴ Alarmingly, the U.S. military has increasingly become a home for white nationalists and other extremists.⁵⁵ A 2022 poll demonstrated a decline in the public's trust and confidence in the military as an institution – a product, evidently, of perceived politicization of the armed services. The percentage of the public expressing confidence in the military dropped from 70 percent in November 2018, to 63 percent in October 2019, to 56 percent in February 2021, to 45 percent in November 2021 (presumably related to the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan), and back up to 48 percent in November 2022.⁵⁶ This is one of the topics Maxey addresses in her contribution to the volume, although she emphasizes not only the decline of trust in the military, but the gap created by the even greater lack of trust in civilian leaders.⁵⁷

The involvement of military symbols and military officers in partisan political campaigns appears to have contributed to public distrust of an institution that is supposed to be above politics. Even as trust in the military has declined,

some Americans (elected leaders among them) continue to see the armed forces as a check on unconstitutional or dangerous behavior by the commander in chief – a concern that came to the fore during Donald Trump’s first presidency, when the long-standing presidential authority to launch nuclear weapons without congressional authorization became an acute worry.⁵⁸ In her essay “Politicization of the Military: Causes, Consequences & Conclusions,” Heidi A. Urben, a professor of security studies, echoes Maxey’s concerns about the politicization of the U.S. armed forces. “While politicization is not a new phenomenon,” she writes, “it has accelerated in recent years and occurs within the larger context of democratic backsliding in American politics.” The implications of partisan polarization of the armed forces “are unique in that the military is the state’s legitimate instrument of violence. When this instrument becomes politicized or is perceived to be politicized, it undermines the very foundation of democratic governance.” Among Urben’s concerns are the “retired general and flag officers who engage in partisan campaign endorsements and public, partisan commentary” who undermine “the military’s norm of nonpartisanship given their stature and following.”⁵⁹

Urben reports that “more than two-thirds of U.S. presidents have served in the U.S. military, and roughly one-quarter of them have been general officers. In fact, in 1852, General Winfield Scott ran for president while still in uniform.” One may wonder, then, how retired generals can refrain from commenting on partisan politics – Urben’s norm of military nonpartisanship – and also run for president. Her answer speaks to the core issue of democratic accountability. “Veterans who run for elected office or serve as political appointees in the executive branch” have “unambiguously cross[ed] into a partisan role.” Having done so, they “therefore face the full scrutiny of the electorate, either directly or indirectly.” But those retired officers who do not run for office or openly serve an elected president, she suggests, “try to straddle both worlds, acting as if their former military status somehow places them above the political fray while engaging in the very activity the norms of their profession once proscribed.” She also notes, using the examples of former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly and former Secretary of Defense James Mattis (both retired Marine four-star generals), that “when retired senior officers who served as high-level political appointees invoke the military’s norm of nonpartisanship as the reason why they refrain from commenting on politics, it weakens the norm and further confuses the American public in the process.” Urben offers a number of innovative solutions to bolster the norm of nonpartisanship, including instilling the norm within the ranks by taking advantage of the hierarchical nature of the military institution. She also proposes that “well-known actors who have starred in war movies should undertake a campaign of public service announcements to educate the public about the importance of civilian control of the military and its associated norm of nonpartisanship.”⁶⁰

Rosa Brooks, a law professor with experience in the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, also addresses the question of civil-military relations. In her essay “Understanding Current Threats to Democracy: The Limits of the Civil-Military Relations Paradigm,” she acknowledges that observers have noted “a range of potentially worrisome trends: a military that has grown too central to U.S. foreign policy, with military leaders gaining excessive influence relative to civilian decision-makers; increased politicization of the military; and a growing divide between the military community and civilian society – or, alternatively, a troubling militarization of civilian culture and institutions.” She finds a more nuanced picture, however, arguing that “civil-military relations in the post-9/11 period have been complex and sometimes contradictory, rather than unidirectional” for the worse. Her main concern is a different one. “Most scholarship on civil-military relations,” she writes, “is animated by the presumption that the military is the sole institution in possession of the tools of mass coercion, making healthy civil-military relations uniquely important to managing coercion in a democratically accountable manner.” Here we recognize the issue that Urben engages, although her reference is to the military as the state’s *legitimate* instrument of violence, not the only one. For Brooks, the “technological and social changes that have marked the post-9/11 period,” including “global interconnectedness and increasing dependence on networked computers,” have led to the creation of “stunning new vulnerabilities.” Among the “new kinds of security threats and new means of mass coercion” that have emerged in recent decades, she includes “artificial intelligence, disinformation, financial market manipulation, and bioengineered weapons,” wielded by state and nonstate actors alike.⁶¹ “In fundamental ways,” she argues, “these changes challenge our ability to articulate clearly what counts as ‘war’ and even what counts as ‘force.’ They undermine long-standing assumptions about the unique role of the military, blur the boundaries between the military and civilian spheres, and make traditional understandings of civil-military relations and civilian control of the military less analytically useful than in the past.”⁶²

Brooks acknowledges that some traditional concerns of students of civil-military relations will remain relevant if, for example, “President Trump follows through on his threats to use the military to suppress domestic political protest” (as he did in June 2025, when he ordered the deployment of some seventeen hundred National Guard soldiers and seven hundred Marines to Los Angeles to counter protests against ICE raids and deportations of suspected undocumented immigrants).⁶³ Yet if Trump wanted to use his power, say, to secure his reelection to a third, illegal term, or to guarantee the dominance of the Republican Party, deployment of the military might not even be necessary. “The threat or use of conventional military force can disrupt or halt elections,” explains Brooks, “but if AI-generated tools wielded by individuals or organizations can achieve the same effects far more cheaply and easily, military force, and the military itself, may become al-

most superfluous.” In light of how Elon Musk and his acolytes took control of multiple government agencies – by installing themselves as the “*sysadmins*, the systems administrators who manage the entire network, including its security” – Brooks’s insight bears emphasis.⁶⁴ The “technological and social changes of recent decades mean that healthy civil-military relations no longer suffice to protect democracy from raw power,” given the other means of mass coercion she has described.⁶⁵

One understanding of the U.S. armed forces is that, by reflecting the diversity of American society and serving as a pathway to full citizenship, they protect democracy. An important milestone in this narrative is President Harry S. Truman’s 1948 executive order desegregating the U.S. military. As the essay on the National Archives website (not yet removed as of this writing) introducing the document points out, “during World War II, the army had become the nation’s largest minority employer.” Truman’s predecessor Franklin Roosevelt had issued an earlier executive order in June 1941 forbidding discrimination against Black Americans by military contractors, directing that they be accepted into job-training programs in military plants, and establishing a Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Truman was unable to prevent racist members of Congress from terminating the FEPC, but he established in its place the President’s Commission on Civil Rights. When Southern senators threatened a filibuster to prevent its recommendations from being enacted into law, Truman issued executive orders in response, including the one desegregating the armed forces.⁶⁶

The “progress narrative” points to the army’s welcoming of Black soldiers as the first step toward expanding opportunities that would eventually include women, gay, and transgender service members. Military service has also provided a “fast track” to citizenship for immigrants, although other motives – such as the desire to escape from poverty – have had a greater influence on enlistment.⁶⁷ As Katharine M. Millar points out in her contribution “Gender, Sexuality, War-fighting & the Making of American Citizenship Post-9/11,” the post-9/11 wars are often understood as having continued that progress. “At first glance,” she writes, “the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq appear to be accompanied by gains in formal equality for women alongside people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions.” In 2011, “the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy prohibiting lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from openly serving in the U.S. military had been repealed.”⁶⁸ In 2013, the army announced it would confer equal benefits to same-sex spouses, two years before the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage.⁶⁹

Millar argues that “given the centrality of military service to historical struggles for citizenship rights, recognition, and dignity in the United States, most notably in the long struggle against anti-Black racism, the increased participation of people previously excluded from, or marginalized within, the U.S. military has sociopolitical significance beyond the institution.” Yet her main claim is that “moves toward formal equality and institutional inclusion did not challenge

prevailing masculinized, heterosexual ideals of normative citizenship and military service.” Her essay focuses on “three paradigmatic events – the graduation of the first women from U.S. Army Ranger School, the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and the antiwar protests of peace activist Cindy Sheehan – to illustrate the intertwining of formal inclusion with the reification of heteropatriarchal, martial citizenship.” She argues that “the global war on terror has reinforced the existing U.S. heteropatriarchal sex-gender order, promoting civilian deference to the military and undermining democratic oversight of the armed forces.”⁷⁰ Her essay concludes with a brief discussion of the changes undertaken by the Trump administration to expel transgender service members and to “cancel” diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, even to the point of removing photos of minority soldiers from Defense Department websites.⁷¹

Even before the second Trump administration took office, there was reason to question the progress narrative that associated war, war preparation, and military service with racial equality. The two essays in the fifth section of the volume address the politics of race, among other topics, by focusing on the militarization of police forces and the relationship between the military-industrial complex and the prison-industrial complex.

The essay on the militarization of the police, “Colonialism Turned Inward: Importing U.S. Militarism into Local Police Departments,” is authored by Azadeh N. Shahshahani and Sofía Verónica Montez, legal and advocacy director and legal fellow, respectively, at Project South, an Atlanta-based organization that provides legal support for grassroots activists opposing anti-Black and anti-Muslim discrimination, among other causes. Drawing on the insights of Martinican poet and political leader Aimé Césaire regarding the “boomerang” effect on the homeland of the practices of European colonial forces, Shahshahani and Montez claim that “from their inception as slave patrols, U.S. police have fundamentally served to enforce a domestic colonial order and white supremacy.” They describe how “since the 1990s, U.S. military resources developed for combat and police tactics imported from abroad have been deployed by local law enforcement agencies.” They find that “most heavily militarized policing, charges of domestic terrorism, and surveillance have been deployed against the Black Lives Matter movement, people who have supported Palestinians, and protestors against the militarization of police.”⁷²

Shahshahani and Montez focus their analysis on the legislation that has encouraged the Department of Defense to provide surplus equipment to local police agencies and on institutions such as the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange. The latter “hosts partnerships with foreign states in the Americas, North Africa, and various regions of Asia, Europe, and Australia, but its first and by far most meaningful partner has historically been Israel.” The authors trace the influence of Israeli practices on U.S. programs. For example, the proposed Atlanta

Public Safety Training Center, colloquially known as “Cop City,” and similar centers elsewhere in the United States resemble the Urban Warfare Training Center in the Negev Desert, dubbed by its Israeli trainees as *Mini Gaza*.⁷³

Although Shahshahani and Montez make a persuasive argument about the role of militarization of police forces, and especially the influence of Cop City, it is worth considering the perspective that Brooks offers in her essay about variation among police departments: “In the United States,” she writes, “policing is highly decentralized and the professionalism of policing varies greatly from region to region.” She argues that “the impact of what might be seen as police ‘militarization’ has been negative in some departments and neutral or positive in others (some studies have found, for instance, that officers who are military veterans are *less* likely to use excessive force than nonveterans).” She adds that neither is “the military” monolithic: “an infantry or special operations veteran with a decade of combat experience may bring different assumptions and skills to civilian policing than a veteran whose military occupational specialty was mechanical engineering or logistics, or a veteran who never deployed.” Moreover, “some civilian law enforcement agencies relied on military surplus programs to acquire armored vehicles and weapons, while others used such programs to obtain office furniture.”⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it is striking that despite the attention to police violence that resulted from the murder of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter, the number of police killings has continued to increase.⁷⁵ Further, while the police response to peaceful Black Lives Matter protests has become more heavily militarized, so, too, has the response to public protests of U.S. wars and immigration enforcement actions.

In their contribution entitled “From the Battlefield to Behind Bars: Rethinking the Relationship between the Military- & Prison-Industrial Complexes,” political scientists Jacob Swanson and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein describe the relationship between what President Eisenhower first dubbed the “military-industrial complex” and what they and others call the “prison-industrial complex.” They introduce two valuable concepts. The first is cross-institutional “seeding,” the process by which the military and the prison system “each transmit resources, practices, and personnel” from one to the other. The second is what they term a “mimetic” relationship “in which both institutions develop processes and practices in parallel, with each likely gaining legitimacy from comparable developments in the adjoining institution.”⁷⁶

They begin by reporting several elements of the “seeding” process. In the wake of the U.S. war in Vietnam, for example, “the closure and repurposing of military infrastructure, specifically military bases, into sites for prison construction” helped inaugurate the age of mass incarceration. “In the next three decades,” they write, “over 40 percent of federal prisons came to be located on former military installations. By the mid-1990s, approximately eighty-six thousand incarcerated individuals were housed within seventy-nine federal institutions, thirty-four of

which were located on current or former military installations.” One-third of the total Bureau of Prison’s population was housed on former military bases. State prisons were also constructed on decommissioned military sites. The authors observe that the “interinstitutional seeding was framed as a ‘win-win’ with the ebbing of the Cold War and the prospect of base closures resulting in large employee layoffs.” On the topic of employment, their analysis also includes discussion of the hiring of military veterans as prison guards as well as the military’s practice, in times of low enlistment, of accepting recruits with criminal records. Other examples of seeding include the use of low-paid prison labor for production of Defense Department goods (clothing, furniture, and electronics) and a general “convergence of international military and domestic carceral practices” when, for example, corrections officers from Virginia and Pennsylvania served as army reservists and perpetrated atrocities in Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison.⁷⁷

Perhaps the most original of the essay’s findings is the “mimetic” practice of private-equity (PE) funding of both military production and prisons. The authors report that private-equity firms accounted for one-quarter of the 3,700 weapons contracts negotiated between 2000 and 2021 and that “PE-controlled firms have acquired over five hundred U.S. arms companies since the early 2000s.” Because private firms are held to lower standards of transparency than publicly held ones, the practice has resulted in “a decline in democratic accountability.” In the carceral system, profit-driven private-equity investors have fueled abuses in the “management of the prison phone industry and digital transactions, commissary sales,” and health care, exacerbated by “irregular and inadequate public scrutiny and reporting.” The economic fragility of the private-equity sector makes incarcerated populations vulnerable to, for example, health providers that might suddenly go bankrupt. In sum, the authors argue, “the striking mimetic (or parallel) development of private equity in military and carceral institutions has accentuated antidemocratic developments.”⁷⁸

The second half of the essay takes up the theme, addressed elsewhere in the volume, of “the dominant narrative about the military and veterans” as “one of improvement, especially for Black Americans and other veterans of color.” The authors compare indicators of economic stability, such as homeownership, of Black military veterans and nonveterans and find, on balance, that “military service provides a clear socioeconomic benefit to Black individuals on average while reversing, to some degree, certain racial inequalities.” They suggest, however, that the story of racial progress is “informed by paternalist assumptions, if not fully racist practices,” which they illustrate with an examination of Project 100,000, an initiative launched by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1966 intended simultaneously to “increase enlistment numbers” for the war in Vietnam and to provide “domestic social benefits.” Using evidence of racial disparities in incarceration rates of veterans, they conclude that the “separate but mimetic pro-

cesses developing in parallel within carceral and military institutions complicate the narrative that the military's impact on American society is primarily one of racial progress."⁷⁹

The effects of war on democracy are complex, but broadly the essays in this volume show that more than twenty years of war and war preparation have contributed to democratic backsliding in the United States. The Trump administration's assault on democratic institutions and practices could be read as independent from the longer-term erosion of democratic institutions. Our inclination, however, is to link them, as Matthew Evangelista does in the concluding essay, "It Can Happen Here."⁸⁰

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- ⁶⁴ Brooks, "Understanding Current Threats to Democracy," 244; Zeynep Tufekci, "Here Are the Digital Clues to What Musk Is Really Up To," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2025; and Jacob Bogage, "Some DOGE Staffers Hold High-Powered Jobs at Multiple Federal Agencies," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2025.
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- ⁶⁶ Harry S. Truman, "Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948)," <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981>.
- ⁶⁷ Sofya Aptekar, *Green Card Soldier: Between Model Immigrant and Security Threat* (MIT Press, 2023).

- ⁶⁸ Katharine M. Millar, "Gender, Sexuality, Warfighting & the Making of American Citizenship Post-9/11," *Dædalus* 154 (4) (Fall 2025): 258, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/gender-sexuality-warfighting-making-american-citizenship-post-911>.
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- ⁷⁰ Millar, "Gender, Sexuality, Warfighting & the Making of American Citizenship Post-9/11," 258, 259.
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- ⁷⁴ Brooks, "Understanding Current Threats to Democracy," 242.
- ⁷⁵ Steven Rich, Tim Arango, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "Since George Floyd's Murder, Police Killings Keep Rising, Not Falling," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2025.
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- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 298, 299, 300.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 300, 301, 303.
- ⁸⁰ Matthew Evangelista, "It Can Happen Here," *Dædalus* 154 (4) (Fall 2025): 312–327, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/it-can-happen-here>.