

Long War & the Erosion of Democratic Culture

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Enduring military mobilization in peacetime and long periods of war may not only weaken elements of democratic accountability and institutions, the checks and balances associated with both young and mature democratic systems, but more insidiously, over time, war may undermine the culture and values that support democratic institutions and processes. Democracies depend not only on these institutional arrangements and processes; they are moored in, motivated, and lubricated by a constellation of normative beliefs, values, capacities, and feelings: namely, empathy and respect for others, the willingness to hear and be persuaded by other's views, willingness of the minority to cede to the majority so long as their rights are protected, and, perhaps most important, the promise that force is taken off the table because might does not make right. When war is sparked by fear, and the mobilization that sustains war amplifies fear, war and high levels of military mobilization in peacetime can undermine the manners and norms – civil discourse, participation, trust, empathy, and tolerance – that are prerequisites and characteristic of democracy.

Democracy is a constellation of procedures that ensure inclusion and representation in deliberative decision-making processes, accountability for decisions and actions, the rule of law applied equally to the powerful and the weak, and the peaceful transfer of power. All the institutional and procedural features of representative democracy – deliberative bodies, elections, civil rights such as freedom of speech and due process, sunshine laws, an independent judiciary, legislative oversight, and more – serve this constellation. While democratic institutions and values are vulnerable to a variety of threats, war and the preparation for it are important, if previously understudied, elements on the road to “democratic backsliding” and authoritarianism.¹

Observers have long noted that war can undermine democratic institutions by weakening the *structural* checks on power that maintain those institutions: war and military mobilization tend to concentrate power, increase secrecy, and reduce the venues and occasions for dissent to be aired in *both* authoritarian and democratic states.² U.S founding father James Madison was very clear about this in 1795

when he enumerated the multitude of existential challenges that war presents to democracy:

Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force of the people. This same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manner and of morals engendered in both. No nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual war. War is, in fact, the true nurse of executive aggrandizement.³

Stephen J. Rockwell, in his contribution to this volume, takes issue with Madison's claims. For the period Rockwell studied, the founding of the country to the turn of the twentieth century, he writes: "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."⁴ However, we think this assertion conflates the formation of the administrative state with the norms of democracy. The violent dispossession of native land and concentration of native people on reservations was profoundly antidemocratic. Further, the United States took the practices it used to defeat Indigenous people and used them in its wars at the turn of the century in Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines.⁵

But these are not merely matters of interest for historians of American political development and democracy. In this essay, we first take up the notion that war and war preparation erode democratic culture by, among other things, "seducing the minds" of the community, particularly 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. It is the norms of respect for deliberation, the use of arguments rooted in evidence and reason, empathy and care for others, and the rule of law that keep democracies democratic. The institutions are weakened without a strong cultural underpinning and this underpinning itself is weakened by war and mobilization. Second, we argue, as have feminists before us, that belligerent, non-empathetic masculinity is an outgrowth of war and constant mobilization, helping explain the rise of authoritarianism and the growth of acceptance of violence in domestic politics (a perspective congenial to the contributions to this volume from Katharine M. Millar and Penny M. Von Eschen, among others).⁶ We also argue that fear of perceived existential threats and perpetual war have eroded the distinction

between the domestic and international so that there is little distinction to be had between foreign and domestic enemies and the U.S. response to them.

Research by political scientist Michael Masterson shows that young democracies may be weakened by war, with fear and the associated threat of war substantially increasing the probability of democratic breakdown.⁷ We have come to expect that mature democracies will go back to baseline after wars end, restoring, for instance, civil rights guarantees and legislative and judicial oversight of the executive. As Masterson argues, “while threats elevate public support for authoritarianism, in both old and new democracies, old democracies are better able to withstand this shock. . . . The fact that after threats pass, public support for increased executive power tends to shrink again accounts for why older democracies that can constrain authoritarianism in the short term tend to ultimately survive international threats.”⁸

But war can have pernicious effects on even mature democracies. Democracies depend not only on these institutional arrangements and processes; they are moored in, motivated, and lubricated by another, deeper constellation of normative beliefs, values, capacities, and feelings: namely, *empathy* and *respect* for others, the willingness to hear and be persuaded by other’s views, willingness of the minority to cede to the majority so long as their rights are protected, and, perhaps most important, the promise that force is taken off the table because might does not make right. In short, these capacities and feelings enable citizens to listen across differences, tolerate difference, and acknowledge that even if others do not agree with you, they are human beings deserving of respect. These values are described by political scientists Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman as respect for the legitimacy of the opposition and the integrity of rights.⁹ The emotional lubricants for these institutions, practices, and norms of democracy are trust and a sense of safety. Fear undermines trust and promotes some of the features of “groupthink” – specifically the tendency to stereotype outgroups and screen out alternative information that conflicts with preexisting preferences.¹⁰

The effects of war on democracy are not simple. We suggest that enduring war and persistent high levels of military mobilization may not only weaken elements of democratic accountability and institutions – the structural checks and balances that we associate with both young and mature democratic systems – but more insidiously, over time, war may weaken the culture and values that support democratic institutions and processes.¹¹ In fact, Madison included a cultural element in his list of problems democracies confront in war, while still rooting those problems in war’s economic impacts. “The same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manners and of morals, engendered by both. No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”¹²

Why and how can war, and perpetual preparation for it, hurt the cultural underpinnings of a democratic society? War is both a trigger for, and at times a consequence of, the weakening of democratic norms. The emotional consequences of threat, military mobilization, war scares, and war itself include deepening distrust and fear. When war is sparked by fear and the mobilization that sustains war in turn amplifies fear, war can undermine the manners and norms – civil discourse, participation, trust, empathy, and tolerance – that are the prerequisites and characteristics of democracy.

The *fear* that motivates and is stoked during war on the level of individuals and groups is an important element of the causal story of democratic erosion. This fear can be magnified by economic, physical, and cultural insecurity as well as a rhetoric of insecurity and threat. Thus magnified, the fear can trigger cascade processes and feelings that erode trust and other democratic values. A people in search of more security are increasingly willing to authorize and pay for more “defensive” and offensive measures such as military and police. They long for a protector, often understood in masculine terms.

Thus, fear *and* hypermasculinity are important intervening factors in the downward spiral of trust and tolerance that weakens democratic culture. The existence and then mobilization of fear, combined with the valorization of a militarized hypermasculinity characteristic of long-term war mobilization and war-making, tend to undermine the habits and feelings of trust and the willingness to listen to other perspectives that underpin democratic societies. Diplomatic solutions to conflict become discredited, and diplomacy itself disappears from popular media depictions of conflict, as Von Eschen argues.¹³

Further, as others have noted, “One of the most pervasive and powerful effects of threat is to increase intolerance, prejudice, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia, regardless of whether threat is defined as a widely acknowledged external force or a subjective, perceived state.”¹⁴ The us-them dynamic, often racialized and gendered at home and abroad, can motivate and authorize the diminution of the rights of the internal “enemy.” President Trump’s confusion, conflation, and inflation of foreign and domestic threats is only a more transparent version of a phenomena that has recurred from the founding anxieties and hostility toward Native Americans, to the subsequent othering and discrimination against antiwar activists, socialists, Chinese, Japanese, and black and brown people, to the more recent obsession with erasing the very recognition of trans people.

Americans have a long relationship with war and fear. Political scientist Harold Lasswell writes:

When we look into the history of American colonization and settlement of the New World, we cannot fail to be impressed by the pervasive influence of violence, and the expectation of violence, upon the civic cohesion of the American people. This is a far

more subtle matter than the War of Independence itself, which was a unifying crucible for the most dynamic elements from which the new nation was ultimately forged. Many of the colonists along the eastern seaboard, to say nothing of the adventurers along the fingers of penetration that reached across the body of the continent and eventually grasped the whole, were ever aware of personal peril. It is no idle myth to recall the pioneer with his weapon leaning against a tree while he cleared and planted a field of corn. There were block houses to serve as emergency garrisons at the sound of alarm.¹⁵

But the end of the Cold War had brought at least a respite from existential dread, notwithstanding the continued maintenance of arsenals of nuclear weapons. Although previous acts of domestic and international terror (for example, twenty years of attacks by the Unabomber, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the 1999 attack on the USS *Cole*) had conditioned the American people to a certain level of vigilance, it is important to punctuate the causal chain with the 9/11 attacks, which were both unanticipated and shocking. These were then followed by the still unsolved anthrax attacks in the United States and years of terrorist attacks in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

While the 9/11 terrorists attacked symbolically important buildings and killed thousands of people that day, and although members of Congress were evacuated from the Capitol building, the attacks did not *directly* hurt U.S. democracy. In fact, comparative research shows that terrorism itself does not tend to harm either strong states or democracies.¹⁶ Rather, the attacks caused fear and likely supercharged the already-pervasive underlying masculine ideology/culture of the United States, and perhaps even activated authoritarian tendencies.

To the extent that many Americans saw the 9/11 attacks as assaults not only on the people and property of the United States but on its culture and values, and perhaps even its national identity, the attacks certainly bolstered nationalism and may have surfaced and supercharged an underlying masculine “honor” culture. Social psychologists Colin Barnes, Ryan Brown, and Lindsey Osterman have identified two possible mechanisms of action:

First, protection of family and possessions is closely associated with masculine honor. Therefore, endorsing actions intended to safeguard one’s homeland from threats would be expected of people who value the honor ethic among men. Second, it has been well established that U.S. men who are concerned with masculine honor tend to respond to personal insults with aggression. Construing acts of terrorism as *national* insults suggests that people influenced by this ideology will respond similarly to terrorist threats because doing so reflects an unwillingness to be disrespected or intimidated, whether at the personal or national level.¹⁷

The culture of defending national honor with aggression was already present but strongly amplified by 9/11. Examples of such responses abound. They include widespread support for rounding up and detaining Muslim U.S. residents without due process, the acceptance and normalization of both torture and extraordinary rendition, the use of Guantánamo as a site of exception for indefinite detention, popular support or quiescence around extrajudicial killings via drone attacks, and the use of war equipment and counterinsurgency techniques in domestic policing.¹⁸

Terrorism – as well as regular invocations of threats to national security – understandably frightens people. It is the fear, the subsequent reaction and over-reaction to perceived threat (including the hypermasculine willingness or even eagerness to confront that feared object with violence), that undermines democratic culture. The United States’ near permanent state of war has elevated the status of a certain type of masculinity, whose main exemplar is the soldier as super-citizen (see Millar’s contribution to this volume).¹⁹ While we are not disposed to use Madison’s eighteenth-century language of manners and morals, the emotions often entail moral judgments.²⁰ Fear can involve the judgment that another is dangerous, and this can include the related judgment that the “threat” merits an angry and violent response. The fact that the United States was in a permanent condition of war and mobilization from September 2001 to September 2021 depended on and deepened fears of “others” – both external others and the racial and often immigrant others within.²¹ Fear, in turn, sharpens domestic political polarization, which erodes the qualities of tolerance and trust that are necessary for democracies to function. Of course, polarization may have other causes, such as growing economic inequality, which itself may be exacerbated by war and war financing (see Heidi Peltier’s essay in this volume).²²

Fear is the spark for war and the fuel for sustaining it. Fear, reframed in the less emotionally tinged language of national security, is the ultimate grounds for the wartime states of exception and supposedly temporary loss of freedoms.²³ Feelings of insecurity foster increased war spending, which redistributes wealth and increases economic inequality and polarization.²⁴ Fear is one root of an inability to listen to others. Fear also reduces our capacity to think as clearly or as contextually as we might otherwise. Preoccupation with domestic threats such as inflation, unemployment, and violent crime are associated with right-wing attitudes.²⁵ Related research suggests that “right-wing authoritarianism originates from the belief that the social world is an inherently dangerous, unstable, unpredictable, and threatening place. This dangerous worldview activates the motivational goal of ensuring collective security and stability through the coercive maintenance of the traditional social order.”²⁶ While conservatism is not authoritarianism, “when people are faced with traumatic, system-threatening

events, they tend to shift toward a more conservative ideology as a means of coping with uncertainty and threat.”²⁷

As international relations scholar Claire Duncanson has argued, militarized masculinity is not confined to military institutions:

Constructions of gender within militaries shape masculinities in obvious places, other institutions in the security sector (such as the police, private security, and ministries of defence), but also in public life more broadly. The outcome is that it is hard for many men, particularly those in positions of authority and leadership, to be seen as too risk-averse, compromising, or conciliatory. It becomes hard, in particular, for any man, especially leaders, to admit to vulnerability and interdependence, of either themselves or their state. Instead, they are compelled to pursue weapons and policies that perpetuate the myth of the possibility of perfect security, perfect invulnerability.²⁸

These attitudes arise at the expense of democratic values such as tolerance, trust, and compromise.

The valorization of masculinity is accompanied by the increasing identification of the president as the commander in chief (as his paramount identity and role) and the fact that the United States has not yet, unlike eighty-three other countries, elected a woman to that role. Over the last twenty-five years, through the “global war on terror” and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, everyday life in the United States, particularly on social media and in political culture more generally, has evidenced a dramatically more masculinist, belligerent quality. Disrespect has centered on women and increasingly on trans people, now central objects of hate because they represent the horrifying idea that a woman can become a man or a man a woman. Tough masculinist talk and the imagination of existential threat have also centered on the “foreigner” within. This is the immigrant with or without papers, and the idea that the original and still true American is white (soldier or civilian), not Indigenous or Black.

A democratic society that faces real insecurity and external military threat can pursue a craving for “absolute security.” When threats are framed as existential, war and mobilization can weaken the institutions, practices, and norms that support democracy. Indeed, there is a large body of research that shows that the support for authoritarian measures and aggressive foreign policies grows in times of threat. As political scientists Marc J. Hetherington and Elizabeth Suhay have argued, “in ‘normal times,’ authoritarians are already more inclined to hold hawkish opinions and oppose democratic principles, while the less authoritarian tend to support democratic principles and less confrontational foreign policies. Hence, when a threat to public safety strikes, authoritarians have little place to travel in terms of their opinions. But the rest of the populace does.”²⁹

The 9/11 attacks and the months of terror alerts that followed were not normal times. Hetherington and Suhay found that during a time of perceived threat, sup-

port for aggressive foreign policies and restrictions on civil liberties grew among those who were more moderate. “When people perceive grave threats to their safety, most individuals are susceptible to ‘authoritarian thinking.’” They continued:

Our findings suggest something much more dangerous to democracy. When ordinary people perceive a grave threat to their safety, they are susceptible to adopting anti-democratic preferences regardless of whether they score high in authoritarianism. In this rendering, antidemocratic preferences can quickly become popular, mainstream positions under the right circumstances. Indeed, to a certain extent, this has been the experience in post 9/11 America, with support for preemptive war, torture, wiretapping without warrant, and the like sometimes enjoying majority support. Our interpretation seems to square well with support for authoritarian policies in other threatening times as well.³⁰

In turn, to the extent that those feelings of fear and relationships engender the weakening of deeper democratic values, as well as the erosion of the processes and institutions that embody and empower them, continued war and mobilization for it may become easier; war mobilization is normalized, and war itself is expected. The narration and then feeling of existential threat can lead to the conflation of self-defense and *preemption* (against an imminent attack) with a *preventive* attack (against a possible future threat).³¹ Potential or actual hostile feelings can become synonymous with hostile acts, justifying preventive war. In other words, if outsiders have a previously contentious or hostile relationship to “us” and the capability to act, this capability is understood as a definite intention to act. War is believed to be inevitable, and thus preventive war seems logical and is then understood as justified preemption. Threats may be perceived as never-ending and new sources of threat may be identified. Permanent mobilization is required against those who are seen as permanent adversaries. The fearful population then demands or at least acquiesces to an even greater concentration of power and authority. Thus, as war and mobilization for war ratchet up in an escalatory spiral, democratic procedures and values ratchet down, weakening the institutions and practices, such as diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchanges, that could temper or limit the forces that believe war and violence are the only ways to solve problems. Or, as the late Robert Jay Lifton argues elsewhere in this volume, “war begets war.”³²

On balance, wars and war preparation strengthen the state and concentrate power.³³ In the United States, war has often been identified as the key source of the concentration of power in the executive/imperial presidency. On the other hand, war can lead to the reinvigoration of democratic traditions: “In the United States, the Vietnam War produced a backlash against the ‘imperial presidency’: Congress sought to impose limits on presidential war-making and budgetary power, rein in runaway intelligence agencies, protect citizens’ privacy,

and generally bolster its capacity to monitor the executive.”³⁴ Further, there is an egalitarian counterforce to the concentration of power when the need for recruitment of large numbers of young people for the mass army expands rights and participation. In various war and postwar periods in the United States, that need has opened the force to both African Americans (the Civil War and World War II) and women (in the late Vietnam era). The end of mass conscription likely limits the egalitarian impact of the army when, as Rosa Brooks points out in her essay in this volume, the proportion of U.S. adults with military service has declined from 18 percent in 1980 to 6 percent today.³⁵

War and the anticipation of war lead to states of emergency. While war causes the emergency, the fear integral to war motivates particular responses to it. Wartime is “a state of exception” during which “the legal order itself” can be suspended.³⁶ The Hobbesian fear of all against all heightens worst case thinking, promotes military preparedness at the expense of other functions of government, and starves the institutions and practices that could render and support the ideal of citizen and citizenship as more than a soldier or uncritical patriot. People are told during wartime that they need only one voice: national unity. A unity government, a unitary executive. Wartime is not the time for debate. Indeed, the argument often goes, in war, there is *no time* for debate or deliberation. We have only thirty minutes between the launch of a nuclear ballistic missile and its arrival. Survival demands a unified command, and in the United States, even though there are many people involved in the process, the president alone has the authority to *order* the initiation of a nuclear war. States of emergency and the institutionalization of fear associated with war can silence nonmilitary experts and substitute new processes intended to increase the speed of decision-making so wars can be conducted with greater efficiency, greater effectiveness, and often less accountability.

As war creates a (temporary) state of exception, nuclearism and perpetual war more generally have created a permanent state of exception in the United States since 1947, when President Harry S. Truman signed the National Security Act into law. This state of exception was fortified with the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act in October 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks. Though many of the PATRIOT Act provisions for expanded surveillance have expired, others were extended and remain. Secrecy contributes a crucial element to democratic loss as the ability to discuss war together with others is severely restricted by that lack of information. Moreover, the size of the military as an institution compartmentalizes knowledge even within the ranks of those who know (that is, inside secrecy culture).

Paradoxically, as the symbolic demonstrations of U.S. militarization abound, the material basis and effects of militarization are less and less evident.³⁷ As Immanuel Kant observed in the late eighteenth century, it is easier to maintain popular support for war if the burden – the cost in blood and treasure – is less visible. For instance, the replacement of conscription with the institution of the all-volunteer

force in 1973, as well as military leadership's strong post-Vietnam emphasis on "force protection" (through strategy and tactics changes, new equipment and medical care, heavy use of private contractors and particularly contractors from other nations, and remote technologies) has reduced the direct human toll of war for the United States. The absolute and relative numbers of U.S. military combat deaths in the post-9/11 wars were low compared to the Vietnam, Korean, and Second World Wars. While advances in military medicine have increased the ratio of wounded-to-killed, the severely wounded veterans of the post-9/11 wars have largely faded from view.³⁸ At the same time that the human costs of war are thus less visible, high levels of military spending are obscured by the fact that war is no longer financed through taxation or through the purchase of war bonds, but is paid for by borrowing.³⁹ The lack of fiscal transparency is what Linda J. Bilmes, in this volume and elsewhere, calls the "Ghost Budget."⁴⁰

Further, as sociologist Elise Boulding suggests, our imaginations and analytic capacities can be blunted in wartime. "The tendency of planners to prepare for worst case scenarios leaves societies unprepared for the opportunities involved in best case scenarios."⁴¹ Such opportunities include investing in better health, education, and housing programs, along with stronger employment levels, with the funds diverted from military preparedness for the worst case imagined.⁴² The "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement's view of the country is an example of this worst-case view. In the MAGA narrative, the United States is a country in great distress, its economy, morality, and governance nearing collapse, and it has been and continues to be attacked by external and internal others: illegal migrants, sex changers, abortionists, women in high places, and criminals lead the list. China, North Korea, Iran – even sometimes Canada and the European Union – are all threats, intent on taking advantage of, destabilizing, or even doing evil to the United States. This extended in 2020 to the idea that "they" – illegal immigrants recruited by Democrats – are stealing "our" votes. The 2016 MAGA chants of "lock her up" directed toward Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton have been transformed into the military in U.S. streets detaining, arresting, and locking up protesters and potential illegal immigrants.

In wartime, and sometimes for years afterward, nonmilitary elements of the administrative state are weakened even as its security-focused elements – police, border security, intelligence gathering, and the armed forces – are bolstered. There can apparently never be *too much* military spending. The care for veterans and their dependents can take up a significant share of total government expenditure even as other social spending is gutted or eliminated.

When the civilian functions of government are starved of resources and derided as less deserving than military forces and policing, the governing functions of states are undermined, which itself feeds into the sense that government is the

problem, not a solution. Political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum describe the attack on the administrative state, the part of the government that makes things work, as “ungoverning.”⁴³ Muirhead and Rosenblum focus on two elements of ungoverning: attacks on expertise, the specialized knowledge that is essential for governing, and attacks on regular processes. As they say, “process is the antithesis of arbitrariness.”⁴⁴ Under a permanent wartime footing, states of emergency are normalized and fear is institutionalized. As the non-military elements of the national government are starved of resources that have been moved over to the military and policing side of the ledger, the social safety net for everyone is weakened, and the perception that the nonmilitary elements of government (schools, transportation, housing, and even election administration) are the problem may grow. In fact, those state and civil society institutions are weaker, and less capable, and so the cycle that leads to distrust, and eventually the ungoverning of government, continues.

The first months of the second Trump administration offered ample evidence of this phenomenon. Even the local and state police aren’t seen to be capable enough. The supposed lack of local capacity can be used to justify the use of the military in domestic law enforcement, as we have seen the Trump administration do in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles in 2025.

While there are many reasons why U.S. politics has become more angry, polarized, distrustful, and violent, we suggest that it is important to include the long-term domestic effects of international war among them. For example, most of the research on trust and war is focused on civil conflict. It shows that violent civil conflict tends to weaken some forms of interpersonal trust and trust in institutions.⁴⁵ External war can generate social unity and increase altruism among “ingroups” as people rally around the flag. On the other hand, international war can be polarizing. As Masterson notes,

Threats that allow leaders to claim that there is an “enemy within” – for example, spies or saboteurs working for the enemy – are more challenging to democracy. The idea that enemies are hidden among ordinary citizens helps leaders justify broad repressive measures to root out the enemy and prevent subversion. These measures can also be used to quash resistance as the leader continues to aggregate power, and leaders may cast resistance to their authority as a fifth column backed by hostile outside forces.⁴⁶

Further, as economist and historian Pauline Grosjean found in her research on European wars, political trust can decline following international wars: “common interest may fall apart after the end of the conflict, especially in the case of a defeat.”⁴⁷

The research on civil war also shows that while war can increase solidarity among ingroup members, it also decreases trust in outgroups and in *institutions*.⁴⁸ And perhaps more surprisingly, these effects can endure for generations. Fear may increase the willingness of people to give authority to those people and practices

that they believe will protect them. Further, “reminders of death and terrorism increase the attractiveness of conservative leaders and opinions.”⁴⁹ The normative emphasis on the justice of force in the international sphere, even when force is ostensibly used to promote democracy, may lead people to believe that force is justified at home against one’s political opponents.⁵⁰

To the extent that inequality is a source of democratic erosion, it is important to note that war fosters inequality both economically – by redistributing wealth upward and to men and by spending on arms instead of social welfare programs – and culturally – by creating supercitizens among (especially white male) soldiers and by degrading the idea of an equality of value in the citizenry that makes democracy work.⁵¹ The growth of radical economic inequality has some roots in long-term military mobilization and war. The disproportionately military-focused budget (49.5 percent of discretionary federal spending, or 59 percent when including the Department of Veterans Affairs in FY 2024) since World War II has helped create a large underclass.⁵²

The reality and perception of economic and social inequality and perceptions of unfairness are related. Many white men have become convinced that their loss of comparative status and wealth in a more diverse society can be attributed to others rather than to deindustrialization or tax policies that favor the rich. The “threat” of loss of status is real, but the causes are misidentified. White men have increasingly developed (or been given) a sense of being threatened, of being surrounded by others – women, immigrants, and minorities – who they believe are being elevated unfairly by affirmative action and who they see as undermining their status by taking their jobs, college placements, political voice, and other privileges and opportunities. This has heightened their fear of the world inside as well as outside U.S. boundaries. Ironically, war culture, more than virtually any other factor, has given men their status as citizens with more rights than others (see also Millar in this volume).⁵³ Their dominance derives from the perceived protection they offer as soldiers (even as the actual protection to life and well-being offered by women, and often and especially women of color, as mothers, teachers, medical personnel, and environmentalists is made invisible). While U.S. foreign policy has become increasingly militarized, with U.S. soldiers engaged in nearly eighty countries and multiple wars, most of those military ventures have failed to achieve their goals.⁵⁴ These failures to achieve what can be called military success may add further emotional force to the felt need to overcompensate, to protect and assert a hypermasculine performance of white male identity. Robert Jay Lifton makes a similar point in his interview in this volume, when he speaks of humiliation as a source of war and the “*Rambo* phenomenon” as a response to defeat in war.⁵⁵

Hypermasculinity, a focus on lethality, and declining respect for the rule of law at home and the liberal rules-based world order abroad, in favor of the rule of force and the militarization of domestic politics, have become, in the last de-

cadres of war, an increasingly overlapping, self-reinforcing set of values undermining democratic norms and institutions. War and violence are generally antipodal and antithetical to democratic norms and institutions. It used to be the case that there was a sort of firewall between democracy at home and the United States' use of force abroad. The argument was that the United States protected its democracy at home and (paradoxically) extended it abroad through war. The bridge between the domestic and international was the law of war and the at least rhetorical adherence to International Humanitarian Law. The militarization of domestic politics has been demonstrated by the loss of distinction between the reasons given at home and abroad for violence, a feature that is both made more transparent as it has been enacted by the second Trump administration.

The declaration in September 2025 that the Department of Defense will henceforth be known as the War Department was both an acknowledgment of what the DOD actually does and an assertion that “woke” values were out and hypermasculine values were in. At a White House event where Trump asserted the name change, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said, “This name change isn’t just about renaming, it’s about restoring. Words matter. . . . It’s restoring the warrior ethos. Restoring victory and clarity as an end state. Restoring intentionality to the use of force.” He added, the War Department is “going to go on offense, not just on defense. Maximum lethality, not tepid legality. Violent effect, not politically correct.”⁵⁶ And as Hegseth said in an address to admirals and generals at Quantico in September 2025:

Today, at my direction, each service will ensure that every requirement for every combat MOS [military occupational specialty], for every designated combat arms position returns to the highest male standard only. Because this job is life or death. Standards must be met. And not just met. At every level, we should seek to exceed the standard, to push the envelope, to compete. It’s common sense and core to who we are and what we do. It should be in our DNA. But when it comes to any job that requires physical power to perform in combat, those physical standards must be high and gender-neutral. If women can make it, excellent. If not, it is what it is. If that means no women qualify for some combat jobs, so be it. That is not the intent, but it could be the result. So be it. It will also mean that weak men won’t qualify because we’re not playing games. This is combat. This is life or death.⁵⁷

The U.S. Department of Defense, over two decades, developed a doctrine for civilian harm-mitigation in war that was meant to reduce civilian “collateral damage” during U.S. military operations by, among other things, making sure rules of engagement protected civilians. It culminated in the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Plan introduced in August 2022 by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. The aim was both to reduce harm and to bolster the ability of the United States to win; there was nothing weak about it. “Hard-earned tactical and operational successes may ultimately end in strategic failure if care is not taken to pro-

tect the civilian environment as much as the situation allows.”⁵⁸ The Pentagon also established and staffed a Civilian Protection Center of Excellence in April 2023. In March 2025, the Trump administration announced that they would close the center.⁵⁹ During his speech at Quantico, Hegseth said, “We fight to win. We unleash overwhelming and punishing violence on the enemy. We also don’t fight with stupid rules of engagement. We untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralize, hunt, and kill the enemies of our country. No more politically correct and overbearing rules of engagement, just common sense, maximum lethality and authority for warfighters.”⁶⁰

At the same event, President Trump was careful to note that there were threats to U.S. security both “foreign and domestic.” Asserting that the military should be deployed to U.S. cities against terrorists and to put down civil disturbances, he explained, “We are under invasion from within, no different than a foreign enemy, but more difficult in many ways because they don’t wear uniforms.” And again, wokeness was out and great men were in: “Together we’re reawakening the warrior spirit and this is a spirit that won and built this nation. From the cavalry that tamed the Great Plains to the ferocious, unyielding power of Patton, Bradley and the great General Douglas MacArthur – these were all great men.”⁶¹

Trump also reminded the general officers that his view of how to deal with crime and domestic protesters was simple: send in the military. “And this is going to be a major part for some of the people in this room. That’s a war too. It’s a war from within. Controlling the physical territory of our border is essential to national security. We can’t let these people live.” A few minutes later, Trump continued, “I say, they spit, we hit. Is that OK? I think so.” In fact, on August 11, 2025, Trump said of people protesting, “They’re not going to be fighting back long. They love to spit in the face of the police as the police are standing up there in uniform. They’re standing and they’re screaming at them an inch away from their face, and then they start spitting in their face. And I said you tell them, ‘You spit and we hit.’ . . . And they can hit real hard. It’s a disgusting thing.”⁶² The masculinist hyperbole of the Trump administration – including their explicit hatred of all things soft and “woke” – reflects, names, and amplifies a longer-term preoccupation with national decline and personal loss of status. The fear among some men of loss of status prevails in the United States despite the fact that the military, as an institution, substantially invests in and benefits men both through the cultural allocation of status and through its human capital investments in soldiers through education, health care, and housing benefits, among others.⁶³

President Eisenhower argued that it is possible for security and liberty to coexist but that the balance is precarious. Eisenhower was at first concerned that military mobilization could undermine free markets. In 1953, he asked, “How do you preserve an independent life at the same time that some of the mea-

asures that you are forced to adopt would tend to lead you toward a garrison state? We don't want to become a garrison state. We want to remain free."⁶⁴ Years later, Eisenhower's warnings would become much more explicit.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.⁶⁵

By 1963, Eisenhower was arguing that “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.”⁶⁶

Madison's and Eisenhower's ability to understand the impact of war and constant mobilization on American culture and American democracy was likely the result of each living in a period of rapid social change, including change in the institutions and understanding of legitimacy of the government that monopolized the use of force. Madison lived as the old order of aristocracy and kingship was under fundamental challenge. Eisenhower joined the U.S. military in 1911, when it was much smaller, less capital- and capitalism-intensive, and less central to American identity than it was by the time of his Farewell Address. We too live in an era of accelerating sociocultural change, institutional failure, and democratic backsliding. In particular, the slowly growing role of money in politics across decades has been dramatically sped up by the internet's circulation of falsehoods, by resurgent, belligerent masculinism and open racism, and by the growth of inequality.

We have argued that the cycle of war, militarization, concentration of power, and diminution of democratic norms and values is self-reinforcing and driven by fear and exacerbated by hypermasculine beliefs. Yet, especially in societies that proclaim that war is in service of protecting freedom and democracy, there is often resistance to the concentration of power and the loss of civil rights and freedoms. Social and political movements tend to arise and mobilize to reassert the institutional features, procedures, and cultural values of democracy. These movements challenge the loss of accountability, the diminution of transparency, and the use of force at home against political opponents. They also work to end wars.

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