“Hunkering Down” and Other Misnomers: The American War Story During the Pandemic of 2020

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In March of 2020—in the early days of the COVID-19 virus pandemic’s appearance in the United States—one billion dollars of the emergency $2.2 trillion 2020 CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act fund was allocated by Congress to the Department of Defense to mitigate some of the “economic and health damage caused” by the response to the virus (Hoffman). Though one might safely assume that most if not all of these emergency monies—one billion dollars of a $718 billion 2020 Defense budget—would be used to build reserves of direly needed medical resources and personnel to confront the coronavirus, DoD instead spent about seventy percent of the funds—688 million dollars—on defense contractors, treating the allocation, according to the Washington Post, as a “windfall” and a “dedicated bailout fund” to patch budgetary holes pre-existing the pandemic (Gregg and Torbati).1 The follow-on May 2020 HEROES (Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions) Act, approved by the House of Representatives but never taken up by the Senate, deliberately included funds for defense contractors. “The legislation,” comments Jake Pearson of ProPublica, “was effectively a stealthy way to bail out the defense and intelligence government contracting industry and their executives at taxpayer expense.”

Hence, when the Defense budget already comprises an immense and potentially disproportionate share of the federal budget and for decades the Department has been the only federal office incapable of passing a federally mandated audit (Boyle, “Coda”; Stone), emergency taxpayer funds ostensibly intended for Personal Protective Equipment and virus testing materials were instead dedicated with the CARES Act to making military dress uniforms, “jet engine parts and body armor” (Gregg and Torbati), and, in the HEROES Act, “to reimbursing defense contractors ‘general and administrative expenses,’ a catch-all phrase associated with the costs of running a business such as paying executives, running the corporate office and even marketing and sales” (Pearson). The DoD response to this reporting reveals that its primary aim always is to bolster the defense industry, pandemic or not:

“Just as we have successfully worked to ensure the readiness of our military forces during the COVID fight, we must continue to maintain the readiness of

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our industrial base. We need to always remember that economic security and national security are very tightly interrelated and our industrial base is really the nexus of the two.”

(Hoffman)

What this series of acts during an ongoing and out of control public health calamity suggests is that though the Defense Department is largely unaccountable for how it spends approximately 16 percent of the entire federal budget and more than half of the discretionary funding, the funds nonetheless pour into its coffers (Center on Budget & Policy Priorities). I argue that this is an outcome of what Drew Magary terms “troop worship,” an unabating trust in the US military always to do what is right by if not best for American citizens even in this period of worldwide medical catastrophe. How is it, one might ask, that this trust has been built? This essay contends that what I call the American war story, preceding but spotlighted during the pandemic of 2020, has persuaded the American public that the military is the most trustworthy of American institutions (Gallup) and should be called upon to resolve all orders of difficulties. Consequently, DoD can remain at once largely financially and ideologically unaccountable to American taxpayers. However, despite the story’s dominance in American culture and its habitual invocation during national calamity, the pandemic era’s spotlight reveals the story’s inadequacy in such a crisis.

While war often is regarded as the United States’ founding event, the American war story intentionally has been made central since the end of the Vietnam War and the development of the All-Volunteer Force (Bailey), a centrality that has fostered the public’s unwavering trust in militarism writ large to deal with all disasters. The defense industry—including the US military—is a principal player in the story, one that appeals to emotion, not reason, and paradoxically in a democracy and in an institution that purports to value above all collective unit cohesion, to individualism, not collectivism. The story’s plotline is that violent, active, armed conflict is the foremost method to resolving differences, that practitioners of such active violence love the United States best, and that the United States must maintain military supremacy in the world, heedless of the cost to other American institutions like education and healthcare and diplomacy. The story concludes that all national crises are best addressed by armed military forces and methods and judging from the frequent invocation of the war story, that conclusion is popularly accepted. But its deployment during the COVID-19 public health emergency makes clear that universally deploying this story is inadequate if not hazardous to national well-being.

This essay tracks and textually analyzes the deployment of the American war story in the 2020 pandemic era, from March through December, in written, on-line sources. The tracking began with my noticing in the pandemic discourse how “hunkering” repeatedly was used in these sources to denote static passivity as Americans isolated themselves at home to stunt the virus’ spread. According to The Oxford English Dictionary, however, “hunkering” means “To squat, with the haunches, knees, and ankles acutely bent, so as to bring the hams near the heels, and throw the whole weight upon the fore part of the feet” (emphasis added). Clearly, this stance cannot be sustained for a long period of time; instead, OED’s definition implies a temporary halt and readiness to spring into action at any moment. “Hunker,” then, is a misnomer to describe pandemic isolation in the United States, a misnaming that indicates perhaps unconscious efforts to draw a sharp line between passive civilians and active military forces. However, my tracking subsequently discerned in the discourse the emergence of war language—words like “warrior” and “hero”—to characterize and motivate as active, not passive, civilian responses to the coronavirus. While I detected at least three dominant lines of discussion in this pandemic era war story discourse—the use of war language, the US military’s purpose, and the militarization of American law enforcement—for reasons of brevity, in this essay I focus primarily on the use of war language and how it normalizes various components of the war story.

The sources represent an array of written journalistic and scholarly works, and all map critically
the emergence and invocation of the war story in the pandemic era discourse. This array typifies how ordinary Americans are exposed to war stories, as normalized, nonsystematic, constant, and dispersed elements integrated into everyday life, exposure that means ordinary Americans do not always recognize the stories as about war or the US military. As I have argued previously about the war story, It underlies the integration of militarism into everyday American life: camouflage as fashion; Jeeps and Humvees on American roadways; the normalization of drones (large and small), surveillance, civilian access to military-grade weapons, and the social authority of the National Rifle Association; the prevalence of war themes in video games; the popular appeal of comic book heroes like Captain America and the Avengers, and the revision of Superman from Clark Kent the journalist to Clark Kent the Navy SEAL. . .; nostalgia for the World War Two era and the “Greatest Generation.” (Boyle 126-27)

Just as this exposure to militarism for ordinary Americans typically is happened upon, not sought out, over the course of the 2020 pandemic months this working-from-home author happened upon these sources through many online media: mainstream journalism, thinktank studies, scholarly journals, and government publications. Though the war story appears in publications across the political spectrum, much of the mainstream journalism is rated by two media bias agencies—All-Sides and Ad Fonte—as either neutral/center or left of center. Therefore, the multiple studies, journals, and publications can be seen as providing balance to the journalism’s perceived partisanship in the pandemic discourse. Moreover, the sources—approximately 150 over the course of 9.5 months—are not comprehensive or taxonomic in their scope but instead are suggestive of the war story’s deployment during a national crisis that does not obviously demand a military response. This tracking of sources during the pandemic of 2020, therefore, reveals the United States’ at-once utter reliance on the war story to fuel its response to crises and the story’s utter inadequacy in this particular crisis. Just as “hunkering” is popularly misunderstood, so, too, is militarism popularly misunderstood to be the answer to all United States social and ideological problems.

As indicated by this wide array of sources, the war story’s ubiquity is what normalizes the American use of physical and violent force even outside of the US military and sanctifies its users, thereby immunizing them from critique. Such normalization and sanctification mean nontroop Americans may criticize a war but may not say “I do not support the troops” and must say “thank you for your service.” The American war story certainly has been deployed to justify the US military’s warring all over the world since the early 70s. But “war” also has been used profligately since then to name domestic crises, both to extol federal programs against drugs, terrorism, crime, poverty, and illiteracy and also to malign alleged social movements against Christmas, traditional marriage, and triumphal American history. The “warrior ethos” has become foundational to training the US military, police forces, and Department of Homeland Security agencies, institutions that Risa Brooks calls the “coercive sector” (Gallagher, Klay, and Brooks) and Robert Kagan names the “power ministries.” “War” is a central theme in blockbuster videogames like “World of Warcraft” and “Call of Duty,” and “warriors” are held up as the most patriotic of all Americans. Most relevant to this essay, war language has been used to describe efforts to encounter COVID-19 in the United States, with Donald J. Trump describing himself as a “wartime president,” “essential” workers like meatpackers and medical personnel as “heroes,” and, when he wanted to resuscitate a cratering economy by emboldening workers to return to work regardless of the virus’ contagion, Trump called them “warriors.” In highlighting some of the means by which the war story has been deployed in the pandemic era, this essay spotlights the story’s insufficiency at addressing American crisis.

Notably, it is because of its insufficiency that the story appears in American culture repetitively, ubiquitously, and in various forms. Several theorists can facilitate understanding repetition as the response to insufficiency. Louis Althusser’s
conception of ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” lays the foundation for this understanding (Robert Dale Parker, Critical Theory 450). These imagined ideas, asserts Althusser, are instated repetitively by ritualistic practices within an “ideological apparatus” such as a religious happening (a funeral), a sporting match (basketball game), or a day in school (class durations) (453). The practices—for example, a congregation’s learned rote responses, players avoiding “fouling” one another, students knowing to change subjects when the bell rings—are not inherently true, but their habitual repetition makes them seem so. Theorists Michel Foucault and R.W. Connell both focus on how this repetition in a variety of media leads to the construction of dominance. Rather than censorship or repression, for instance, Foucault’s “polymorphous incitement to discourse” echoes Althusser’s ritualistic practice of imagined relationships, which leads to dominance and what Foucault terms the discipline of particular narratives (Foucault 34). Talk about something enough times and in enough different media and it assumes the gloss of normalcy; talk about it exclusively and it becomes dominant and thereby disciplinary or what Foucault says is conceived as “truth.” Such truth, of course, is not absolute and universal, but merely a construction of social power. Furthermore, the dominance of such truth does not mean fixedness; the talk can never abate but instead must be constant. An example of dominance dependent on repetition is R.W. Connell’s (with J. Messerschmidt) assertion that gender hegemony is a fluid, not stable or fixed, condition that because of its fluidity must be reasserted repeatedly. That is, the dominance of masculinity relies primarily on the repetitive assertion of its dominance; without such repetition, it is not dominant. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity varies from culture to culture, and so each culture must also repeat its often changeable version. Finally, Karen Kopelson provides another example of dominance relying on repetition in her analysis of how Alcoholics Anonymous slogans echo and reinforce American truisms, asserting that “the more extensive the entry of a discourse into cultural ‘consciousness,’ the more unconscious our rehearsal of it is likely to be” (592). Such repetitive “habituation by ideology” (621) strengthens the truisms and the slogans, bolstering their dominance and, as Kopelson puts it, making them more “impervious to rhetorical intervention” (627). Thus, Althusser, Foucault, Connell, and Kopelson point to the provisionally insecure quality of dominance and its subsequent need to be unendingly reiterated. Over the course of this March-December pandemic period, the war story was repeated in the on-line sources in at least three ways. First, familiar war language like “wartime,” “hero,” and “warrior” was employed to motivate the citizenry to combat the virus by ignoring its potentially fatal effects. Second, the US military’s purpose was debated in light of its share of the federal budget, its role in developing and distributing a COVID-19 vaccine, its role in domestic civil unrest, and the prospect of a non-peaceful transfer of power following the November presidential election. Finally, as the virus raged through less-advantaged communities, creating high levels of stress and anxiety, the manifest militarization of most American law enforcement agencies was made apparent in cases of civil rights protests, like the response to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Though together these repetitions uncover the profligate and inadequate invocation and deployment of the American war story, this essay will examine in detail only the first way, familiar war language.

Two reports illustrate how war language at opposite ends of the rhetorical spectrum has been normalized in American culture and consequently used to motivate the citizenry in the pandemic era. First, Bill Chappell’s April 13 report about several states collaboratively using science, not politics, to determine when their economies will reopen features the image of a California billboard exhorting Americans to become heroes by honoring others’ wellbeing: “Being a hero has never been easier. Stay home to save lives.” Second, Paula Thornhill’s June 17 report registers then-Secretary of Defense Esper’s using “battle space” to characterize the relationship between all US government entities and civilian protesters: “I
think the sooner that you [governors] mass and dominate the battle space, the quicker this [civil unrest] dissipates and we can get back to the right normal.” On one end of the rhetorical spectrum, “hero” is meant to encourage generosity toward other valued Americans so the virus’ spread can be minimized, but “hero” also is cast as a desirable personal status. One should, apparently, act primarily out of self-interest and expect a reward for this action. It is not enough to encourage generosity toward others alone; there must be a personal prize. On the other end, “battle space” insinuates that US government encounters always are with enemies who need to be controlled by way of violent force, and that this control is proper, even against other Americans. Both conceptions are evident in the pandemic era discourse, and they demonstrate the contradictions of invoking war and its language in moments of American crisis.5

“Hero” implies a respect for other Americans and a willingness to sacrifice for them, but also confers an honorific on the sacrificer; “battle space” demonizes other Americans and legitimizes violent force by the US government against them. While they appear to be opposites, both notions valorize the American war story’s plotline, indicating more the war-tinged, active “readiness” part of “hunker” than the peace-tinged, passive “halt” element. What follows are closer examinations of “hero” and “warrior” as they appear in the pandemic era discourse.

“HERO”

Conceiving the homeland as a battle space is obviously disconcerting, even to Esper, but designating someone as courageous, a willing sacrifice, or “hero,” is also troublesome. This expectation has been applied in the pandemic era discourse to so-called “essential workers,” like those who work in food production—restaurants, grocery stores (Melin and Steverman), meatpacking plants (Schlosser)—and education, much to those workers’ dismay. “When will the efforts and labor of other people be recognized? If not now, when?” wonders Sara Selevitch, a restaurant worker. “When did courage become equivalent [at Notre Dame and Purdue Universities] to a willingness to allow others under your supervision to be ground up in the gears of commerce?” fumes educator John Warner. Matt Reed, who calls war an “atroc-ity,” further refutes the notion that teaching in the classroom is heroic: “Applying war logic, or war metaphors, gets it wrong. You don’t fight contagion by jumping into a crowd.”

Healthcare workers especially have been designated in the pandemic discourse as “hero,” and some of them contend this worshipful language perilously confuses them with (armed) troops. “While images of health care workers running into death may seem ‘beautiful’ to some,” remark Arghavan Salles and Jessica Gold, “frequently hailing health care workers as heroes and praising our sacrifice suggests that our lost colleagues were expected to be human collateral damage in the fight” (emphasis added). They protest this characterization, saying “none of us chose to be in this position.” Talia Lavin extends this argument: “The rhetoric of heroism implies that those forced needlessly to labor unprotected amidst threat to their lives must be grateful for a chance at martyrdom.” Thus, when Americans are designated as “heroes,” an appellation they may not apply to themselves, they are being expected—nay, mandated—to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of others. “[B]y cheering martial metaphor without providing protection and payment,” Lavin clarifies, “we are asking for martyrdom, not heroism.” A physician who had been in combat and was deployed during the pandemic to a civilian hospital as a Reserve member of the Marine Corps implies this deficient protection and subsequent demand for martyrdom: “The staff is dedicated and hardworking and they do their best, but the situation is overwhelming. Long shifts, nonstop admissions, patients intubated ... inadequate resources. It is a nightmare” (Sargeant). Musaub Khan, elaborates on how this language and its insinuated expectation obscures the “structural failures” of the American public health system, disclosing how “hero” is employed in American culture as a conscience-salve. “Rather than
interrogate on a political and institutional level why our working conditions remain hazardous, our society is glorifying the struggle through hero narratives.”

“WARRIOR”

“Warrior” also has been used in the pandemic era discourse to imply willing, unarmed sacrifice and subsequent martyrdom, with the President of the United States conspicuously invoking this language. Even though offhandedly referring to himself as a “wartime president” in a March 18 news conference (Elving), and Senator Mitch McConnell referring a week later to the CARES Act as “a wartime level of investment in our nation” (Cheney), “warrior” was not broadly extended to citizens until early May, when President Trump wanted to reopen what had become a closed economy. Three May 6 reports record Trump’s calculated invocation, mirroring the expectation of sacrifice and martyrdom implied with “hero.” “In recent days,” reports Chris Megarian, “he’s begun describing citizens as ‘warriors’ in the battle against the pandemic and suggested some of these fighters might have to die if that will help boost the economy.” “We have to be warriors,” Megarian reports Trump saying “from his seat behind the Resolute desk in the Oval office. ‘We can’t keep our country closed down for years.’” Meanwhile, J. Brady McCullough argues, such language is insensitive to the then-rapidly rising number of coronavirus deaths and infers that just as healthcare workers should willingly embrace their martyrdom, other Americans should be willing to die for the economy.8 Texas’ Lieutenant Governor said older Americans should welcome this opportunity for economic martyrdom. “No one reached out to me and said, ‘as a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that’s the exchange, I’m all in,” he volunteered (Rodriguez). Nonetheless, Aaron Rupar reports, despite naming himself a “wartime president” and other Americans as “warriors,” Trump’s administration has mounted “no serious, coordinated plan to tackle the crisis,” as though American citizens inherently are warriors and so do not need to plan, be trained, or have ammunition.

IMPLICATIONS OF USING WAR LANGUAGE

In addition to “war” indicating there is a foe, a coordinated plan to encounter the foe, and an expectation of sacrifice (including death) from the populace in wartime, using war language like “hero” and “warrior” also implicates extraordinarily high levels of spending and material production, potential suspension of some democratic liberties, mobilizing and arming military forces, and solidarity-building among the citizenry. During the 2020 pandemic year, the Trump administration was willing to blame China for the microbial invasion, Trump was willing to label himself a wartime president and to expect the populace to sacrifice, and McConnell was willing to name the emergency monies a “wartime level.” But the administration stopped well short of other crucial elements of “war” in responding to the virus, thus indicating the invocation’s hollowness.

For instance, though the Defense Production Act has been invoked on average 300,000 times a year by the Trump administration to expedite DoD requests, “wartime” Trump resisted invoking the Act for the production of direly needed medical necessities during the pandemic, disparaging the law as “disruptive to business” (Jacobs). Moreover, as of December 2020, the federal government still had not developed a nationwide strategy for dealing with the virus, leaving 50 states and their individual health experts to stitch together “a patchwork of state-by-state, competing and at times contradictory decisions” (McGinley and Wan). In the pandemic months’ discourse, critics widely disparage the federal administration’s few attempts as bogus and feckless employments of wartime powers. Mark
Hannah claims that “war” as imagined by the Trump administration creates a new reality, one that enables “belligerent nationalism,” “stopgap economic intervention,” and new powers afforded to the state, concluding that, given the administration’s history, “there are bound to be consolidations, if not abuses, of newfound wartime power along the way.” Julian Reid also cautions that “war”—even against a virus—means there are no boundaries to state power and so the public will not resist measures like the Trump administration designating gun stores as “essential” businesses that must remain open and in one of its rare invocations of the DPA, forcing meatpacking plants to stay in operation (Collins and Yaffe-Bellany). Like Hannah and Reid, Alex Ward reports that there is more rhetorical than physical heft to Trump’s claiming war: there is no coordinated plan, Trump repeatedly undercuts the health experts leading what little effort they are permitted to enact, the CINC refuses to effectively invoke the DPA, leading to competition among states for medical equipment, and he deliberately has divided the American populace rather than uniting it by downplaying and ridiculing the virus’ threat to life and limb. Senator and disabled veteran Tammy Duckworth indicts the President for his self-nomination to being a “wartime president” but not behaving as one: “Wartime presidents don’t look over the trenches and deny the war has begun. They don’t spend months refusing to acknowledge the body count because it might spook Wall Street or hurt their poll numbers. And they certainly don’t put profits [for medical-equipment-producing corporations] over people, slow-walking policy that could be the difference between life and death for so many because they want to curry favor with rich donors.” Lastly, when the prolonged timetable for a war did not align with the political timetable of the November 2020 reelection campaign, remarks Stephen Collinson, the Trump administration in May calculatedly declared “victory over a pandemic that appears likely to rage for many more months.”

The upshot of the pandemic era discourse’s evaluation of this war language usage is to follow through fully with what the language infers and not to use it recklessly.

### SOME HAZARDS OF USING WAR LANGUAGE

Furthermore, many critics point out in the discourse the inaptness and outright hazards of using war language to brand responses to the coronavirus pandemic. Cynthia Enloe, for instance, argues that using militarized terms “privileges masculinities,” can seek only a human adversary, and sacrifices democratic processes, so a substitute syntax is needed for national crises. “Militarized language,” she explains, “is nurtured in a militarized seedbed of images, narratives and symbols. But repeatedly drawing on militarized terms to describe our current anxieties and hopes, in turn,” she foresees, “fertilizes that seedbed.” Fundamentally, then, such a repetitive cycle of iteration and fertilization and reiteration leaves nothing but the war story to confront crises. Tom McTague asserts that a pandemic is not a war but a “medical challenge,” one “that demands scientific excellence, swiftness of action, smart government, and public cooperation.” Without this activation of “eye-opening universality,” warns McTague, great socio-economic and healthcare inequities among Americans will prevail. Catherine Lutz and Neta Crawford, both of the “Costs of War” project at Brown University, echo Enloe and McTague’s apprehensions, saying that employing “war” to describe responding to a public health crisis is the root of the national calamity. “[E]quating a ‘determined, coordinated national response’ with war mobilization, rather than with community care,” they aver, “is precisely the problem. In fact, part of the reason we’re in this predicament,” they reveal, “is that we hollowed out America’s public health system in favor of military spending.” Crawford and Lutz hold responsible the many trillions of dollars dedicated to the war story’s imperative for military supremacy against the relative pittance of monies...
allotted to the FDA, CDC, and NIH. “We have
stockpiled thousands of nuclear weapons,” they
claim bitterly, “but not enough ventilators.”¹¹
Finally, Al Mauroni denounces the conflation of
public health and national security in “Operation
Warp Speed,” federal efforts to develop and dis-
tribute a coronavirus vaccine that depend heavily
on the DoD. Not only will this divert resources
away from the DoD’s development of already
desperately needed biological defense equipment,
Mauroni argues, but also the Department of
Defense has repeatedly demonstrated that it does
not have the expertise nor the historical record to
fulfill the country’s needs in this crisis. Pointing
to the unabated trust invested in the US military,
a disbelieving Mauroni asks, “[W]hy would the
American public trust the Department of Defense
to effectively execute a multibillion-dollar defense
acquisition program to deliver hundreds of mil-
lions of vaccine doses within a six-month period
given this [poor] track record?”
An answer to Mauroni’s question is that
“war”—and the American war story—is used in
the United States as an emotionally-driven short-
cut to collective solidarity. Invoke “war,” the sup-
position may go, and the united populace
unquestioningly will rally around the flag. Invoke
“war,” and material voluntarily will be produced
by patriotic corporations. Invoke “war,” and only
the most necessary restrictions on democratic lib-
erties will be ordered and accepted. Invoke “war,”
and citizens spontaneously and naturally will
together become warriors. Still, in a national crisis
that should rely on coast-to-coast solidarity, the
pandemic era discourse uncovers a fundamental
contradiction in American culture, that between
individualism and collectivism, from the conflict
between individual states’ rights and responsibili-
ties and federal rights and responsibilities, to the
conflict between an individual person’s ostensibly
inviolable right to bodily and psychic self-deter-
mination and the collective’s right to democratic
processes and protections. As Keith Humphrey
points out, “public health prioritizes an entire
population’s well-being,” a priority that relies on
“widespread consent” to government manage-
ment. A uniquely American problem, then, is the
“prevalent [individualistic] distrust in [collectivis-
tic] government’s role in public health that would
curtail the success of any test, trace, and isolate
program” needed to control the virus. Sean Illing
attributes this mistrust to the prioritizing of indi-
vidual liberties, or libertarianism, which “gives us
a language of [individual] rights but it can’t give
us a language of [collective] obligation.” “War,”
then, may appear to create the conditions suitable
for a collective national effort, but in truth has
great obstacles to overcome, not least of which is
democracy itself.
For example, former President Barack Oba-
ma’s May 2020 graduation speeches exhorted the
graduates to be good citizens of a democracy:
“Our society and democracy only works [sic]
when we think not just about ourselves, but about
each other” (Burch and Eligon).¹² According to
this thinking, democracy itself, pandemic or no,
war or no, relies on a collective sensibility. In an
echo of the California “hero” billboard, Soraya
Roberts commends those “who distance them-
selves, not for themselves alone, but for everyone
else.” Individual actions matter, though, she
urges, because “cumulatively they are what makes
the world what it is.” Graham Mooney agrees,
suggesting that those who insist on individual lib-
erties above all should take heed of the lessons
learned from nineteenth century American epi-
demics: “freedom” can also mean freedom from
disease, and individual liberties should not be the
cause of harm to others. “[C]urtailing personal
liberties is sometimes necessary to secure freedom
for everyone,” Mooney insists, “… and Ameri-
cans’ freedoms surely include the opportunity to
minimize the collective risk of random viral
death.”
Others in the discourse warn more ominously
that the pandemic unveils pre-existing weaknesses
in the democracy on which the United States was
founded. Leila Lalami writes that because federal
leaders have abdicated from their “wartime”
responsibility to devise a coordinated strategy for
the collective nation, everyone has been obliged
to act individually. “Unless government and citi-
zens honor their commitments in the social con-
tract,” Lalami continues, “the mortar that holds

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the blocks of the nation together will dissolve for good.” Russell Brand, presaging McTague’s warning above, cautions that this sensibility cannot prevail in light of unabashed wealth inequality, heightened during the pandemic “when it becomes clear that (as usual) some are without bread whilst others are adrift on pristine yachts.” Henry A. Giroux indicts neoliberal capitalism for its toxic impact on democracy writ large but evident especially during the pandemic era. It is “feeding the current crisis in the United States with its shortage of hospitals, medical supplies, beds, and robust social welfare provisions, and increasingly presents itself as a shocking indifference to human life.” Viet Thanh Nguyen urges Americans to awaken in these times to our “social virus,” American exceptionalism, a value that disguises how “our government prioritizes the protection of the least vulnerable.” Spike Lee and Judith Butler separately hold individualism responsible for how the virus has been dealt with in the United States, with Lee condemning via his film, *Da 5 Bloods*, “the enduring depravations of war and the false promises of American individualism” (Ugwu) and Butler avowing that “life exceeds the person in forms of interdependency” (Wade). All of these views suggest that collective solidarity is central to a thriving democracy, and that calling on individuals by invoking “war” or war language cannot uniformly deliver that solidarity.

**EFFECTS ON THE US WAR INDUSTRY OF USING WAR LANGUAGE**

These challenges to what constitute “war” in a democracy, when the commander-in-chief reneges on the duties incumbent to declaring, even informally, the country at war, calls into question the power of the American war story in the pandemic era specifically but also generally. Not only, as Al Mauroni outlines, has the utterly trusted DoD been made central to distributing a coronavirus vaccine in Operation Warp Speed, the US military also has been expected, as ever, to resolve other national issues in this high-anxiety-and-grief time period. The war-story-generated expectation that the military should provide all solutions to all problems can explain why the DoD continues to be awarded unaccounted-for many-billion-dollar budgets cited at this essay’s opening.

The expectation can also explain why the American war story, though dominant through repetition of war language during the pandemic era, ironically has been exhausted of signification through this habitual overabundance of usages and meanings, or Foucault’s “polymorphous incitement to discourse” (34). Echoing Cynthia Enloe’s concern about the sterilizing overuse of militarized terms and Karen Kopelson’s “habituation by ideology,” Paul M. Renfro identifies the “troopification of everything,” or American over-reliance on war and the US military to address all national issues. It “takes other policy approaches off the table,” Renfro cautions, thereby hindering the federal government’s “ability to respond to myriad other problems from public-health emergencies to chronic issues such as hunger,” let alone win the wars of the last many decades.14 During the pandemic, the effects of Enloe’s over-use, Kopelson’s habituation, and Renfro’s troopification have been spotlighted as hindrances to effective national collective action and reveal Foucault’s notion of a discourse made only provisionally dominant through powerful repetition. “Provisional” is key, here. Troopification is how the war story’s repetition ostensibly undergirds the defense industry’s dominance. But that very repetition, a kind of protesting too much, at the same time calls into question the purpose and condition of the military. What follows are seven ways I have identified this calling into question in the March-December 2020 pandemic era discourse, a questioning that disputes the American war story’s centrality and thus the legitimacy of the war industry to solve all American problems.
“TROOPIFICATION” DURING THE PANDEMIC

First, the military has been fetishized in American culture, not only throughout the year but also especially in its role in the American dioramas staged every Memorial and Veterans’ Day. Veteran Peter Lucier comments in his 2020 Veterans’ Day op-ed, “Veterans often serve as a kind of stand-in for patriotic values that many Americans feel disconnected from—service, selfless sacrifice, unity, action toward a common goal.... Fighter jet flyovers and half-time shows featuring those in uniform serve as much to sanitize the experience of [atrocious] war as they do to connect veterans with the civilian population they served.” Lucier concludes that “As a result, veterans have taken on a kind of talismanic status,” serving as hero props in the war story’s triumphal tale of American history. Other critics suggest the “military elite”—higher-ranking cadet officers and commissioned officers—enjoy this exceptionalist status as “secular saint” (Bryant, Swaney, and Urben).

Second, this fetishization camouflages the military (and the defense contractor industry) as a (big) business since the 1973 advent of the All-Volunteer Force (Bailey). Consequently, the military is comprised, at least among its higher-ranking classes of commissioned, warranted, and noncommissioned officers, more by managers than warriors. This framing as a business as opposed to a corps of voluntary martyrs dilutes the fetishized hero element of the war story, a condition Kyle Gaffney applauds in May 2020. “Our times call for us to stop relying upon our history’s greatest hits, the same old battle-weary warriors who are only good anymore for a quick fix of patriotic nostalgia.” Instead, he asserts, “The most underrated part of leadership is good management,” a quality best performed in World War Two, when “the generals who won [the war] weren’t ‘warriors’ but superior managers.”

Third, a November 2020 report claims not only are the higher-ranking classes more managers than warriors, minus the hero element of the war story, the enlisted troops are employees who join the military as much out of economic need as patriotism (Lupton and Margulies). Americans pretend the troops are the heroic citizen-soldiers of the past, as though imagining them heroically volunteering to enlist out of patriotic fervor warrants sending them to fight the United States’ wars. Recruiting ads, videogames, and films sponsored by the US military encourage spectators to engage in such fantasy. Ronald Krebs and Robert Ralston say instead that despite the public’s desired image of the “troop,” “the United States has recruited its armed forces on the open labor market” and so the military’s employees work primarily for financial compensation and benefits (including health care), not the figurative laurel wreaths of public veneration. Krebs and Ralston’s May 2020 article notes that holding up American servicepeople as patriotic exemplars is detrimental to military and civilians alike. Unlike the higher-ranking people cited above, lower-ranking, enlisted servicepeople find it “exhausting to be a saint all the time.” Meanwhile, civilian Americans, under the sway of “the penumbra cast by militarist myths,” or the war story, find it easier “to send the patriotic, gung-ho hero into harm’s way than to dispatch into battle either the careerist professional doing her job or the reluctant soldier striving to escape multigenerational poverty.”

Fourth, though trillions upon trillions of tax dollars are apportioned to the Department of Defense to guarantee national security through military supremacy, the dollars do not and cannot. The 2020 pandemic-era CINC, Donald Trump, had repeatedly said during his administration that no one had poured more money into the military than he had, insinuating that money equals security. In their June 2020 op-ed, however, Neta Crawford and Catherine Lutz condemn this arithmetic, saying that for the “past two decades, the US government has [faultily] equated Americans’ national security with military supremacy,” thereby fueling DoD’s voracious consumption of most of the discretionary funds intended to cover other elements of national security, including “everything the government
does other than programs like Medicare and Social Security.” Furthermore, the annual Heritage Foundation report issued in November 2020 concludes that these vast funds have produced a US military “only marginally able to meet the demands of defending America’s vital national interests” (2021 Index). Thus, the financial neglect of other American institutions in favor of the Department of Defense has not produced the expected results, a condition excruciatingly evident in the pandemic era. This suggests there will never be too much money in the military industry’s coffers.

Fifth, a significant portion—more than half in 2019—of those tax dollars are spent by DoD in what Heidi Peltier terms in her June 2020 paper the “Camo Economy” populated by civilian American defense contractors, leading to an exponentially increased cost of military operations in the last two decades. This “commercialization” of the military is a deliberate attempt to conceal “the true financial and human costs of America’s post-9/11 wars,” Peltier observes, as the private, commercial contractors “profit from public funds.” Furthermore, using taxpayer monies, the contractors pay much higher wages to their employees than does the US military, thereby encouraging mercenary soldiering and “making it more difficult...for the military itself to compete.” This situation, Peltier concludes, produces craven and secretive “war profiteering,” not the heroics of the war story imagined and expected by the US public.

Sixth, an important element of the trust in the US military and the war story’s dominance is the presumption that, because the military employees pledge allegiance to the Constitution and not to a Commander-in-Chief, they are purely apolitical. The greatest fear about the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (General Mark Milley) appearing with Trump in Lafayette Square on June 1, 2020, was that it would tarnish the military’s apolitical reputation, especially in view of the potential for Trump’s having to be pried from the White House should he lose re-election (Steinhauer and Cooper). In their June 2020 thinktank study, Jim Golby and Marak Karlin argue that the issue is not whether the institution is political—it is, they assert, as the military “is an instrument of policy”—but whether it is partisan. “We don’t want a military that is ‘apolitical’,” they contend; “we instead want a military that avoids partisanship, institutional endorsements, and electoral influence,” and resists elected leaders who try to “wield the military or use it to garner greater domestic support by wrapping themselves in the veil of military prestige.” Meanwhile, in his June 2020 article, Gregory Foster lambastes the “political transgressors” who deliberately politicize the military but then expect the military leadership to remain in a “‘silent quid pro quo ‘deal’” when it comes to publicly criticizing their civilian “masters.” In this context, to be “apolitical” means to be mutely deferential. Foster concludes that the “alarming experience of the last four years” should precipitate a reconsideration of the civilian-military political relationship.

Finally, the presumed apoliticality of the warrior caste in the war story confers on it a unique moral integrity, given how “political” has become a near-profanity in American culture. As Gregory Foster notes, military professionals consider themselves “models of rectitude.” But the consideration of civilians by military servicepeople is not reciprocal, as Risa Brooks points out in her August 2020 conversation with Matt Gallagher and Phil Klay. “While Americans revere the military, that respect is not mutual...a sizeable percentage of military personnel disparage what they describe as their indolent and selfish civilian peers” opines Brooks, and Gallagher adds that “we’re told from day one of basic training we’re better than dirty, lazy, soft civilians” (Gallagher, Klay, and Brooks). Nonetheless, despite this sense of superiority, the military is rife with the same social ills afflicting other parts of American society—for example, sexual assault, suicide, burglary, murder—and is known to host and produce paramilitary, white nationalist groups (Spindel, Motta, and Ralston). These seven instances of troopification spotlighted in a period of national calamity and within the pandemic era discourse challenge the received American war story. Instead, though one might
still conclude the US military is a vital American institution, contrary to the war story it should not be regarded as the sole or primary solution to all national difficulties. Active-duty officer Stewart Parker cautions about the misuse of the military during the pandemic, a period “proving to be a dictator’s dream come true as a way to nationalize extreme population surveillance and control.” “The [virus] outbreak,” Parker argues, however, “is teaching the country difficult but valuable lessons, foremost that the military is necessary but insufficient to guarantee America’s safety.”

The American war story levies a high price on the United States, a tariff most apparent in a moment of national crisis such as the 2020 pandemic months. The habituated rhetorical use of war language such as “war,” “hero,” and “warror,” and the troopification effects on popular understandings of the US military call attention to the war story’s recklessness and injury. But the pandemic era discourse also calculates yet more injurious costs to the nation of a story that argues armed force is the best way to confront challenges in and to the nation. These costs include: the threat of active-duty forces being deployed against domestic civil unrest; the threat of active-duty forces intervening should Donald Trump not be reelected; the wide distribution of military equipment to law enforcement agencies across the country; the militarization of law enforcement’s language and mindsets; the paramilitary training of law enforcement agencies; and other ways by which the US citizenry is taxed by a militarized police force.

All these many costs—to the US military, to American culture, and to US residents—are tariffs levied by the American war story. The story’s most valuable feature might be its ability to conjure social solidarity in a time of national crisis. But its use during the 2020 pandemic months, as commented on in mainstream media by scholars, journalists, and editors, signals the extraordinarily high price of its inefficacy at motivating American camaraderie. The story’s invocation during this national crisis instead exposes the nation’s prioritizing military supremacy to the detriment of other crucial social institutions like healthcare and education, the increasingly political and corporate nature of the defense industry since the end of the Vietnam War, and the toxic suffusion of the story’s primary plotline—that physical force is the best way to solve problems—in American culture.

Notes

1. Andrew Jacobs also reports in September 2020 that most of the CARES money dedicated to DoD was allocated to defense contractors who spent it on “semiconductors, shipbuilding, and space surveillance.”

2. This case can be compared to the 9/11/01 national crisis when the US populace supported a physical military response to the physical attacks by terrorists. A violent physical attack demanded a violent physical retaliation. In a public health calamity, where microbes are at fault, it is much more difficult to identify an assailant against whom to target violence. This kind of response also does little to nothing to mitigate the health harm being done to the nation.

3. President-Elect Biden also used war language to describe countering COVID-19. See Karni.

4. This normalization of words is not unique to this national crisis. Terry Eagleton’s Postscript to 2004’s After Theory illustrates the vacuousness of commonly used post-9/11 words, “terms like ‘evil,’ ‘freedom-loving,’ ‘bad men,’ ‘patriot’… They are well-thumbed tokens which serve in place of thought, automated reactions which make do for the labour of analysis” (223).

5. Eric Levenson’s April 2 report discusses these drawbacks: on the one hand, “war” can be employed to convey urgency and the need to mobilize as a nation, but on the other, it can lead to short-term solutions when what is most needed in this worldwide crisis is diplomacy.

6. An ad campaign launched in November 2020 by major hospital groups calls out this expectation for martyrdom. The New York Times names the campaign a “call to arms,” and the ad caption demands reciprocation: “We put our lives on the line daily to keep you safe. So, do something for us. Wear. A. Mask.” See Abelson.

7. See also Wheeler, Jackson, and Mazza critiques of Trump naming himself a “wartime president” and a “lone warrior.”

8. The comparison of COVID-19 American dead to the number of American war dead reinforces the impulse to use the war story. See Brockway.

9. See also Karni, Haberman, and Epstein.

10. Moreover, war mobilization is a highly complex undertaking. See Biddle and Biddle, who say that mobilization requires considerable planning, but that the Trump administration demonstrates an “inattention to, and disrespect for, planning and the civil service experts who do it.”

11. See also Crawford and Lutz.

12. In her June 2020 commencement address, Ivanka Trump hailed the students as “wartime graduates” (Allen).

13. For more on the DoD’s role in Operation Warp Speed, see “Explaining Operation Warp Speed.” Michael Osterholm, a member of President-Elect Joe Biden’s Coronavirus Advisory Board, expressed concerns for the DoD’s distribution plans: “We at the
public health world out here are concerned about the planning the military is bringing forward touted by many as the answer, when in fact in many cases we’re concerned it’s part of the problem.” See Budryk, see also Burns, who aver that Trump has repeatedly “mistranslated” the role of the Department of Defense in Operation Warp Speed, that the military will not be responsible for delivering or disbursing the vaccine.

14. See Magary for “troopification.” See also Stewart Parker, who says “The U.S. military has a monopoly on legitimate violence against foreign enemies; it must be ready to do what only the military can do. Now is the time to put the military back in its place.”

15. See also Mittelstadt.

16. According to the “Costs of War” project at Brown University’s Watson Institute, more private contractors have been killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than have U.S. military members. See “Costs of War.”

17. See also Belew, and “Department of Defense Board.”

18. See Brooks and Grewal; Bruni; Emmons; Hauser; Kagan; Lupton and Margulis; The New York Times; Papenfuss; Pickrell; Schogol “89”; Stevenson.

19. See Britzky; Schogol “We need.”

20. See Edmondson; Gallagher, Klay, and Brooks; Joyner; Penzenstadler and Chen; RAND.

21. See Baumann; Delahanty, et al; Joyner; Klein; Regan.

22. See Asken, et al; Brooks, Rosa; Rizer and Mooney; Shank.

23. See Burns and Martin; Jones; Katzenstein; Keller; Noboa y Rivera; Segura.

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