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*Nothing is Fair in Love and War: Analyzing The Emergence and Continuation of War Rhetoric in
American Cultural Scripts*

During any national crisis in America, we rally the troops. The troops, however, are not only the military men and veterans which we revere, but rather the mailman and the soccer mom who are just as ready to participate in the battle. In times of war, our politicians can justify sacrifice and clearly designate an enemy. It may seem impossible to turn a pandemic such as COVID-19 into a tangible enemy, but the rhetoric of our public health officials, late night show hosts, and our neighbors show that we very much so believe we are fighting, especially those who are on the “frontlines.” The notorious “rally around the flag” effect is most *effective* when we are at war, whether real or perceived, and our politicians know that. From the Cold War to the War on Terror, America’s greatness has always been contingent on our military prowess. Even worse, American identity has been formed by the violence of war and the subsequent sentimentalism we as a nation can share when remembering our greatest victories.

Why did participation in or love of war become an indicator of Americanness? Why did war rhetoric become so commonplace in what Americans perceive to be “good” or “effective” politics? And what are the implications of engaging in politics like it is war, where one side must win and another lose, where there must always be collateral damage? My aim with this research, which will be a collection of various literature reviews, media, and speech analysis, is to show

that seemingly separate phenomena within our political landscape can all be attributed to a cultural script written by the impressions of war on this nation.

In the very beginning of drawing the map of this nation, war was encouraged as a necessary act to settlers who did not yet even identify as American. How did acts of extreme violence against indigenous peoples come so easily to Christian settlers who had themselves escaped persecution? Settler-ranger groups that systematically hunted Indians through irregular warfare, separate from any military institution, were commonplace throughout all emerging colonies. War against Indians became glorified and a right of passage, as author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz articulates in her novel “An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States” :

“Scalp hunting became a lucrative commercial practice. The settler authorities had hit upon a way to encourage settlers to take off on their own or with a few others to gather scalps, at random, for the reward money. In the process they established the large-scale privatization of war within American frontier communities... Bounties for Indigenous scalps were honored even in absence of war” (Ortiz 65).

In enacting genocide, immigrants from all different backgrounds found a commonality, a shared goal that established their nation from sea to shining sea while defining Americans and a distinct “other.” Scalping is claiming trophies of war and it was celebrated by their peers, rewarded by their authority figures, and justified in the name of their God. This war created a lasting legacy within the minds of Americans, in which war was a necessary means for “progress” and that any enemy we faced was naturally a barrier to such progress.

I argue that because this war was sanctioned by American politicians, this was the beginning of engaging in war so as to reap the benefit of being part of greater institutions and

social groups in which one could take pride. This form of “participation” made every settler feel vital to processes of development and thus personally vested in the earliest form of American nationhood. As Almond and Verba argue in “The Civic Culture Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations,” a “democratic form of participatory political system requires as well a political culture consistent with it” (3). Democracy is only effective when the people are willing to buy into its very essence and are able to believe that the “the ordinary man is politically relevant” (Almond and Verba 2). Settlers, many of whom had come from monarchies in which they were always made to feel inferior, could use war to feel equal and important.

Slave patrols similarly empowered white men of all backgrounds, from plantation owners to brick masons, to feel a sense of duty in policing those who “threatened” the law and order of this nation. It was, in fact, men of *military age* who were selected for these early police forces thus linking participants in military or war with those most suited to protect their communities (NPR American Police). Lawmakers purposely created these mandated patrols in order to stoke fear in white Americans, the fear of potential rebellion and subsequent retaliation by slaves. These systems, fueled by the work of ordinary citizens, provided white populations with a sense of superiority that was directly linked to their ability to inflict violence through weapons such as whips, dogs, and guns. Again, we see acts of war as crucial for defining communal identities and as a mode of bonding. Even more so, the police are the most everpresent manifestation of the law, meaning such acts are extensions of state power.

As is glorified in every history textbook, it was exactly an act of war that bore America. The war of Independence solidified for all Americans that defiance and defense of freedom is in the very fabric of “the flag that was still there,” that out of violence came hope and newfound

unity. I believe this was the beginning of relying on the phrase “we need to fight for our freedom.” This same sentiment would propel our country in the aftermath of the Civil War in which our nation needed a unity so strong it could mend a house divided. I would argue that this was the moment in our history that solidified war, the ultimate escalation and last resort in any conflict resolution, is necessary for handling complex, divisive issues such as slavery. The death of 620,000 Americans was the only way in which those in the South would finally concede, not due to discussions or diplomacy, but rather due to lack of resources and wounded pride (American Battlefield Trust). Yet, even though the outcome of this war left the South in economic devastation and the country as a whole aching, there are passionate Civil War reenactors who, to this day, take pride in reliving this national travesty. War simplified it all, it gave Americans a loser and winner which comes with prescribed roles. Except these roles also split American reality as the South inherited the fantasy of the confederacy and the North inherited delusions about their progressiveness.

This split reality was accepted starting after the Civil War and as contemporary Americans we are seeing the resurgence of this phenomena. While we as a nation have somewhat emerged from having to kill our fellow brethren to solve these issues, we have instead evolved into designating two camps of ideological thought as our two armies. Pro-life versus Pro-choice. Black Lives Matter vs Blue Lives Matter. Pro-Israel vs. Pro-Palestine. Each ideological debate is presented to Americans with sides, and realities, that are irreconcilable. Hyper-polarization has become the acceptable escalation just below war. The consequence of this is not only lack of bipartisanship, but a lack of motivation within average U.S citizens to

understand those whose values run counter to their own. As history has progressed, distinctions between sides not only widened but elevation of veterans over civilians began to take place also.

The GI Bill of Rights established that war or being a participant in war (a veteran) can provide the ultimate components of the American dream. GI benefits included “priority in jobs -- that is preferential hiring -- financial support during the job search; small loans for starting up businesses, and most important, low-interest home loans and educational benefits which included tuition and living expenses” (Brodkin 77). Effectively the GI Bill, and the Korean War, created all of the necessary conditions needed to produce the nuclear family and the white picket fence home that would come to be associated with the essence of America. Veterans pulled ahead of nonveterans in earning capacity due to educational opportunity as it caused “the greatest wave of college building in American history,” which set in motion the foundation for generationally accumulated wealth and assets (Brodkin 78). This elevation of veterans signified that war is the most American thing you can participate in, especially because it became the most effective way for working class individuals to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. In “The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’ and Other Writings,” it is argued that America, and the capitalist system it exemplifies, is founded on Protestant ethics that see hard work as a moral obligation. Even more so, however, Protestant philosophy is founded on “the calling,” which sees “work as the divinely appointed task” and one’s “destiny” paved by that which makes you profit (Weber 32). In the case of the GI bill, not only did war reward the hardest work, being on the front lines, but it carved clear paths for how one could fulfill his calling not only to a higher God but to his country.

Even more so, being a veteran provided some groups with their very first taste of an Americanness previously denied to them by institutions and withheld from them in white social circles. After the Korean War, when troops were integrated for the first time, the Civil Rights Movement was able to gain traction. World War II brought to the surface the hypocritical nature of fighting fascism overseas, while allowing for blatantly undemocratic distributions of power among groups in the United States. Again, we see wars as determining the development of American identity and who falls under that umbrella. If a person of color can lay their life on the line in order to defend America, it no longer becomes a politically justified or viable message that such peoples are undeserving of certain protections under the United States Constitution.

As Edward Banfield argues in “The Moral Basis of a Backward Society,” “successful government depends, among other things, upon the possibility of concerting the behavior of large numbers of people in matters of public concern” (7). The military is one of the greatest mechanisms through which American ritual and tradition has been created and continues to be influential in encouraging the participation of civilians. Banfield explains that some countries have struggled with not only political organization but economic development because of the presence of amoral familism. As he explains it, amoral familism is an inability to “act together for the common good, or indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family” (Banfield 10). The military is an outlet by which Americans can act for the needs of *all* American families and be justly rewarded for doing so, both with social and economic capital. The military provides a narrative that justifies the ritual of placing our hands over our hearts in our allegiance to the flag. The military has made the flag a symbol, a piece of America, worth *fighting* to protect.

Arguably, Americans fall in love most with “just wars.” “Just war” throughout our history often meant a civilizing mission under the leadership of Wilson with his moral diplomacy, fending off Nazism in World War II, or saving democracy with the Vietnam War and any other communism-fueled conflict. American self-perception is guided by this history, where we assume the role of savior, peace-maker, and moral standard for the rest of the world. In the language of object relations, “the central meaning of narcissistic libido is an erotic or libidinal attachment with oneself, even if an object is the vehicle for such involvement” (Eagle 59). Through film and television, Americans have found pleasure in the fantasy of us as heroes and subsequently respect politics which advance this erotic attachment we have.

Almost every year for the past 20 years there has been a film about war, or glorifying the years in which our country was at war, in the best picture category at the Oscars (IMDB). Americans have come to associate greatness with times in which we made blatant assertions of military prowess and find the actions of those during wartimes as inspirational legacies which we can continue to emulate in our peacetime politics. Films have even come to distort American histories so as to propagate the myth that Americans go to war for good, moral causes. Movies like *Green Beret* of 1968 “use sentimentality to disguise the fact that the Vietnam War was a narcissistic conflict for America. As the recent memoir of Robert S. McNamara reaffirms, U.S involvement had little to do with the welfare of the Vietnamese but a lot to do with the ideological struggles of the Cold War and American self-esteem” (Vera and Gordon 123). In this film, the American war hero walks off into the sunset with a Vietnamese orphan at its conclusion, yet never mentions that millions of war orphans would be produced by America’s efforts to “save” the Vietnamese. Vietnam War veterans have repeatedly been abandoned by

federal programs and garnered far less sympathy or praise from greater society when they returned. This war was controversial and exposed Americans not as noble saviors, but rather foolish narcissists, and I would argue this is why we disavowed these veterans. This war did not line up with the history that has formed American political culture and it caused cognitive dissonance among all those who saw going to battle as the most patriotic act there is. Much literature has been written on the comparison between the homecoming of WWII soldiers, who liberated not only Jews but so much of Europe, and that of Vietnam Veterans who claimed they were spat on during their homecomings and have since fallen highly victim to homelessness and addiction (Vlieg). The “collective emotion of the country was divided” and “this war was unconstitutional,” therefore we dubbed it as not American and wrote it off (Vlieg 9).

By desiring to see ourselves as heroes, and consuming such imagery in film, we are then more apt to seek these heroic qualities in the political leaders who are meant to represent us. To serve America as a politician, you often must possess personality traits like the movie soldiers who serve America by fighting battles or even sacrificing their lives. In 2012 military veterans made up 20 percent of the membership of Congress, which is “twice the proportion of military veterans in the general public” (McDermott and Panagopoulos). Political parties actively recruit military veterans due to the myth that they have more appeal, while candidates themselves over exaggerate war stories in order to gain personality points. The media contributes even further to the theory that “a candidate with a uniform, rank and military résumé should be redoubtable: a symbol of strength, patriotism and resolve, and at least somewhat inoculated from the debilitating personal attacks that have come to represent American politics” (McDermott and Panagopoulos). In a study conducted by Jeremy Tiegen, participants were asked whether they

would be more likely to support a presidential candidate if they had military experience. Tiegen found that “48 percent reported they would be more likely to support this candidate. This figure stands in contrast to 28 percent who would be more likely to support a business executive, 15 percent more supportive of a minister or religious leader, 35 percent for an elected official serving “for many years,” and 22 percent for someone who attended a prestigious university” (Tiegen 417). The implications of this finding is that Americans perceive the role of commander in chief as the President’s most vital job, with even economic knowledge (represented by the business executive) falling at half as much perceived importance. Possibly even more important to glean from these statistics is that the American people desire leaders who will advance our national defense, despite the U.S already spending more on defense than the next 10 countries combined (Peter G. Peterson Foundation). To be in control of our troops and our military reputation means to be in control of how American we really are not only in our eyes, but the rest of the world.

Contemporary wars are fought much differently, especially after the development of nuclear weapons, yet our politicians just as heavily rely on the conditions of traditional war to stoke national unity. To be in a constant state of war, means a constant power held by politicians to demand the American people sacrifice and that they follow leadership so as to be patriotic. There is the War on Terror and the War on Drugs waged by federal administrations while the media espouses race wars and cultural wars between traditional and secular control of American institutions. America relies on naming an enemy, whether that enemy takes on the form of a concept such as terror or an abstract, unbeatable force such as difference in culture.

War is a fundamental characteristic of our cultural scripts and leaders like President Donald Trump have utilized this script to rise to unprecedented levels of power/influence. The most alarming phenomenon, however, is how politicians exploit this culturally ingrained love of war by often using veterans as political ploys and operating with battle tactics in the most civilian of situations. Unwarlike situations like the campaign trail have devolved into battlegrounds by which opponents are expected to fight not physically, but with words, scandals, and sophisticated use of media platforms so as to prove something to the American people about their ability to govern our country.

The campaign trail is quintessential to American politics and with the emergence of not only increased access to media, but increased variance among media sources, the campaign trail has become a manifestation of this love for war we Americans share. President Trump dominated media coverage during the entirety of his campaign run against Hillary Clinton, despite whether the intentions of journalists were to shame or uplift his war-like political messages. Mass media in itself utilizes a simplification of politics in order to create digestible content for the American public. From “horse-race” coverage, that encourages the American public to feign for a “winner,” to use of talking heads, that instigate aggressive arguments between those on opposing sides, the media profits just as much off our cultural script. Media is an incredibly powerful agent of socialization, especially political media, which capitalizes off the viewership gained from portraying politics as a necessary battle. I would even argue that politics may be the new frontier for “just wars.” Nightly news and social media are often the platforms by which politicians begin to wage war against their opponents or disseminate rhetoric that wages war against ideologies.

President Trump, while campaigning, relied heavily upon the fear that is produced when citizens believe they are at war. His primary voting base was precisely American workers who felt they had been fighting a war with globalization and foreign countries, with immigrants who could dispossess them from their industries, and with elitist enterprises in American institutions. Trump carefully crafted images/characters so as to designate America's enemy which manifested as Mexicans who are "rapists and murderers" alongside Islamic terrorists who "threaten American values of freedom." He targeted the white working class, directly tapping into their fear and perceived vulnerability so as to have them engage in interpersonal war just as the settlers were encouraged to do so by colonial governments. This time, however, it would not be under the guise that these ordinary citizens are building America but rather that they would be helping to *reclaim* it, to make America great again. As I have previously discussed, war creates an incentive for political participation by those who have previously felt politically marginalized or unvalued within our democracy. President Trump was able to bring the previously non participatory, white working class to the voting booth "by cultivating differences; that is by reinforcing the boundaries drawn toward socially stigmatized groups" or essentially engaging a narrative that there are two sides (Lamont, et.al 32).

President Trump, during his campaigning, directly tapped into the "erotic fixation" Americans have with images that glorify us as heroes. In a Harvard University paper analyzing rhetorical tactics in 73 speeches made by President Trump, it was found that women are the fourth most frequently mentioned group (Lamont). These researchers found that "women were often described as needing protection from foreign 'evil' forces... They were most associated with Islamic terrorism (12 times in relation to Islamic terrorism and 3 times in connection to

safety as opposed to 1 time in relation to poverty)” (Lamont, et.al 30). Trump clearly utilized the American desire to assume the role of protector, which also happens to be “central to working class men’s concept of masculinity and which he himself embraced as their representative” (Lamont, et. al 30). President Trump completely exploited American views on war heroes, despite not being able to lay claim to any actual time spent serving this country. President Trump, in Wisconsin in 2016, proclaimed

“We are going to need a fighter in the White House. I will be your fighter. To defeat crime and Radical Islamic Terrorism in our country, to win trade in our country, you need tremendous physical and mental strength and stamina. Hillary Clinton doesn’t have that strength and stamina. She cannot win for you” (Goldmacher).

President Trump, in a range of speeches given over the course of his debates with Hillary Clinton, emphasized how he was willing to fight for our country, using repetition to drive home to viewers that there is a constant threat being made against their lives, their jobs, and their borders. As President Trump said so passionately, “[i]t is the first duty of government to keep the innocent safe, and when I am President I will fight for the safety of every American – and especially those Americans who have not known safety for a very, very long time” (Goldmacher).

Through my analysis of his varying campaign speeches, I found repeated examples of President Trump exemplifying the hypocritical ways in which politicians engage with war so as to capitalize off our cultural script. Both President Trump and the greater Republican Party focus great campaign attention to veteran issues. Veterans as a concept are invincible, there is almost no way to politically justify criticizing those that have risked their lives defending this nation.

Veterans, as I have discussed earlier, are a symbol of peak patriotism and are personifications of the love for war that Americans have been socialized to have. President Trump stayed consistent on one theme throughout his campaign speeches: veterans have been treated poorly. His claims ranged from “veterans are not cared for or respected at all” to “veterans have been treated worse than illegal immigrants” (CNN). He pledged to overhaul the Veteran Administration, address mental illness epidemics within veteran communities, and provided a 10 point policy plan in order to personally address the injustices he campaigned on. However, President Trump would proceed to criticize prominent veteran John McCain, exhibiting exactly the behavior that he condemned, by treating McCain and his service legacy disrespectfully. As NPR articulated, “Trump — who avoided the Vietnam draft after claiming he had bone spurs — said that McCain, who endured over five years of torture as a prisoner of war at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, was only seen as ‘a war hero because he was captured’ and that he liked ‘people that weren’t captured’” (Taylor). One cannot simply base entire segments of their political platform on uplifting veterans, while simultaneously qualifying/quantifying what service is acceptable or worthy. This implies that President Trump is using veterans and their issues as political pawns, profiting off an established political trend in which military service or support of the military means advantage in elections.

What are the implications of politicians utilizing war rhetoric to gain themselves favor? When politicians repeatedly encourage and glorify violence as a means to secure protection of our rights, and are rewarded for doing so, they become the gatekeepers of what war should look like. Even further, they become the gatekeepers of what wars are justified and subsequently what violence is warranted. State sanctioned violence has become acceptable but citizens, who have

been taught to equate fighting with Americanness, are kept from such activity and criminalized for using “unnecessary violence.” President Trump stated in one of his speeches of 2015, “I wear their opposition [Democrats] as a badge of honor. Because it means I am fighting for REAL change, not just partisan change. I am fighting – all of us across the country are fighting – for peaceful regime change in our own country” (Goldmacher). Even the President of the United States acknowledges the paradoxical logic we all believe in, that you need to *fight* for *peace*.

When Americans are taught that violence or war is a means by which one can assert authority, there are devastating consequences. Instances of racial brutality have plagued social media feeds and news outlets for weeks, particularly after the death of Ahmaud Arbery by white supremacists and George Floyd by a Minnesotan police officer. When protests erupted to *fight* back against systemic racism and harmful institutions, their violence was seen as evidence of their “thugness” or a reason for why their cause is not valid. National guards, tanks, and military-grade riot gear were utilized by the police in order to reassert dominance and control. Yet President Donald Trump, while campaigning, would claim that it is in fact the police who are under attack and are vulnerable victims. In 2015, he proclaimed “[how] are we serving American victims [those killed by police brutality] by attacking law enforcement officers? The war on our police must end” (Goldmacher). Teargas and rubber bullets, which are war instruments, were utilized against American civilians. Medical tents and nurses were subject to the same use of force, which directly violates Geneva Conventions on war protocol. As President Trump even tweeted, these protestors were met with “the most vicious dogs and ominous weapons I have ever seen” meanwhile he praised Secret Service agents for wanting to be on the frontlines, in his words “we put the young ones on the front line, sir, they love it” (President Donald Trump).

When Americans are made to consume war and glorify its powerful effects, violence will be met with violence as each “side” vies for authority and credibility. Subsequently, whichever side can cause the most damage, whether physically or psychologically, will have their issues/ideologies represented as mainstream and valid. In other terms, whoever wins the war gets to write history.

Many media outlets, politicians, and members of the public have condemned the instances of looting that happened as a result of protests escalating. However, I beg the question, if Americans follow suit of what our political culture and politicians promote then can we criticize these instances of civilian looting? In the second paragraph of this research paper, I spoke to the collective looting of Indigenous lands and life as fundamental for the creation of our country. In another passage I spoke to the looting of black life with slavery, and how both the North and South pillaged each other’s states in order to defend their right to abolish or perpetuate the system of slavery. Revolution in America is violent. From the Boston Tea Party to Shay’s rebellion, defense of American values has been secured only through warlike revolts. A democracy secured through war, means it is necessary to build a political culture that justifies war.

In this nation we have a possessive investment in war and all symbols, peoples, and actions that represent it. Our histories and institutions are contingent on the myth of what this love can offer us in return. More importantly, our political culture has been molded by the successive battles that stain our American timeline for, in my opinion, the worse. By allowing our government, which is disproportionately elitist whites and catered to white ideologies, be the gatekeepers of what war is warranted we are allowing them to also be gatekeepers of who and what is *American*.

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