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The Condition of Permanent War: Is There a Way Out?

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Abstract

In The United States, we live in a time of permanent war, not only in the sense of continuous hostilities but also in terms of the granting of political and legal emergency measures typical of war time and the maintenance of a war economy. It is a challenge to move out of this condition of permanent war since most citizens do not directly experience the costs of war. This presentation discusses a variety of steps to move from a time of “alienated” war to peacetime.

The Condition of Permanent War: Is There a Way Out?

My focus in this paper will be on wars executed by the United States, especially from the time that the United States gradually emerged as the world’s foremost military power. I will begin by exploring how we should understand the notion of permanent war within the US context and then address some steps that might lead us out of the condition of permanent war.

Do we actually live in a time of permanent war? Let me first address how we should understand the idea of living in a time of war. The common understanding is that war has a clear beginning and endpoint so that wartime is a discrete and exceptional period of time that disrupts normal time as peacetime. Thus, when war ends, peacetime returns and peacetime predates wartime. In *War.Time*, Mary L. Dudziak discusses how, with regard to the United States, this common understanding is inaccurate and distorts its historical social reality.¹ Consider the Second World War. The United States was attacked on December 7, 1941, and Japan signed surrender documents on September 2, 1945. We may think of the United States as being at war during this time period, while we lived in times of peace before the attack on Pearl Harbor and after Japan’s official surrender on September 2, 1945. However, this would be an error because

¹ Mary L. Dudziak, *War.Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the Second World War already significantly determined American society several years before Pearl Harbor, notably in the form of increased exercise of presidential powers, expansion of the production and trade of weapons, wider federal surveillance, and increased prosecution of (with broadened understanding of what counts as) national security violations. Similarly, Dudziak writes with regard to the official end to hostilities on September 2, 1945: “But the power of war could not quite be extinguished with a signature. The United States began to demobilize, but the draft would persist, and a legal state of war, enabling the use of government war powers, would endure for several years.”²

Following Dudziak, then, wartime is the time period when “war” is the “historical actor,” or, at least, a main determinant of what happens in society. More specifically, wartime begins, on her account, when the anticipated hostilities impact law and politics, and it continues as long as the law and politics engendered by the actual hostilities prevail, even after the cessation of the hostilities. So while the time of actual hostilities may have specific dates, wartime has no “tidy time boundaries.”³ Broadening Dudziak’s concept of wartime a bit, war impacts not only law and politics, but also material production and culture, and, accordingly, we are in wartime as long as war (anticipated, actual, or remembered) sets the direction and tone of all these social processes.

For Dudziak, the main problem of viewing wartime as a discrete period of actual hostilities is that it enables us to misconstrue much of American history and wrongly anticipate our future as one of peacetime. She writes: “Built into the very essence of our idea of wartime is the assumption that war is temporary. The beginning of war is the opening of an era that will, by definition, come to an end.”⁴ Thus, looking at the past, we focus on the major wars and construe the other times as peacetime. Accordingly, “it is only through forgetting the small wars that so much of American history is remembered as peacetime.”⁵ Once we take an accurate look at American conflicts over the past century, however, it becomes clear that peacetime has been the exception. Dudziak visualizes this fact by mapping all the years that American soldiers could receive “campaign medals” during the twentieth century. Her map shows very few years when this opportunity was not available, and, typically, in any given year, several theatres of conflict

² Ibid., 62.

³ Ibid., 36.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 31.

would offer this opportunity, especially in the post Second World War era.⁶ We should conclude, then, that, in the words of Dudziak, “war is not an exception to normal peacetime, but instead an enduring condition.”⁷ In other words, “wartime has become normal time in America.”⁸

The upshot is that wartime has become our permanent time, even though the scope and location of actual hostilities varies and actual hostilities might even be absent from time to time. In other words, we have permanent war even though actual fighting falls short of being permanent. The Cold War and the Global War on Terror illustrate the point. Viewing the Cold War period as wartime is appropriate in that actual hostilities were common during the time period, often at the periphery of the zone of American influence, while foreign policy became thoroughly militarized, the national security state was expanded, and the war economy became ingrained in society. Similar observations apply to the Global War on Terror, but a trend that was already manifest especially during the later part of the Cold War has now become more striking: when wartime has become permanent it is no longer distinguishable from peacetime and what facilitates its continuation is that it is no longer fully experienced as wartime. Initially, it seemed that 9/11 was the beginning of a particular wartime sharply distinct from peacetime, requiring the people to change their lives in a fashion similar to how Pearl Harbor impacted the American people. In other words, 9/11 appeared to launch “genuine” wartime. Presidential powers were increased, war was waged against the Taliban and al-Qaeda (and indefinitely authorized by Congress), federal surveillance became even more extensive, indefinite detention emerged, and “normal” law was additionally suspended in the approval of extraordinary renditions and torture. But, unlike in 1941, most people were not asked to really change their lives. In a speech on homeland security on November 8, 2001, President George W. Bush talked in detail about what the government and the military had done in response to 9/11, but when it came to outlining the “new responsibilities” of the American people, he praised them for offering the following “ultimate repudiation of terrorism”: “People are going about their daily lives, working and shopping and playing, worshiping at churches and synagogues and mosques, going to the movies and to baseball games.” Bush further applauded that more people had displayed

⁶ See *ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

their patriotism and had opted for volunteering and service careers, and he promised that the government would create more opportunities for citizens to promote public safety and health. In the meantime, the only main (additional) “new responsibility” of citizens that Bush mentioned was that people should be “vigilant.” Clearly, in the years ahead, working, shopping, playing, and praying continued, while the other expressions of the citizens’ “new responsibilities” waned or never materialized. Wartime and peacetime seem to coalesce in our current time. Dudziak writes: “As war goes on, Americans have lapsed into a new kind of peacetime. It is not a time without war, but instead a time in which war does not bother everyday Americans.”⁹ In other words, “alienated war”¹⁰ enables a wartime that appears as a normal time and, so, as peacetime.

The Obama administration, even more than the Bush administration in its second term, seems intent on masquerading wartime as peacetime. In his Second Inaugural Address, President Obama said that “We, the people, still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war.” And the first thing that he noted in his State of the Union Address of 2013 is that “after a decade of grinding war, our brave men and women in uniform are coming home.” Moreover, President Obama said: “Today, the organization that attacked us on 9/11 is a shadow of its former self. It's true, different al Qaeda affiliates and extremist groups have emerged -- from the Arabian Peninsula to Africa. The threat these groups pose is evolving. But to meet this threat, we don't need to send tens of thousands of our sons and daughters abroad or occupy other nations.” Clearly, the misleading message here is that we are not at war when we use drone strikes to eliminate terrorists, including American citizens affiliated with groups declared to be “extremist,” and we are no longer living in war times when the troops come home from Afghanistan, even though the authorization to use military force granted by Congress immediately after 9/11 will remain in effect, and a host of legal “emergency” measures remain effective. Admittedly, some emergency measures adopted by the Bush administration have been rejected by the Obama administration, such as torture, but the rejection has not led to holding perpetrators accountable, and, so, history may easily repeat itself. And, of course, Obama conveniently forgets to mention here that his time in office as a time of moving towards “peace” includes the NATO overthrow of Gadhafi, an increase of U.S. military activities and presence in

⁹ Ibid., 135.

¹⁰ Cheyney Ryan, *The Chickenhawk Syndrome* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 5-7.

Africa, a continued military build-up of the Asia-Pacific region, and increased force projection towards Iran.

How do we get out of the condition of permanent war? Dudziak describes the practical purpose of her study as follows: “The American people cannot wait for a new peacetime to end the detentions at Guantanamo or to rein in expanded presidential war power. Time itself will not wash them away. Wartime is the only time we have, and therefore is a time within which American politics must function.”¹¹ In other words, Dudziak argues that we must seek to eliminate the legal exceptions warranted by war during wartime itself. Dudziak does not discuss the tenability of her proposal, but the example of the Cold War might be instructive here: the exposition of domestic surveillance abuses that occurred into the 1970s led to improvements, and some restrictions were placed on the CIA operations abroad. Presidential war powers were also curtailed, at least on paper. So, perhaps, could the same happen again?¹²

I see several shortcomings with this proposal. First, we live not only in a time when people are alienated from the wars fought in their name, but there is also alienation from the legal “emergency” measures justified in the name of war. Only pictures of torture seem thus far to have angered the public and led it to demand change in this regard. Thus, we should at least put into question Dudziak’s implicit assumption that the strategy of focusing on changing only the legal climate is much less challenging than trying to move away from wartime altogether. Second, the more narrow focus leaves the direct costs of war untouched, as well as the negative cultural and economic consequences of living in wartime. Third, any weakening of the homeland security state might be swept away once an occasion occurs that might again make the sound of war appealing, similar to how 9/11 swept away any restraints placed on the abuses of the early Cold War, after these restraints were already weakened beginning with the Reagan administration. Accordingly, the only lasting way out of permanent war is to greatly reduce the preparedness of the American people to support war.

One way of trying to reduce popular acceptance of war is to question the morality of this support; another way is to argue that the support goes against the self-interest of most American citizens. Cheyney Ryan’s *The Chickenhawk Syndrome* adopts the first strategy by arguing that

¹¹ *War.Time*, 8. See also 136.

¹² See David K. Shipler, “Will Obama the Constitutional Lawyer Please Stand Up?,” *The Nation*, February 11, 2013. Shipler is pretty skeptical of history repeating itself here.

citizens who support wars that they are not prepared to fight and risk dying for are chickenhawks. On his account, the chickenhawk has a “flawed moral character,” that is, he “is a hypocrite and a freeloader.”¹³ The same can be said of elected officials who vote for war but refuse to fight them or discourage their children from doing so. Following Ryan, persons with integrity will apply what he calls the “Murtha test” (named after late Congressman Jack Murtha): they will only support wars which they are prepared to fight in and even die in.¹⁴ Now since most Americans appear to have lost the preparedness to sacrifice their own lives for the wars that their country has been fighting in recent times, they should generally reject the option of war. In short, Ryan seeks to shame Americans from so easily supporting their wars. Wartime is a time of hypocrisy and freeloading, and only peacetime can restore our collective virtue.

The problem with this argument is that the dominant morality of our society, the morality of the market, does not support the Murtha test, and that citizens who apply this morality to those who fight our wars do not necessarily have a flawed moral character. It is hypocritical and freeloading to tell warriors that they have a moral duty to risk their lives for society and then simply exempt oneself from this duty, but once fighting is viewed as a voluntary job with decent pay and moderate to high (but not huge) risks of harm to oneself, these charges become less convincing. Increasingly, American warriors fit the market model of dangerous jobs rather than the model of duty and sacrifice for the nation, and so the chickenhawk charge will increasingly lose its shaming potential and with it the potential to affect progressive change.¹⁵

A similar objection might be raised against the expectation of Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen that once Americans become aware of the increased “casualty gap” of recent American wars, they will become less supportive of war.¹⁶ In a word, Kriner and Shen show that, due to the emergence of the volunteer army and the placement of recruits with lower levels of educational attainment into combat roles, war deaths more frequently occur among lower income groups than the affluent. Kriner and Shen argue that this casualty gap is unfair because war as collective enterprise should involve sacrifices equally borne by all classes. The gap also reduces the

¹³ *The Chickenhawk Syndrome*, 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see my “From Combat Boots to Civilian Shoes: Reflections on Cheyney Ryan’s *The Chickenhawk Syndrome*,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 13.2 (2010): 173-80.

¹⁶ Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

“democratic brake” on wars in that affluent communities nowadays are less inclined to oppose wars (than are low income groups) because their members are less likely to be directly acquainted with the costs of war.¹⁷ And what further weakens the “democratic brake” is that communities with more war victims are less likely to be democratically engaged.¹⁸ In my view, it is a merit of Kriner and Shen that they offer rich data in support of the casualty gap hypothesis and explore the various aspects of this gap, but I doubt that they are correct in holding that growing awareness of the gap will make Americans much less inclined to support war. What counts against this expectation is that it is widely accepted that the less affluent have higher job risks and a more limited political voice, and so, again, the more the ethics of the market will determine the popular assessment of the military profession, the less the casualty gaps and its consequences will appear as morally unacceptable.¹⁹

The greatest moral failing of the American public, I would like to argue, is not hypocrisy in their support of American wars and troops, but failing to take on moral responsibility for the countless civilian victims of some recent American wars. There is some public understanding that the Vietnam War and the most recent Iraq War were mistakes, but there is little shame and regret regarding the devastation inflicted upon these countries. No doubt, we should be cautious in ascribing blame here. It might lead to defensive responses; it might be divisive and be politically unproductive; and it may overstate the role of average citizens in enabling wars of aggression and their capacity to prevent such wars.²⁰ Still, it seems that insofar as moral criticism has a role to play in progressive politics, the insistence that the American people come to a frank assessment of how their wartime impacts people around the world might be the moral appeal with the greatest potential for how to get us out of the condition of permanent war.²¹ And what needs to be emphasized in this context is that the wartime that appears similar to peacetime to

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 113-23.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 191ff.

¹⁹ See also my “Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s War,” a review of *The Casualty Gap*, in *Radical Philosophy Review* 14.2 (2011): 255-59. There is also a “wounded gap,” and continued injustices inflicted on veterans (such as inadequate medical care and limited job and educational opportunities) may turn them into a strong opposition force to permanent war.

²⁰ I am listing here some problems regarding liability ascriptions for social harm articulated by Iris Young in her *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113-18.

²¹ Soldiers and veterans can play an important role here and so address their responsibility for the harms of their wars.

many American citizens, the wartime of alienated war, is real wartime to the civilians who become victims of drone strikes and the like.

It should be admitted, though, that the odds are strongly against success of moral criticisms in light of a very powerful and pervasive discourse of American exceptionalism. Appeals to self-interest as the basis for motivating the American people to leave behind permanent war, to the contrary, have the advantage that they do not need to directly challenge the narrative of America as having the finest (not just most lethal and best-equipped!) men and women in uniform in the world, who aim at promoting democracy, liberty and justice for all. One appeal to self-interest is that investment in military technology, the weapons industry, etc., is a comparatively inefficient way to promote job growth and scientific and technological progress. Another appeal is that our huge spending on the military has high opportunity costs in terms of spending on education, transportation, and the like. Clearly, such arguments have considerable currency in a time of weak economic growth and federal deficit. Let me focus here on the seemingly strongest (somewhat related) recent appeal to self-interest as articulated by, for example, the late Chalmers Johnson. He wrote in 2009 that “we are like the British at the end of World War II: desperately trying to shore up an empire that we never needed and can no longer afford.” That is to say, “the United States no longer has the capability to remain a global hegemon, and to pretend otherwise is to invite disaster.” And this disaster is in the making: “the United States is not seriously contemplating its own bankruptcy. It is instead ignoring the meaning of its precipitate economic decline and flirting with insolvency.”²²

Johnson is obviously correct that the post 9/11 expansion of the defense budget and costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been a drain on the US economy, but he underestimated the capability of the Pentagon to seek correctives. Even at the time of Johnson’s criticisms, the drain on the economy played a role in an evolving shift away from an emphasis on (the threat of) using overwhelming conventional force as the instrument of maintaining American hegemony towards a more “balanced strategy” in the direction of developing more counterinsurgency capabilities and closer cooperation between the defense and state departments.²³ Moreover,

²² See Chalmers Johnson, “Three Good Reasons to Liquidate Our Empire,” *Huffington Post*, July 30, 2009.

²³ See Robert M. Gates, “A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age,” *Foreign Affairs* 88 (January/February, 2009): 28-40. His recommendation is followed in the National Security Strategy of 2010.

current policy is that hegemony is to be sustained through closer security cooperation with other countries. In the words of former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the American military must get better at “helping others to defend themselves.”²⁴ This policy is meant to prevent “imperial overreach,” both in terms of the economy and the demands on the troops. The growing use of drones in the war on terrorism seems to be partly motivated by these concerns, as well.

In my estimation, these measures in response to the extreme hubris and excesses of George W. Bush and his neoconservative policy advisors indicate that Johnson’s prediction of immanent collapse had some merit but failed to take into account that even the Pentagon can make adjustments. Perhaps Johnson’s error was that he did not appreciate the difference between the United States as global hegemon and such colonial empires as Britain. Additionally, it seems that Johnson overstated the financial burden of the “empire of bases.” He cites a figure of \$250 billion per year that the United States uses to maintain its global military presence, claiming that “we must liquidate our empire or else watch it liquidate us.” However, it is difficult to see how this amount (unlike the amounts needed for fighting wars similar to the Iraq war) is a real threat to the American economy. After all, it is less than 2% of America’s GDP, and most of the costs would have been covered by not adopting the so-called Bush tax cuts. Finally, growing defense budgets in Russia, and especially China, may eventually push American defense budgets to the breaking point, but the gap is still so huge (the American defense budget is five times that of China and ten times that of Russia) that this is not going to be a major issue any time soon.²⁵

In short, it seems the road out of permanent war that we can foresee is one of numerous small steps, requiring action on multiple moral, political, and economic fronts. Cultural change involving making the military hero less “cool” also seems important. Let me end by briefly addressing one final theoretical step – that is, three suggestions of how to modify just war theory such that it would become more adequate for addressing the problem of permanent war.

My first suggestion concerns John Lango’s proposal that we must “temporalize” just war principles, meaning that we should use these principles not only to question the initial resort to force, but that we should apply them to each successive phase of military action.²⁶ The merit of

²⁴ Robert M. Gates, “Helping Others Defend Themselves,” *Foreign Affairs* 89 (May/June 2010): 2-6.

²⁵ There is also a lesser but still very significant gap in warfare technology.

²⁶ John W. Lango, “Generalizing and Temporalizing Just War Principles,” Chapter 4 of Michael W. Brough, John W. Lango, Harry van der Linden, eds., *Rethinking the Just War Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

this proposal is that the legitimation of war becomes not a one-time event; rather, military action must be continuously interrogated. Thus, the ongoing hostilities, as, for example, in Afghanistan, would less likely disappear from the public radar and be viewed as requiring continuous political oversight. Second, Steven P. Lee has recently argued that the project of the abolition of war should be viewed as integral to just war theory, with *jus in abolitione belli* having its own criteria. One of these criteria is that non-military ways of achieving justice should be maximized, since war is such a blunt instrument for rectifying injustices.²⁷ Thus the *jus ad bellum* principle of last resort is taken more seriously, and we can criticize from this perspective the militarized foreign policy of the United States and condemn its permanent war orientation. Third, I have argued in some recent essays that just war theory fails to consider that war decisions are made within a social framework of allocating resources for defense, selecting, training and educating troops, shaping public perception of war, etc., and that this framework has a significant impact on whether wars are justly initiated, fought, or concluded²⁸ That is to say, a precondition of any just war is just war preparation or *jus ante bellum*. This new category of just war theory seeks to articulate what the purpose is of preparation for war, which bodies should have the authority to make war preparation decisions, how troops should be trained and selected, and how security should be balanced against other collective values. Obviously, reasonable people will disagree concerning what counts as just military preparedness, but it seems that raising the very issue of American *jus ante bellum* will put into question U.S. military hegemony and bring us closer to peacetime.

²⁷ Steven P. Lee, *Ethics and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012), 300-06.

²⁸ See “Just Military Preparedness, U.S. Military Hegemony, and Contingency Planning for Intervention in Sudan: A Reply to Lango and Patterson,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24.2 (2010): 135-52; “From Hiroshima to Baghdad: Military Hegemony versus Just Military Preparedness,” in *Philosophy after Hiroshima*, ed. Edward Demenchonok (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010); “Barack Obama, Resort to Force, and U.S. Military Hegemony,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23/1 (2009): 95-104; and, “Questioning the Resort to U.S. Hegemonic Military Force,” in *The Moral dimensions of asymmetrical warfare: Counter-terrorism, western values, military ethics*, ed. Ted van Baarda and Desirée Verweij (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers/Martinus Nijhoff, 2009).