Soldiers Fighting Alone: The Wars of the Market-Security State

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ABSTRACT: The rise of the Anglo-American "market-security state" in the past few decades has created contradictions in how Britain and the United States conceive and conduct their armed conflicts abroad. For those who bear the brunt of the fighting, killing and dying, the accentuated political distance between the frontline and the civilian world produces a particular kind of alienation. Creative measures are needed to help those who must navigate the transition between the war and the mall.

There is a problem with how the United States and its allies exercise power, a problem rooted in forces deeper than the imperfections of any one president or government. This problem was pithily summarized by a widely circulated photograph of a written statement on a whiteboard in a forward operating base in Iraq: "America is not at War. The Marines are at War. America is at the Mall."[1] As it happens, this statement in some ways is an inadequate summary of the ripples the war in Iraq generated. It ultimately stretched beyond the frontline and affected home society deeply, from the war's contribution to the debt-deficit crisis that has swept the Euro-Atlantic world to the unexpectedly large number of maimed and wounded personnel, the extent of whose care our societies are unprepared. But the statement does summarize how a dysfunctional set of social relations shapes the way the state exerts force in the world and begets a confusion about what it means to be "at war." To borrow a phrase Leon Trotsky, albeit used in a different context, "no war, no peace."

The rise of the Anglo-American "market-security state" in the past few decades has created particular problems in how countries both conceive and conduct their armed conflicts abroad. Due to confluent forces and choices, countries like Britain and the United States wage war (and augment state power to do so) by invoking the moral language of great national wars, while in other ways resisting the status of being "at war" as a political condition, that is, not declaring war, not making material demands of the people directly, and going to great lengths to insulate their populations from the conflict.

For the nation as a whole, this contradictory condition helps bring about a situation in which the state applies military power continuously in the name of an existential struggle, but trying to do so "on the cheap" while encouraging "the people" to look on as passive consumers — or to look away. For those who bear the brunt of the fighting, killing and

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1   For the photograph of the quote, see "The Quotepedia," http://www.thequotepedia.com/america-is-not-at-war-the-marine-corps-is-at-war-america-is-at-the-mall-america-quote.

dying, the accentuated political distance between the frontline and the civilian world produces a particular kind of alienation. This distance does not warrant nostalgia for the twentieth-century's "total wars" that mobilized an engaged, nationalist, and even conscripted population. But it does warrant concern for "the consequences of lessened levels of mobilisation for war on the quality of democratic citizenship."[2] It suggests greater attention is needed to bridge the gap, and greater support is needed for creative measures to help those who must navigate the transition between the war and the mall. More ambitiously, it means greater demands should be made of the people on whose behalf such wars are fought, and in return, a more robust civil society is needed to exert greater civilian supervision of government.

War Time and Peace Time

In her ground-breaking study of conceptions of "war time" and "peace time," Mary Dudziak observes as the Global War on Terror dragged on, it left society in a strange state of limbo. "It is not a time without war, but instead a time in which war does not bother everyday Americans."[3] In her account, the root problem is how the collective memory of the twentieth century creates an outmoded way of thinking, where people suspend vital political questions—of state power, its limits, and authority—because they wrongly await the end of the war to get back to a post-war normality. Yet, as she notes, the issues at stake are too important to leave waiting for a mythical discrete peacetime. Rosa Brooks agrees.[4] The very conception of a separate peacetime is an illusion, and the lines are blurred because of real developments, in particular that of the ongoing struggle against a geographically diffuse terrorist network that also gets a vote. The desire by political elites to remain in a state of permissive wartime status—to retain the enabling aspects of such a status—is not likely to end soon. We cannot and should not try to draw sharp boundaries for the state of wartime, therefore. Somewhere in the space between total peace and war, she argues, is where we should develop institutions and rights that are not premised on a temporary suspension of normality.

I want to offer an alternative account of how we got here, one that adds to these interpretations rather than conflicting with them. Neither the United Kingdom nor the United States as a whole is straightforwardly at war. They are at war and peace all at once. The confusion over war and peace is not just due to an outmoded twentieth-century time horizon, or to the evolution of threats and military technologies. It is also due to how the Atlantic liberal states have chosen to organize themselves. Britons and Americans find themselves in an ambiguous state of "no war, no peace" because they are market-security states, which apply force regularly and globally while treating the citizen as a passive consumer of security, choosing both the extraordinary powers of formal wartime while desiring the undisturbed – and unmobilized – civilian life of peacetime.

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2   Allan Silver, "Not Peace, Not War: America Since 1945," The Liberal Way of War Conference, University of Reading, July 6, 2012.

3   Mary Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 134.

4   Rosa Brooks, "There's No Such Thing as Peacetime," *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2015.

The Market-Security State

By market security state, I do not mean the same thing as Philip Bobbitt's concept of the market state, a form of polity that seeks to harness private capital to maximise the opportunities of its citizens.[5] Rather, I mean the marriage of two things often thought of as antithetical. These two things are an ever more intrusive statism, with ever more monopolistic market capitalism, intended to ensure capital's profitability. Since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher spearheaded an Atlantic liberal revolution from the 1980's, an unintended net effect of this emerging market-security state is to erode and hollow out civil society, or what Edmund Burke called the little platoons of voluntary association, family, local, and collective local life. Paradoxically, though the architects of this revolution advocate limited government, the act of unleashing a pure marketplace requires order and good liberal subjects, and this demands ever stronger enforcement of the rules of property, the rule of law and free trade, thus creating a state with strengthened security apparatus and powers of coercion and surveillance.[6] That the size of the state actually grew under Thatcher and Reagan was no accident, but a defining feature of neo-liberalism.

The unleashing of capital and the acceleration of market exchange, with the support of the state, offers cheaper products, assists the fight against crime, and helps drive innovation. But it has its costs. It leaves people increasingly lonely and disconnected from real relationships of quality, despite the vaunted interconnectedness wrought by globalizing technologies. It uproots people in search of work, it loosens neighborhood bonds, and sees families increasingly broken up.[7] It drives a decline in collective association, with falling membership of trade unions, political parties, churches or community groups. There are efforts at forging an intermediate, civil society; but such efforts struggle against a trend towards the domination of big business and the big state. The growing dominance of an oligopolistic market, or one dominated by a few mighty companies like Walmart, coupled with the ever-greater dependence on the welfare state by more and more people, drains civic life of meaning. Citizens transform into clients, indebted in the market and reliant on the state as protector, with less and less shielding from anything in between.

We are left with shopping and consumption as the remaining communal rituals, though neither seems to make people very happy. The present condition is not simply one of consumerism. It is also an age of anxiety about security. In the new order, however, security is predominantly something not collectively created by a nation in arms, but as a consumer product, as a commodity the state must offer or deliver. The liberal revolution of the late-twentieth century depleted social solidarity and therefore inevitably reshaped the relationship between citizens and the state in the course of the ultimate political act, that of waging war.

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5   Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Random House, 2003), 211; and Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty First Century* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 88.

6   David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64-65.

7   For more on the effects of the new liberalism, see Phillip Blonde, *Red Tory: How Left and Right have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010); on the loneliness' problem, see John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

The measure of this change has been taken by Robert Putnam, who characterizes the unravelling of community as "bowling alone."[8] Is it possible that the small fraction of professional armed services bear the main burden of operations abroad are, in an existential if not literal way, fighting alone?

Shopping for Victory

Consider how the United States and, on a lesser scale, the United Kingdom has designed and conducted their wars over the past few decades. Most of them have been intended to be a swift, hi-tech and, for their own side, relatively low-casualty affairs, though conditions and opponents have got in the way of these clinical ambitions. In any event, the state's preference has been to eliminate opponents from a distance, minimize their own losses, and make the conflict both minimally disruptive and yet a basis for increased state power. The private market increasingly plays a role, as military-logistic functions are outsourced to it. Despite dramatic rhetorical gestures invoking the memory of collective struggle in national wars, such as the British Secretary of Defence's recent claim that the campaign against the Islamic State is the "new battle of Britain," the state strives to push wars into margins of national life, turning the civilian—in whose name the wars are waged—mainly into a spectator and beneficiary, observing the continuous projection of power.[9]

In the wake of the atrocities on 9/11, some American commentators hoped the crisis which had erupted this time on home soil would have a silver lining, that it would rouse the citizenry to a revived sense of common purpose. The neoconservative variant of this hope was the crisis would summon people out of commercial torpor through a politics of heroic greatness.[10] Yet the response of government was not to urge citizens to mobilize into an extraordinary state of supreme emergency, but almost the opposite, to maintain their routine way of life, at most keeping a wary eye on anything suspicious. Contrary to one legend, President George W. Bush did not urge his compatriots just to "go shopping." But he did urge them to carry on as normal. Speaking at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago only weeks after Al Qaeda's attack, he announced one of America's goals in its new war was to restore confidence in the airline industry:

> It is to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.[11]

The summons was not to self-sacrifice, as the state urged citizens to practice during World War II, but to self-gratification, or at least collective

8   Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

9   Ben Farmer, "New 'Battle of Britain' against ISIL," *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2015.

10   David Brooks, "Facing Up to Our Fears," *Newsweek*, October 22, 2001; George Packer, "Recapturing the Flag," *New York Times Magazine*, September 30, 2001; see also Michael C. Williams, "Morgenthau Now: Neoconservatism, National Greatness, and Realism," in *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 216-241.

11   "Bush on Airline Safety Measures," *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2001.

gratification. This new struggle was not to be the property of the nation as a whole.

The heavy demands of industrialized major wars of the twentieth century prompted campaigns, from above and from below, to get local and often voluntarist society to pull its weight actively, to dig for victory, buy war bonds, melt down church bells, and knit socks, to make material sacrifices. The effort to maximise the state's extraction of resources also had a coercive side, with the draft, mass internment camps and intervention into the economy. But it was linked symbiotically to the awakening of new political consciousness, the movement for enfranchisement. Mass mobilization also energized the demand for independence from empire for better deals and new settlements with their governments.

The ending of a war, at least in some countries, was the occasion for internal struggle over the relationship between the citizen and the state. War's socially mobilizing power, in fact, has traditionally been a point of hope for the political left. One result of the attempt to neutralize and divorce the people from the conduct of wars is to remove an important stake the population could have in the fight, making the war over there, for those not directly linked to family or friends, feel to most like an abstract curiosity.

This characteristic marks a contrast with the wars of our time in the first fifteen years of this century. To finance the ambitious and unbounded war against terrorism, the United States turned not to war bonds or taxes, but to private capital markets, contracting many services out to private specialists. The belief states could run up extra debts rather than extract resources from their citizens was the product of a market fundamentalism, where in the age where "deficits don't matter" or "the end of boom and bust," the state could borrow with little regard to its carrying capacity. The financing of what turned out to be, in both direct and indirect costs, a three trillion dollar war in Iraq (according to the former chief economist of the World Bank) was shaped to quarantine, as much as possible, the economy and the general population from the strains of conflict.[12] Of course, deficits in the long run do matter, and the state has effectively placed the burden back on its people to reduce them. The interaction of war and debt is one force that has stirred up the wave of leftist and rightist insurgents in politics across Europe and North America. As it turned out, the attempt to insulate the people from the fiscal strain of modern wars could only be temporary. And there are the other human dimensions for those coming home.

Points of Transition: Coming Home

There have long between tensions between those who fought and those who stayed away. But in the national wars of the past century, wider civil society was intensively engaged either in support, civilians at times were rotated to the front by force, rationing and taxes brought the war home in a tangible way. Equally, in more divisive conflicts there was that other, opposite manifestation of an energized citizenry, an active, vocal mass anti-war movement. War in Iraq did initially generate opposition, and one mass protest in Britain, as well as political rancor, but did not

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12   Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

create a sustained, energized counter-cultural movement comparable to Vietnam. Whereas now, the general population looks on mostly with sympathy but with far less connection or dissent. Conversely, surveys of veterans in the United States report a common theme of disconnection from civilian life, and a sizeable minority is wary of overt expressions of support at airports, bars and sporting events. The story is not a simple one of disillusionment. Many also express professional pride and regard military life itself as a nobler existence. But every indication is that the civilian-military divide is real and growing.[13]

The situation in Britain is not an exact parallel; public military uniforms and overt displays of gratitude are less frequent, but there are similar patterns. There is popular demand for better treatment of those in arms, and respect and curiosity for memory of great national struggles like World War I, and also considerable voluntarist donations to charities like Help for Heroes. Yet even this charity explicitly separates the appeal to supporting the troops from the cause of supporting the war itself: the very concept of "hero" is de-politicized, and the organization frames the hero as a worthy person in need. Again, in contrast to the national wars of the past, civil society offers war without politics and we are encouraged not to engage the political purpose of the conflict with what Clausewitz called "passion."

In addition, downward pressure on defense budgets reflects a broad reluctance to pay any more for operations, equipment or personnel, and most surveys suggest a wider unfamiliarity born of political disengagement. The military covenant – between armed forces, government and civil society- is under strain though not "broken."[14] Only 18 percent of the British public have any friends or relations serving in the armed forces.[15] This anxiety was put in concrete terms by General Richard Dannatt: "When a young soldier has been fighting in Basra or Helmand, he wants to know that people in his local pub know and understand what he has been doing and why."[16] Yet this presupposes a kind of social solidarity that does not exist. Despite wide use of term hero and broad support for armed forces as an institution, there is little sustained political engagement to their causes and little belief their sacrifices have achieved positive, meaningful political results.

These problems are accentuated in the case of reservists, lacking a secure recognition either at the front or at home. Studies find that even family and social networks are less receptive to returning reservists than to regulars. Jake Wood, a lance sergeant turned investment banker, recalled the disorientation of moving between worlds:

> There is almost a fascination [with you] when you first come back but it doesn't last long. First you get questions – some intelligent, some stupid and some just ghoulish – then by the afternoon it's like, OK, here's a business document. It was as if I'd never left and that was incredibly disorienting.

13   See the poll conducted by *The Washington Post* and the *Kaiser Family Foundation*, "After the Wars - Post-Kaiser Survey of Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans," *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2105, http://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/03/30/National-Politics/Polling/release_305.xml.

14   Helen McCartney, "The Military Covenant and the Civil-Military Contract in Britain," *International Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2010): 411-428.

15   YouGov Poll on Defence and Britain's Place in the World, March 26-28, 2007, (sample size 2,042), http://www.yougov.com/archives/archives-Political.asp,

16   "General Sir Richard Dannatt's speech," *BBC News*, September 21, 2007.

> That feeling of isolation, alienation and dislocation was heightened by what
> I found out later was PTSD.[17]

Some of the most effective efforts to reach out to returning service personnel come from civil society where veterans can articulate a more complex set of responses than being forced into banal categories of victim or hero. The "Theatre of War" project in United States is a case in point. This project began with an independent production company, Theater of War, visiting military sites to give stage readings of Sophocles' two plays about tormented veterans, Ajax and Philoctetes' and now attracts Pentagon funding. While we do not yet have any systematic survey of the effects of such processes, the impression of audience response suggests a communal space for the articulation of pain and anger resonates with those who are trying to come home:

> During the post-performance discussion with the audience, led by a panel of therapists and military personnel, veterans from the Vietnam War, Iraq and Afghanistan spoke about their own sleepless nights, drug addictions and isolation from family members. A Vietnam veteran described being homeless for 10 years, suffering breakdowns but at last "getting my dignity back" in part from mental health care.[18]

Conclusion

Clausewitz as an historicist argued how states fight reflects who they are in time. If so, the current state of "no war, no peace" tells us something about our societies' contradictions. The penetration of security by a neoliberal market ideology has given birth to the idea and, in many ways, the reality of the passive consumer citizen, unmobilized, insulated from war's revolutionary and subversive power, yet also not granted a condition of peace.

This contradiction has caused problems, not only at the strategic and policy level, but for those who do the fighting and must live with endings. It poses problems in comprehending the distinctive difficulties of warmaking; it poses problems in the financing of war; and it makes life stranger, and harder, for those who must endure the endings of war most directly, the people who do the fighting and come home. It places the burden of the fighting on a small fraction of the population, asking most citizens to get on with their lives as consumers and being distinctly uncomfortable with spontaneous acts of grass roots mobilization. By demanding little of citizens, it encourages the corollary, and encourages political inattention from the ruled and an alarming lack of civic supervision. At the very least, this means we need the likes of Theatre of War more broadly. At the most, it calls for a new politics of civil society.

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17   Simon Usborn, "Broken by War," *The Independent*, January 15, 2014.
18   Patrick Healy, "The Anguish of War for Today's Soldiers, Explored by Sophocles," *New York Times*, November 11, 2009.