FROM GI JOE TO AMERICA'S ARMY: MILITARISM AND CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES Do GI JOE

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Recebido: 13 abr. 2012 Aprovado: 26 abr. 2012

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Abstract: This article analyzes the militarization of culture in the United States. The author examines the controlling processes and legitimizing mechanisms that encourage the artistic, academic, and cultural embrace of militarism in the US. By relying upon historical examples of "warrior societies"--ancient Sparta, the Mongolian empire, and Aztec civilization--the author considers how we might compare the contemporary US to these militaristic cultures. He also questions whether warfare is a part of human nature (as some social scientists have argued in recent years). In a society where violence is entertainment, torture is an acceptable norm, and academia is merely another means to achieve military ends, the author concludes by challenging his colleagues to consider ways that anthropology might contribute to cultural demilitarization, namely by exploding the myths that surround and perpetuate militarism.

Key words: Militarization. Culture. United States. Anthropology. War. Peace.

AO EXÉRCITO AMERICANO: MILITARISMO E CULTURA NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

Resumo: Esse artigo analisa a militarização da cultura nos Estados Unidos. O autor examina os processos de controle e os mecanismos de legitimação que estimulam a acolhida artística, acadêmica e cultural do militarismo nos EUA. Tendo como referência exemplos históricos como o de "sociedades guerreiras"- a antiga Esparta, o império mongol e a civilização asteca- o autor considera possível comparar os EUA contemporâneos com essas culturas militarescas. Ele também questiona como a busca do bem estar é parte da natureza humana (como alguns cientistas sociais têm argumentado em anos recentes). Numa sociedade onde a violência é entretenimento, a tortura é aceita como norma, e a academia esta apenas voltada para o desenvolvimento dos objetivos militares, o autor conclui convidando seus colegas a considerarem as contribuições que a antropologia pode oferecer para a desmilitarização cultural, explorando os mitos que circundam e perpetuam o militarismo.

Palavras-chave: Militarização. Cultura. Estados Unidos. Antropologia. Guerra. Paz.

INTRODUCTION

Not so long ago, most people in the US tended to hold a negative view of military institutions. The country's founders were suspicious of standing armies and used the Constitution as a means of ensuring civilian control over the military. Until World War II, people in the US generally "saw the military as a burden in peacetime and at best very occasionally necessary. Middle class families were reluctant to send their children into a military they saw as a virtual cesspool of vices" (LUTZ, 2009, p. 23).

In the 21st century, the situation could not be more different. As recently as 2007, surveys indicated that 84% of people in the US hold a favorable view of the military, including nearly 50% who hold a "very favorable" view[1]. This presents an interesting cultural question: How is it that US attitudes towards the military have changed so dramatically, within a relatively brief period of time?

Anthropologist Catherine Lutz describes US militarization as a process that began taking shape seven decades ago. She argues that militarization consists of more than just overseas bases and economic links. According to Lutz (2009, p. 23), it includes:

> All of the institutions and groups who benefitted from a large military budget. Not only weapons manufacturers but companies like Proctor & Gamble and the Disney Corporation came to enjoy and rely on immense military contracts. US universities were drawn up in a concerted government campaign to put much of the nation's scientific talent and university training at the disposal of the military, to the point where 45 percent of all computer science graduate students with federal support get it from the Pentagon, and 25 percent of all scientists and engineers work on military projects. The military-industrial-Congressional-media-entertainment-university complex is a massively entangled system.

Before going further, it might be useful to ask: What exactly is militarization? What is militarism? How are they connected?

Historian Richard H. Kohn (2009, p. 182) defines militarization as a wide-ranging process that occurs when "a society's institutions, policies, behaviors, thought, and values are devoted to military power and shaped by war." He argues that for nearly 70 years, the US has experienced

[1] This survey was conducted by researchers from the Pew Research Center. See Allen, Smaranayake, and Albrittain (2007).

an unprecedented degree of militarization. What concerns Kohn (2009, p. 196) even more is the possibility that American militarization will blur into *militarism*, which he defines as "the domination of war values and frameworks in American thinking, public policy, institutions, and society to the point of dominating rather than influencing or simply shaping American foreign relations and domestic life." For Kohn--who served for 10 years as the US Air Force's Chief Historian and has held various academic positions at the US Army War College--militarism is the more troubling condition. Kohn's analysis of the post-9/11 era and the subsequent open-ended "war on terror" raises the question of "whether the very character of the US people changes [as a result], with the emphasis on freedom and individualism displaced by obedience, discipline, hierarchy, collectivism, authoritarianism, pessimism, and cynicism" (KOHN, 2009, p. 182).

It is striking that a scholar with career-long connections to military institutions would issue such a warning, but others have echoed Kohn's concerns. Andrew Bacevich (2005, p. 255), a political scientist who graduated from West Point, argues:

> Today as never before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power… America will surely share the fate of all those who in ages past have looked to war and military power to fulfill their destiny. We will rob future generations of their rightful inheritance. We will wreak havoc abroad. We will endanger our security at home. We will risk the forfeiture of all that we prize.

His detailed account of the rise of militarism in the US points to the need for its citizens to take seriously the threat that it poses[2].

In the ground-breaking book *Homefront*--an ethnography of Fayetteville, North Carolina, a town located near one of the largest US military bases in the world Catherine Lutz (2001, p. 3) observes that:

> there are many places like Fayetteville in America, from its nearly nine hundred other domestic military bases in such towns as Norfolk, Virginia, New London, Connecticut, and Killeen, Texas, to the thousands of places from Seattle, Washington to Binghamton, New York, where weapons and equipment are made.

[2] Tragically, Bacevich's own son was killed in 2007 by an improvised explosive device in Iraq while serving in the US military.

The US's economy, its geography, its history, its forms of entertainment, even its values, are shaped by military institutions. She continues: "In an important sense, we all inhabit an army camp, mobilized to lend support to the permanent state of war readiness that has been with us since World War II" (LUTZ, 2001, p. 3). US militarism truly affects the entire country.

To get a closer view of the controlling processes that enable militarism in the US, let us consider some of the ways in which it manifests itself in daily life.

HOMETOWN HEROES

For seven-year-old Justin Velázquez, Wednesday had been a big day--possibly the biggest day of his life. The slender, wide-eyed boy from San Diego, California had won a nationwide contest, and he and his family were awarded a special prize: the opportunity to attend an advance screening of a Hollywood action movie.

The judges chose Justin's letter from hundreds of others that had poured in during the summer of 2009 for a "Hometown Hero" contest sponsored by the Hollywood film production company Paramount Pictures. Justin told the world about his father José, who had recently returned from military deployment overseas. In a 200-word essay, Justin movingly described the pain of sacrifice, the value of giving, the strength of love, and the power of family relationships:

> I am Justin my dad name is José. I am writing because my dad is a Real American Hero he has been through so much my dad is in the Navy I was just born in 2002 of Feb. my dad went on deployment when in July he was involved in a helo [helicopter] crash where the helo crashed on the ship and into the water (gulf). My dad was injured from what he told me. He had 2nd degree burns, back, shoulder injuries. My dad was helo out to the hospital where he stayed. Later he was sent back to Japan to go to therapy for his injuries. My dad didn't leave the Navy instead he stayed because of me. My dad in 2007 was motored and rpg [rocket propelled grenade] when he went to Iraq to support the war my dad did it not just for me but for all of us. I love my dad so much and so does Raul. He's my brother. My dad has been through a lot but he has always come back for us. My Dad.A Real American Hero. I went to give something back to my dad for all he has done for us.

On a sunny August afternoon, Justin, his parents, and his younger brother Raul climbed into a camouflaged HUMVEE (armored military vehicle) and were escorted in a motorcade led by police cars and a fire truck. Also present in the procession were the film's stars, director Stephen Sommers, state assemblywoman Lori Saldaña, and a group of uniformed men and

women from the California National Guard. Once the motorcade arrived at the theater, the San Diego State University marching band greeted the party. The out-of-town guests made speeches, the local media interviewed the Velázquez family, and then Justin met a special guest from Washington representing Susan Davis, the Velázquez family's congresswoman in the US House of Representatives. He gave Justin a US flag, a certificate, and a set of plastic "action figures"[3].

Then all entered the theater to watch *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra*.

The story of Justin and José Velázquez resonates deeply--a triumphant and unusual case in which bonds of love and affection between father and son, between parent and child, are publicly recognized and celebrated.

At the same time, there is something profoundly unsettling about the entire episode, for it illustrates the intricate means by which militarism is designed, manufactured, packaged, and marketed in the US today. It also reveals how human connections--including family relationships--are easily infiltrated by what President Dwight D. Eisenhower once called the "military-industrial complex."

Paramount Pictures' movie is the latest product of the long running GI Joe franchise. For nearly half a century, the Hasbro toy company has sold its movable plastic doll to millions of boys in the US. (First introduced in 1964, GI Joe's creators were motivated to compete with Mattel's wildly popular and lucrative Barbie doll.) Its commercial success was due in large part to hundreds of additional accessories (such as uniforms, weapons, vehicles, and battle stations) that Hasbro developed and sold to enthusiasts. Today there are dozens of official and unofficial GI Joe fan clubs and collectors' clubs, and original "action figures" and accessories sometimes sell for hundreds of dollars at antique shops. Some film critics were upset by the crass commercialism of Paramount's blockbuster: "It's More Toy Commercial Than Movie," declared the *Miami Herald* (RODRIGUEZ, 2009).

The "Hometown Hero" contest--and the Velázquez family--were, in a sense, extensions of a broad marketing assault designed to promote *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* to US servicemen, servicewomen, their relatives, and others living in North America's "heartland." Just a few days before the San Diego event, Paramount invited 1000 military personnel and their families to a screening at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. The movie's stars (Channing Tatum, Sienna

[3] For an account of the "Hometown Heroes" event see Sánchez (2009).

Miller, and Marlon Wayans) attended and were treated to a helicopter tour and a meeting with the base commander (ELLER; FRITZ, 2009).

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Paramount's Vice Chairman Rob Moore was blunt about the company's marketing strategy: "Our starting point for this movie is not Hollywood and Manhattan but rather mid-America," he said. "There are a group of people we think are going to respond to the movie who are normally not the first priority. But we're making them a priority."(ELLER; FRITZ, 2009) Moore revealed that Paramount hoped to lure European audiences by having much of the action take place in France, and to attract East Asian audiences by casting South Korean star Lee Byung-hun in a supporting role.

Paramount also launched a series of "tie-ins" including partnerships with Burger King and the 7-Eleven chain of convenience stores. Burger King introduced a "Kid's Meal" with GI Joe "gadgets, action figures, and vehicles that offer the ultimate adventure." In the hyper-active, hyper-hyphenated language typical of corporate press releases, Burger King global marketing executive Russ Klein remarked, "Partnering with Paramount has allowed us to go beyond the typical tie-in property sponsorship to create all-encompassing entertainment and promotions that offer our restaurant guests a real piece of the action--in-restaurant, on their televisions, and online. . .the creativity and innovation we bring to the partnership add value to the studios' movie marketing effort" (BURGER KING, 2009).

During the same week, 7-Eleven introduced a "GI Joe-themed true-blue Slurpee® flavor--Liquid Artillery" created by the Coca-Cola Company and a "Go Joe" cappuccino drink flavored with three "natural energy ingredients--taurine, guarana, and caffeine." "Liquid Artillery" and "Go Joe" were served in cups featuring GI Joe characters. Jay Wilkins, 7-Eleven brand manager, stated in a press release that GI Joe "is probably the best-known boy's toy in the world. . .The movie has a ready-made audience of boys and men who played with GI Joe, and we want to bring back some of those great childhood memories" (CHABRIS, 2009).

As if these initiatives were not enough to promote the "boy's toy" franchise, in 2009 Paramount and Hasbro created additional officially licensed "tie-ins" with Electronic Arts for a video game, with Del Ray Books (a division of Random House) for an "Essential Guide to GI Joe vs. Cobra," and with IDW Publishing for *We Are GI Joe*, a children's book "specifically written and illustrated for developing readers." Paramount also placed various products in the film,

including Cisco Systems' Telepresencevideo conferencing services, Dubble Bubble gum, and Norton anti-virus computer software[4].

But the biggest "tie-in" of all was the partnership between Paramount and the US Department of Defense. As in the case of many recent Hollywood war films (from *Top Gun* to *Iron Man*), the Pentagon loaned a great deal of equipment and personnel for the making of *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra*, including Apache helicopters, Humvees, and even members of the Army's 21st Cavalry Brigade and the California National Guard. (HOLMAN, 2009; SHEFTICK; PRITCHARTT, 2009). Paramount had already experimented with this relationship in its 2007 movie *Transformers*, another film based upon a line of Hasbro toys. According to a report published by the Bloomberg news service, "Pentagon officials and weapon makers say they've found a savvy way to make US military service seem attractive to teenage boys": by placing the weapons of war on the big screen. The "synergies" of the Paramount-Pentagon partnership were simple but powerful--free high-tech stage props in exchange for a two-hour recruitment advertisement for the military. Weapons manufacturers enjoyed the added benefit of product promotion. The Bloomberg report quoted Scott Lusk, spokesman for the giant weapons manufacturer Lockheed Martin, who provided a candid assessment of including F-22 fighter planes in Paramount films. Lusk declared that such appearances "help promote the state-of-the-art, high-tech products that are designed, developed and manufactured" by Lockheed Martin for the US military (LOCOCO 2007).

Even before its partnership with Paramount, the Pentagon was involved in a symbiotic relationship with toy companies. In an eye-opening report that followed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, journalist William Hamilton (2003) revealed how Mattel, Hasbro, and other companies inspired state-of-the-art weaponry:

> "The M-16 rifle is based on something Mattel did," says Glenn Flood, a spokesman for the Pentagon, which is looking to toys and electronic games for parts, prototypes and ideas that can be developed effectively and inexpensively as battlefield tools. Inspiration has come from model planes (reconnaissance drones), "supersoaker" water guns (quick-loading assault weapons), cheap cellular phones for teenagers (video-capable walkie-talkies) and gaming control panels (for unmanned robotic vehicles). Today's troops effectively received basic training as children.

[4] For descriptions of product placement in the *GI Joe* movie, see Electronic Arts Inc. (2009); Goldman (2009) and Product Placement News (2009).

Given these connections, *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* could be described as a massive joint venture between Paramount Pictures, Hasbro, the Pentagon, the Pentagon's contract firms (Boeing, Lockheed Martin, AM General), Burger King, 7-Eleven, Random House, Cisco, Norton, and other firms and organizations set to benefit from box office sales, "action figure" sales, weapon systems sales, junk food sales, video conferencing system sales, and the like. Despite the high price tag--$175 million in production costs plus an additional $150 million in marketing expenses--the film turned a huge profit. It earned Paramount more than $55 million in the US and Canada during its opening weekend, and another $45 million abroad, making it among the year's most successful Hollywood box office debuts (FRITZ 2009).

THE STORY OF US ALL

But such endeavors can be measured in more than dollars and cents. The social and psychological consequences are also important considerations, for people and families sometimes get caught in the cross hairs. Cultural anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (2009, pp. 6-7) has explored the deeper meanings of films like *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra*, and the wider processes by which military values are imposed upon young people:

> Hollywood's movie industry. . .churns out films, from *Rambo* to *Saving Private Ryan*, that glamorize soldiers, projecting them as archetypical American men whose struggles define the quest to come of age and find meaning in life. . .the film makers behind such films routinely submit their scripts to the Pentagon and rewrite them, in exchange for access to military hardware and military locations, if the Pentagon objects to particular scenes. . .Just in case teenagers are insufficiently brainwashed by their constant marinating in this pro-military mass culture, under the No Child Left Behind Act high schools lose all their federal funding if they do not give the names, addresses, and phone numbers of their students to military recruiters[5].

Like any cultural product, *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* reveals much about US society, including the powerful role played by the "complex" linking the Pentagon, Hollywood, weapons manufacturers, toy companies, and other industries; the mechanisms by which such institutions succeed in diffusing militaristic ideologies widely and effectively; and the disproportionately large effects of these projects on youth. Apart from the web of corporations and government

[5] Hugh Gusterson wrote the quoted passage as part of a longer chapter co-written with David Price and Roberto González.

agencies connected by "synergistic" business relationships, and apart from the economics of profit-making, there is the question of attitudes and values. What are the consequences of a culture industry that produces war films, toys, video games, and comic books year after year, in lockstep with the Pentagon's military adventures abroad? How can we better understand the long-term effects of the normalization of militaristic worldviews? In short, what are the costs of militarizing culture?

The screening attended by Justin Velázquez and his family might be viewed as a human interest story with a heart-warming ending, a media event that has the effect of making us feel good about fighting wars that create "hometown heroes."

But from a more critical perspective, it might be viewed as an illustration of how today's military-industrial complex is powerful and sophisticated enough to infiltrate and mediate intimate social relationships--between parent and child, between family and community, between civilian and soldier--while exploiting those who can help it further its own ends. The "Hometown Hero" contest certainly did not lead most people in the US to question whether their servicemen and women should be occupying Iraq and Afghanistan at all, or what happens to hundreds of thousands of children--American, Afghan, and Iraqi--who, unlike Justin, have lost their fathers or mothers.

What makes the Justin Velázquez story troubling--even tragic--is that it reveals how in our society, heroism, valor, and love are often expressed in the idiom of a military-industrial-entertainment complex whose architects have altogether different motives. What does it mean when gratitude, honor, and affection between parent and child are effectively expressed through a contest organized by one of the biggest entertainment corporations in the world, with support from the most powerful military in world history?

I begin with the story of Justin Velázquez and *GI Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* because it is in many ways the story of us all. It is emblematic of themes that run throughout this book: the prevalence of militaristic ideologies in our society, the processes by which military organizations and ideas subtly invade our daily lives and relationships, and the cultural strip-mining (of science, education, art, and artifacts) practiced by the Pentagon, the "intelligence community" of spy agencies, and their contract firms.

WARRIOR CULTURES: SPARTAN, MONGOLIAN, AZTEC

The US is not the first society to follow a military imperative. Others have also placed a high value on military prowess and war fighting, but at a cost. Archaeologists and cultural anthropologists have researched the rise and fall of "warrior cultures" in various regions of the world. Although there are many differences among them, they hold in common several characteristics that give insight into the consequences of militarism.

The ancient Greek city-state of Sparta is among the most famous. It was the dominant military power in Greece for nearly three centuries, beginning in approximately 650 BC. A citizen's primary obligation was to be a good soldier, and Sparta rose to prominence on the strength of its infantry.

According to Plutarch, Spartan mothers bathed their newborn sons in wine rather than water to test their resilience, and did not swaddle them as was customary in other parts of Greece. Even more remarkable was the extraordinary dominance of the Spartan state and its institutions. Unlike its rival Athens (and many other Greek city-states), Sparta was a society in which children, particularly boys, were separated from their parents at an early age. All boys were required to undergo a lengthy, physically challenging collective upbringing called the *agoge*, supervised by the city-state's most prestigious officers. Historian Mark Golden (2003, p. 20) provides a glimpse of what childhood was like in this society:

> From the age of seven, Spartan boys spent at least part of the day in the company of their agemates… [focusing] on physical training… The groupings of the agoge were called "herds" and "flocks," the official immediately responsible for it the *paidonomos* (boyherd). Boys lived close to the land--going shoeless, stealing from the fields to supplement scant rations, making their own beds with river rushes cut by hand. Recalcitrance or failure met brutal punishment, beating, or a distinctive form of discipline, biting of the thumb.

The Spartans placed little importance on literature, the arts, or commerce. Instead, education focused upon strength, discipline, and austerity. By the age of 12, when most Greek boys had completed their schooling, the agoge made ever greater demands upon young Spartans, according to Golden (2003, p. 20):

> Boys lived in barracks under the constant watch of leaders they chose themselves and of the community's elders as well as of the paidonomos and his whip bearers… Besides this everyday scrutiny, boys faced frequent tests, from massed brawls and dancing under the midsummer sun at the Gymnopaediae festival to stealing cheeses from the altar of the goddess Orthia, in order to pass from one stage of the agoge to the next. Only those who proved their fitness could eventually earn election to one of the common messes where Spartan males lived from the ages of twenty to thirty and ate their main meal for thirty years more. The agoge aimed to instill soldierly virtues: strength, endurance, solidarity.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the great Athenian statesman Pericles once noted that Spartan youth had no childhood at all.

A striking effect of this prolonged training was a severed bond between fathers and sons; indeed, Spartan fathers had no significant role in raising their children: "The boy belonged, effectively, not to his own family but to the state, and the goal was to produce a strong and efficient military machine whose men were loyal only to each other and to Sparta" (SHAPIRO, 2003, p. 107).

The nomadic peoples of Mongolia were another society that placed great importance upon war fighting and military expansion. Prior to the 13th century AD, localized raids between different nomadic groups in that region were not unusual, but Genghis Khan managed to either unite or subdue the various groups by 1206. Then he and his descendants led the Mongol confederation on a series of conquests that would lead to the creation of the largest empire the world had ever seen.

The Mongol army was organized in a strict hierarchy, and its fighters were ruthless. As it expanded across Asia (and eventually into Europe), the army laid siege to towns and cities. Those who refused to surrender were often massacred, and surviving soldiers incorporated into the Mongol military. Genghis Khan earned the loyalty of his growing army by distributing the spoils among his warriors, and by promoting officers based on merit rather than kinship. He demanded absolute allegiance.

These tactical and political strategies were grafted onto the nomadic pastoral culture of the Mongols, according to Stephen Turnbull (2003, p. 26):

> To be a Mongol man was to be a Mongol warrior. There is no word in the Mongol language for "soldier," and it is no exaggeration to say that the whole of a Mongol warrior's daily life was a preparation for war. The same techniques that were learnt for survival, for herding or for hunting had direct application in the Mongol campaigns… the Mongol army may alternatively be regarded as a Mongol society arranged on a war footing.

An essential part of childhood, particularly for boys, included herding and hunting with bow and arrow. These things were commonly done on horseback; consequently, Mongolian men were experts in horsemanship by the time they were conscripted into the army at the age of fifteen. The Mongol army relied heavily on its cavalry, which allowed it to move, strike, and if necessary withdraw from battle quickly.

But perhaps what is most remarkable about 13th century Mongol warfare is the fact that the entire family--and the entire society--was mobilized in support of the Khan's wars of conquest: "The Mongol armies were the Mongol people in arms: all adult males were soldiers, and all women, children of age to do herding, and animals served as the logistical 'tail' of an army," resulting in a constantly moving "citizens' army" (TURNBULL, 2003, p. 26).

As the Mongol Empire was disintegrating into smaller entities in the 1400s, Aztec society was beginning to take shape on the other side of the world. It offers yet another example of a culture in which warfare was a central part of the identity of a people. Eric Wolf (1957, pp. 130-151) has described the Aztecs, also known as the Mexica, as one of Mesoamerica's "militaristic" societies (as opposed to "theocratic") because warfare was much more widespread in the last few centuries of the pre-Hispanic period. Furthermore, within Aztec society warriors had more power and influence compared to ancient cultures of the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, or Mixtec (WOLF, 1957, p. 100).

The Aztecs settled on an island in the lagoon of Texcoco, situated in central plateau of Mexico in the 1340s. Here they established the famed Tenochtitlán, a sophisticated city connected to the mainland by a series of causeways. Some have suggested that the Aztecs served as mercenaries for other indigenous groups in the region before their ascent to imperial power in the late 1400s (AGUILAR-MORENO, 2007, p. 100).

Warfare was a defining feature of Aztec life. It was the means by which they established political and economic hegemony over their empire. Warfare also had religious significance, for most of the victims that the Aztecs sacrificed to their gods were captured in battle (WOLF, 1957, p. 132).

Military service was mandatory for all Aztec men. Commoner families, who made up the majority of the population, prepared their sons for the military by having them do hard physical work and by strictly rationing their food. Such hardships were designed to instill discipline. By the time they were 15 years old, boys were required to undergo rigorous military training at an institution called the *telpochcalli*. Here the lessons of home were reinforced and expanded: teams of youth were expected to complete public works projects such as the cleaning and repairing of causeways and aqueducts, and to carry firewood over long distances. According to Eric Wolf (1957, p. 145-147), veteran warriors trained youth in a series of exercises that eventually culminated in battlefield experience:

> War captains… taught the young men to handle weapons, including shooting arrows from a bow, throwing darts with an *atlatl* (spear-thrower), and holding a shield and a *maquahuitl* (a kind of saw-sword carved of wood and affixed with an edge of sharp obsidian razor blades). Youths were taken as apprentices to carry supplies and arms for the instructing warrior when he went to war… Eventually, they would be allowed to participate fully in battle and to attempt to capture enemy prisoners for sacrifice.

Mock battles between groups of boys--organized as competitions--were valued highly in Aztec society. Youth who deviated from *telpochcalli* training were publicly humiliated. Those who excelled might one day join the ranks of the elite warriors: the military orders known as the eagles (*cuacuauhtin*) and jaguars (*ocelomeh*). Aztec emperors granted special rights and privileges to the members of the orders: "the right to wear otherwise proscribed jewelry and daily military attire, to dress in cotton and wear sandals in the royal palace, to eat human flesh and drink *octli* (pulque) in public, to keep concubines, and to dine in the royal palaces" (AGUILAR-MORENO, 2007, p. 105).

As in many militaristic societies, women were profoundly affected by warfare. Although they were not allowed to become warriors, Aztec women defended their families from external attacks, even if that meant jeopardizing their own lives. But as in any society undergoing constant warfare, women were most directly affected by the reality and the effects of death. Aztec women

frequently lost their husbands, their brothers, and their children in battle, and the burdens of everyday life were much heavier as a result.

A range of experiences differentiates Spartan, Mongol, and Aztec societies. At the same time, certain commonalities appear: the dominance of state or empire over personal relationships; child-rearing and educational practices characterized by hard physical training and harsh discipline; the extraordinary role of military symbols in songs, rituals, and art; a cult of masculinity; and absorption of the family unit by the warfare state.

It is worth considering the degree to which militarization has shaped US society in comparable ways. In the US today, intelligence agencies fund "educational" programs for children as young as 11 and 12 years old in order to recruit them for future government work; entertainment and media companies regularly create movies, television series, and video games that have the effect of normalizing torture; the Department of Defense and military corporations are employing social scientists for counterinsurgency work in the Middle East and Central Asia; and millions of military family members are bearing the tremendous burdens of extended deployments, post-traumatic stress disorder, battlefield injuries, and financial turmoil (GONZÁLEZ, 2010). Yet in spite of all this, vast numbers of people in the US continue to glorify military service, to unquestioningly approve of illegal wars of aggression, and to view war as "a force that gives us meaning" (HEDGES, 2003).

WAR, HUMAN NATURE, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

So many societies have engaged in warfare that it is tempting to ask: Is war a part of human nature? Are militarism and warfare inevitable?

A recent poll conducted by Zogby International reveals that nearly three out of five people in the US agreed that "waging war is a part of human nature," which would imply that a majority of people in that country think warfare is rooted in *Homo sapiens*' evolutionary past (ZOGBY, 2009). However, overwhelming anthropological evidence indicates that this is not true. In fact, it appears that warfare is only an invention--and a relatively recent one at that. Writing more than a half-century ago, Margaret Mead (1940) argued that organized armed conflict between rival groups--that is, the institution of warfare--had never been invented by some societies. Mead noted

that some contemporary hunting and gathering groups, such as the Inuit of the Arctic region and the Lepchas of the Himalayas, did not engage in war, but instead resolved conflicts through other means. The ethnographic record reveals that humans have been creative when it comes to ending conflicts: mediation, duels, ordeals, games and contests, court systems, self-help, and other means have all functioned as alternatives to war.

More recently, others have expanded upon Mead's hypothesis. In his book *Beyond War*, anthropologist Douglas Fry (2007) identifies 74 "nonwarring" societies, mostly hunter-gatherers such as the Mbuti of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Semai of the Malay peninsula. (Many of these societies are not completely free from violence, but have used means other than organized armed conflict for settling disputes.) The evidence is clear: human warfare does not have evolutionary roots, and Fry (2007, p. 2) argues that *Homo sapiens*has "a substantial capacity for dealing with conflicts non-violently." He suggests that this might help humanity pave the way towards a future in which warring is less common.

Another anthropologist, R. Brian Ferguson, has conducted more than 30 years of research on war and has reached similar conclusions. He summarizes his findings in an essay entitled "Ten Points on War," and notes that "Our Species Is Not Biologically Destined for War" and "War Is Not an Inescapable Part of Social Existence" (FERGUSON, 2008, p. 33-34). After presenting a devastating critique of those who argue that humans have an innate predisposition to violence, Ferguson systematically outlines six "preconditions" which make war more likely to occur, namely: sedentary agriculture (which began approximately 10,000 years ago); increased population density; pronounced social hierarchies; trade, particularly of prestige goods; "bounded social groups"; and "serious ecological reversals." War became common once a series of long-term processes was set in motion. According to Ferguson (2008, p. 35):

> (1) as those preconditions became more common, war began in more places; (2) war spread, often quite gradually, into surrounding areas; (3) the rise of ancient states projected militarism deep into their peripheries and along trade routes; and (4) Western expansion since the late fifteenth century often generated or intensified war in contact zones.

War is a relatively recent human invention that has spread as humanity has become more agricultural, more organized into hierarchical state societies and expanding empires, and more involved in cross-cultural conquest and trade.

Ferguson (2008, p. 34) concludes with a disturbing point: "people have the *capacity* to learn, even to enjoy, war and build it into their social lives and institutions." Furthermore, he argues, "once a given society is internally adapted for war, making war becomes much easier--a necessity, even, for the reproduction of existing social relations. Commentators have often compared war to a disease, but a more apt analogy is an addiction" (p. 40).

Any serious analysis of militarism in the US today must include a wide range of related phenomena: public acceptance of (or passive acquiescence to) the widespread presence of the military in US society; the rise of obedient technical experts and simultaneous disappearance of critical thinkers and generalists; frequent dehumanization of people in other societies; a naive belief in US exceptionalism (the idea that the US is morally superior to other countries and therefore can do no wrong); the prevalence of marketing and public relations approaches to dealing with complex social problems; the drift to imperialism, though with a different label; an apparent willingness on the part of scientists and other professionals to abandon ethical principles; a reappearance of dissociated persons out of touch with their own capacity to transcend violence; the artistic, academic, and cultural embrace of militarism; and the predominance of apathy, triviality, and escapism in US life.

DEMILITARIZING CULTURE

On the surface, the possibility of demilitarizing US society seems remote. Although US troops have been withdrawn from Iraq, approximately 100,000 US troops remain in Afghanistan, and more than 100,000 Defense Department contractors are there today (SCAHILL, 2009). President Barack Obama's defense budget for 2010 authorized $550 billion for the Pentagon and an additional $130 billion in spending for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan--an amount greater than that spent on defense by former President George W. Bush during his last year in office. In the meantime, the US Defense Department recently reported success in meeting its recruitment goals, probably due to the fact that many people are unable to find work as recession plagues the global economy (ALVAREZ, 2009; MILES, 2008).

The bigger picture is more disturbing still. The US accounts for nearly *half* of the world's military expenditures. To put it another way, our government spends more on its military than *the next 14 countries combined.*

Given these grim realities, what are the prospects for those concerned about our militarizing culture? What hope can be offered to young people in the US when a president promising "change" prolongs military occupations abroad and increases the Pentagon's budget at home?

The end result of a militarized society is a greater propensity for war and its consequences: death, disfigurement, disease, depression, and destruction. Many people in the US have forgotten this reality.

In some ways, the disconnection is not surprising. Catherine Lutz (2009, p. 36-37), who has exposed the deep roots anchoring modern-day militarism in her books *Homefront* and *Empire of Bases*, notes that the Defense Department has spent billions of dollars on "decades-long work to control the messages that the American people receive and the beliefs they hold about the innocence and high civilizational goals of the US military." (According to the *New York Times*, the US Army alone budgeted $1.35 billion for advertising between 2006 and 2011. (ELLIOT 2008). Pentagon officials and the compliant corporate media have also sanitized the brutality and violence inherent in militarism's predictable products: war and occupation (SOLOMON, 2006).

But all one needs to do is to look at war's victims to understand why a militarized society should be an anachronism today. All one needs to do is to look at the wedding photo of Ty Ziegel and Renee Kline, who were married on October 7, 2006. At first glance, it appears like any other wedding photo: the beautiful bride wears a lovely white dress and holds a bouquet of roses, while the groom stands by her side, wearing the impeccable black and blue dress suit of the US Marine Corps. But a closer look reveals that Sergeant Ty Ziegel has been severely mutilated--his face is nearly unrecognizable as the result of burns from a car bombing in Iraq in 2004. (Ty Ziegel also had half of his left arm amputated.) Is he smiling? Is he frowning? The scar tissue is so thick that it is impossible to tell. Renee Kline appears stunned. Her face stares vacantly into the distance. We have no idea what she might be thinking. The photographer, Nina Berman (STEINMAN, 2007), says that her photo "shows how war has crept its way into the most common phase of

daily life." One is not sure whether to weep tears of joy for love's triumph, or tears of grief for the severe injuries inflicted upon the young man[6].

To understand why a militarized society should be an anachronism today, all one needs to do is to hear the story of NoriaBarkat, a seven-year-old girl from Farah province in Afghanistan. She and her two sisters suffered severe burns on May 4, 2009 when US helicopters bombed the small village of Granai. According to a report, "the entire left side of her body [was] a patchwork of weeping bandages," and NoriaBarkat had to undergo multiple skin-graft operations in the weeks following her injury. Photos of young survivors of the air strikes are heartrending: the images of children with blistered and charred faces and suppurating wounds are nearly impossible to bear. Yet others in Granai suffered a fate far worse. The US bombing killed NoriaBarkat's mother, along with as many as 96 other civilians, according to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. The attack killed more Afghan civilians in one day than any other since the US-led invasion began in late 2001 (SMALLMAN, 2009; BOONE; MACASKILL; TRAN, 2009).

Thousands of accounts like these can be found in the tragic annals of occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, though they are largely invisible to the American public. Making them visible will be a necessary task for those hoping to change the status quo. Now more than ever before, opponents of US militarism must begin "identifying and challenging the pillars of belief and the streams of profit that support business as usual within the military normal" (LUTZ, 2009, p. 37).

There is much work to be done. But there are concrete measures that might eventually break the shackles of our militarizing culture, a culture that has become something of a tradition. We might take inspiration from Franz Boas, the renowned anthropologist who once asked: "How can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them down."

[6] Ty Ziegel's troubles continued after returning to the US from his deployment. He underwent approximately two years of rehabilitation, but he had difficulty holding a job after treatment. He hoped that monthly disability checks from the Veterans Administration might help to pay expenses, but he received much less payment that what he had expected. Eventually, the VA sent him a letter that "rated" his injuries according to a cold bureaucratic calculus: "80 percent for facial disfigurement, 60 percent for left arm amputation, a mere 10 percent for head trauma and nothing for his left lobe brain injury, right eye blindness, and jaw fracture" (PROBST, 2007).

Breaking down the pervasive ideology of militarism could take many forms. Shaking the pillars of belief--exploding the myths surrounding and perpetuating militarism--is one way of bringing about change. As points of departure, we might consider the following:

a) *Exploding the myth of generosity and goodwill*. Military recruiters (including those recruiting social scientists for embedded work) often convince potential recruits that the armed forces are primarily concerned with delivering humanitarian aid, economic development, and emergency relief abroad and at home. This has become a leading motive for many young people to join the military. Anthropologist David Graeber (2007, p. 38) refers to this syndrome as an "army of altruists." He asks: "Why do working-class kids join the army anyway? Because, like any teenager, they want to escape the world of tedious work and meaningless consumerism, to live a life of adventure and camaraderie, in which they are doing something genuinely noble." The military appears to offer this noble prospect to nearly all young people in the US. Few other institutions do. It is striking evidence of how military institutions are sophisticated enough to co-opt the idealism of our youth and to draw them into cycles of violence.

b) *Exploding the myth of US exceptionalism*. The idea that our society is fundamentally different from--and morally superior to--other societies is among the most entrenched and perilous ideologies lying behind militarism. Some have argued that it can be traced to the Puritans who arrived in North America in the early 1600s, and cite John Winthrop's famous "city on a hill" sermon as evidence. For centuries, the idea of US exceptionalism has been a powerful force in academic, legal, and popular discourses. It has also served to justify conquest, "Manifest Destiny," and military intervention on nearly every continent over the past two centuries. In essence, it is a peculiar form of ethnocentrism--and as such, anthropologists are in a strong position to critique it and to expose its pernicious consequences.

c) *Exploding the myth of war as entertainment*. More and more, media corporations present war as light entertainment. Among the most successful recruiting tools developed by the Pentagon and its corporate allies is *America's Army*, a series of video games available for free downloading on various computer platforms. The man who conceived of the idea, Colonel Casey Wardynski, noted that he envisioned it as "a virtual Soldier experience that was engaging, informative, and entertaining." Recruiters have used it at amusement parks, sports events, and other venues. According to Nick Turse (2008, p. 117-118), the "first person shooter" game was developed by gaming giants Epic Games and NVIDIA, with support from Lucasfilm's THX, Dolby Laboratories, and other companies. He notes: "It hits the very youth demographic the Army was targeting for potential recruits as well as their younger siblings." For psychologist and former West Point professor Dave Grossman (2009), the effects of such games (along with other factors) are insidious: "We are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the infliction of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment: vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we are learning to like it."

Although militarism is a powerful force in the US today, exploding these and other myths that surround it might make an impact on decommissioning American society, if supported by independent (and non-commercial) media and a more autonomous university system. One thing is certain: doing nothing at all will only perpetuate our militarizing culture and its harmful effects around the world. We can take heart from the lessons that history has to offer. As the eminent historian Howard Zinn (1967, p. 122) once observed: "The American people have the courage to fight. We have shown this a dozen times in the past, from Bunker Hill to Gettysburg, from Normandy to Guadalcanal. We also have the courage to *stop* fighting, not when someone else decides for us, but when *we* decide for ourselves."

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