SACRIFICIAL U.S. WAR-CULTURE: COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND THE ABSENCE OF SELF-AWARENESS

Kelly Denton-Borhaug
Moravian College

Abstract: This article explores the potent sacrificial sacred canopy that shrouds rhetoric, practices, and institutions of post-9/11 war-culture in the United States. Analyzing examples from popular culture, presidential rhetoric, and military history, especially Andrew Bacevich’s *America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*, I show how the depth and breadth of sacrificial rhetoric and logic result in a highly disciplined practice of framing and decision-making about militarism and war in the United States. Sacrificial linguistic patterns profoundly ignite and transcendentalize militarization and war, even while simultaneously mitigating conscious awareness, concern, and protest.

Key Words: sacrifice, war-culture, Christianity, nationalism, rhetoric, violence

On April 30, 2016, the anti-war activist, peace builder, author/poet, and spiritual icon Daniel Berrigan died at the age of 94. Speaking about the meaning of Berrigan’s life work, Ken Butigan, Director of Pace e Bene, described one encounter: “For several hours, he shared with me his vision, which essentially boiled down to this: ‘We live in a culture of death—and it is up to us to resist it.’”

Or in Berrigan’s own words, looking back on his life: “Peacemaking is tough, unfinished, blood-ridden. Everything is worse now than when I started, but I’m at peace. We walk our hope and that’s the only way of keeping it going.”

1Butigan 2016.
2As quoted by Matt Meyer, email message to the “Peace and Justice Studies Association” May 1, 2016.
Daniel Berrigan’s life and words have resonance for anyone working to analyze U.S. militarization and war. Over the last fifteen years, with the events of 9/11 as a springboard, deep impulses and tectonic shifts in U.S. culture spurred increasing militarization in the United States. But moreover, and at least equally disconcerting, a strange but little recognized cognitive dissonance spread in U.S. war-culture. For it seems that with every passing year, militarization in the United States expanded in ratio to citizens’ increasing lack of self-awareness or concern. As I put the question in my first book, “How is it that U.S. citizens could be living in the middle of the largest war-culture the world has ever known, and have so little consciousness of it?”

In spring of 2016, this state of affairs was such that Jake Sullivan, the policy adviser for Hillary Clinton at the State Department and in her presidential campaign, could casually comment without irony: “There’s no doubt that Hillary Clinton’s more muscular brand of American foreign policy is better matched to 2016 than it was to 2008.”

In this article I explore and analyze one important source that mostly goes unnoticed, but profoundly contributes to citizens’ lack of consciousness about the extent of war-culture in the U.S. This source is indebted to religious ideas and language, but stretches beyond religious cultures and practices. It is ubiquitous and has strong traction in U.S. culture, but mostly resides below the surface of conscious awareness; nevertheless, in abiding ways this dynamic shapes the way citizens think, make decisions, and rationalize the war-culture we have created. I refer to the rhetoric, logic, and practices of sacrifice that ignite and inflame militarization and war, even while the same language and thinking simultaneously diffuse conscious awareness and concern, much less protest.

I argue that a seemingly omnipotent sacrificial sacred canopy shrouds popular rhetoric, practices, and institutions of war-culture in the United States. Such an argument flies in the face of dominant assumptions in American culture; popular opinion would have it that citizens and especially leaders approach decision-making about war with “a clean slate,” as it were. Supposedly we logically and neutrally calculate how to address “national interests” and the merits and deficits of each armed conflict we enter through the theoretical method of Just War Theory, guided by national and international law. This naiveté is at the heart of our self-delusion. In addition to other factors, widespread linguistic habits and patterns of sacrificial language and logic successfully discipline citizens and also leaders, such that the violence of

---

3Denton-Borhaug 2014.

4Dowd 2016.
our current wars remains mysterious to us, and clear analysis of war’s true costs is disabled.

THE SOCIETY OF MILITARY HISTORY

Let me explain “sacrificial war-culture” by way of an anecdote that comes from the 2016 conference for The Society of Military History. In a panel discussion of military historians gathered to discuss themes from my book, U.S. War-culture, Sacrifice and Salvation, historian Lisa Mundey explored cultural changes that have taken place in the United States with respect to militarization since the time of the Cold War. In her words:

In the early Cold War era, even as the national security state became entrenched, Americans were still culturally anti-militarist. They recognized the necessity of having the armed forces for national defense, but rejected the national identification of being aggressive, war-like, or regimented like the Nazi Germans or militaristic Japanese. In the post-9/11 world, Americans are no longer culturally anti-militarist.

What explains this change? Mundey in particular reflects on the shift in recent decades in popular culture’s portrayals of the military. After WWII and through the first part of the 1960s, American soldiers could be portrayed as “underdogs” in popular culture, and Americans could “poke fun” at the military through TV series such as Sergeant Bilko or McCale’s Navy. Shows such as these did not hesitate to highlight characteristics of soldiers as bumbling, ineffective, and fun loving. These largely were affectionate portrayals, and they humanized the military for many Americans. Eventually, national tension and polarization during the Vietnam War era began to eat away at this playful, tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the military. But beginning with the 1980s, and especially influenced by the discourse of the Reagan administration, Mundey describes a definitive cultural transformation that stressed glorification of the professional military class and its ideals. Reagan combined use of patriotic symbols and open praise of the military, while simultaneously emphasizing that enlistment was strictly a matter “of individual preference.” Discourse from this era increasingly limited any requirements made of the populace to verbalize “support for the troops.” Meanwhile, Mundey claims, the earlier, more easy-going attitude toward the military gave way from “American soldier” to “uncritical hero.” As she said at our panel,

No one would dream of making a movie like Stripes (1981) today. It would be excoriated for being offensive to the military. The one attempt to make a TV military sitcom, Enlisted (Fox, 2014), failed. Enlisted actor Chris Lowell

---

5Mundey 2016.
surmised that it had been decades since television networks even tried to produce a military comedy because “there’s such a sensitivity and fear around mocking or laughing at any public service,” and he pointed out that the show’s creator was “hell-bent on making sure the military knows we’re laughing with them, not at them.”

Mundey’s work provides the broader historical context to introduce my analysis of sacrificial war-culture. For if it would be impossible to make *Stripes* today, what kind of popular cultural portrayal has taken its place? Strong focus on the military, its institutions and culture, and war, is no less common today than ever in U.S. popular culture. It’s just that the content of the portrayal has drastically changed. Our close attention to the highly disciplined fictional portrayals of war and militarization in contemporary mainstream popular culture can tell us a great deal.

A recent episode from the popular television series, *House of Cards*, tells the story with respect to the post-9/11 cultural transformation in the United States regarding the disciplining dynamics of U.S. militarization and war. Featuring actor Kevin Spacey as a fictitious villainous president of the United States, and actor Robin Wright as the equally heartless and ambitious first lady, this highly acclaimed TV series is an exercise in guilty pleasure for the television viewer. Occasionally the series ventures into the realm of religion, and in one striking episode, the president travels to Arlington National Cemetery to attend a funeral for soldiers who died as a result of the president’s own orders to deploy troops. Viewers observe the president standing uneasily on the lawn during the graveside service, as his glance moves between the open grave, and the distraught spouse of one of the dead who stands near him. Then the clergyperson intones the following graveside homily:

> And God said to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son who you love, Isaac, and sacrifice him.” Abraham was willing, but when he raised his knife above Isaac on the altar, God stopped him, for Abraham had proven his devotion to God. Then God, to prove his own devotion to us, made his own sacrifice. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son. Devotion. Sacrifice. Love. This is what the Lord teaches us, what these young men have exemplified. We shall forever honor them, and in heaven they will have eternal life. Amen.

The absence of any irony in this *House of Cards* portrayal of a military funeral invites further thinking. Like other military funerals American citizens have seen on television, or attended in person, the scene comes across as utterly believable, because the sacrificial rhetoric, logic and practices, such as those front and center in this “fictional world,” have become endemic to real-world

---

6Yahr 2014.

7“Season Three, Chapter 30” 2015, *House of Cards*. 
U.S. ways of militarism and war. In many realms of culture, entertainment included, citizens have become disciplined and acculturated to frame and interpret war and militarism precisely through this sacrificial lens.

If Mundey concluded that the current trend is to “glorify the military,” sacrificial language and logic provide the specific tools through which glorification takes effect. The *House of Cards* homily demonstrates the logical steps in common discourse about the military, especially military injury and death, in the United States. It is fascinating that in a nation with declining membership in Christian religious institutions, nevertheless Christian speech, doctrine, and ritual practices play a dominant role in this logic regarding “the necessity of war.” According to this thinking, God demands sacrifice as a demonstration of devotion. Sacrificial action on God’s part, through relegating Jesus to the cross, shows God’s own devotion. Sacrifice is claimed to be the ultimate form of love. The death or wounding of soldiers and the death of Jesus commonly are described with precisely the same language, as “the ultimate sacrifice,” in American culture. Like Jesus, according to this logic, soldiers show what they most value by dying for it. Thus, they are to be honored (or “glorified,” following Mundey’s language), and they will be rewarded with eternal life and remembered forever.

A cultural meme that became common in the post-9/11 era, posted on Facebook walls and spreading like a virus through social media culture, sums up the dominant message. Especially at times of national remembrance and commemoration, such as Veterans Day or Memorial Day, people across the United States can be found sharing the following message: “Remember that only two forces have ever agreed to die for you: Jesus Christ and the American Soldier. One died for your soul; the other died for your freedom. Pass it on!” Frequently the message is attached to images of Jesus on the cross, juxtaposed with photos of flag-draped coffins of American soldiers.

But lest we imagine that this sacrificial logic and language are found only in popular forms of culture, I additionally share examples of the same dynamic from the two American presidents of this same period of American history. Both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations have made ample use of this rhetoric and thinking. It would seem that the Bush administration made more explicit reference to Christian resources in his rhetoric, but otherwise I would argue that there is relatively little difference between these administrations regarding the acculturating impact of sacrificial war discourse on the American populace in the post-9/11 era.

---

8“The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.” Pew Research Center 2015a.
Among many examples from the Bush presidency, his radio address on Easter, 2008, stands out:

Good Morning. This weekend, families across America are coming together to celebrate Easter . . . during this special and holy time of year, millions of Americans pause to remember a sacrifice that transcended the grave and redeemed the world. . . . On Easter we hold in our hearts those who will be spending this holiday far from home—our troops. . . . I deeply appreciate the sacrifice that they and their families are making. . . . On Easter, we especially remember those who have given their lives for the cause of freedom. These brave individuals have lived out the words of the Gospel, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

This language holds deep emotional resonance for the American public, not to mention its powerful shaping influence. The above example also highlights the ease with which Christian resources may be manipulated to slip into civil religious mandates and frameworks. Elsewhere I have written about the dishonesty of these messages: as we see here, the biblical narrative of a “nonviolent messiah” neatly is exploited to underwrite glorification of war’s death and destruction.10

Meanwhile, the House of Cards fictional graveside scene would appear eerily to mirror words spoken by Vice President Biden at a commemorative event at Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day, 2014, “You are the veterans of America, the most trusted among us, and the most tested of all Americans . . . who have served and sacrificed for all of us. You are not only the heart and soul, but you are the very spine of this nation.”11 Note how Biden’s language links sacrificial activity to the deepest meaning of the national imagery itself.

Even President Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize speech did not escape these dynamics. In a speech supposedly given to celebrate peace, Obama deftly drew upon the logic of sacrifice to rationalize a defense for continuing war:

Peace entails sacrifice. . . . The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity.12

Though many scholars and journalists alike analyzed the speech on various levels, I have yet to find any critique that investigates the way Obama’s

---

9Bush, “President Bush’s Radio Address, Easter 2008.”
10Denton-Borhaug, forthcoming.
11Bakotic 2014.
12Obama 2009.
rhetoric successfully drew upon the “necessity of sacrifice” both to weaken notions of peace and to defend war without end.

Returning to Mundey’s insight, we can take the analysis of sacrificial rhetoric and logic further. For not only does this language contribute to an illogical glorification of the military. Elisabeth Samet, Professor of English Literature at WestPoint, called this “linguistic subterfuge.” She was struck by the disciplining nature of the language of militarism and war in our own time that inevitably marshals every line of discourse into “a narrative of redemption.”  

I argue for even more explicit awareness regarding these rhetorical processes. For these stories of “redemption” consistently are shaped and ordered by way of sacrificial logic and language. In addition to promoting a de-realized glorification of soldiers and militarization, sacrificial language and thinking specifically ease pathways for uncritical development and use of violence. Furthermore, this discourse provides ample cover for effective concealment of the consequences of militarization and war. In the end, sacrificial rhetoric plays a powerful role in the lack of conscious awareness of citizens in the post-9/11 world of the United States about our own reality: we live in a sacrificial war-culture.

U.S. WAR-CULTURE

I define “U.S. war-culture” as the interpenetration of the ethos, institutions, and practices of war with ever-increasing facets of supposedly civilian sites of culture in the United States. From the economy to educational institutions, patterns of labor and consumption, popular culture and entertainment, religious institutions, and rituals of civic remembrance and celebration, citizens of the United States are connected to militarism and war 24/7. President Eisenhower’s concern in his final speech as president to the nation in 1961, when he coined the terminology of “the military-industrial complex,” now seems almost quaint, when set aside the expanded definition of “the complex” from sociologist Nick Turse to better match our contemporary reality. If Eisenhower worried about the threat posed by the interpenetrations of war and weapons corporations and manufacturing, the Pentagon, and government branches of the United States, what would he say about the growth of these dynamics in the U.S. since his time? At the beginning of the second decade of this new century, according to Turse, we live in the midst of a “military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homeland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex.”

Samet 2014.

Denton-Borhaug 2014. See Chapter One for a more in depth exploration of the diverse facets of war-culture in the United States.

Turse 2008, 16.
Of course, cognitive dissonance is not an uncommon consequence for those who engage in cultural analysis and criticism of the United States. For example, columnist Jenée Desmond-Harris writes about the studied denial of racism by many citizens in the U.S., despite a tsunami of evidence to the contrary. Desmond-Harris reported on Department of Justice findings regarding Ferguson, Missouri’s police and municipal courts, focusing on evidence that city institutions consistently had violated the constitutional rights of the city’s black residents. But the primary response to her writing was “a barrage of angry emails” demanding to know “why she had to make everything about race.”\textsuperscript{16} This was the dominant response, despite damning evidence pointing to unabashed racist language and practice, such as emails that became public from Ferguson public officials. One email submitted as court evidence featured “a photo of a bare-chested group of dancing women, apparently in Africa, with the caption, ‘Michelle Obama’s High School Reunion.’” Nevertheless, readers were adamant in their refusal of any racist attitudes at work in the Ferguson municipal government. Faced with such cognitive dissonance, Desmond-Harris concluded that people resent being confronted with information that conflicts with the way they have been acculturated to see, or wish to see, the United States and themselves.

At times it is breathtaking to observe the cognitive somersaults turned to protect a given perspective against evidence that would contradict it. These sites of cultural cognitive dissonance deserve further investigation, for they hint at important, largely subconscious and deep-seated notions of identity, and assumptions about privilege and control, that citizens feel are in danger of being tread upon or injured. In addition to deconstructing the deep rivers of racism in U.S. culture, I have discovered that asking questions about sacrificial war-culture also raises “hackles” for many citizens. Questioning whether it is a good idea to describe the death of soldiers as “the ultimate sacrifice” is akin to a kind of heresy in U.S. culture. A very similar reaction takes place in many religious settings, if one dares to ask whether it is a good idea to describe Jesus’s death on the cross as “the ultimate sacrifice.” In both cases, profound, cherished, even sacred identities seemingly are put at risk, as if to investigate and discuss such things were to engage in immoral and impermissible behavior.

Elizabeth Samet also wonders about deeply emotional and hostile responses to certain questions about war that she believes must be faced, such as: “Is war ever futile?”\textsuperscript{17} For not a few citizens, posing the question of futility is to risk damage to the frame of glorification and “the necessity of sacrifice.”

\textsuperscript{16}Desmond-Harris 2016.
\textsuperscript{17}Samet 2014.
The post-9/11 era is filled with examples of eager citizens rushing to prohibit any such thinking or discourse. For instance, Samet points to one incident that took place during promotion of the popular film, *Lone Survivor*, based on the book by former Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell. In one interview, CNN journalist Jake Tapper mused aloud as he spoke with Luttrell regarding what he saw as the film’s ambiguous message. Given the events portrayed in the film, especially the excessively violent scenes of the deaths of American SEALs, Tapper burst out, “I don’t want any more senseless American death.” The tone of the interview immediately shifted, as Luttrell sat forward in his seat and sharply rebutted Tapper regarding any message about “hopelessness” or “senselessness” in the film or book. In the Twitter feed that followed, a barrage of hostile comments erupted from viewers who were incensed that Tapper might actually suggest such an interpretation. As one tweet read, “Jake Tapper was about 3 seconds from getting his throat caved in.”

A SACRIFICIAL SACRED CANOPY

The conflation of sacrificial rhetoric, logic and practices with war may be traced in the United States from the very beginnings of its history. Research that supports this conclusion is growing, such as Philip Jenkins’s *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*. Not only the United States in this era, but according to Jenkins, in every nation “the potent concepts of martyrdom and redemptive sacrifice . . . pervaded wartime language.” Because the warring countries of Europe all relied on Christian sacrificial language to transcendentalize war efforts, and also because war requires that the enemy be dehumanized in order to justify his death, a common religious ideology among these warring nations emphasized “dehumanization” by way of “dechristianization.” In other words, as warring Christian nations relied on the same religious sacrificial notions to justify and sacralize war efforts, it became necessary to differentiate one’s own Christian efforts from those of the Christian enemy by way of disaffiliating him from “true” Christian faith. Among countless examples of sacrificial rhetoric and thinking to justify the war effort, “Pastor and popular novelist Harold Bell Wright declared that ‘a man may give his life for humanity in a bloody trench as truly upon a bloody cross’.”

---

18Samet 2014.
20Jenkins 2014.
21Jenkins 2014, 96.
22Jenkins 2014, 97.
23Jenkins 2014, 102.
The ubiquity and longevity of “the necessity of war-as-sacrifice” should not surprise us, for sociologists such as Catherine Albanese long have noted the way that language of sacrifice surges in times of actual or potential war.\textsuperscript{24} The question is, why?

This question may be explored through diverse disciplinary perspectives. I have found that instead of attempting to identify one overarching theory of sacrifice to explain these dynamics across time, it is more helpful to draw together diverse theories of sacrifice, since every theory or analysis shines light on a slightly different vector of sacrificial war-culture. We can gain better understanding of our reality by incorporating the insights from a wide variety of scholars on this theme.

For instance, Peter Berger’s sociological theory related to human world-building is one resource that helps us understand why sacrificial rhetoric surged as the United States descended into war following 9/11. War is one of those marginal experiences that presents a potential threat to the given order, the \textit{nomos} of any social world. Berger characterizes human beings as preeminent “world builders,” who effortlessly pour themselves into the creation of social worlds. We can’t help it, and we can’t live without these efforts, or without the worlds themselves that come into being through our outpouring. Nevertheless, once created, human beings live in a forgetful state with respect to their very activity as world constructors. Society appears to us as “given,” acting upon and shaping us in turn.

Berger thus outlines a dynamic dialectic between the construction of human societies and the shaping of human persons. At the same time, as he emphasizes, “all social worlds are inherently precarious.” The marginalization of war represents a threat to society’s \textit{nomos}, unveiling the reality of any society’s precarious hold and its “taken for granted” reality. In such circumstances, society seems less formidable and inevitable, and the social legitimations propping up the world come up for more intense questioning. In these contexts, Berger writes, “religious legitimations almost invariably come to the front.”\textsuperscript{25} “The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk inevitably, toward it.”\textsuperscript{26}

The rhetoric and logic of sacrifice provide “an appropriate plausibility structure,” through which individuals absorb and integrate war’s “anomic experiences” both at the level of individual consciousness and in society’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[25]Berger 1967, 29, 44.
\item[26]Berger 1967, 51.
\end{footnotes}
norms and institutions. Think about Presidents Bush and Obama’s rhetoric above. In both cases, the actual destructiveness and death of war are mystified, rationalized and posited as inevitable and necessary by way of civil-religious sacrificial language and logic. War and violence are transcendentalized. This is why, in times of potential or actual war, the rhetoric of sacrifice surges, forming a sacrificial sacred canopy that acts as a kind of theodicy in the face of the incomprehensible human (and planetary) suffering that comes with war.

In addition to sociological theory, cognitive linguistic theory, such as from scholar George Lakoff, adds to this analysis. Lakoff persuasively argues that “cognitive metaphors” unconsciously shape our way of thinking, valuing, and acting. The dominant cognitive metaphor we tend to use in our language to think and speak about morality is that of wealth, or “keeping the moral books.” Lakoff writes, “Whenever we are not talking literally about money, and we ask whether a course of action is ‘worth it,’ we are using this financial metaphor to treat the resulting well-being or harm as if they were money.” Exchange systems, including and especially sacrificial notions of exchange, are endemic to the ways we speak, think, and act, and we tend not to question or analyze the logic behind them; they are normalized, readily spring into action, and function unconsciously. The sacrificial logic that is involved in the assumption that something must be offered up, destroyed, killed, and eviscerated, as exchange for something of supposedly greater benefit to us, is very deeply embedded in the collective human (sub)consciousness. This too is part of the reason why we tend not to raise questions about sacrificial rationalizations and justifications.

Elsewhere I have identified many other diverse theories of sacrifice, culminating in a rich multidisciplinary trove of scholarship that illuminates these dynamics. Sociology, political science, history, anthropology, feminist studies, communication studies, economics, theology and more all have a role to play in helping us to better understand the sacrificial war-culture that so deeply characterizes the post-9/11 United States.

SACRIFICIAL “LINGUISTIC SUBTERFUGE” AND “NATIONAL INTERESTS”

If historian Lisa Mundey helps us better understand the historical context through which sacrificial rhetoric and logic has surged in the post-9/11 period, a second military historian, Jacqueline Whitt, raised another important issue.

---

27Berger 1967, 58.
28Lakoff 2002, 44.
30Denton-Borhaug 2014.
during our panel at The Society of Military History. What is the interplay between this civil-religious language and logic of sacrifice, and the language and thinking of “national interests?” Whitt wonders. A military historian working to train members of the military in national security policy and strategy, she notes that “national interest” tends to dominate as a linguistic category in her area, much more than the language of sacrifice. As she says, “discussions are usually driven by consideration of ‘interests’ alongside risk, vulnerability and uncertainty.” This deserves further thinking.

Andrew Bacevich’s 2016 America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History explores U.S. military involvement in the Middle East from the 1953 coup in Iran (engineered by the CIA) to the present. This work, I propose, is a helpful bridge between my focus on the rhetoric of “the necessity-of-sacrifice of war” that has surged in the post-9/11 era, and Whitt’s questions about how this same language plays any role in national security policy and strategy discourse.

According to Bacevich, the decades-long U.S. war in the Middle East has had everything to do with one essential U.S. “interest”: oil. As he writes, “oil has always defined the raison d’être of the War for the Greater Middle East.” One fascinating chapter in this history comes from the Carter administration, when for a moment President Carter attempted to redefine the sense of American entitlement to the world’s oil in favor of a different mentality that would address a malfunction in the nation’s moral compass. As Bacevich puts it, “an oil addiction . . . signified something far, far more troubling—a people that had lost its moral bearings.” In an ambitious and risky speech to the nation, Carter outlined the problem with religious language:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one consumes.

The embrace of sacrifice would play a role in addressing the need for “a restoration of American values,” according to Bacevich. But sacrifice in this discourse from the Carter era had far different connotations from those explored thus far in the post-9/11 period. As Bacevich describes it, the sacrifice proposed by Carter in this earlier context meant “getting by with less,” and

31Whitt 2016.
32Bacevich 2016, 3.
33Bacevich 2016, 18.
34Bacevich 2016, 19.
choosing against “narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility” (note the language of interests here!)\textsuperscript{35}

Though initially the speech was received positively, nevertheless, very quickly leaders of the nation, followed by a majority of prickly citizens, turned against what Whitehouse speechwriters described as Carter’s “exercise in national pastorship.”\textsuperscript{36} Bacevich writes,

The idea of giving up pretzels and potato chips in favor of broccoli and asparagus is one thing. Actually following through tends to be something else again. And so it was with Carter’s call to restore American virtue through self-denial and self-sacrifice. . . . As Americans contemplated all that they would be obliged to give up, the prospect became less attractive. The carping started within days.\textsuperscript{37}

Analyzing what took place in this struggle, Bacevich describes a “battle” of “self-interest against self-sacrifice.” In the end, self-interest won out in a “defacto referendum,” in the public square, with oil as the epitome of “the American way of life” rising to the top.

In addition, elsewhere in the book and in interviews, Bacevich more explicitly describes the murkiness of the relationship between national interest and national identity, drawing upon the ideology of American exceptionalism to complicate his analysis:

I argue that there really was much more at stake than simply access to oil, that in the context of the times, the war for the Greater Middle East really becomes an effort to refute the notion that the United States is a country that has to accept limits. [Instead we see the effort] to affirm the claim of American exceptionalism, of the uniqueness of our special status in history and in the world at large.\textsuperscript{38}

In the book’s conclusion, Bacevich summarizes his point. In order to preserve a way of life based on extreme disparity with the rest of the world (today the United States holds 5 percent of the world’s population and 25 percent of the world’s wealth, in his estimate), a “paradoxical logic” took hold, to define American “freedom” as the freedom to maintain this same privileged position in the world. This would be accomplished through averting any armed challenge to the inequitable state of affairs, by developing outsized and superior military strength. From the Cold War to the present, Bacevich argues, “containment” as a military strategy would be more correctly defined

\textsuperscript{35}Bacevich 2016, 19.
\textsuperscript{36}Bacevich 2016, 20.
\textsuperscript{37}Bacevich 2016, 20–21.
\textsuperscript{38}Goodman 2016a.
as “preponderance”: “honoring military power into a utensil that would maintain America’s privileged position, and not so incidentally, provide a continuing rationale for the entire apparatus of national security.”

There is much to appreciate about Bacevich’s historical analysis of “The War for the Greater Middle East.” But his analysis also may be enhanced through a comparative investigation such as my own, focusing on religious ideas, narratives, rhetoric and logic that also have played a role in shaping this history. For example, one could begin with further exploration of the religious foundations of American exceptionalism, that “unique and special role” as Bacevich describes it, that Americans hold as central to their identity as a nation. A sharp irony here involves increasing numbers of American citizens who may be wary of religious institutions, but who nevertheless have been shaped and formed by the religious understandings at the basis of American nationalism.

Though not particularly religious himself, President Reagan adeptly flattered citizens with religious allusions throughout his political career, such as “the city on the hill” vision of themselves as an exceptional nation. Re-elected for a second time, President George W. Bush interpreted the event as a “divine mandate,” even as the wars in the Middle East were spiraling downward. Bush made the most of his reelection momentum to rebrand the wars with exceptionalist language. Now the wars would be fought with the goal of “advancing the ideals . . . [through] the calling of our time . . . ending tyranny in our world.” Additional irony emerges as we consider the way in which Christian notions of American exceptionalism have been used to rationalize and energize excesses in American expansionism and control over global resources, even while these same arrogant practices adamantly go against the grain of other biblical norms of justice, such as those that measure justice according to the extent that the widow, orphan and stranger are acknowledged and provided care.

---

39 Bacevich 2016, 361.

40 “The percentage of adults who describe themselves as religiously affiliated has shrunk.” Pew Research Center 2015b.

41 As one example, see Reagan (1974). In this speech, Reagan extolled a vision of American exceptionalism, including statements such as, “Into the hands of America God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind.” But he also simultaneously sought to minimize any questions or protest with respect to an imperialistic United States’ war and militarism: “We are not a warlike people. Nor is our history filled with tales of aggressive adventures and imperialism, which might come as a shock to some of the placard painters in our modern demonstrations.”

42 Bacevich 2016, 268.
Bacevich’s important analysis further gains traction when we deepen his insights about American exceptionalism through investigation that addresses religion, including the role of the ideology I have outlined, “the necessity of war-as-sacrifice” that has become a dominant shaping meme of U.S. war-culture. In fact, the question that I raised at the beginning of this article, “How is it that American citizens live in the largest war-culture the world has ever known, and have so little awareness of it?” is mirrored by Bacevich’s own conclusions. At the end of this book, Bacevich explores the consequences of “four assumptions” that shape “the absence of self-awareness that has become an American signature.”

What are these four “assumptions”? The first involves the dominant worldview of elites who rotate through high-level U.S. national security apparatus; these precisely are the people Whitt referred to with her questions at our panel. According to Bacevich, these leaders are deeply faithful to the narrative about an “epic competition” that sees the world divided into camps—“Liberalism vs. fascism vs. communism.” But Bacevich emphasizes that the actual realities shaping Greater Middle East have little to do with this framework; in the end, not only is this mindset meaningless, but it also powerfully contributes to destructive decisions, and lack of awareness.

A second assumption builds on notions of American exceptionalism. Bacevich describes patterns of thinking that not only justify American superiority and right to rule through unassailable military might, but also seal approval upon “a superior way of life based on consumption and choice.” As I suggest below, adding a comparative religious analysis to Bacevich’s exploration of American exceptionalism provides further depth to this analysis.

Third, lack of self-awareness is shaped by the assumption that military solutions always will be the best solutions to any conflict. Think back to the quote by Hillary Clinton’s campaign advisor at the beginning of this article, and his enthusiasm about her “muscular foreign policy.” As I have argued, the “necessity of war-as-sacrifice” is a powerful frame that both disciplines against raising any questions with respect to this frame, and sacralizes militarization and war.

A last assumption once again is grounded in notions of exceptionalism; Bacevich outlines the thinking on the part of many citizens that “America’s purposes ultimately [will] win acceptance,” and American norms will be “eagerly embraced” by those we are working to subdue. In the end, Bacevich

---

43Bacevich 2016, 365.
warns, “Americans remain deep in slumber” with respect to a deeper clarity regarding our own reality and our dealings with the Greater Middle East.\footnote{Bacevich 2016, 370.}

**A FINAL WORD ABOUT THE ROLE OF SACRIFICE**

Bacevich’s pessimistic outlook on the American enterprise of war could by rephrased with the ironic religious language Tom Englehardt uses to describe our current moment: “In a Washington that seems incapable of doing anything but worshiping at the temple of the U.S. military, global policymaking has become a remarkably mindless military-first process of repetition.”\footnote{Englehardt 2016.} I close by outlining five consequences of sacrificial war-culture that expand upon the conclusions from Bacevich.

First, the sacred canopy of sacrificial U.S. war-culture results in loss of self-awareness by concealing our reality from clearer view. Here I draw upon the theological analysis of Salvadoran Jon Sobrino, who analyzes the nature of the forces of global injustice. As Sobrino asserts, “The preliminary step of all theology is—as it is for Christology—an adequate incarnation into reality as it is.” In other words, the first step of any theology is to strive for honesty toward our reality.\footnote{Sobrino 1994, 36.} But institutionalized processes of concealment shield from us the realities of structural injustice and institutionalized violence. As I have argued, the rhetoric and logic of sacrifice play a strong role in the exercise of concealment of our reality in the United States. The depth and consequences of U.S. militarization and war are masked as the language and thinking of sacrifice discipline, rationalize, mystify and sacralize the current state of affairs, as Englehardt describes it, our “worshiping at the temple of the U.S. military.” In combination with the four “assumptions” above, this contributes to the “American slumber” described by Bacevich.

Second, the cognitive framework of “the necessity of war-as-sacrifice” transcendentizes destruction and death. Borrowing from Judith Butler, we can describe rhetoric such as that from the *House of Cards* episode, or Presidents Bush and Obama, as “de-realizing narratives.”\footnote{Butler 2009.} Such narratives carefully thrust certain stories to the forefront even as they simultaneously demote others. Once the death of soldiers has been conflated with the death of Jesus on the cross, what more really can be said? Think in particular about the catch-22 this framework poses for the loved ones of military service members who have died in the recent wars. One the one hand, language about their “ultimate sacrifice” is offered as a form of comfort, to provide meaning

---

\footnote{Bacevich 2016, 370.} \footnote{Englehardt 2016.} \footnote{Sobrino 1994, 36.} \footnote{Butler 2009.}
for their deaths. On the other hand, the same framework prevents probing the deeper meaning of these losses. It derails honest and open-ended grief. Asking questions such as “Is war futile?” is perceived as a sort of disloyalty, or heresy. As long as American deaths are glorified in this way, it remains more difficult to question the purpose of the wars that led to this end.

Third, as the above begins to make clear, sacrificial rhetoric and thinking related to war rationalize and mask the actual “costs” of war; financial, social, human, and more. Feminist theological historian Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts that most political leaders of the U.S. have operated simultaneously with a realpolitik framework and with a sincere belief in the sacrificial/exceptional national imaginary. Grounded in this imaginary, leaders more easily conceal what they are doing from themselves, as well as blur overt cynicism of a realpolitik morality.50 How else are we to understand rhetorical examples foregrounded in this article, from leaders such as Presidents Bush and Obama or Vice President Biden? Author Ann Jones, who interviews and writes about the profound struggles confronting returning warriors, describes the situation: “America’s soldiers return with enough troubles to last the rest of their lives. . . . But all through these wars we’ve heard the patriotic tales of heroism and sacrifice, refashioning the suffering of soldiers and their families into the national narrative we know so well—the one about the greatest nation, the greatest military force, the greatest generation the world has ever known.”51

Fourth, sacrificial language and thinking contribute to what communications scholar Robert L. Ivies has called “victimage rhetoric.”52 In other words, sacrifice is linked to a binary view of “us” and “them” that bolsters and justifies the necessity for sacrificial violence. Within this rhetoric, the United States is portrayed as peace-loving, rational, fair, generous, and secular with respect to its form of government; while “they” are pictured in exactly the opposite fashion: irrationally violent, unjust and unfair, and dangerously religiously extremist. In the end, such a portrayal results in dehumanization, making it easier to stomach the violence that will be rained upon them. Victimage rhetoric commonly may be found wherever ISIS is discussed, and tends not to be questioned in today’s climate. However, if one turns to American history, we find a long trail of other “enemies” who were described in almost exactly the same way. We should learn from this rhetorical pattern. Victimage rhetoric plays into the supposed “need” for “sacrifice,” both of the enemy and of “the troops” who will fight against them. The rhetoric of “necessary

50Ruether 2007, 2.
51Jones 2013, 167.
“sacrifices” also effectively shields citizens from facing their own impulses toward vengeance and violence. It deters logical thinking and questioning, as Bacevich repeatedly addresses in his book. As he asks, is it really reasonable, even possible, to “destroy ISIS”? Is it ethical to adopt this point of view? Can it be said that all other attempts have been exhausted to address ongoing global conflicts other than to assign an all-too-nebulous group of people to mass destruction? Speaking about U.S. strategy with respect to ISIS and other “centers of what we call terrorism,” Noam Chomsky commented:

> That’s what happens when you hit vulnerable systems with a sledgehammer, not knowing what you’re doing and not looking at the roots of where these movements are developing. . . . So you have to understand . . . where it’s coming from, where the appeal lies, what the roots are—there are often quite genuine grievances—at the same time try to cut back the level of violence.  

Fifth, sacrificial frameworks in the service of war-culture degrade religion, exploiting and manipulating religion so as to minimize, soften, justify, and transcendentalyze practices of violence and destruction. About a hundred years ago, Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch labeled “militarism” one of the six social sins in what he called “the Kingdom of evil.” Meanwhile, he also wrote about “priestly religion” as the kind of religion that defends practices of state power such as “the necessity of war-as-sacrifice.” This religion mostly is dedicated to preserving institutional religious authority, and promotes “a protective web around an idealized doctrine and history;” in addition, it easily may be called upon to support the status quo, especially with respect to social arrangements of power. In contrast to priestly religion, Rauschenbusch described “prophetic religion” as a different kind of religion altogether. This religion “raises a voice of doubt regarding the doctrines and literature that shelter the priest,” emphasizing instead a “quickening of social conscience” to highlight the value of life, compassion for the suffering and weak, a keen feeling for human rights, and indignation regarding injustice. If the military in our own time has become a kind of “sacerdotal class,” one very important distinction to stress here has to do with the military’s priestly role not only to perform sacrifice by way of killing the other, but also to become sacrificial grist themselves.

In U.S. sacrificial war-culture, degraded religion becomes a handmaiden to cultures of war. A few years ago, I was invited to preach at an ELCA congregation in Pennsylvania on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend.

---

53 Goodman 2016b.
To my surprise, at the end of the Eucharistic liturgy inside the sanctuary, leaders of the congregation herded everyone outside to the garden for what I realized was the “true liturgy” for that day. Explicitly referencing Christian sacrificial notions as the backdrop for “the necessary sacrifices” made by members of the military, the congregation engaged in a very powerful ritual of sacrificial remembrance for those fallen by war; following in the way of Jesus, these martyrs also made the “ultimate sacrifice.” This clearly was an example of the sacrificial unification and bonding that sociological scholars have identified in American war-culture, including a gun salute, red poppies on people’s lapels, flags, hymns, and testimonials by veterans and, yes, the Boy Scouts! Needless to say, the ritual was completely without irony as well; indeed, it was devoid of any critical consciousness regarding what was taking place with respect to this transcendentalization of war. I suspect that such rituals are quite common across the country in diverse Christian denominations and congregations. American exceptionalism, as Bacevich describes it—that quasi-divine stamp of approval upon American choice, consumption and power—is to no small degree undergirded and maintained through such transcendentalizing rituals.

Sixth, sacrificial war-culture degrades the national imaginary and the life of citizenship in the United States. As he neared the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. was unrelenting in his criticism of U.S. war-culture and its deleterious effects on the American citizenry as a whole, in addition to his description of the U.S. as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.” In what many consider to be his most important speech, “Beyond Vietnam,” from 1967, given a year almost to the day before he was assassinated, he delivered the following warning: “If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam” (King, “Beyond Vietnam: A Call to Conscience”). Sacrificial war-culture impacts individuals and the moral compass of the nation. As King’s summarized, “We are adding cynicism to the process of death, for they must know after a short period that none of the things we claim to be fighting for are really involved.” It is clear that not only loss of self-awareness, but also the acidic destruction of cynicism is growing in the post-9/11 era. In the end, cynicism would appear to be the flip side of sacrificial war-culture, as reflected in our popular culture. Remember the House of Cards episode and the homily on the lawn at Arlington? Seemingly ill at ease with the consequences of his actions to deploy the troops who died, the fictitious president decides to look up the clergyperson after listening to his homily at the national cemetery. Finding the priest in the sanctuary of his church, the president further asks him about the homily. An exhausted

---

55Marvin and Ingle 1999.
cynicism drips from the priest’s response: “Between you and me, that’s the same sermon I always give at Arlington. You put enough soldiers in the ground, you get tired of writing new ones.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


---

56 Season Three: Chapter 30” 2015, *House of Cards*. 


doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758009376037


doi: https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226471006.001.0001


Meyer, Matt. 2016. Email to the Peace and Justice Studies Association list serve, May 1, 2016.


