

## “COVID-19 is Not a Foreign Enemy”

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The rise of a lurking militarism has resurfaced in the United States in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent weeks a series of protests at state capitals, with the encouragement of President Trump, have included militia members, armed, and demanding to speak with elected officials. This past week such a protest spilled into the Michigan capitol building, with armed men demanding to meet with Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Casting American governors who are enforcing stay-at-home orders in the name of public health as despots is a perhaps predictable response among those who see nearly all government regulation as a form of oppression. Although such protestors do not represent the majority, or even a significant minority of public opinion, their presence is jarring, especially as they have cast the pandemic into terms of the government versus the people. Such tactics play old chords in American memory—some of them very violent, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and the Birmingham, Alabama church bombing in the middle of the African American civil rights movement, or the Civil War itself.

While most Americans are not grabbing assault rifles and taking to the state capital, the militarization of language around the pandemic has been striking. The use of war metaphors in COVID-19 merits discussion, and challenge. As Kathleen Tierney wrote following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, war metaphors are not facile linguistic quirks in the moment, but instead serve a longstanding agenda of militarizing disaster response in the United States. Why do war metaphors matter in COVID-19? First, we can be clear about why people use them: the “we are at war” framing of the pandemic connotes urgency, an existential quality to the threat, the invasive nature of the threat, the strategic needs of a response, the need for a full and coordinated government response, and the reality of sacrifices among the public—including “combatants” (doctors, nurses, cleaning staff) and “civilians” (everyone else, especially those most at risk for contracting the disease). American media accounts of the pandemic making use of these framings are too numerous to count here, but to give just two examples: the resurgence of World War II era propaganda posters (image 1) and the mass market for camouflage face masks (image 2). The nation is, in these artifacts, gearing up to fight and win a war.

To the extent that war metaphors allow public anxiety to find a focus in a shared enterprise then who could be against the use of war metaphors? At a surface level I take no issue with people talking in whatever ways they need to in order to make sense of a disaster. The deeper concern is a mindless repetition of the metaphor in the media, and the uptake of the usage by public officials. Linger over the metaphor for a moment and you see what it enables. First: the governmental aspect. The war power is the strongest power the President (as Commander in Chief) can assume. It’s such a worrisome power that the Congress has at various times (War Powers Act) sought to curb the excess powers the President enjoys in times of national crisis. This power, and these concerns, date

to the founding of the nation, and have surfaced throughout our history. The advent of nuclear weapons in the cold war, however, ushered in a thoroughgoing re-making of the Executive Branch to give the President surveillance powers, war-preparation powers, and response powers never seen before in American history. The long term struggle of the cold war, set against the immediacy of a nuclear attack threat—the war lasts decades and can be over in minutes—provided the rationale for the formation of the CIA, the defense intelligence apparatus, civil defense (now FEMA), and the nuclear weapons complex. The cold war is over but we have inherited this structure of war readiness. Late in the cold war the emergence of FEMA from the ashes of the civil defense structure promised the nation an “all hazards” approach to disaster preparedness and response. The reality is that FEMA continued to do cold war style disaster planning: focused on command and control, enabling the President to wield extraordinary powers in disaster, primarily through use of the Stafford Act and the Presidential Disaster Declaration process. This is not intended to be a war power per se, but in practice it structures a national response to disaster that stops one step short of military deployment. The use of private military contractors in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (as noted by Tierney), and the F-16s flying over Manhattan after the September 11 attacks brought directly to the fore the concern that we are one overwhelming disaster away from an internal military deployment. The use of the Defense Production Act demonstrates the power of the government to directly intervene in the economy in such moments—again, this may be desirable in “non-war” emergencies, but it necessitates clear thinking about the rationale, timeframe, and boundaries of such interventions.

Would that be so bad, having the military and the President as commander in chief “rally the troops” against COVID-19? Well, it’s worth considering what other special powers are enabled by a war mentality in facing disaster. In wartime, surveillance, secrecy, and free speech suppression are called for and tolerated by the press, and by the courts—these were signal features of the government’s response to the “Spanish Flu” outbreak in the midst of World War I. The “call to service” is crucial, and implies that the need is existential in nature, and that the federal government puts its full support and best commanders in charge of the war effort. If we are at war, we also must accept that the enemy must be destroyed for the survival of the nation. And, we must accept that the “fog of war” is inevitable—meaning that though we try to uphold international treaties and accords, violence is violence, mistakes are made, and innocent people will suffer and die. Are we prepared to accept this “deployment” for COVID-19? Are we willing to declare “war” if it means placing more power in the hands of the Executive, suppressing free speech, further closing the border, and ignoring some failures of the government as we race towards the goal of “beating the enemy?”

In this question we find the quandary of our moment, and frankly the challenge to the federal government in this perilous time. We would like the President to act with the urgency of a war, but without abusing his power. We use war metaphors because those work to express our deep concern, but we want the President to also show restraint and a willingness to delegate power to states and localities in the response. We want the threat to subside before more lives are lost, and we are desperate to say whatever it takes to get people to take COVID-19 seriously. We turn to war metaphors because, as stated above, our government is built on them, and we are conditioned to use them.

At the same time, we also have another set of metaphors at hand, tailor made for our moment: the metaphors of science and medicine. In science there are “frontiers,” scientists work patiently searching for truth, but can also work urgently (sometimes when the nation is at war!) In medicine doctors, nurses, and support staff race to save lives—they can work with urgency but their goal is life, not death. Their mandate is not to save the nation, but rather to support humanity. They do not follow orders from the commander in chief, but instead the protocols of their medical training and their professional codes and standards. If we consider the various pandemics, infectious disease outbreaks, and chronic health emergencies of the past century—1918 influenza, polio, AIDS, drunk driving, smoking, cancer—we see everything we need to craft language in a mode that demands urgency, accountability, and sacrifice without imagining a war, an imperial President, or soldiers in the streets. The doctor is not a battalion commander—he is a doctor, he gives care and employs scientific reason. That is enough to describe our time. And at a deeper and crucial level, health metaphors reinforce the need for a national commitment to health—with the goal of lengthening lifespans, addressing health disparities, and being prepared for unexpected infectious disease outbreaks. The language of care is as central to the experience of humanity as the language of war, and its use brings us into an entirely different policy mindset. We start thinking about preparedness in terms of stockpiling medical supplies, promoting health broadly as a shared national sacrifice, and honoring medical professionals the way we honor soldiers—but recognizing their duties are different, their mandate is broader than saving a nation, they are called to save life everywhere.

At 7:00pm every evening in Brooklyn, neighbors go outside of their homes, to windows and rooftops, to clap for the health care workers who risk their lives every day in the American center of the pandemic. These workers and their families have borne a tremendous burden throughout the disaster, for no extra money, and with no guarantees of their safety. The 7:00pm clap is an organic example of solidarity in the disaster. But the United States armed forces have taken a different approach. This past week a remarkable series of public gestures started—a “collaborative salute” to health care workers in America—with unprecedented dual flyovers of the Navy’s Blue Angels and the Air Force’s Thunderbirds. These are military aircraft that fly in highly technical and impressive formations, usually performing at air shows and on days of great patriotic importance such as Memorial Day and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The military jets flying over American cities are signaling a form of national honor for the “service” of the doctors and nurses, in the only language the military knows, the language of power and force. The intentions are in earnest and pure—the desire to honor is real, but do we not have any better form of expression to hold up the actions of heroes in a disaster? The deafening roar of the jets drowns out the 7:00pm clap, maybe not unexpected in a nation where military spending outpaces the rest of the world many times over every year.

Beyond words and flyovers, it seems that the United States is also engaging in espionage activities aimed at proving COVID-19 was an act (perhaps inadvertent) of the Chinese state. This began with President Trump’s usage of the terms “Chinese Virus,” and “Wuhan Virus” in his press briefings. Although scientists and cooler diplomatic heads seemed to hold back this impulse, the *New York*

*Times* has now reported that portraying the COVID-19 spread to the United States as an act of Chinese aggression is a winning strategy for the 2020 Presidential election. Foreign policy scholars have mused about how a confrontation between the United States and China might begin—a pandemic had seemed an outlandish possibility up until this year. However, president trump is now clear that he wants US spy agencies to confirm that a virus laboratory in Wuhan is the starting point for the transmission of COVID-19 to humans—discounting more scientifically grounded theories of the virus origins. Like the militarists with their guns at the state capitals, Trump’s words do not fall on deaf ears. Although there is no proof that China weaponized COVID-19 as an act of war against the United States, acts of aggression and violence against Asian-Americans increased over the past two months.

The struggle against COVID-19 is not about winning territory—it is about the desire to diminish suffering and save lives everywhere. If we mean the “war on COVID-19” as a narrowly nationalistic struggle, if we mean it as an act of aggression, and if we intend to further empower a President who cannot see a line between war and peace, human enemies and inhuman pathogens, then we can keep on mindlessly using the metaphor. But words matter. Donald Trump knows that, better than most of us.



**Donald J. Trump** ✓  
@realDonaldTrump



The world is at war with a hidden enemy. WE WILL WIN!

3:31 PM · Mar 17, 2020 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

111.2K Retweets 562.9K Likes

Image 1: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/03/27/coronavirus-wwii-posters/>

Image 2: [https://www.amazon.com/Digital-Camo-Comfortable-Reusable-Filtering/dp/Boo9R9P38O?ref\\_=fsclp\\_pl\\_dp\\_3](https://www.amazon.com/Digital-Camo-Comfortable-Reusable-Filtering/dp/Boo9R9P38O?ref_=fsclp_pl_dp_3)