
Just War Ethics And the Slippery Slope of Militarism

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ABSTRACT: Considerations of the ethics of war should more carefully attend to the material conditions of war and the pressures of militarism. To understand contemporary warfare, and the failure of just war theory to restrain war in some cases, we must consider how the military-industrial complex influences war-making. Militarism and the profit to be made in warfare create a slippery slope of sorts which can incline us to fight wars that are unjust.

DISCUSSIONS OF MORAL ISSUES are often focused on abstract issues such as the rights and moral status of those involved. In thinking about abortion, euthanasia (or assisted suicide), and genetic engineering, for example such moral considerations should indeed be primary. Likewise, in discussions of the morality of war, we must first clarify basic moral principles about just causes for war and morally appropriate means for fighting. But one must also attend to the economic and social pressures that will influence the real world application of such moral considerations. Justifiable procedures can be abused by unscrupulous agents who profit from them and who create social conditions in which immoral decisions are likely. Even agents with good intentions and honorable motives can be blinded by bureaucratic rationality and the echo-chamber effect of political, academic, scientific, and economic systems. It is not irrelevant to consider who profits from morally permissible actions and to wonder whether there are “slippery slopes” that pose moral problems. Nor is it irrelevant to consider how interested parties influence policy decisions about such matters. In the case of medical ethics, it is not irrelevant to consider the influence of drug companies, pressure from the insurance industry, the interests of doctors and nurses, and so on. In the case of war, it is not irrelevant to consider the influence of defense contractors, the pressure of pork-barrel politics, and the interests of lobbyists, military officers, and politicians who

benefit from war. While we like to think that moral principles drive policy, policy decisions are also guided by economic interests, influenced by corporate lobbying and interest-group politics, and formed in a crucible of systematic pressures, political gamesmanship, and think-tank and consultant echo-chambers. Moral consideration of contemporary ethical issues should take into account these material and sociological factors, including the question of whether there are slippery slopes heading in unwanted directions.

Slippery slope arguments are occasionally fallacious. But such arguments are only fallacious when they make an all or nothing, absolutizing claim about the slipperiness of the slope. In arguments about euthanasia, it is fallacious to claim that there is a slippery slope that leads from passive non-voluntary euthanasia for brain damaged persons to active involuntary euthanasia for the aged. There are safeguards along the way, which would prevent such slippage. My argument here attempts to avoid such a fallacious argument. I am not arguing that there are no just wars; nor am I advocating pacifism. Rather, I argue that ubiquitous militarism makes it likely that there is a slippery slope from justifiable war to unjust war. There is no necessary connection here between militarism and unjust war. But there is a likelihood—and a nagging worry—that a nation, such as the United States, with its massive military-industrial complex, will tend to fight unjust wars. This point is often ignored by mainstream authors in the just war tradition, who spend little time discussing the problems of militarism and the military-industrial complex.

Militarism and the Military-Industrial Complex

The just war tradition provides the best theory for the ethics of war. The theory holds that war can be used to respond to aggression so long as such a defensive war is proportional and discriminate. This moral theory has deep roots in the Western philosophical and theological tradition. It also undergirds basic principles of international society: both in the United Nations framework and in a series of other treaties and conventions including a growing body of international law coming from special tribunals. Just war principles are espoused by politicians and by military personnel.

The just war ideal is a good one. The ubiquitous presence of the just war theory provides a kernel of hope for a dawning era of peace. If the nations of the world adhered to the basic principles of the just war tradition, there would be fewer wars and the wars that are fought would be more limited and less destabilizing. Although just war theorists do not often put it this way, the just war tradition provides a framework that would limit war in order to produce peace. Indeed, Kant thought that general adherence to moral limitations on war would point toward perpetual peace (Kant 1991). Kant also noted, however, that it would also be necessary to limit what we would now call “militarism.” For example, Kant criticized the presence of standing armies, which are financed by public debt. For peace to occur, we need both moral limitations on warfare and restraint on the social and political preconditions of war.

The problem of militarism is that a nation that is heavily invested in military power will tend to want to use that power. Militarism has recently been defined as follows:

At high levels, militarism is a pathological grand strategy in which a large portion of a society supports the building of an excessively strong military, believes in its superior efficacy as a foreign policy tool, and exhibits a heightened willingness to employ it. Militarism is an over-weighting of military power within the portfolio of investments designed to increase a state's security, its grand strategy. In a highly militaristic state, the use of force becomes increasingly attractive to a large cross-section of the public relative to the employment of other foreign policy tools (or doing nothing) (Caverly 2012, 3).

The problem of militarism is that when military solutions become the preferred mechanisms for foreign policy, moral concerns tend to be overshadowed by strategic, geo-political, and even economic concerns. Said more forcefully, militaristic nations are more inclined to violate the spirit and the letter of just war ethics. Even "good nations" such as the United States end up fighting wars that violate both principles of *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum*. When a nation has a standing army, and massive defense budgets, waiting to be deployed, it becomes easier to go to war (and to continue fighting protracted battles) even in the face of moral criticism.

A further issue is the revolving door between the military, the defense industries, the political leadership, and the media. This creates an echo-chamber effect, where media, military, political and corporate leaders all appear to agree and reiterate militaristic ideas. Consider, as an example, the case of General Barry McCaffrey (see Barstow 2008). General McCaffrey was a retired four-star Army general, who was frequently seen on television as an expert commentator on the war in Iraq. In 2007, he was hired by Defense Solutions as a consultant. He promptly contacted General David Petraeus, the commanding general in Iraq and recommended that the Army buy 5,000 armored vehicles from Defense Solutions. McCaffrey subsequently testified in Congress against a plan that would have given business to a competitor of Defense Solutions. McCaffrey has profited from consulting contracts, work for defense firms, and investments in defense corporations such as Veritas Capital and HNTB Federal Services. He uses the platform given to him as an expert commentator on television news to promote views of the war that profit him personally. He owns a stake in DynCorp; and he appeared on television touting the success of the war in Iraq, including the special training provided by private contractors such as DynCorp. As a result of its ongoing profits from Iraq, DynCorp's profits went up by 87%. In 2006, General McCaffrey became chairman of a DynCorp subsidiary, Global Linguist. He used his personal connections with the Army to gain the translation contract for Global Linguist — a coup that caused DynCorp's stock to jump 15%. McCaffrey was offered a share of the profits of Global Linguist's \$4.6 billion deal to provide translation in Iraq for the next 5 years. Many experts were recommending withdrawal from Iraq, including the Iraq Study Group. But McCaffrey appeared regularly on television arguing against

withdrawing or de-escalating in Iraq. The U.S. decided to stay in Iraq and General McCaffrey profited.

I am not blaming McCaffrey himself or invoking a conspiracy theory. Rather, McCaffrey's behavior and profits are normal outcomes in a militarized system such as ours. The revolving door and echo-chamber are lubricated by the vast sums earned by defense contractors and then reinserted into the political game by lobbyists. The top five American defense contractors include the following (from SIPRI 2010): Lockheed Martin (with arms sales in 2010 worth \$36 billion; profit of \$2.9 billion), Boeing (2010 arms sales worth \$31 billion; \$3.3 billion profit), Northrup Grumman (\$28 billion; \$2 billion), General Dynamics (\$24 billion; \$2.6 billion), and Raytheon (\$23 Billion; \$1.9 billion). This money is reinvested in political lobbying in order to buy influence. According to the Sunlight Foundation's Influence Explorer website, in the past two decades, Lockheed Martin had spent \$125 million on lobbying and \$23 million on campaign donations (Influence Explorer 2012). Meanwhile the CEO's of these corporations earn vast sums of money. In 2010, Lockheed Martin's CEO, Robert Stevenson earned \$19 million; Boeing's CEO, James McNerney earned \$20 million; Northrup Grumman's CEO, Wesley Bush earned \$22 million; General Dynamics' CEO, Jay Johnson earned \$14 million; and Raytheon's CEO, William Swanson earned \$19 million.¹ This puts the combined compensation of the top five defense contractors at about \$100 million/year. The profit motive and the lobbying industry ensure that defense budgets remain large (even while domestic infrastructure and welfare benefits are under intense budgetary pressure). Defense spending is driven by profit-seeking corporations, who lobby congress for projects which the military itself sometimes deems as unnecessary — such as Lockheed-Martin's F-22 Raptor (Hartung 2010).

These sorts of examples help to clarify a claim made by Ismael Hossein-zadeh's analysis of what he calls "parasitic military imperialism." Older forms of military imperialism were aimed at expropriating territory or resources. But parasitic militarism occurs when militarism becomes an "end in itself" — no longer a means to national glory abroad but an economic force within the domestic economy (Hossein-zadeh 2007, 3).

Consider the remarks of Andrew Shapiro, the Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, at a meeting of the Defense Trade Advisory Group in July of 2012 (Shapiro 2012).

This is a record-breaking year for Foreign Military Sales. We have surpassed \$50 billion in sales in FY12. This represents at least a \$20 billion increase over FY11 and we still have a chunk of the fiscal year left. To put this in context, FY11 was a record setting year at just over \$30 billion. This fiscal year will be at least 70 percent greater than FY11. These sales support tens of thousands of American jobs, which is welcome news in this economy.

¹ Sources: Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/business/capitalbusiness/executive-compensation-2010/>; Reuters: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/18/boeing-ceo-idUSN1820958820110318>; Boston Globe: http://www.boston.com/business/ticker/2010/04/raytheons_swans.html

It is not surprising that overseas defense contracts are celebrated as creating jobs at home. Domestic economic interests are at least as much of a concern as justice or injustice abroad. Shapiro further explained, “At the State Department—when we deem that cooperating with an ally or partner will advance our national security—we advocate tirelessly on U.S. companies’ behalf.” This helps explain why the U.S. undermined an attempt at the United Nations to impose limits on the international arms trade in August of 2012: corporate interests, including the gun industry’s domestic advocacy group, the National Rifle Association, mounted a campaign to oppose limits on international arms sales (Democracy Now 2012).

Moral language does show up in such discussions. Shapiro claimed that foreign arms sales are permitted only after they are vetted for human rights issues and non-proliferation concerns. But this claim flies in the face of the fact that American defense contractors continue to send arms to regimes and irregular fighting groups that are autocratic and that violate human rights: Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt, Bahrain, Honduras, and Peru (Toombs and Smith 2012). This occasionally leads to “blowback,” as happened in Afghanistan (where the U.S. armed the mujahedeen), in Iraq (where the U.S. armed Saddam Hussein), and even in Libya (where recent arms sales from European companies were permitted by the U.S.). The irony is that when full-blown war breaks out in these places, American military might is then employed in a supposedly “just war” against the enemies who were at least partially armed and abetted by American arms dealers. This shows us that just war ethics runs at cross purposes with a materialist critique of militarism and the military-industrial complex.

Does Just War Theory Have Teeth?

This materialist analysis shows us why just war criticism does not always work to limit warfare. As John Howard Yoder pointed out in several places, for the just war tradition to be credible it would have to have “teeth,” meaning that politicians, citizens, and soldiers would actually have to use just war criteria in advance or during a battle in order to say *no* to an unjust war (Yoder 2001; 2012). But Yoder worries, as do I, that the theory is not employed that way. Indeed, it might be that just war theory is “more like a spoon than a knife,” as Laurie Calhoun put it in a review of Michael Walzer’s work (Calhoun 2005). Thus, although the just war theory is a useful tool of moral criticism, one wonders whether it is really employed as a tool of “statecraft” (as Paul Ramsey, George Weigel, James Turner Johnson, and other defenders of the tradition describe it) which guides the decision-making of politicians. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that just war principles are employed as post hoc rationalizations for war decisions that are driven by systematic pressures including materialistic factors. This is not to say that the politicians do not mean what they say about the morality of war; nor is there a conspiracy of the corporate elites. Rather, the problem is that the material conditions of the military-industrial complex create systematic pressure toward military solutions, which then are rationalized using just war ideals.

It is true that just war principles are widely accepted among military authorities and institutionalized in rules of engagement and codes of conduct. It is also true

that war is often justified in political discourse by appeal to moral principles such as are found in the just war tradition. But just war thinking runs aground on a system in which war is profitable and in which echo-chambers and revolving doors make war seem both inevitable and morally appropriate.

One interpretation of the just war tradition is that it provides a decision-procedure prior to war. Brian Orend describes it this way: “just war theory offers rules to guide decision-makers on the appropriateness of their conduct during the resort to war, conduct during war and the termination phase of the conflict” (Orend 2012). I have no doubt that many politicians and military leaders do in fact think this way. And they should consult just war ethics in making their decisions about war. However, I wonder why, given the “triumph of just war theory,” as Michael Walzer once put it, we end up fighting unjust wars such as the war in Iraq (Walzer 2004).

One answer is that the logic of the military system is such that military solutions are viewed as easy and obvious answers to very complicated questions. Once trillions of dollars have been spent on armaments, it appears that these arms ought to be used. As Abraham Maslow once quipped, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Maslow 2004, 15). The systematic pressures of a culture in which there are standing armies, substantial military spending, and profit to be made, make it more likely that we will pick up the hammer of military power and start pounding without really attending to moral criticism. As Murray Rothbard put it in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, “A government that has a permanent standing army at its disposal will always be tempted to use it, and to use it in an aggressive, interventionist, and warlike manner” (Rothbard 1973, 101). We should be careful here. Rothbard absolutizes this claim. It is not always true that standing armies will be abused in this way. But we should not underestimate the systematic pressures of militarism. And one need not be a libertarian like Rothbard to recognize this temptation. Cold Warrior George Kennan lamented, in 1984, that the U.S. had developed into a “national-security state” (Keenan 1997, 131). More recently, Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army officer, has outlined the rise of militarism in the United States (Bacevich 2005).

The Economics of Unjust Wars

Politicians in the U.S. do tend to appeal to just war ideals when advocating war. American political life is infused with moralistic notions of American power being used only for morally appropriate purposes and in morally appropriate ways. Despite this, Americans have fought unjust wars. I have outlined this in some detail elsewhere (Fiala 2007). We might well wonder: why, despite our moralistic image of ourselves, do we end up fighting unjust wars?

My answer is that there are systematic materialistic pressures that incline the U.S. toward war, even in violation of moral principles. There are also constitutional issues here: the executive branch has grown in power and Congress has abdicated its responsibility (see Yingling 2010). One explanation for this change in the constitutional system is the money and influence of defense contractors, and the rest

of the military-industrial complex who influence congressional decisions. But war is not simply in the interest of those firms that build bombs and tanks. War is also in the interest of a variety of other corporations. Consider the fact that much of our war fighting has been privatized—representing an opportunity for private corporations to cash in. These corporations profit both from supplying and facilitating war fighting and from rebuilding what is destroyed in war. This is part of what Naomi Klein has described as “disaster capitalism” and the “disaster capitalism complex” (Klein 2008). The war on terrorism has been a great windfall for certain corporations. Klein reports how, within just a couple of years after September 11, the “homeland security sector” was created and became a \$200 billion per year venture. In the warzones themselves, the American military outsources work to non-military firms that employ “third country nationals” — foreign laborers who are brought to Iraq and Afghanistan to do the laundry, cut hair, and work in the Taco Bells, Subways, and Cinnabons that are found on American military bases (Stillman 2011).

These familiar American brand names remind us how ordinary corporations benefit from war (Turse 2011). Corporate contracts with the Department of Defense grew rapidly after September 11, 2001. FedEx now does over \$1 billion in business with the Defense Department. Dell has done more than \$4.3 billion in business supplying computers to the Defense Department since 2001. Kraft supplies snacks to the troops and its yearly deal has doubled from \$148 million in 2001 to \$371 million in 2010. And Pepsico increased its defense contracts from \$61 million in 2001 to \$217 million in 2010.

Recent wars also have mixed motives, connected with the need to secure economic resources. This muddies the just war idea of “right intention.” As economic concerns factor into war decisions, it is not clear that moral intentions are primary. Consider, for example, the geo-political significance of a land-bridge between China, Pakistan, Iran, and several former Soviet nations. One significant development project in post 9/11 Afghanistan is the TAPI gas pipeline that would connect Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and India. Afghanistan is also rich in resources, with a recent report indicating that there is a trillion dollars worth of iron, copper, lithium, and other precious metals waiting to be mined there (Rissen 2010). These economic issues were not ostensible cause of war. But we cannot ignore how these factors influence decisions about war.

Related economic interests were often thought to be the underlying cause of the war in Iraq. There is good evidence that oil politics played at least a part in decisions about going to war against Iraq. The Bush Administration was concerned in 2001 that “Iraq remains a destabilizing influence... to the flow of oil to international markets....” (Dolan 2005, 81). To be fair, however, we should admit that there were just war principles that could have justified the invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator and humanitarian arguments were made. But the original justification of the war was the claim that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction which could be used against people in America and Europe. Even at the time, just war theorists were critical of the call for “pre-emptive war,” since pre-emption of the sort employed in Iraq is ruled out by the traditional interpretation of the just war theory (Fiala 2006). Although some scholars—Jean

Bethke Elshtain, James Turner Johnson, etc.—maintain that the Iraq war was justifiable, it is now widely accepted that the original claim about WMD was false, and that the war was not justifiable on just war grounds, as discussed by McMahan and Walzer (See Elshtain 2004; Johnson 2005; McMahan 2004; Walzer, 2006).

The U.S. was involved in supplying Iraq with some of the chemical and biological weapons that we then accused Iraq of threatening us with. Prior to the first Persian Gulf War, the U.S. was supplying military equipment to Saddam Hussein, including chemical and biological weapons. These chemical and biological weapons included nerve agents, chemicals to make mustard gas, and anthrax toxin — the same weapons some believe were used against American forces in the first Gulf War, causing “Gulf War Syndrome.” This information was made available to the public in a Congressional report nearly ten years before the U.S. invaded Iraq in order to eradicate weapons of mass destruction (Riegle 1994). Indeed, throughout the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980’s, the U.S. was facilitating Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical and biological weapons (see Tyler 2002; Boggs 2003; Dixon 2004). The *Los Angeles Times* dubbed this “Iraqgate” in 1992. By the time Iraq invaded Kuwait and the Gulf War was underway, the U.S. had already been involved in supporting Saddam Hussein both with weapons and with intelligence, which facilitated chemical attacks against Iran. One report about this in *The Progressive* included some stark admissions by Representative Samuel Gejdensen: “From 1985 to 1990, the United States Government approved 771 licenses for the export to Iraq of \$1.5 billion worth of biological agents and high-tech equipment with military application” (*The Progressive* 1998). This article went on to quote Richard Murphy, an Assistant Secretary of State, who explained: “If an item was in dispute, my attitude was if they were readily available from other markets, I didn’t see why we should deprive American markets.”

This points us beyond the just war and back to the materialist focus on economics. The Iraq problem of weapons of mass destruction is linked to the profits of American corporations, which were involved in the build-up of those weapons and which then provided the justification of the war. American corporations profited by supplying weapons to Iraq and they profited again when we finally invaded Iraq to combat those weapons.

Conclusion

I am not arguing that there is a conspiracy of business interests leading to unjust war. Rather, my point is that there are systematic pressures toward war, even unjust war, in a militaristic economy such as we find in the United States. Material interests are moderated by moral concerns in a very abstract and unsystematic way. The problem is that nations such as the U.S. have become “addicted” to military spending, as Todd S. Purdum (2012) and Steven M. Walt (2011) have each recently argued. The American self-image and economy are intimately tied to its militarism. It has long been obvious that defense spending is organized not only around the need for defense but also around the need for domestic spending, and by good old fashioned pork-barrel politics. The argument is often made that defense spending helps the economy. Representative Buck McKeon, the Chairman of the Armed

Services Committee, represents a district in Southern California that houses several military installations. McKeon said that defense cuts would mean job loss, especially among skilled laborers: “We don’t spend money on defense to create jobs. But defense cuts are certainly a path to job loss, especially among our high-skilled workforces. There is no private sector alternative to compensate for the government’s investment” (Armed Services Committee 2011). McKeon continued to explain that defense cuts would cause job losses in states that rely upon military spending: “How does this translate to the larger economy? In 2013 alone, growth in GDP would fall by 25%.” The local economic impact of defense spending has been studied by sociologists Casey Borch and Michael Wallace (2010), who showed that states with high military spending do better economically. In 2012, as defense spending shrank in the U.S. by 3%, this had a negative impact on the growth of the whole economy: one estimate put that impact as causing half a percentage point slowdown in growth (USA Today 2012).

Now one might claim that there is nothing immoral about building armaments and profiting from this work.² But my argument is not against the profit motive or against capitalism (even if a state-sponsored weapons industry seems to violate the spirit of the “free market”). Rather, my argument is a version of the slippery slope argument, which claims that the slope toward unjust war becomes slippery when it is lubricated by the interests of the military-industrial complex. This is not a pacifist argument against the just war ethic. Rather, it is a cautionary argument. Those who are interested in the morality of war should not ignore this slippery slope.

The materialist logic of militarism is far removed from the moral concerns of just war theory. It would be nice if just war theory had “teeth” (as Yoder put it). But moral criticism provides a faint voice of restraint in the face of the prevailing winds of the military-industrial complex. Thus, in addition to focusing on just war principles and the complexity of thinking about concepts such as the combatant/noncombatant distinction or the doctrine of double effect, those of us concerned with the ethics of war should also focus our attention on the growth of militarism and the systemic problem created by the military-industrial complex. The whispering voice of moral criticism is easy to ignore in a system that is guided by corporate and political interests who have more to gain from war than they do from peace.

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² Thanks to David Chan for suggesting that I consider this objection.

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