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Sarah Curtin
Denison University

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A Necropolitical Analysis of American Military Recruitment

Sarah Curtin

Abstract

In light of postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics or sovereignty's right to kill, Curtin historically and ethically analyzes American military recruitment from a draft to an all-volunteer-force. Defining soldiering as a form of necropolitical labor because soldiers, especially low-ranked soldiers, jeopardize their own lives while carrying out their jobs at war, the author ethically suggests that (1) war must be understood as a path to death, (2) the U.S. should slowly downsize its military, and (3) religion such as Christianity must accentuate life over death.

Necropolitics, a term made famous in Achille Mbembe's namesake essay, explores the ways in which sovereignty is concerned with death as opposed to life (biopolitics). In introducing his essay, Mbembe defines necropolitics in the most basic way:

...[T]he ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.¹

Because war inevitably results in death (either one's own or the killing of another), necropolitics is relevant. He notes how war functions with necropolitics:

War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?²

The conflation of sovereignty and the ability to choose who dies is a problematic one, explored in this paper through the case study of American military recruitment history. In what ways does sovereignty exercise the right to kill

¹ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1, Winter(2003): 12.

² *Ibid.*

through military recruitment? How has that changed throughout history? Whose lives have been privileged and who has been sacrificed? Soldering will always be a necropolitical enterprise; what are possible solutions to this ethical problem?

Soldiering as Necropolitical Labor

In her book, *Service Economies*, Jin-kyung Lee narrows Mbembe's concept into another that is more specific: necropolitical labor. She defines necropolitical labor as: "an expendable or disposable labor or life; as a graduate combination or intersection of fostering, maintenance, or reproduction of life; and as an extermination of life or condemnation to death."³ The military is a form of necropolitical labor, which functions within a larger necropolitical system. When the military chooses certain communities to recruit heavily for combat soldiers, they are choosing who dies for the sake of the country. Lee explores military labor as one dimension of necropolitical labor:

On the one hand, military labor carries out the will of the state in conquering and subjugating the enemy, but it also carries the risk of being exterminated by the enemy. In the state's ability to mobilize a sector of the population as military workers who are potentially expendable... the state already constructs them as subject to its own necropolitical authority.⁴

The military often recruits in impoverished areas where joining the military is a very appealing option; I argue this is intentional. The military, as a manifestation of sovereignty, has the power over who lives and who dies in a very straightforward. Certain soldiers' lives are jeopardized more carelessly (and perhaps, intentionally) than other soldiers.

Currently, there is no draft for the American military; it is volunteer only. While talent and intelligence matter, the vitality and fortitude of any military is determined by size, in order to fulfill the enormity of the military mission. In *Attitudes, Aptitudes, and Aspirations of American Youth: Implications for Military Recruiting*, authors Sackett and Mavor write: "The current size of the enlisted military force is 1.2 million and approximately 200,000 new recruits are needed

³ Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

each year to maintain this level.⁵ There must be enough soldiers to replenish those who have died or are too damaged (mentally or physically) to contribute to the military. Often, the rhetoric surrounding military service is honor, love of country, and sacrifice. Individuals join the military for a multitude of reasons—benefits, lack of other options, family tradition—but seldom do individuals join the military to kill or to be killed.

By analyzing historical shifts in military enlistment—draft to all-volunteer force—the current agenda and anxieties of American military recruitment becomes more clear. The decision to shift the military from a draft to an all-volunteer force was contemplated for years, discussions often resulting in reinforced logic to maintain a draft. The choice to have an all-volunteer force comes with the benefit of civilians not anxiously waiting to potentially be forced into military service, but also with dangers. Having an all-volunteer force (AVF) makes it difficult to secure enough people for the desired military strength, which leads to more desperate or manipulative recruitment and hiring private contractors. Conversely, having a draft gives sovereignty extreme power and leaves the drafted civilian powerless, forced to sacrifice his or her livelihood for the sake of a country or a war that may not be worth their martyrdom. This paper aims to critique different historical shifts in military recruitment with a necropolitical lens to examine who has historically been allocated to die. By understanding the rationale behind different types of military recruitment, a more informed proposed solution is possible. For example, a lottery-style military recruitment is random, so sovereignty is not choosing certain populations to die, but it still has the power to choose life or death for an individual. Soldiering, in any form, is a type of necropolitical labor. In some ways, military recruitment is a reflection of national values; because the military is inextricably tied to death, it is an illustrative way to trace the necropolitics of a time.

History of American Military Recruitment

During the 1960s, the United States military was drafting soldiers to fight in the Vietnam War. The Department of Defense, among other subcommittees, became concerned with inequities in the draft and strived to create a less discriminatory draft. While the draft was successful in building an enormous military force, there were criticisms of what kinds of men were being prioritized over others.

⁵ Paul Sackett and Anne Mavor, eds., *Attitudes, Aptitudes, and Aspirations of American Youth : Implications for Military Recruiting* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2003).

Between September 1950 and 1966 there had been 188 draft calls placed with the Selective Service System—one in every month except May and June 1961. During this period 11.3 million men have entered or been called to active service as enlisted men, of whom 3.5 million—nearly one in three—were draftees.⁶

While one in three were draftees, it is hard to estimate how many were volunteers that enlisted in fear of the draft. This makes it difficult to truly track the effectiveness of the draft. The draft is impacting millions of lives—each soldier who is drafted or volunteers because of the draft and their network of loved ones—so it matters who sovereignty is choosing first. During this time, the draft applies to 18-25 year-old men who meet certain DoD standards. The Pentagon conducted a study and made four major critiques:

...classified major criticisms of the draft into four categories: First, the present selection procedure calls the oldest men first—those who are the most settled in their careers; second, past deferment rules have favored college men—those who may be the more fortunate economically; third, past deferment rules have favored married men without children—this putting a premium on early marriages; and fourth, Department of Defense standards in recent years have disqualified men with lesser mental ability and education attainment—those who may have been culturally deprived.

This criticism is complicated when analyzed through necropolitics. It acknowledges that there is a cognizant choice being made between potential draftees. Older men are drafted before younger men, which has economic consequences when they are more valuable within their own careers. Childless husbands are drafted before fathers, which compromises the general population—if a husband dies at war without having any children, this becomes a problem. This initial begs the critique of which kind of man is more valuable to keep around: older or younger, husband/father or merely husband? Sovereignty is making a choice. The critique also acknowledges that in allowing college deferment, the draft favors those who are privileged enough to afford college, which is inherently classist. Simultaneously, the Pentagon also critiques on filtering out lower-performing members of society. This is contradictory though, because in allowing

⁶William A. Taylor, *Military Service and American Democracy Lawrence* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), 97.

college students to defer, the draft favors them, but in excluding lower-performing men, the draft is prejudiced against them. Both exclusions have the same effect—to not be forced to fight—but in one case, the draft favors the men, and in the other, the draft discludes. To dismantle both limitations—deferment and disclusion—would have one effect: more men in the draft pool.

Debates concerning who is included in the draft, who is overrepresented, and who is serving but suffering from unfair treatment highlight some of the ways that sovereignty devalues certain citizens. The language used by the DoD can be difficult to analyze; the documents are decorated in rhetoric of equality and inclusion, but a certain level of skepticism should be applied. Allowing people of different races and ethnicities to participate in the military is a reflection of equality, but the motivation of their inclusion is muddied with a necropolitical framework. It depends on what kind of equality the DoD is pushing for also; it is one act of equality to encourage more enlistments, but another to promote enlistments to less risky or deadly officer positions. For example, African-American soldiers volunteered and were drafted, yet “promotion remained slow and wholly inadequate.”⁷ The Gesell Committee, which is focused on discrimination in the military, noted:

The slight Negro participation in higher non-commissioned and commissioned ranks...suggests strong that Negroes, at least in the past, have not enjoyed equality of treatment and opportunities in the Armed Forces. In any event, this pattern acts to deter other Negroes from choosing the Armed Forces as a career.⁸

This quote acknowledges the mistreatment of black soldiers in the American military; the subtext of black soldiers not being promoted is that they are occupying lower, more dangerous roles. It is not explicitly said that black Americans are being allocated for the most deadly roles, it can be inferred that the concern with this lack of promotion is not merely career. Lower-ranked soldiers are used differently—and perhaps more carelessly—than ranked officers who provide a more specialized and harder to replace service to the military. While mandating equality within a draft could appear to genuinely be non-discriminatory, it matters who is being promoted and kept farther from danger.

The decision to switch from a draft to an all-volunteer force was not made quickly or without debate. The aforementioned Pentagon study lasted years and

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*

was finally concluded in 1966. The study investigated the worthiness of a draft and considered its potential replacement with an all-volunteer force. The study concluded that a draft was entirely essential and irreplaceable. The first of the reasons was cost: "It resolved that the all-volunteer force was prohibitively expensive and estimated that an AVF of approximately 2.65 million service members would cost at least \$4 billion and potentially upwards of an additional \$17 billion in defense planning."⁹ It is more expensive to create incentives for civilians to enlist, making the Armed Forces an attractive and worthwhile career path. Many changes were made to the draft, as recommended by research that the Marshall Commission conducted, to insure fairness. In many ways, the critiques formerly made by the Pentagon were answered. Firstly, "the present 'oldest first' order of call should be reversed so that the youngest men, beginning at age 19 are taken first in order to 'reduced the uncertainty in personal lives that the draft creates.'"¹⁰ Secondly, college deferments would no longer be granted, because those deferments "explicitly highlighted social class divisions within American society."¹¹ Thirdly, more opportunities would be made available to women "thus reducing the numbers of men who must involuntarily be called to duty."¹² Lastly, the Marshall Commission suggested that there be programming to bring civilians who were previously not qualified to join the army up to the enrollment standard.

Chief among these efforts is the 1966 Project 100,000, which sought to "promote military service among citizens previously disqualified due to poor test scores."¹³ While Project 100,000 was praised for its inclusivity of potential that had gone untapped due to prior restrictions, others were suspicious of its agenda. Project 100,000 is a point of departure for military recruitment of America's most vulnerable. Some suspected Project 100,000 is "nothing more than a plot to fill the infantry's ranks."¹⁴ These changes espouse values of inclusivity and equality, but the end result is a stronger, larger military force. In the name of inclusion, the these changes to recruitment just offset the amount of middle-class, middle-range intelligence (not smart/privileged enough for college but able to pass baseline military intelligence tests) men drafted. So in privileging diversity, sovereignty is simultaneously preserving the average, white male.

With Nixon, the draft ended and since, the United States military has become what was once feared—an all-volunteer force. Currently, American is fighting two

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

simultaneous foreign wars. There is an effort to “minimize the number of American service members mobilized for both wars,” which as led to the heavy and controversial use of private security contractors.¹⁵ Due to how few deployments there have been, there is “an increasing use of private military contractors to fill roles traditionally reserved for military service members.”¹⁶ In April 2008, the DoD stated “it had 163,900 contractors supporting 160,000 troops in Iraq.”¹⁷ Perhaps more remarkably, “between the fiscal year 2007 and 2013, the total cost of contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan hovered above \$25 billion per year; it peaked at \$32,684,200,570 in fiscal year 2008.”¹⁸ This is interesting because in an effort to preserve the average American troop, the DoD is willing to pay private military contractors exorbitant amounts of money to do the work of soldiers. Within the framework of necropolitics, this is complicated because sovereignty is hiring workers who can “present especially sensitive risks, because their armed employees can become involved in incidies that injure or endanger innocent civilians.”¹⁹ The willingness to contract outside labor to support troops during these wars also reveals the anxiety of the military and the true precarity of our current enlistment. While it is uncited the ethnic/class/gender of the private military contractors, there is a certain disposability of the private military contractors. Part of the benefit of using them is that the military can have a significant addition that does not force “policy makers publicly to justify their usage to the American people in the way that using increased numbers of American service members always requires.”²⁰ In this way, Americans (or perhaps, others) who are employed by private military contractors inhabit a wrung below the average American soldier—in an effort to preserve the lives of American soldiers, private military contractors are used more.

Even though American soldiers are being supported by private military contractors, there is still extreme anxiety over the inability to recruit sufficient numbers. Despite the current enormity of the United States military—it stands weakly and precariously at 1.2 million—there is a constant need for replenishing. To put this in perspective, “for every soldier on a mission, a second must be in training for that role, and a third will have just returned from the mission assignment and is scheduled for retraining.”²¹ The military requires a constant influx of young people, regardless of their retention rate. Still a legacy of the equalizing efforts of the late 1960s, there are no special skills that serve as a prerequisite for military

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

²¹ Sackett and Mavor, *Attitudes, Aptitudes, and Aspirations of American Youth*, 19.

service— “given young men and women who meet the minimum qualifications, they can and will be trained to meet changing military requirements.”²² The lowered recruitment standards make certain communities more vulnerable to military recruitment. Considering the current ambitions and attitudes of American youth, Sackett and Mavor make recommendations:

“We recommend increasing mechanisms for permitting military service and pursuit of a college degree to occur simultaneously... We also note the number of college dropouts and stopouts... For this reason, we recommend that DoD investigate mechanisms for cost-effective recruiting of the college stopout/dropout market.”²³

The target audience is all young people, although the subtext would suggest that a simultaneous college/military service program may provide different opportunities and promotions than one for college dropouts or stopouts. Both recruitment efforts would encourage propensity to enlist, but are targeting different communities for different types of military participation. Another recommendation for the DoD is for their advertising and recruitment materials; they should use “a balance between focus on the extrinsic rewards of military service (e.g., funds for college) and intrinsic rewards, including duty to country and achieving purpose and meaning in a career.”²⁴ While a reward-based rhetoric could be a productive recruitment method, it ignores the intrinsic risk of joining the military. Throughout Sackett and Mavor’s investigation of American youth and military recruitment, any concept of death was not used. Masked in words like attrition, the concept of death functions as military need or demand. This investigation of military recruitment does its own act of soldering, converting individuals into numbers and suggesting different ways to more effectively convince someone to enlist.

An Ethical Analysis of American Military Recruitment

Recruitment for the United States military is an ethical problem because branches of sovereignty are using rhetoric and tactful recruitment to take the livelihood of young people—in some cases, vulnerable communities—in exchange for both financial and intangible benefits. Military recruitment will always be an ethical problem because it is convincing someone to have in some cases a rewarding career, but in most situations a taxing, costly, and traumatizing one.

²² *Ibid.*, 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

Those who return to war live a type of “death-in-life,” as introduced by Mbembe.²⁵ Using Lee’s term, soldiering is an act of necropolitical labor that keeps enlisted men on a quickened continuum towards death, highlighting their perceived disposability. When sovereignty has conversations about the draft or tactics for military recruitment, they are not merely discussing the strength or vulnerability of the military, but instead individual lives left tainted, wounded, and mangled. Desensitized conversations concerning military recruitment are dangerous because they separate the human from the soldier, often forgetting the consequences for the person recruited. So narrowly focused on the maintenance of a military, drafting or recruitment prioritizes safety of nation or world over protection of the soldier or individual. The bleak, necropolitical reality of soldiering is heartbreaking and can feel hopeless.

While there are solutions to a necropolitical framework for military recruitment, there are also many roadblocks. To present the idea that sovereignty has a necropolitical framework with an inappropriate right to death/life would expose the blatant valuing of certain lives over others. To frame the military as a death machine rather than a protective, proactive, honorable force would further condemn the military. While the military is already struggling to attract volunteers, the likelihood of transparency to that degree is slim. Also, the military reflects civilian values, so when the larger society is racist, sexist, and classist, the military embodies those oppressive systems in its own way. Historically, many of the seemingly forward-thinking military recruitment/draft initiatives appear to be equalizing, but all end in the same result—access to more people’s livelihoods. Conversely, if there is a military, anyone who wants to serve should be allowed to. That is a difficult part of this; to have the freedom to serve is important, but that service is the willing/manipulated participation in necropolitical labor.

Despite these complications, I offer a few solutions. There needs to be a radical re-thinking of the true cost of war. With the concept of necropolitics at the forefront, conversations about the United States’ involvement in wars, including R2P, would be colored with human pain and loss. Instead of numbly deploying people to war—soldiers or private military contractors, branches of sovereignty need to recognize the true gravity of their choices—power over life or death. Seeing war as a function of death rather than a pathway to life could reshape the ways in which we see a future of war. The panic over military recruitment is both the inability to meet current military needs, but also the future. If instead of planning

²⁵ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 21.

for a consistent (or perhaps larger) military size in the future, the DoD could start slowly downsizing the military. Perhaps, this would be mirrored by other countries considering our position as a global military force. If the United States begins to demilitarize, perhaps other countries would mirror this after considering their own losses. While this could be a long-term ambition of the military, the military could make current changes to enhance the military experience for those who volunteer. For example, instead of aiming to get new recruits, the military could treat those who have volunteered with respect, dignity, and humanity. This would include training, during service, and post-service treatment. If the military took steps to prevent the potential life-in-death aftermath of their soldiers and prioritized the livelihood of soldiers, the need for recruitment would not be so dire.

In most religious practices, there is an explicit and implicit value placed on human life. If sovereignty was inspired by the value of human life—a vein that connects many religions or moral practices—no life would appear disposable. A true equalizer would be viewing each life with individual importance and intrinsic value, which would make it impossible to choose an unmarried 19 year-old over a married, childless 25 year-old because both lives matter. This religion-based value of life could counteract necropolitics in a meaningful way. Beyond military recruitment, the practice of valuing each life equally would make war-time murder or abuse less of a feasible option. This belief would have to be inserted over time, slowly complicated choices simplified within a necropolitical framework. As seen through the use of private military contractors, the denunciation of violence, murder or war from a public does not matter with the sovereignty has the assets and means to hire outside labor, unmotivated by patriotism or honor, but instead money. A total upset of the ways in which sovereignty views the individual—disposable or not—could radically change the ways the military functions. This upset would preserve the livelihood of each instead of creating sacrifices of others in the name of country.

Considering the Christian identity that American, on the whole, claims, this particularly religion could be a starting point for anti-necropolitical rhetoric. Despite Christianity's harmful involvement in war throughout history, it has also offered possible truths to guide a national/global movement towards an anti-necropolitical framework. While it is difficult, many Christians attempt to follow the Way of the Master who tells us:

You have heard that it was said: 'You shall love your neighbor

and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and on the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.²⁶

This life-affirming voice, even in wartime, could serve as a guiding light as sovereignty and its subject navigate out of a necropolitical world. Not only does this truth slowly move sovereignty away from involvement in wars by encouraging love of enemy, but it also serves as a meaningful equalizing force. Enemy and neighbor become one and all are equal. While the movement away from necropolitics would be difficult, using part of the already built Christian framework to authentically reshape the ways in which sovereignty conceptualizes its subjects is more likely than other moral frameworks.

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²⁶ Andrea Bartoli, "Christianity and Peacebuilding in *Religion Christianity and Peacebuilding*," eds. Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 161.