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The liturgy of triumph: victory culture, popular rituals, and the US way of wartiming

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Abstract

Wartime is fundamentally important to the study of international politics but not especially well understood. In this paper, we use timing theory and the concept of liturgy to unpack the contemporary dynamics of US wartime. A theory of political timing posits that all temporalities derive from and symbolize underlying social processes, and that these timing efforts unfold according to a master organizing standard. Liturgy highlights the way that ritualized acts help participants commune with the sacred – whether this be God or the nation-state. Scrutinizing contemporary US culture practices, we combine these ideas to argue that the notion of victory, as enacted through a widespread set of performative routines, acts as an organizing standard that embeds and reifies wartime in US security policy and daily life. Prevalent ideals of winning wars gather together a stylized past, explicate present problems, and generate expectations about future problems and conflicts. We tabulate several highly influential examples of this liturgy of triumph from national calendars, commemorative sites and events, and cultural practices like spectator sports. In addition to normalizing a view of wartime as having clear beginnings and uniquely successful endings, the US liturgy of triumph highlights a growing gap in the country's relationship to the use of force. Most of what performative war liturgies commemorate is 'finished'; it has been seen, known, and ostensibly won. Yet, much of what defines 21st century conflict is anything but certain or victorious. Moreover, US victory culture has only grown more acute the longer the concrete victories fail to materialize, suggesting a tragic code at the heart of US security politics.

Keywords

liturgy, ritual, timing, US way of war, victory, wartime

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Introduction

Times of war are fundamentally important to global politics and the discipline of International Relations but not especially well understood. Convention states that the 20th century's two world wars ended with clear settlements that ended hostilities and produced welcome results. Yet World War One (WWI) generated 11,000 casualties after its armistice was agreed, and the settlement was so punitive and contentious that it birthed mostly resentment, conflict, and a second global conflagration.¹ World War Two (WWII) formally 'ended' on the deck of the USS Missouri in 1945 yet US military personnel still faced trials by wartime courts martial as late as 1949, by which point the defeat of the Axis powers had morphed into a nuclearized Cold War.² That conflict ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the implosion of the USSR 2 years later, yet for much of his 21st century tenures as Russian President, Vladimir Putin pursued policies and initiatives whose purpose many take to be re-adjudicating or avenging the Cold War settlement along Russia's frontier. In early 2022, even as the rest of the world began to acknowledge that war had returned to the European continent on an era-defining scale, Russia refused to call its attack on Ukraine an invasion, insisting that it was a 'special military operation' with specific, discrete goals that evoked the idea of wartime as a concrete and delimited parcel of political time. Since 1991, the US has become mired in bedeviling conflict after conflict, from the humanitarian interventions of the '90s to the Global War on Terror that has inflected much of the current century. The US seemed poised to end two decades of 'forever wars' with its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, yet conflict continues in that country and op-eds and think pieces are already calling for renewed intervention.³ Civil wars in Yemen and Syria drag on before they peter out, but do not decisively end in any tangible way. Drone surveillance and strikes against extremists, terrorists, and insurgents have become a permanent tool of the industrialized national security state.⁴ And while many of these practices may fall under the formal auspices of 'operations short of war', the US and its allies increasingly embrace a stance of 'permanent wartime footing' and heightened preparedness.⁵

In IR, conflict research, strategic studies, and normative literatures tend to take the boundaries of warfare mostly for granted. We hear about conflict duration as if war's end presents few coding problems.⁶ Strategic studies speculate about *how* to bring a war to a successful close but not on the meaning or political consequences of various questions surrounding the conclusion of hostilities.⁷ Just war literature compartmentalizes normative reflection in three tidy temporal niches – *ad*, *in*, and *post* bello – but does not pay sufficient attention to how we might know when one category ends and another pertains.⁸

The practical and theoretical problems interconnect. Notions of wartime, and especially the way that wartime opens with formal declaration of hostilities and ends in clear-cut victory and defeat seem increasingly anachronistic and unable to gather all the messy aspects of war together in a coherent whole⁹ – which is the necessary condition of wartime's promise to mark an exceptional but discrete temporal duration between 'normal' times of peace. As interstate wars declined and intrastate and non-state conflicts increased, as legal and normative restrictions grew, as technology cheapened and extended the means of killing, and as globalization made targets everywhere more

accessible and vulnerable, it has become more and more paramount that conflict successfully produce lasting and widespread political change. Yet all of these factors also make victory in the way we typically imagine it – as a clear, decisive, and durable end to combat operations that improves the *status quo ante bellum* – most difficult to achieve.¹⁰ More so than ever before, then, and despite breathless Western commentary about the ongoing war in Ukraine¹¹ it seems that contemporary war, and the times that it constitutes, confirm Kenneth Waltz's observation that in modern international politics, no one clearly wins a war, and both sides share variously in defeat.¹²

And yet, global politics and IR are both difficult to imagine without their times of war understood as regrettable but discrete parcels of politics that 'make the world safe for democracy', overcome totalitarianism, or safeguard the liberalism against 'those who hate our very way of life'.¹³ The historical record of world politics would be nearly unrecognizable without the rhythms of conflict providing this backbeat of punctuated progress in the flow of historical time.¹⁴ It is just as difficult to conceive of 21st century international politics without the political claims attached specifically to wartime. Whether these involve actual kinetic conflicts or the application of martial metaphors to national referendums, global pandemics, and other political issues, discourses of wartime undergird claims about exceptional measures (the US Patriot Act), national effort and sacrifice (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Barack Obama, George W. Bush), economic stimulants (Rishi Sunak), historical spirits (the Dunkirk spirit, the Blitz spirit, a 'modern Pearl Harbor'), and more.

In these ways, wartime presents as both familiar and strange. It occupies a privileged position at the heart of many political imaginaries, yet few bother to look directly at it. Like so many visions of time in international politics, we are quite familiar with its involvement in social phenomena, but ill equipped to elaborate or analyze it.¹⁵ This paper works toward a more effective understanding of wartime by unpacking the meaning of another equally elusive concept at the heart of war – victory – and showing how ideas about 'winning' and triumphant practical performances deeply inform the constitution of wartime, its evermore blurry border with peacetime, and its normalization in everyday life. If time is the most common noun in English, victory holds a similar place in the discourse of politics, peppering not only the theory and practice of war but also elections, legislation ('this law is a victory for the people of . . .'), and judicial decisions. But much like time,¹⁶ for all its ubiquity and our general comfort level in hearing and speaking of 'victory' and 'winning' wars, we do not understand victory or its relationship to war and the use of force especially well.¹⁷

In what follows, we use timing theory to unpack the political dynamics of an especially intense example of wartime – the United States in the 21st century – and to show how these flow from notions and practices of victory or triumph. In the next section we briefly introduce key ideas from timing theory. We then make the case for why notions of victory, triumph, and success function as the overarching vision or rubric by which wars start, unfold, and end – that is, by which wartime gets constituted. In the following section we catalog key US practices of victory and wartiming embedded in national calendars, public commemorations, and team sports. These form a 'liturgy of triumph', a repetitive set of practices that abet two related political processes. First, they help institutionalize wartime victories in modern society, offering a routinized familiarity

that symbolically resolves the strangeness of modern wartime. Second, however, by that same routinization, they spur longing for such clear, obvious ‘wins’, which grows stronger the longer that actual strategic successes remain unrealized or that war outcomes remain unresolved. Liturgical timing practices of war habituate and reify triumphant closure, and in so doing cover over the many traumas and aporia of lived wartime while instilling a cultural reflex or desire to ‘solve’ political and policy problems by exclusively martial means.¹⁸ In the final section, we consider such liturgical processes, which incant over and over the idea that America wins its wars and wins them decisively, against the contemporary record of wars where no final victory ever comes to pass.

From wartime to wartiming

As the introduction to this special issue elaborates,¹⁹ the explicit term ‘wartime’ has enjoyed widespread usage for only a century or less. However, the idea that war demarcates a *special* temporal expanse is much older, reaching back through Hobbes’ ‘time of warre’ to Judeo-Christian visions of war as having an ‘appropriate’ time in God’s plan. Today, wartime is as intuitive as most other times or temporal symbols. But theoretically, it presents some challenges – we can descriptively chart its emergence and political effects, but choosing to unpack it with some other master temporal concept (e.g. *chronos*, *kairos*, *aion*, social temporality, absolute natural time) immediately opens up the question of what authorizes our analysis of one concept of time with another.²⁰ There is little, other than age, researcher preferences, or ahistorical claims about primordial or fundamental priority, which authorizes the analysis of one vision of time *per se* by another and the ‘tireless philosophizing’ that often follows.²¹ Moreover, such analysis historically runs into irresolvable aporias of time,²² which struggle to provide a coherent typology or analytical framework for grappling with various master concepts of time, much less slotting in relative newcomers like wartime.

For these reasons, in this paper we use three key concepts from timing theory to unpack wartime.²³ First, timing theory claims that behind every ‘time’ in discourse, or each temporal symbol, is a social timing activity – an effort by one or more humans to determine which actors and change phenomena matter in a given context and to stitch them together in a creative way that creates new series or processes (or reconfigures old ones), which then unfold toward an outcome that reflects their animating interests or purposes. As humans undertake timing efforts, they naturally discuss them and need to represent them or transmit knowledge about them. The peculiarities of symbolic language encourage ‘substantivizing’ or concretizing and reifying, habits of representation, so that we attach predicates to the static noun ‘time’ that actually reflect our experiences in dynamic, processual timing efforts. Thinking about time as a ‘thing’ with attributes turns out to be a simpler and more powerful way of communicating about timing and the changes with which it grapples, but this also obscures their process-relational nature behind an increasingly reified notion of ‘time of’ or even time *as such*. When we find ‘time’ or ‘temporality’ in discourse or lived experience, then, we can and should look further for the timing activity that gives it its attributes if we want to more fully unpack and comprehend where this time comes from, how it works, and what its consequences are.

Second, timing establishes dynamic relations that otherwise would not occur spontaneously, and it does so according to some overarching rule, rubric, or *timing standard* – a singular idea or theme that determines what matters, how it can and should be fit together, and the criterion for successful timing beyond the basic need for it to produce a more satisfactory outcome than would occur spontaneously in the given situation. Timing standards can be abstract, general, and quantitative, as in the hegemonic rule of homogenous and enumerated motion found in standardized clocks. They can be highly particular, like a simple vision of a short-term desired future that informs concrete actions. And they can be anything in-between, for example, a widely known narrative, which unfolds a plot arc that points to a ‘moral of the story’ in its chronological conclusion; or the combination of qualitative meaning and managed measurement (i.e. equal days but with leap years). The only criterion for a timing standard is that it subordinates all other change aspects involved in the timing effort to its rule. So when we look for the timing activity behind ‘time’ in discourse, we also need to search for its master timing standard.

Finally, timing activities can be more or less active. Novel timing efforts stitch together unruly processes and actors through conceptual and practical labor. Proposed timing standards remain provisional until they succeed in usefully configuring (or re-configuring) concrete processes. They may face resistance or contestation until a critical mass of actors accept them – either voluntarily or involuntarily.²⁴ If active timing succeeds and social agents adopt or adapt to a growing array of contexts,²⁵ these efforts grow increasingly passive, becoming habituated, routinized (e.g. standard operating procedures), institutionalized (e.g. calendars), and ritualized (e.g. church liturgical practices reaffirm the sacral meaning of specific calendrical dates). These increasingly passive timing practices work together to embed the timing regime in social life to the point where it comes to seem intuitive, requiring almost no conscious effort and brooking little contestation or negotiation. Stable, reified symbols of passive timing are powerful, apparently objective parts of life’s furniture – first as stock concepts of time, and then, perhaps, as a freestanding or natural ‘time’ independent of human effort – that as such obscure their process-relational roots. The more routinized and ritualized the specific practice that operationalizes a given standard, the more that standard and its static predicates come to seem like a given time of the world.

Timing theory suggests that upon finding a widely circulated, largely intuitive term like ‘wartime’, we should look beyond it to identify the practices of timing war – that is, the intersubjective ideas and processes that construct and produce war as a temporal expanse empowering certain agents and authorizing exceptional actions and political relations. We need to determine war’s ‘timing standard’, to sketch the modes of coordination it stipulates, and to elaborate how these knit together a multitude of messy and malevolent practices into a cohesive and recognizable ‘time of war’. In subsequent sections, we discuss ways in which wartiming has become increasingly passive in US political life.

Triumphalist timing

If the ubiquity of ‘wartime’ in contemporary politics indicates the ascendance of wartiming as a dominant process of establishing and managing political relations, it should

proceed according to some overarching standard, which indicates rubrics of coordination and order that enable new processes to come together and to unfold in particularly martial ways. In this section, we briefly sketch victory as a standard for timing war before unpacking a number of temporal coordination or ordering practices that it entails.

The timing standard of victory

Strategic, normative, and legal thought all suggest that victory provides modern war's master timing standard. Clausewitz argued that modern war is carried on 'swiftly and ruthlessly . . . without respite until the enemy succumb[s]'. This vision of 'absolute war' with a clear and decisive outcome 'must ever be kept in mind, and *its standard approached* where it can or where it must'.²⁶ As Martin van Creveld summarizes, Clausewitzian 'War . . . is an activity with a *purpose*. That purpose, *which is not inherent in the phenomenon itself* but is laid down for it by the requirements of policy, *does more than any other single factor to define its shape and direction* and indeed to determine whether it makes any sense at all'.²⁷ Taken together, these comments understand war as decisive violence deployed absolutely for a political purpose, which also shapes how the violence unfolds.²⁸ In the just war tradition, 'likelihood of success' and conflict termination depend upon assumptions about a clean and lasting end to hostilities – so that its probability might be reckoned or so that *jus post bellum* and transitional justice considerations might be deliberated. Yet with few exceptions,²⁹ rarely do normative scholars focus on victory as a topic of analysis in its own right. One of the central claims in Mary Dudziak's critical legal study of wartime is that the purported finiteness of this temporal category authorizes its exceptional measures, which respond to 'catalytic moments' like Pearl Harbor or 9/11 for the express purpose of defeating an enemy conclusively and thereby enabling 'regular life' to resume.³⁰

Each in their own way, these arguments forward victory as an overarching criterion by which modern wartiming – and especially US wartiming – proceeds.³¹ It provides the desired endpoint toward which various processes must work, poses the frame of reference by which to integrate and coordinate them, and promises an end state that will authorize extraordinary actions. Though war may be chaotic, the ideal of victory promises to surmount it by allowing us to 'grasp together' that chaos in an intelligible and welcome sequence or 'temporal *Gestalt*'³² – which we call 'wartime'. It is a standard by which we judge the war prospectively (Should we fight? How can we win?), presently (are we winning?), and retrospectively (was it all worth it?).

A successful timing standard is the nexus of well-ordered change continua, the pole through which they all run and by which they become meaningful and relevant. In strategic, legal, and normative thinking about war, victory provides this to wartiming, making it possible to envision widespread destabilizing violence as a way out of situations that have grown intolerable to one or more sides of a political conflict. More than levels, phases, or the grammatical logic of war, victory offers a guiding star for wartime – a singular and all-encompassing idea that promises not only to tame the danger, radical contingency, and uncertainty of war but to justify it by an imaginative vision of a better future. Victory thus provides a rationale for initiating combat operations, a frame of reference for their prosecution (which will involve vast efforts at integration, coordination,

and control as well as great concern for *when* particular processes and events occur), and ultimately a benchmark by which war can be concluded and its ultimate worthiness assessed. However, an unsuccessful standard allows violent change continua to run amok, producing chaos rather than order, leading to unknown consequences, and enabling an extended ‘time of peril’ in which, as we will soon see in our elaboration of US wartiming practices, ritual incantations of triumph become all the more desirous and destructive.

Liturgy and the nation-state

Victory speculates about a political future inaccessible by other means, linked to a synoptic vision of how to realize this future by enabling but also constraining the chaos of battle. Thinking less about *wartime* as a discrete period and more about *wartiming* as a social and relational activity highlights how violent conflict coercively re-synthesizes political arrangements according to the standard of an idealized outcome, namely, victory. Yet the question remains, if victory provides such an influential standard, how does it inflect the martial activities and daily life of the nation-state?

Chris Hedges (2003) argues that war is a ‘force that gives us meaning’; a limit-pushing, addictive, individual, and collective experience that provides directed purpose and existential import. As such, it creates and sustains national myths, because it involves the highest stakes, alters national histories, and becomes a key element of ‘sacred’ memory.³³ In this way, war enters the symbolic vocabulary of social life – an important, almost metaphysical facet of the frameworks and routines that sanctify the nation-state as worthy of loyalty and service. As we will soon see, in the case of the US, such practices reflect the trappings of formal religious liturgy: a particular concept of the ‘sacred’, an understanding of ‘sacrifice’ on its behalf, and spiritually loaded routines and conventions that function to produce emotional familiarity and spiritual reverence.³⁴ Out of such enacted constructs, memories, and routines, liturgy produces an alternative reality, much more stylized and thereby meaningful than the mangle of lived experience. Such stylized meaning holds the kernel of deliverance, into which participants might ‘escape’ or from which they draw comfort in moments of trial and tribulation.³⁵

Beyond analytical affinities, US war and religious liturgy share a longstanding historical link. Andrew Preston’s magisterial historical account details how, like religion, US security politics is ‘a ritualistic activity, and both use ritual and ceremony as a means to codify social relations’.³⁶ Building on this, we argue that various US cultural practices exemplify an increasingly passive and embedded wartiming regime that reflects the symbolic dominance of victory.³⁷ Taken together, these practices compose a *liturgy of triumph*, a suite of ritualized cultural incantations that grant the tendentious claim that America is a uniquely successful warfighting nation tasked with glorious historical purpose a silent, common-sensical influence – which is all the more powerful for its ability to operate in plain sight.

Liturgies are public rituals wherein participants ‘commune’ with the ‘sacred’ through praise, repentance, worship, and other forms of performative symbolism. The practice and experience of liturgy is often dependent upon multiple factors, largely focused on the familiar, the routine, and the ‘ritual’ itself which has the effect of solidifying collective

memory. When ensconced in religious trappings, liturgical ritual helps individuals transcend their individuality and connect with the eternal in an accessible way. And as such liturgies are performed over multiple iterations and generations, these also pre-figure new experiences, framing encounters and setting expectations about how future events will unfold and how novel problems might be solved.³⁸ Liturgy thus helps us transcend the stubborn incoherence of lived experience, allowing us to fold ourselves into venerable, familiar, but also anticipatory frameworks wherein experiences make more sense, become bearable, and, ideally, avail themselves of our intervention. The practices, memories, and performative elements of such routinized participation provide a bulwark against unpredictable outside forces, a symbolic and practical resource which anxious actors can draw on for stability and comfort.³⁹

By disentangling how ritualized symbolic practices abet and enable international conflict, our discussion of a liturgy of triumph complements a growing interest in IR and beyond on ritual. We build from theorizations of rituals as a 'thick' activity that 'does something' to participants and can encourage a unique ethos of social action.⁴⁰ We also extend IR understandings of rituals as performative practices 'generating tacit connections between thinking and acting',⁴¹ especially in the ontological security building practices of performative militarism.⁴²

Approaching ritual and politics in these ways highlights how religious symbolism and liturgical ritual saturated the US way of war from the colonial era onward. Amongst numerous examples, English colonists fighting in the Powhatan War of 1622 announced holy days of fasting to remember their dead and praise a victory they believed was delivered by God.⁴³ A century later, during King George's War, colonists relied on public fast days of unprecedented scale and coordination, and Benjamin Franklin won 10,000 new volunteers to the Pennsylvania militia through a campaign revolving around a new official day of thanksgiving 'to implore the Blessing of Heaven on our Undertaking'.⁴⁴ During the American Revolution, soldiers in Newburyport MA requested a special church service before departing to invade Quebec, a practice repeated widely in that war and many that followed.⁴⁵ In the early days of the US Civil War, the religiously devout abolitionist, Julia Ward Howe, heard a company of soldiers singing a short riff known as 'John Brown's Body', which appended somewhat irreverent lyrics to a familiar melody, as they marched past in a public review of the troops departing Washington, DC to fight in Kentucky. Her companion, a reverend, suggested she attempt some new, more reverent words to bless their coming struggle, which she did the next morning. These became 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic', published in *The Atlantic* the following year, soon after the rallying anthem of Union soldiers, and today a standard accompaniment to US patriotic events and military deployments.⁴⁶ The Democrat President, Franklin Roosevelt, routinely prayed before important decisions during WWII, and PM Winston Churchill secured his unwavering support in part by planning a 'shipboard religious service and the singing of FDR's favourite hymns' during their first-ever meeting. Roosevelt later invoked one hymn as he told his son, 'If nothing else happened while we were here, that would have cemented us. *Onward Christian Soldiers*. We are, and we will go, with God's help'.⁴⁷

The US experience in these respects anticipated a wider shift across many polities in the modern age: the nation-state as the collective imaginary 'unit' and, increasingly, the

central focus of ‘sacralisation’ and liturgy: ‘in the modern world, the nation itself has become an object of worship’.⁴⁸ This is attributed to the coterminous rise of nationalism across Europe (and to a certain extent, in the United States) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the parallel development of conflict premised on ‘mobilizing large anonymous masses’.⁴⁹

These are undoubtedly huge and complex sociopolitical developments, which served to impart critical elements of collective identity formation to multiple groups, particularly in Anglo-European contexts. A key element of these long-term change processes was the emergence of national-state commemorations, rituals, and practices meant to capture and redeem the lessons of the nascent state’s self-understood history. Likewise, mass mobilization entailed public commemorations celebrating and reflecting upon war and conflict on a grand scale. And as generals and strategists changed the way modern wars were fought,⁵⁰ there also arose a distinct shift in how politics commemorated those struggles – ‘from a cult of individual heroism to the celebration of the national people’.⁵¹ These mass rituals supported national collective identity formation in part by covering over the generational trauma and loss of mass-mobilized war with multiple symbols of political progress delivered by national valor in victorious battle. Mass ritual celebrations of national sacrifice subsumed individual egotism and class divisions in a national community, ‘supplant[ing] in importance older religious and monarchical rituals’ that encouraged the ‘active participation of the people’.⁵² In nations where these have been most effective, we see novel forms of iconography, language, song, ritual, performance, and time aimed at sustaining a particular memory or lesson from the past and binding this with possible futures – a task that becomes all the more a matter of supreme meaning and identity as present experiences grow increasingly anxious or confounding.

There is not room here to delve further into the long-term dynamics between meaning, ritual, and America’s increasing liturgical way of war.⁵³ Taking a cue from the defining features of liturgy, we focus in the next section on those symbolic routines, prevalent in daily life and popular culture, which publicly or loudly commemorate past victories in ways that speak directly to the nation’s current security politics and future prospects – that is, performative war rituals that commemorate a ‘past’ seen, known, and ostensibly won, which imbues present practices with meaning and pre-figures dispositions toward the future. Our rationale is that such temporal moves help knit idealized pasts and futures together in the often stormy present, helping to manage current anxieties and indicate how the nation might go on in the face of contingent and confounding collective experiences. And our approach is to explicate how specific commemorative social practices create, sustain, and structure a culture of victory by encouraging communion with stylized past triumphs, which dispose US publics positively toward war as a foreign policy tool and wartime as a normalized category or way of life.

Victory culture and US liturgies of triumph

One need not look too deeply into US popular society to find a liturgy of war wrapped up in cultural signifiers of victory. Shirts, hats, and other apparel items boldly emblazoned with an US flag have been a staple of casual fashion for decades, helping generations of Americans to ‘Get Patriotized’.⁵⁴ In 2014, a university apparel company found

overnight success by adding the words 'Back to back world war champs' to such items, tapping into an extant cultural familiarity with grand, decisive victories.⁵⁵ Began as an ironic gag, the retailer soon was fielding 200–400 orders per day, and the 'world champs' apparel became its best seller of the year, moving over 52,000 items.⁵⁶ New variations on this theme add a warning about the future: 'Don't make us three-peat'.⁵⁷ WWII remains a dominant topic of film and literature, a springboard for new authors,⁵⁸ a prestige achievement that solidifies artistic status,⁵⁹ and more simply a theme of enduring interest across multiple genres.⁶⁰ It informs a common and unquestioned war vernacular in team sports, from 'winning in the trenches' and 'blitz defense' in American football, to slapshots, three-pointers, and homeruns described as 'bombs' in ice hockey, basketball, and baseball, to the gendered trope that teams are 'bands of brothers' who 'go to war together' and are thus bonded for life.

National monuments and memorial days

As symbolic productions, memorials, commemorations, and other forms of national observance invoke simple, easily transferrable messages for mass consumption. These help 'suspend' individual and collective actors in 'webs of significance' with the nation-state at the center.⁶¹ Moreover, the particular cant and content of US liturgies weave a particular (and peculiar) web of militarism that flows from affective familiarization with success and 'winning'.⁶² As indicated above, these are not meaningless or idle exercises. They possess a performative liturgical aspect that connects, binds, and links participants to a common vision of the role and impact of the US in the contemporary world. In this case, by institutionalizing symbolic wartime victories past, monuments and memorials provide a routinized link between war and triumph, which helps soften the strangeness of contemporary conflict and quells longing for an as-yet unrealized decisive and enduring victory in the US's ongoing deployments.

The sheer number of US statues, monuments, memorials, and sites commemorating war is staggering.⁶³ The heart of this phenomenon is, unsurprisingly, Washington D.C.'s National Mall, which geographically and visually links all three branches of US government. Its landscape abounds with sites, which function like 'stations of the cross' as one journeys through them to the country's own Elysian Fields, Arlington National Cemetery, just across the Potomac river. This includes tributes to major wars fought by the United States,⁶⁴ monuments to each military service branch, memorials to marginalized and minority groups,⁶⁵ and specific monuments to important individuals like Ulysses S Grant (US Civil War) and John Pershing (WWI), who delivered key victories and 'steered the nation and its armies through . . . the most tumultuous periods in American history' while leaving 'a heritage of whom those who follow may ever be proud'.⁶⁶

Moving among and through these sacred sites, visitors imbibe a calendar of sacrifice and heroism that picks out certain years or dates as significant not only to specific wars but to the nation's own history. Likewise, US public holidays include numerous dates that compose a liturgical calendar of war, and particularly victory: Memorial Day (last Monday in May), Veterans Day (11 November), the Fourth of July, Pearl Harbor Day (7 December) Military Appreciation Month (May), Patriot's Day (third Monday in April).⁶⁷ This list multiplies if we expand it to include non-national observances and

service-specific dates, which while less well-known will hold great significance on and around various military bases and communities.⁶⁸ Each year, the Memorial Amphitheatre at Arlington National Cemetery hosts a Memorial Day event. Its entrance prominently quotes Horace's description of a warrior who, as he 'plunges through a tide of blood', declares, 'It is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland'.⁶⁹ Just inside and directly above the event stage, a quote from Abraham Lincoln reminds the audience that 'We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain'.⁷⁰ At the gateway to the nation's most famous cemetery, whose acres of headstones toll the human costs of war, the memorials champion resolve, legitimacy, and unequivocal rightness of cause. These words and themes, which are evident to immediate and distant participants alike, habituate and reify triumphant closure as part of US national identity and the intuitive endpoint of any and all efforts to 'resolve' political problems by martial means.⁷¹

So do the speeches that occasion liturgical ceremonies there. For one formulaic example, on Memorial Day 2021, President Biden began his remarks by acknowledging the 'sacred place', the 'solemn hour', and the 'most *fundamental* of undertakings: the rite of remembrance'.⁷² And while he also highlighted 'that black hole [of loss] you feel in your chest', he framed it and every other possible meaning of US war in service of freedom, justice, sacrifice, and the valor of the 'fallen heroes' or 'fallen angels' of 'the greatest experiment the world has ever known, ever seen. The experiment bears a noble name: The United States of America'. He also called them 'the children of sacrifice', the 'sentinels of liberty, defenders of the downtrodden, liberators of nations', and avowed that each fallen soldier possessed 'transcendent humanity' and represented a 'link in that chain of honor' living 'forever in our hearts'. Biden invoked 'the weight of history' as measured by the American Revolution, the Civil War, and Vietnam, yet his remarks were not merely historical. For him, 'eternal' gratitude links distant history with the present, in which he keeps in his pocket a tally of the exact number of troops killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, 'still today, Americans stand watch around the world, often at their great personal peril. War and conflict, death and loss are not relics of our American history; they're a part of Americans' story'. This is because 'the soul of America' requires 'perennial battle': '[F]orged in . . . the fires of war', the country's 'vital, beating heart' is a collection of principles – equality, dignity, decency, and honor for all under 'Almighty God' – that together mark 'the greatest idea in the long history of humankind'. Thus did Biden ritually reconstruct the meaning of past wars, link these to the present, and prefigure the stakes of future challenges as limit situations requiring defense 'at all costs' in order to ensure that 'future' for which *all* past generations fought and died – namely, a 'more perfect Union' worthy of 'our whole souls'. It is, Biden concluded, a 'battle on fields around the world, but also the battle *of our time*', one that all must 'carry forward: liberty and union, now and forever. . . . What we do now — what we do now, how we honor the memory of the fallen, will determine whether or not democracy will long endure'. Past sacrifices and the victories they earn offer 'renewed purpose', so that new generations of Americans might 'move forward' in line with an All Saints' Day hymn: to 'fight as they "nobly fought of old."'

Biden's pivot from the 'black hole' of tragedy to triumphant eternal struggle reflects a habitual response across the US liturgy of war. Consider the long-term shift in the observance of what we now call Veterans' Day. As first celebrated by President Woodrow

Wilson, and later institutionalized by Congress in 1926, Armistice Day (11/11) was a celebration but also a very somber reflection of the destruction visited by WWI. It initially ‘marked the cessation of the most destructive . . . and far reaching war in human annals and the resumption by the people of the United States of peaceful relations with other nations . . . and commemorated with . . . exercises designed to perpetuate peace through good will and mutual understanding’.⁷³ In 1954, Congress passed an act renaming Armistice Day as Veterans Day.⁷⁴ Today, the solemnity of those early decades has been eclipsed by martial hero worship in the form of discounted or free meals, and by businesses marketing new products under the guise of ‘saluting service’. So widespread is Veterans Day triumphalist capitalism that the business magazine, *Forbes*, now publishes instructions – ‘6 Ways to Create an Authentic Veterans Day Campaign’ (step 1: ‘Stay apolitical’).⁷⁵ So immense had the national phenomenon become by the 2010s that the Trump Administration for 2 years running extended Veterans’ Day to ‘Veterans’ Month’ with little to no discussion.⁷⁶ Such national commemorations privilege moments of US history imbibed in primary school: Valley Forge, Appomattox, D-Day. They mention far less frequently the sacrifice of Saigon in April 1975 or the continued defense of stalemate in Korea. Such elements of US war memory are equivocal and difficult to interpret, remember, and honor within a liturgy of triumph – unless they can be quickly inscribed in ultimate, final victory, as in the case of Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day (7 December), which officially began amidst 1990s WWII nostalgia occasioned by the 50th anniversary of VE and VJ Day. Flags fly at half-mast in solemn observance of those lost in the attack, and the original Joint Resolution of Congress codifying the day began by acknowledging the sneak attack and its human toll. However, the fourth clause of the first sentence linked this to the US entry into WWII, which US history teaches is decisive to the final outcome of the war.⁷⁷ President Clinton’s remarks in the Proclamation announcing Pearl Harbor Day followed suit, almost immediately rewriting the devastating Japanese sneak attack (and the intelligence warnings that President Roosevelt overlooked beforehand)⁷⁸ as ‘mark[ing] the beginning of America’s involvement in World War II—a war that fundamentally reshaped the international geopolitical landscape, . . . [and] involved America in a worldwide battle against the forces of fascism and oppression’.⁷⁹ Like Biden years later, Clinton linked the past with the present and future in martial prose:

Never again can America be unprepared, or permit an aggressor to threaten our vital interests, or isolate itself from events of global significance. America must be a leader in the continuing struggle for lasting peace. As President John F. Kennedy affirmed: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty”, including paying the “ultimate sacrifice . . . [for] priceless liberty . . . [and] defense of freedom.”

Across the country, it requires little work to find similar symbolic rituals operating at the local level. *Inter alia*, the Kansas City Symphony partners with the National WWI Museum and Memorial to host the Memorial Day ‘Celebration at the [Union] Station’, located on a road named after Gen. John Pershing. The event includes patriotic music and fireworks, the highlight of which is traditionally the 1812 Overture, perhaps one of

the original ‘victory marches’.⁸⁰ Similarly, less institutionalized moments still occasion reflections that knit together US history, current events, and future prospects, as when the recent 70th Anniversary of VE Day stimulated op-eds and blogs linking WWII to the relative ‘success’ of the War on Terror.⁸¹

A sporting liturgy of triumph

These liturgical logics repeat in smaller-scaled rituals as well. For instance, Brent Steele analyzes the surge in popularity of ‘military reunion videos’, in which a returning service-member surprises family and friends in local, folksy settings: gymnasiums, schools, churches, community centers, or sporting event intermissions. Such artefacts, two of which garnered over 20M views on YouTube over a 6 year period, replace a planned large event with a seemingly more organic and individual moment that still symbolically invokes ‘the soldier returning “home” following a clearly “won” and now finished “war.”’⁸² In this same issue, Steele similarly unpacks ‘Honor Flights’ as primarily triumphal ‘micropractices’ of symbolic closure that help ‘treat’ anxiety about current US military ventures without resolving the disconnect between US victory culture and strategic realities.⁸³ Multiple redeployments, which characterized the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, do not receive such video chronicles or tours of celebration. The standard Honor Flight tour revolves around a day-long journey to many of the war memorials described above, constituting a Möbius strip of martial hero worship. Because every step of the journey, from hometown to national capital and back, is filmed and publicized, Honor Flights turn veterans, transit hubs, and airplanes into sites just as revered, as performatively sacred as those ‘stations of the cross’ that they visit.

We find similar rituals at work in US spectator sports.⁸⁴ The National Football League (NFL) is the most-watched and most heavily militarized sport in the US. Since 2011, the NFL partners with various non-profit organizations to raise awareness and donate hefty monetary sums around Veterans’ Day – \$34,000,000 according to the NFL.⁸⁵ In addition to selling specially licensed team merchandise,⁸⁶ the NFL runs a commercial bonanza promoting this cause, in which specific individuals are the focus, perhaps most prominently Pat Tillman and Alejandro Villanueva. Numerous commercials and publicity videos have aired over the years highlighting their sacrifice, valor, and service, complementing focus-pieces on other non-playing military veterans and active-duty service members.⁸⁷ They function as recruitment tactics, but to do so they must avoid complex and ambiguous discussions of contemporary conflict – not least how Tillman felt about the War on Terror, or Villanueva’s opinion on tensions that emerged between the NFL and the military following Colin Kaepernick’s national anthem protests.⁸⁸ What many consider a controversial form of ‘paid patriotism’⁸⁹ glosses over decidedly less triumphalist details – whether these be Tillman’s own death by friendly fire, shot thrice in the forehead at close range, or his decidedly anti-war sentiments.⁹⁰ Instead, the NFL’s iconography of war veterans turned football players, and vice versa, contributes to a pantheon of heroes, whose individual actions vouchsafe liberty and sanctify US nationalism.

Like national holidays, more local examples reflect the same tendencies. For years, Northwest Missouri State University has celebrated ‘Military Appreciation Day’ at a football game in October or November. Football players of this public university wear

special military-themed uniforms, and recently added stylized portraits of local veterans to the front center stripe of their helmets.⁹¹ Games always begin with the national anthem, something absent from similar-scaled spectator sports in other countries like the United Kingdom.⁹² In many seasoning-opening games this ritual is preceded by a ‘fly-by’ squadron from a regional military base, or an Airborne soldier parachuting into the stadium to present the US flag. Auburn University’s pet golden eagle and football fight song are both called War Eagle. The pet bird flies over Auburn’s stadium, regularly filled to capacity at over 87,000, prior to each football game.⁹³ In numerous other US places and sports, a bald eagle – national symbol of fierce independence – circles the crowd before landing near centerfield to thunderous applause ahead of auspicious games.⁹⁴

These examples highlight the familiar and uncontroversial interpenetration of war vernacular in US sports, and vice versa. The ‘back to back world champs’ phenomenon discussed earlier offers a sartorial complement to a wider lexicography which has unquestioningly become part of US discourse: amateur draft rooms described as ‘war rooms’; the aforementioned ‘bombs’; confrontations between offensive and defensive lineman in football colloquially referred to as ‘battles in the trenches’; important games or rivalries regularly couched as (border) wars or ‘titanic struggles’ for supremacy. By the same symbolic process that turns games into metaphorical wars and elevates athletes to regional or national heroes, however, large conflicts driving massive suffering are recast as discrete, finite, ‘games’ with idealized rules, boundaries, and time limits. Consequently, deliberations about the use of force too easily ‘become more about who is “winning” the war. . .’⁹⁵ than difficult, complicated discussions of legitimacy, justification, cost, and feasibility – as if a complex large-scale process like war-waging can be reduced to scorekeeping and, by extension, timekeeping, of the sort that tallies clear winners and losers. At the limit, the military-sport intertext threatens to subsume war within spectator sport’s ‘quest for excitement’ in a discrete and intelligible contest occurring in safe spaces – whether local sports fields or faraway battlefields – for our collective appreciation or experience of cathartic closure.⁹⁶ In this way, the militarization of US sports suborns identity commitments to a country full of ‘winners’ and turns both professional and amateur athletic institutions into ‘forums for a type of large-scale, patriotic theatre meant to promote a sense of national unity’.⁹⁷ As Tricia Jenkins concludes, ‘the use of war metaphors in sports media coverage [and vice versa], however exciting and dramatic, ultimately devalues the war experience by trivializing its horrors and further conflates war and sports in the minds of the public’.⁹⁸

These examples cover multiple facets of US life and culture, from national to local, grand to individual scale, professional to amateur, orchestrated to organic. An important element that unites them is the way in which they draw on and reproduce a distinctive liturgy of triumph in war to remember past struggles, contextualize current events, and prepare the observant populace for future challenges. We hope we have shown that these liturgical practices feature consistent iconographies, follow distinctive patterns and logics, and while they each disclose particular historical patterns or dynamics, all feed into a general theme of victorious sacrifice and martial problem-solving. While it is unsurprising that modern nation-states would feature collective social liturgies that sanctify the nation as an object of ultimate loyalty and belief, we also hope we have shown that US liturgies are particularly militarist and triumphalist.

Conclusion: wartime, won and lost

As a country almost perpetually deployed and with a global military footprint, it is little surprise that war is a force that gives US meaning.⁹⁹ Many scholars have worked to make US war more intelligible, with strategists unpacking how the US fights, or specifying an ‘American way of battle’,¹⁰⁰ or speculating about how to win future wars better.¹⁰¹ However, the empirical examples we discussed above suggest a more fundamental move in the American way of war, one that sits at the heart of contemporary US wartime. When it comes to warfighting, US victory culture teaches a single moral: ‘we always win out in the end, and win big’.¹⁰² Furthermore, ‘American wars are at root celebrations of identity [wherein] victory is the fulfillment of war’s liturgy’.¹⁰³ When considering the frequency and ease with which Americans gather on these days to perform the same rituals, sing the same songs, and honor the same casts of triumphant veterans with routines that venerate past struggles and sanctify militarist logics and orientations, it becomes difficult to overestimate the impact of this triumphalist imaginary – in which wars have clear beginnings and successful endings¹⁰⁴ – on the conceptual wellsprings from which other strategic, descriptive, and normative claims about wartime flow. We might then suggest a modification of Hedges’ aphorism: *winning* – historically, symbolically, and liturgically – is a force that gives US wartime meaning.

But it is precisely this modification that highlights a growing aporia in US wartime. Liturgies of triumph perform and commemorate past wars that are ‘known’ – already fought, comprehended, and won. Yet much of what defines 21st century conflict is unseen, ambiguous, and anything but victorious. As meaning-making times of exceptional struggle and sacrifice, America’s contemporary wars have so far delivered murky lessons at best. A growing gap between the ‘facts on the ground’ and cherished collective identity symbols might occasion jeremiads and other critical practices of reflection, as when religious tribes in covenant with God read battlefield losses as signs that they had strayed from his favor.¹⁰⁵ However, another aspect of liturgy we highlighted earlier plays an important part here. Recall that by offering a symbolic feeling of deliverance, liturgies provide an alternative reality into which participants might withdraw or escape from present trials and tribulations. We argue that the ubiquitous variety of triumphalist liturgies in contemporary US life suggests a national culture in retreat rather than reflection. That is, as decisive or final ‘victories’ have become more elusive in this century, and as the expanding logics of US wartime became a recipe for ‘forever war’, liturgies of triumph grew only more acute. Indeed, this may mark a defining characteristic of the contemporary US way of war: the more that the finality augured by ‘victory’ remains elusive, the more deeply society longs for it, and this longing renders liturgies of triumph more seductive as means of collective anxiety management.

While it may provide a sop to confusion and angst, or help direct daily attention away from the lived costs of forever warring, rituals of escape further complicates the US’s relation to war, creating a fantastical expectation of what victory can and will mean, and how readily it might be achieved in ongoing and future conflicts. With ritually practiced symbols of triumph enacting an overarching standard of victory, US liturgy operationalizes wartiming as an all-or-nothing, Manichean struggle premised on clear beginnings and enduring, successful endings. While this evidently appeals at the national and

cultural level, it is ill-suited to an era when ‘the character of warfare is changing’ toward increasingly asymmetric, irregular, attritional, and otherwise indecisive conflicts of questionable legitimacy.¹⁰⁶ Long after GW Bush declared ‘Mission Accomplished’ and in parallel with the emergence or growth of several practices tabulated above, the Iraq War saw US troops deployed for a decade, then withdrawn, then redeployed as an insurgency emerged and evolved. The war ended with a fizzle of bad diplomacy between the Trump administration and Iraqi Parliament, rather than any fireworks of victory celebrations. In the context of victory culture, it is instructive that a ‘sober[ing]’ US Army audit of the war, which cautioned against ‘the “short war assumption” and overly optimistic thinking’ in US national security policy, and ultimately concluded its only ‘winner’ was *Iran*, was delayed for release for 3 years because of concerns ‘over airing “dirty laundry.”’¹⁰⁷ More recently, the Biden administration drew heavy criticism for its botched drawdown of troops in Afghanistan, nearly two decades after the war began. Biden insisted he would not ‘extend this forever war’, nor would he extend the withdrawal timeline, lest it turn into a ‘forever exit’. Again, it is telling in our discussion that Republicans immediately accused him of ‘surrendering’ to the Taliban, that close observers called it a ‘humiliat[ing]’ outcome ‘for the American psyche’, and Biden rushed to deem the withdrawal an ‘extraordinary success’ while promising to ‘maintain the fight against terrorism’ via drones and other remotely delivered technologies.¹⁰⁸ Both debates about America’s largest 21st century wars hinge on claims about winning or losing, while the premise of permanent wartime has moved beyond scrutiny – a tension we note that Biden embraced again in his recent remarks on the US killing of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, which evoked a conclusion of sorts to the Afghanistan intervention while renewing the language of endless war.¹⁰⁹

This growing aporia of US wartime suggests a tragic code at the heart of national security politics, which substitutes fantastical performances for more sober and realistic discussions about ends, means, and limits to US military power as a tool of foreign policy. As discussed in the introduction to this special issue, wartime emerged as a term signifying a discrete and delimited period of organized state violence, which by these qualities could justify its exceptions and excesses beyond the bounds of the ‘normal’ politics that might define a nation or form of government.¹¹⁰ In the case of the US, supposedly discrete wartime was also reliably successful, a temporal punctuation that not only ‘secured liberty’ but also protected the exceptional promise of the ‘greatest experiment the world has ever known’ from the stain of power politics and coercive force. In contrast with its initial conceits, contemporary US wartiming far outstrips these traditional predicates because its standard of victory exerts an iron grip on the assumptions and imaginaries of how war can and will unfold, which in turn inform its relationship to wider foreign policy. In short, why would a uniquely powerful and victorious country *not* use force to solve all manner of foreign policy problems?

We find three particularly problematic and interrelated aspects of the relationship between victory and wartiming manifest in contemporary US liturgy. First, ending any war is of vital importance in terms of reducing harm, enabling future stability, and preventing costly and debilitating deployments. The way that US liturgies of triumph symbolically reproduce war’s end set an exceptionally lofty standard for what counts as a politically acceptable ending. Second, while lofty, US notions of victory have also grown

abstract and therefore ambiguous. An idea flexible enough to work equally well as t-shirt slogan, national commemorative frame, or sports metaphor necessarily contains multitudes, which makes it malleable to a variety of situations. Taken together, these two issues turn contemporary wartime into a valve – or as Donald Rumsfeld put it in 2014, ‘it’s easier to get into something than it is to get out’.¹¹¹ And as several scholars note, lofty but malleable ideas about victory all too easily translate into convenient or cynical ‘metrics of success’ *in bello*, which from Vietnam to Afghanistan have only made it more difficult for the US to extricate itself from problems of its own making.¹¹²

Third, wartiming with victory as the standard of coordination and control embeds a tension especially pertinent to conflict involving democratic nation-states. Because it typically requires loftier promises or more dramatic narrative framings to gain support for a violent exchange that depends upon either mass mobilization or public funding of a standing professional military, ideas about victory naturally incline toward overwrought rhetoric, and this inclination only grows the more that such a nation deploys and re-deploys its military. Put simply, lofty but malleable victory drives US wartiming, and increasingly frequent or perpetual expanses of wartime push ideas about winning higher and higher, creating a vicious victory cycle. The current danger is that US wartiming, remembered, observed, and imagined through various liturgies of triumph, has become a self-propagating phenomenon. A nation in thrall to victory not only explodes ‘wartime’ well beyond any discrete or deliberate limits – ‘mission creep’ – but threatens to render all other forms of political time subordinate to wartime, so that ‘the mission is all there is’, all the way down.

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Notes

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51. Hutchinson, 'Warfare', p. 406.
52. Hutchinson, 'Warfare', p. 406.
53. Nor does our thematic analysis cover all contemporary instances of US liturgical triumphalism, which include explicitly religious observances (e.g. the prominence of the hymn, 'Victory in Jesus', in evangelical Protestantism), the legacy of race relations (e.g., the 'settlement' of the frontier by wars of annihilation), and gender ('real American men' always win, 'bigly', from business and sports to foreign wars). These will form the basis of Hom's larger project on 'Hollow victories and the politics of US wartime'.
54. This slogan mastsheads a website dedicated to *American flag apparel*, 6 May 2022, available at: <https://theflagshirt.com/products/copy-of-mens-waving-flag-polo-shirt> (accessed 6 May 2022); see also *Amazon*, 6 May 2022, available at: <https://www.amazon.com/American-Summer-Patriotic-Eagle-Shirt/dp/B004TNF2Q6> (accessed 6 May 2022).
55. Now available at multiple online retailers, e.g. 'Back to Back World War Champs', *Etsy*, 28 April 2022, available at: http://www.etsy.com/market/back_to_back_world_war_champs (accessed 6 May 2022).
56. 'The Unbelievable Story Behind the Patriotic "Back to Back World War Champs" Tank Top', *Business Insider*, 4 July 2014.
57. 'Back to Back World War Champs Don't Make US 3 Peat-Black Coffee Mug:Amazon. Co.Uk:Home & Kitchen', 5 May 2022, available at: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Back-World-Champs-Dont-Make/dp/B08Z7SMYDS> (accessed 5 May 2022); and 'W-W-C-Don't Make Us 3-Peat Sticker', 6 May 2022, available at: <https://cloydrivers.com/Sticker-W-W-C-Dont-Make-Us-3-Peat-p177374803> (accessed 6 May 2022).
58. E. R. Ramzipoor, *The Ventriloquists* (London: Park Row, 2019).
59. Steven Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan* (Universal City, CA: Dreamworks Pictures, 1998); Christopher Nolan, *Dunkirk* (London: Syncopy, 2017).
60. David Ayer, *Fury* (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2014); Christian Schwochow, *Munich: The Edge of War* (Netflix, 2022).
61. Norbert Elias, 'The Symbol Theory: An Introduction, Part One', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 6(2), 1989, pp. 169–217; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3rd ed. (London: Basic Books, 2017).
62. See Luke Campbell, 'The "Importance of Winning": Affect, Just War and the "Familiarization" of Success' (PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2015).

63. As a very rough indication, Wikipedia lists 127 military monuments and memorials in the US. The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains 32 federal veterans memorials and 26 military cemeteries across 17 countries and territories outwith the US; 'About Us | History', American Battle Monuments Commission, 2022, available at: <https://abmc.gov/about-us> (accessed 8 March 2022). As further evidence of the prominence of war commemoration in American culture, in 2009 Google added a new GoogleEarth layer, 'Map the Fallen', which allowed users to pinpoint the location, time, hometown, and manner of death of US servicemembers in Afghanistan; see Peter Lanier, 'Interactive Map Tool Creates Online Memorial to U.S., Coalition Troops', *CNN*, 24 May 2009; Sean Askay, 'Map the Fallen', 2 June 2009, available at: <http://www.mapthefallen.org/> (accessed 3 May 2022). Commercially, the popularity of 'war memorials' has grown such that producing statues, plaques, monuments, etc. is big business. Marc Fisher, 'Why Those Confederate Soldier Statues Look a Lot like Their Union Counterparts', *Washington Post*, 18 August 2017, reported on Monumental Bronze Company, a manufacturer of Civil War (and other) statues that became infamous for turning out so many requested Civil War monuments that the individuals memorialized in bronze looked almost identical regardless of Union/Confederacy affiliation.
64. WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Civil War (via the Lincoln Memorial) ring the National Mall's the Reflecting Pool.
65. E.g., the Women in Service for America Memorial, the American Jewish Military History Museum, and the African American Civil War Museum and Memorial.
66. 'Ulysses S. Grant Memorial', *DC Historic Sites*, 2022, available at: <https://historicsites.depreservation.org/items/show/260> (accessed 7 May 2022); 'Phone:426-6841 Visitor Information Phone Number Contact Us: The Pershing Memorial', National Park Service, 2021, available at: <https://www.nps.gov/wwim/learn/historyculture/statue.htm> (accessed 7 May 2022). Grant's statue deliberately emphasizes his 'customary stillness' and contrasts this with the 'turbulence' and fragility of his surrounding soldiers, who, unlike Grant, are depicted struggling with the friction of battle; 'Ulysses S. Grant Memorial'.
67. Patriot's Day 2013 saw the Boston Marathon bombed by the Tsarnaev brothers, an event immediately written into the struggle against terror and quickly commemorated in film, see Masha Gessen, *The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2015); Peter Berg, *Patriots Day* (Lionsgate, 2016). Presidents' Day (the third Monday in February), revolves around the memory of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, those wartime leaders remembered as securing liberty and the union, respectively.
68. Indeed, January is the only month of the year that does not feature a military day, see R & DA, 'Military Holidays and Observances', Research and Development Associates for Military Food and Packaging, 2022, available at: <https://www.militaryfood.org/military-holidays-and-observances> (accessed 8 May 2022).
69. '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*', also translated as, 'What joy, for fatherland to die!' (Q. Horatius Flaccus) Horace, 'Book 3, Poem 2', in *The Odes and Carmen Seculare*, trans. John Conington (London: George Bell and Sons, 1882).
70. 'Home', Arlington National Cemetery, 2022, available at: <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/#/> (accessed 9 May 2022).
71. To be sure, Arlington National Cemetery also remembers far less successful episodes in US history. Yet the prominent physical placement and calendrical uses of the quotes above show how they inscribe even less victorious conflicts within a narrative of collective heroism redeemed as national triumph—a vision to which leaders, the media, and the US voting public all appear predisposed, see Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing*

- to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); on the memory of a particularly debilitating US war, see Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).
72. All quotes in this paragraph from Joseph Biden, ‘Remarks by President Biden at the 153rd National Memorial Day Observance’, *The White House*, 31 May 2021, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/05/31/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-153rd-national-memorial-day-observance/> (accessed 4 September 2021).
 73. Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, ‘History of the Veterans Day National Committee’, General Information, US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020, available at: https://www.va.gov/opa/vetsday/vdnc_history.asp (accessed 13 August 2020).
 74. The first local celebration called ‘Veterans’ Day’ occurred in Birmingham, AL, 1947. Its organizer, a WWII veteran named Raymond Weeks, later received the Presidential Citizens Medal for his efforts.
 75. Hunter Johnson, ‘6 Ways To Create An Authentic Veterans Day Campaign’, *Forbes*, 22 October 2021.
 76. Leo Shane III, ‘White House Declares All of November as Veterans and Military Families Month’, *Military Times*, 1 November 2019, available at: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/11/01/white-house-declares-all-of-november-as-veterans-and-military-families-month/> (accessed 21 October 2021).
 77. ‘H.J.Res. 131 (103rd): Designating December 7 of Each Year as “National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day”. (Passed Congress Version)’, 1994, available at: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/103/hjres131/text> (accessed 4 May 2022).
 78. See Craig Shirley, *December 1941: 31 Days That Changed America and Saved the World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011).
 79. All remaining quotes in this paragraph in Bill Clinton, ‘Proclamation 6758 (29 November 1994)’, available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-108/pdf/STATUTE-108-Pg5668.pdf> (accessed 3 May 2022).
 80. ‘Bank of America Celebration at the Station with the Kansas City Symphony’, Kansas City PBS, 2021, available at: <https://www.kansascitypbs.org/local-shows/celebration-at-the-station/> (accessed 5 September 2022).
 81. For a critical assessment, see Michael C. C. Adams, ‘Taps for the Good War Myth?’, *JHU Press*, (blog), 8 May 2015, available at: <https://www.press.jhu.edu/newsroom/taps-good-war-myth> (accessed 5 September 2022).
 82. Brent J. Steele, ‘Welcome Home! Routines, Ontological Insecurity and the Politics of US Military Reunion Videos’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32(3), 2019, p. 323.
 83. Brent J. Steele, ‘From Subjects to Objects: Honor Flights and US Ontological Insecurity’, *International Relations*, 36(4), 2022, this issue.
 84. On US stadiums as points of ritualized nationalism, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Crowds: The Stadium as Ritual of Intensity* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Briefs, 2021).
 85. ‘NFL Honors those who Have Served and Continue to Serve in the Armed Forces Through Salute to Service’, *NFL*, 2019, available at: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-HONORS-THOSE-WHO-HAVE-SERVED-AND-CONTINUE-TO-SERVE-IN-THE-ARMED-FORCES-THROUGH-SALUTE-TO-SERVICE.aspx> (accessed 4 May 2022).
 86. That practice is not unique to Veterans Day. Sports teams now regularly wear a special camouflage jersey design on one military memorial day or another, e.g. Chris Creamer, ‘MLB 2022 Camouflage Caps for Armed Forces Day’, *SportsLogos.Net News*, (blog), 2 May 2022, available at: <https://news.sportslogos.net/2022/05/02/mlb-2022-camouflage-caps-for-armed-forces-day/baseball/> (accessed 4 May 2022).

87. E.g. *Pat Tillman: 7th Round Pick to All-Pro Safety* (NFL Films 2016), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y60CjdhoV4E> (accessed 7 May 2022).
88. See ‘Steelers Army Veteran Villanueva on Protests: “VFWs Won’t Show NFL Games”’, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2017; Villanueva was the lone player on the Pittsburgh Steelers to come out and *stand* for the national anthem during an early 2017 game, in his own words, ‘embarrassing’ himself and throwing his teammates ‘under the bus unintentionally’ by observing the national ritual; see James Dator, ‘Alejandro Villanueva, a U.S. Army Veteran, Was the Lone Steeler on the Field during National Anthem’, *SBNation.com*, 24 September 2017, available at: <https://www.sbnation.com/lookit/2017/9/24/16357738/alejandro-villanueva-u-s-army-veteran-lone-steeler-on-field-national-anthem> (accessed 4 May 2022).
89. Eyder Peralta, ‘Pentagon Paid Sports Teams Millions For “Paid Patriotism” Events’, *NPR*, 5 November 2015.
90. See Steven Wells, ‘The Inconvenient Truth about Patrick Tillman’, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2008; Ryan Devereaux, ‘The NFL, the Military, and the Hijacking of Pat Tillman’s Story’, *The Intercept*, 28 September 2017.
91. Northwest Equipment [@BearcatEQ], ‘Proud to Honor Those who do so Much to Protect our Freedoms. Every Student-Athlete Tomorrow Will Have a Photo of a Family Member who has Served on their Helmet. The Background of Each Stripe is Comprised of the Family Members Names That Have Served. #KnowYourMil, *Twitter*, 1 November 2019, available at: <https://twitter.com/BearcatEQ/status/1190282457188204545> (accessed 5 May 2022); ‘College Football Team Wears Images of Military Veterans on Helmets’, *Fox News*, 5 November 2019, available at: <http://video.foxnews.com/v/6100698421001/> (accessed 5 May 2022).
92. As one anonymous reviewer rightly notes, these differences point to the contingency of the US context while opening up comparative research opportunities on wartime liturgies and victory/defeat cultures in other countries; e.g. David Whetham, ‘Neither Victors nor Victims: Royal Wootton Bassett and Civil-Military Relations in the Twenty-First Century’, in Andrew R. Hom, Cian O’Driscoll and Kurt Mills (eds), *Moral Victories*, pp. 175–97; and Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 100–2, who notes how the US rise to global hegemony produced hypertrophied US militarism while almost all other states came to view war as no longer a legitimate part of politics.
93. There is little consensus on the historical origins of Auburn’s War Eagle phenomenon, but plenty of foundational legends rife with triumphal militarism. On this, the War Eagle *Wikipedia* page is an instructive empirical source; ‘War Eagle’, 14 January 2021, available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=War_Eagle&oldid=1000369685 (accessed 5 September 2022). One possibility it lists is that an Auburn student and military veteran returned to school after a war ‘with an eagle who was wounded on the battlefield with him but he nursed back to health. The eagle soared above the field in 1892 as Auburn scored the winning touchdown as the crowd chanted “War Eagle!” Just then, the eagle fell to the ground dead from age but was to live on as the Auburn football battle cry’. Another revolves around a cheerleader describing an upcoming game against archrival Georgia as war.
94. Mike Axisa, ‘WATCH: Trained Bald Eagle Escapes Dodger Stadium on Fourth of July’, *CBSSports.com*, 4 July 2016, available at: <https://www.cbssports.com/mlb/news/watch-trained-bald-eagle-escapes-dodger-stadium-on-fourth-of-july/> (accessed 9 May 2022).
95. Tricia Jenkins, ‘The Militarization of American Professional Sports: How the Sports–War Intertext Influences Athletic Ritual and Sports Media’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 37(3), 2013, p. 247.

96. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (London: Wiley–Blackwell, 1986).
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98. Jenkins, ‘ Militarization ’, p. 247.
99. Here we riff on both the above Hedges quote and Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).
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101. Mandel, *The Meaning of Military Victory*; Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy From the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Christopher D. Kolenda, *Zero-Sum Victory: What we’re Getting Wrong About War* (Louisville, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2021).
102. Vlahos, ‘ Fighting Identity ’, p. 2.
103. Vlahos, ‘ Fighting Identity ’, p. 4.
104. The temporal borders of war are much blurrier in lived experience, as discussed in Dudziak, *War Time*; McIntosh, ‘ Theorizing the Temporal Exception ’; Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 274.
105. William A. Callahan, ‘ War, Shame, and Time: Pastoral Governance and National Identity in England and America ’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 50(2), 2006, pp. 395–419; Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, p. 85.
106. Todd South, ‘ Army’s Long-Awaited Iraq War Study Finds Iran Was the Only Winner in a Conflict That Holds Many Lessons for Future Wars ’, *Army Times*, 18 January 2019, available at: <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/01/18/armys-long-awaited-iraq-war-study-finds-iran-was-the-only-winner-in-a-conflict-that-holds-many-lessons-for-future-wars/> (accessed 4 May 2022).
107. In addition to these quotes taken, South criticized the habit of assuming that ‘ victory was always 18 months away ’.
108. ‘ Defiant Biden Defends Afghanistan Withdrawal as Criticism Mounts ’, *Al Jazeera*, 4 May 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/31/defiant-biden-defends-afghanistan-withdrawal-as-criticism-mounts> (accessed 4 May 2022).
109. See Hom and Campbell, ‘ Wartime in the Twenty-first Century ’.
110. Hom and Campbell, ‘ Wartime in the Twenty-first Century ’.
111. In Errol Morris, *The Unknown Known* (History Films, Moxie Pictures, and Participant Media, 2013).
112. Blake Hounshell, ‘ Evaluating Progress in Afghanistan-Pakistan ’, *Foreign Policy*, (blog), 16 September 2009, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/16/evaluating-progress-in-afghanistan-pakistan/> (accessed 1 May 2022); Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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