The Risks of Scholarly Militarization: A Feminist Analysis

Cynthia Enloe

Michael Mosser's thoughtful essay calls on us as political scientists to engage more closely with the contemporary US military. To weigh the implications of such a proposal, we need to consider, I think, not just the military but the wider, deeper processes of militarization. As a multi-layered economic, political, and cultural process, militarization can be blatant and off-putting; but just as often it can be subtle and seductive. All of us trying to craft the best practices of political science here in the United States in the early decades of the twenty-first century are making those scholarly efforts at a time when militarization is a potent process in American public life. Awareness of its potency breeds scholarly caution.

Every researcher, of course, has to weigh the risks and opportunities of dealing intimately with powerful institutions when conducting an analytical study. The chance to gain access, maybe even to acquire an influential audience, is enticing. Yet the potential intellectual costs must be tallied. One might, for instance, be tempted to trim one's own research agenda so it conforms to the investigated institution's own interests—and anxieties. To gain the insiders' trust and even become "invisible" to them, one might incline toward a sort of self-censorship that goes beyond discretion to the dampening of one's core curiosity. If one is eager to be held in high regard—to be "taken seriously"—by the institution's senior players, one could begin to adopt not only their language, but their priorities, even their outlook on the world. These are the sorts of potential inclinations that a researcher investigating the US House Ways and Means Committee or the Japanese Finance Ministry needs to monitor—at every step along the investigatory path. What I'm suggesting here, however—and what raises my concern as I consider Michael Mosser's proposal—is that the relationship between an independent civilian researcher and the contemporary US military is so dramatically unequal that these usual scholarly risks become acute. I am not sure that Michael Mosser's scale is finely enough calibrated to accurately weigh these intellectual risks.

When assessing the merits and risks of a scholarly cooperative engagement with the military—that is, going beyond just a conventional scholarly investigation of the military—we are considering not the US military in, say, 1932, nor the Norwegian military in 2010; we are weighing our scholarly relationships to the US military at this specific historical moment. We all know that scholars do not conduct their—our—research outside of history. We and our endeavors are in history. I think that at *this* moment in *this* society with *this* military, it is risky indeed to imagine that scholars can fashion a cooperative engagement with—not just access to—the US military on sufficiently transparent, autonomous and equal terms that the full integrity of their/our scholarly research can be insured.

And the reason is the high degree of militarization that characterizes American political culture and which, in turn, raises the US military to a plain far above that occupied by even a well-established independent scholar.

Such a concern about the currently intense militarization of American political life and about political scientists within it might seem misplaced now, in the aftermath of Commander in Chief Barak Obama's successful pressuring of General Stanley McChrystal to submit his resignation subsequent to the Afghanistan commander's stunningly indiscreet interview with a reporter for *Rolling Stone*.[1] The US president's dramatic assertion of civilian control over the military in June 2010 thus might seem convincing evidence that militarizing processes in early twenty-first-century American society can be stopped dead in their tracks, permitting more low-risk cooperation between civilian scholars and this military.

That same month, however, on the evening on June 15, 2010, I watched with interest as President Obama delivered his first televised address to the nation from the Oval Office, a militarized address. In recent decades American presidents have delivered speeches there only sparingly,

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choosing to do so when they have wanted to underscore direct executive involvement in an issue of national urgency. The June 15 speech was this president's first from the Oval Office. The topic: the then-two-month long oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico caused by the explosion of the British Petroleum's oil rig Deepwater Horizon. Actually, as the president's advisors and most of the viewing public knew, there was a second topic on that evening's agenda: the authority and effective leadership of President Barak Obama. Was the BP oil spill turning into this president's "Katrina"?

What I was struck by—and I was not alone—was Barak Obama's immediate resort to military imagery and metaphor. "Battle," "fight," and "battle plan"—these were the metaphors deliberately selected by the President to frame his message.[2] Clearly, the president and his advisors had decided that the best way to persuade Americans that this administration was serious, determined, and in control was to militarize the crisis and to militarize the president's declared dedication to resolve it. That is, in contemporary US political culture, to frame one's enterprise as a war, as a form of battle, is presumed to bestow on oneself and one's effort the desired mantle of determined seriousness. In this instance, an American president was not just revealing his own militarized understandings of executive seriousness; he was implying that he believed that such a militarized understanding was widely shared by his American audience. He may have been right.

Nonetheless, any official, including a contemporary American president, choosing this militarized discursive framing needs to be seen in the eyes of the beholders as being at least somewhat credible as a wearer of the militarized mantle. Being the occupant of the US presidency in the present era, when so many Americans seem to perceive Commander in Chief as the presidential responsibility that should be awarded primacy, bolsters that credibility. Being a male occupant of this political office at this moment in the gendered history of the US presidency also helps. Yet being male by itself is never sufficient. The male occupant of the presidency must also be seen by the public as convincingly manly. Masculinities are diverse, and a publicly-legitimized masculine status is unstable. Consequently, even a male president in this society, at this time, may believe that he has to wage a continuous campaign to sustain that valuable status on the slippery slopes of American gendered militarized politics.

The presidential discursive choice in crafting his June 2010 Oval Office address thus was notable for several reasons. First, Barak Obama had campaigned just eighteen months earlier by positioning himself as an alternative to that of a militarized incumbent and a militarized partisan electoral rival. To achieve this, his campaign sought to craft an alternative form of authoritative masculinity that, nonetheless, would be seen as authoritative in the eyes of the American public: the cerebral, physically fit, basketball-playing, ESPN-watching, good father, civically-minded lawyer and senator. Second, the Oval Office address's militarized discourse was surprising because there was no weapons-wielding enemy to personalize in the Gulf of Mexico crisis. Militarization as a process of transforming a frame of policy reference is easiest if one's audience can be persuaded that there is an enemy with whom a war must be waged. Despite the tough language the president deployed to position the oil corporation as responsible, the White House had no intention of turning BP (or Britain, its corporate home base) into the equivalent of al-Qaeda, a demonized enemy. Third, choosing a war-waging frame of reference was unexpected because the Department of Defense, while presently reaching into more and more spheres of US public policy (development aid, environment, health, drugs, immigration, scientific research), had been kept relatively marginal to the federal government's response to the Gulf coast disaster. Instead, the president had tapped a Coast Guard admiral to take overall charge of federal operations in the Gulf.

To explore the processes of militarization in contemporary American political life and their consequent implications for doing political science research, it is worth taking a moment here to say something about the US Coast Guard's currently ambiguous relationship to militarization. Its ambiguity underscores the complex processes of militarization. The Coast Guard is not under the authority of the Defense Department. Originally a part of the US Treasury, because of its mandate to tackle coastal smuggling, in the post-9/11 reorganization of the federal bureaucracy designed to mobilize the federal government to wage a "war on terror," the Coast Guard was placed under the newly-formed bureaucratic behemoth, the Department of Homeland Security. In practice and in culture, since the 1990, the Coast Guard has been subjected to growing pressure to become a more militarized institution: its role in preventing maritime acts of terror, together with its mission to turn back boat-borne immigrants, each has received higher priority; its ships have been outfitted with heavier weaponry; its Coast Guard Academy cadets have been issued new dark blue uniforms that have a distinctly commando look; many of these cadets, the USCG's next generation of officers, when asked said, that the service they would most like to be taken seriously by was the US Marine Corps.

Nonetheless, the Coast Guard's institutional mission, culture, and personnel have fallen short of full-blown militarization. During several discussions at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, cadets and some of their officer-instructors voiced concern, even alarm, that the Coast Guard's longstanding water safety mission and its newer marine environmental mission were in danger of being down-graded in the name of raising its profile as a key player in the "war on terror." Some women cadets, many of whom had been drawn to the Coast Guard because

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of their interest in marine biology, also suggested that, as the Coast Guard was becoming more militarized, it was becoming even more masculinized. Thus the Obama administration's selection of a Coast Guard admiral to be the lead federal official in tackling the BP oil spill could be read two quite different ways: on the one hand, it seemed to underscore the Coast Guard's less militarized environmental and maritime safety missions; on the other hand, in the wake of the president's Oval Office speech framing the massive oil leak as a crisis calling for a militarized response, it might be viewed as confirming the USCG's transformation into a militarized institution.

Barak Obama's dismissal of General Stanley McChrystal, his Oval Office discourse, and the ambivalent sentiments among Coast Guard personnel each and together shed light on the complex gendered process of militarization in general and its implication for political scientists' research choices—"puzzles and problems" in Michael Mosser's terms. For militarizing processes anywhere—in Turkey, Pakistan, Britain, Iran, Japan, Canada, Poland, Mexico, or the United States—are propelled, stymied, or reversed by the strengthening or weakening of particular assumptions, fears, and ambitions among a wide range of public actors. Some of those actors wear the state's uniform, and many are civilian; and among the latter are academic researchers.

To assess the cultural level of any society's militarization is to assess the intensity of co-optive pressures. The more likely one is to internalize—often unconsciously—militarized assumptions, fears, and ambitions, the less likely one is to be able to sustain one's autonomous stance in dealings with the military as an institution. Thus to get a firmer grasp on any society's (or any smaller community's) level of militarization, it might help to suggest several empirical questions to pursue. For instance, who among civilian policy-makers is eager to be taken seriously by senior military officers? Legislators? Civil servants? Journalists? Scholars? Some corollary questions result: How often do civilian officials turn to the military to provide solutions to domestic or foreign problems? And how prone are civilian officials and legislators to defer to military officers' assessments of the conditions under discussion?

This is barely a start. To measure the degree of structural militarization, we will need to ask what proportion of the state's budget is dedicated to military purposes? That's an obvious one, the one most often asked. Continuing further, how autonomous is the military's own justice system? How accepted is the "revolving door" between senior military ranks or defense department/ministry posts and corporate executive posts? How broad or narrow is the military's authority to limit civilian media access during wartime operations? But we will need to dig deeper into the country's public structures, to ask, for example, how common has it become for civilian school boards to accept the assumption that retired military officers are best equipped to become local school principals? What proportion of the country's public secondary schools and colleges have institutionalized military cadet programs?

These are not questions that most political scientists have systematically asked (or encouraged their own graduate students to ask), certainly not all of these together, and certainly not when designing studies of the *American* political system. Interesting perhaps, many political science supervisors might say, for analyzing Israeli politics, or Egyptian, Indonesian or Russian politics, but not *US* politics. That is one of the reasons we are presently so ill-equipped to fully assess the likely consequences of political scientists adopting the proposal that we engage cooperatively with the US military to help them answer their questions.

Still, if these seemingly "political science-y" questions are infrequently posed, there are other questions that need to be asked in gauging the level of a society's or a community's militarization that are even more rarely asked. These are questions about culture. For instance, how widespread in the general public is the belief that past or present soldiering confirms unquestioned manhood on a young—or middle aged—man? Or conversely, how frequently is a man avoiding conscription or explicitly claiming conscientious objector's status tarred with the patriarchal brush of feminization? Further, how widespread (and among whom) is the assumption that the world is a dangerous place requiring constant military readiness? What proportion of citizens trust the military more than, for instance, the national legislature?

As political scientists, we need to put popular culture on the table. Frequently, it is the militarization of popular culture that provides the nurturing soil for elite and institutional militarization, though the flow of causality should be constantly questioned. Imagine, therefore, these questions being placed on the research agenda of serious political science: Do civilian football matches start with a bomber fly-over? Are those graduating seniors going from secondary school directly into the military given special mention at their public school commencements? When suburban homeowners plant patriotic flags and "support our troops" signs on their lawns, are they admired by their neighbors? Do wives of male soldiers who support their husbands' missions garner more familial and public support than the soldiers' wives who voice reservations about those missions? The questions multiply: What proportion of the society's civilian teenagers think wearing camouflage pants and t-shirts make them look fashionable? Do commercial institutions—beer brewers, telephone companies—craft popular advertisements showing their products in close proximity to uniformed soldiers?

Too often, I think, we have left these penetrating questions to sociologists and anthropologists. As a discipline, the neglect has left us intellectually poorer.

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In my own on-going education into the workings of particular state militaries at specific historical junctures, but also into the myriad ways in which militarization manifests itself, takes root, and occasionally has been reversed, I have been tutored by scores of scholars, among them: Ximena Bunster, Carol Cohn, Catherine Lutz, Hugh Gusterson, Ayse Gul Altinay, David Vine, Joni Seager, Insook Kwon, Cynthia Cockburn, Leslie Gill, Sabine Frühstuck, Rela Mazali, and Erin Fitz-Henry.[3] Not surprisingly, many of them are anthropologists and women's studies scholars. Among the political scientists who have opened my analytical eyes to the multi-layered interworkings of militaries and militarization have been Mary Katzenstein, Chalmers Johnson, Sandra Whitworth, Sonya Alvarez, Paul Higate and Katherine Moon.[4]

Despite their disciplinary diversity, they all share skills in ethnographic research. That is, they know how to move from micro levels to macro levels of analysis, to see significance in the mundane, and to monitor structural and cultural processes simultaneously. Importantly, they also all take seriously the operations of masculinities and femininities within militaries and in militaries' relationships to various sectors of the civilian population. Some of these researchers have been actively involved in drafting the American Anthropological Association's new guidelines for conducting research that has military implications, the very guidelines that Michael Mosser believes dampen cooperative relations between social scientists and the contemporary US military. Thanks to their ethnographic training, all of these researchers are conscious of their own ambivalences toward the attractions of militarized values and rewards, and toward the military as an institution and soldiers as individuals—and they don't hide their ambivalences from their readers. Their intellectual candor helps their readers understand the workings of militarization even in the lives of academic researchers.

As we continue to think about the research opportunities Michael Mosser suggests here, we will be aided by two new scholarly projects, both involving political scientists. In Britain, the "Reflexivity and Military Scholarship" project was initiated by University of Bristol political scientist Victoria Basham, herself a student of the British military. During its lively 2008 symposium, participants talked frankly about finding themselves, while working closely with military personnel, wanting to be held in high esteem by them. The male researchers said the temptation was especially alluring. A second project is here in the US and co-founded by Aaron Belkin, a political scientist, and Catherine Lutz, an anthropologist. Titled the Eisenhower Research Project and based at Brown University's Watson Institute, it is exploring the causes, workings, and consequences of militarization in US political life.

For political scientists in any country there will be opportunities to offer one's academic skills to the state's military. The only way, I think, to accurately weigh the benefits and risks in taking up such opportunities is to have a thorough understanding of how militarization works. We're not there yet.

Notes

1 Hasting 2010.
2 Obama 2010.
3 Altinay 2004; Bunster-Burotto 1986, 297–326; Cockburn 2007; Cohn 1987; Fitz-Henry 2009; Fruhstuck 2007; Gill 2004; Gusterson 1998; Kwon; Mazali 1995; Seager 1993; Vine 2009.
4 Alvarez 1994; Higate and Henry 2004; Johnson 2003; Katzenstein 1998; Moon 1997; Whitworth 2004. My own recent efforts to explore militarization include Enloe 2004, 2007, and 2010.

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