

NDISC colleagues –

I am really looking forward to joining you next week. Enclosed please find portions of my new book manuscript, whose working title is *The Age of Militarism: How Military Worship Spread Around the World and Why It Matters* (under contract with Princeton University Press).

I am writing this book with a cross-over audience in mind. Princeton UP hopes to market it as “academic trade.” So I’ve tried to keep the tone a *little* more informal and to keep citations (endnotes) to a minimum. I have also avoided including methodological detail in the chapters: those details appear either in published articles or will appear in separate online appendixes. I have also tried to keep the chapters fairly short: between 4,000 and 6,000 words of core text, i.e. not including endnotes.

So I’m sharing with you two chapters (Chapters 1 and 3), which should give you a good sense of the puzzle and argument, and which are together roughly the length of one IS or Security Studies piece. The exposition of Chapter 1 also makes reference to all the other chapters, so you will have a sense of the scope of the book. In my talk, I’ll present some of the evidence from the later chapters.

If you are a glutton for punishment, and want more evidence of the puzzle itself, you can read Chapter 2 also, which begins on p. 29 of this packet. But my talk will assume only that folks have read Chapters 1 and 3 (pp. 2-28 of this packet).

I’m very much looking forward to your feedback!

Ron Krebs

Chapter 1 The Mystery of Modern Militarism

Throughout the Cold War, Denmark's NATO partners thought of it as the alliance's slacker-in-chief. A perfectly pleasant country, but one that spent little on defense, rode free on its allies' efforts, banned foreign troops and nuclear weapons from its territory, and added little value to the alliance except its strategic position at the mouth of the Baltic Sea.¹ Denmark was an avid participant in UN peacekeeping missions.² But, throughout the Cold War, Danes did not think much about their army. To the extent that they did, Danes dismissed career servicemen as "somewhat ludicrous," well-meaning bumbler, as anti-heroes who chiefly devoted themselves to avoiding danger.³

Twenty years after the Cold War's end, Denmark had become "a role model within NATO," according to America's ambassador to the alliance.⁴ Denmark did not spend much more on defense, and the Danes retained their cosmopolitan spirit, their firm belief in serving the global good. But, unlike nearly all other NATO countries, Denmark imposed no limits on its troops' assignments in Afghanistan. More Danish soldiers died in Afghanistan, on a per capita basis, than any other country, and the Danish public's support for the mission was surprisingly steadfast.⁵

Equally striking, Danes' views of their soldiers had shifted dramatically. They were no longer considered amateurish bunglers. They were regularly portrayed as supremely competent and brave warrior heroes. Once overlooked and ignored, Denmark's soldiers and veterans had become prominent, praiseworthy figures in politicians' speeches and media stories, as well as in movies, TV shows, art, and fiction. The Danish parliament approved a National Flag Day for Danes Serving Abroad, a national Monument to Denmark's International Effort since 1948, and new medals for military valor. Danish politicians held out the nation's soldiers as role models for their fellow Danes in their self-discipline, willing sacrifice, and evident enthusiasm to "make a difference" in the world, and they encouraged private corporations and public institutions to grant military veterans special privileges.⁶

Denmark's transformation from "NATO laggard" to "krigsførende nation" (war-fighting nation) has been stunning.⁷ It has been an outlier in its ready embrace of the battlefield and in its public's resilience in the face of casualties. But it turns out to be quite typical when it comes to the rising social status of its soldiers and officers. Denmark is a striking example of an overlooked and puzzling post-Cold War global trend: a new age of militarism.

Military Veneration since the Cold War: A Global Puzzle

Militarism is an oft-abused term. The historian Volker Berghahn once observed that "militarism is and always has been a word of political propaganda and polemic."⁸ By militarism, though, I mean, without any polemical overtones, simply venerating and idealizing the nation's soldiers—in the colloquial sense, including sailors, marines, aviators, and all uniformed service-people. Countries marked by militarism place soldiers at the center of the civil religion and its associated rites and rituals. Their politicians extol soldiers' and veterans' virtues, hail them as paragons of patriotism, and present them as the embodiment of what it means to be a citizen. Since the end of the Cold War, more and more countries have been recruiting soldiers on the open labor market rather than via the draft. Militaristic discourse overlooks, and implicitly

denies, the reality that soldiers very often have diverse, and sometimes openly monetary, motivations for enlistment.

Militarism, in this sense, has made an unexpected comeback in the decades since the Cold War. Consider three revealing data points, presented in greater detail in the next chapter. First, public confidence in the armed forces. At the end of the Cold War, people around the world expressed little confidence in their nations' armed forces. This was true of citizens of Eastern European nations emerging out of communism, of Latin Americans and sub-Saharan Africans whose militaries had often committed massive human rights violations, but also of Western Europeans eager to put the Cold War behind them and of Americans still grappling with the legacy of the Vietnam War. Over the next decades, in every region of the globe, public trust in the military rebounded. The armed forces have since become one of the most—and often *the* most—trusted central state institution.⁹

Second, how nations celebrate their national independence days. Independence day ceremonies are revealing statements of national values and identity. Militaries are sometimes central to these ceremonies, sometimes tangential, and sometimes virtually invisible. I have tracked the role of the armed forces in these observances around the world since the 1980s in the world's top 50 military spenders, and I have discovered that military displays—soldiers, tanks, and missiles on parade, complex air maneuvers, naval flotillas—have steadily become increasingly pronounced features of these celebrations, especially since the 1990s. In democracies, according to the Militarism Independence Day Index explained in Chapter 2, the armed forces were around 75% more prominent in national independence day celebrations in the 2010s compared to the 1980s.

Third, the slate of national holidays. I thought that nearly all countries had long ago established holidays honoring veterans and mourning the war-dead. Given how rarely countries have fought interstate wars since 1945, I assumed that there would be little opportunity or reason for nations to institute new military-themed holidays. I was wrong. Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, new holidays commemorating fallen soldiers, honoring veterans, or celebrating the military have popped up on national calendars. The world's top 50 military spenders celebrate at least 261 military-themed holidays—an average of just over 5 every year. At least 108 of these military-themed holidays—over 40 percent—have been established since 1991, and at least 82—over 30 percent—since the start of the War on Terror in 2001. This is certainly an undercount, since we could not identify the year on which 86 (sometimes rather obscure) holidays were instituted. Since the start of the 21st century, countries as diverse as China, Colombia, Iran, Norway, Poland, Turkey, and Uruguay have established new military memorial days. Colombia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Romania, and Sweden, among others, have since 2000 instituted days in honor of their military veterans. During that same span, Afghanistan, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, among others, have set days celebrating the armed forces. Numerous others have started celebrating individual services (e.g. army, navy, air force) and specialties—like paratroopers, engineers, even military surveyors.

And these are just the indicators easily tracked across countries. Militarism crops up in countless locally-specific ways. Grand monuments to those who died in the nation's service, both recently and long ago, are erected. Long-established holidays are celebrated with renewed vigor and militaristic displays. Organizations in civil society celebrate military sacrifice. Youth organizations imbue the next generation with militaristic pride and fervor. Politicians who once

spoke of soldiers as highly trained professionals instead hail them as self-sacrificing heroes and patriots. Politicians who once ignored the military fall over each other in proclaiming their devotion to the armed forces and in charging their rivals with failing to uphold society's compact with soldiers past and present. These locally specific manifestations of militarism appear throughout the detailed case studies presented in chapters 5-7.

The enduring and even intensifying presence of militarism around the globe is not what was generally expected at the end of the Cold War. Militarism had taken off in the second half of the 19th century as large-scale conscription became the continental European norm, as military service became a common male experience transcending class divides, as industrialized states devoted ever more resources to preparing for war, and as total warfare blurred the line between home-front and battlefield. But, over the decades since the Second World War, warfare between industrialized nations became rare, the full-scale mobilization of total war receded, large conscript armies gradually gave way to smaller, volunteer, professional forces, and the privileged classes again largely stopped serving. After the Cold War, in the wealthy, industrialized Global North, military spending declined as governments rushed to reap the "peace dividend," and nationalistic commitments among the mass public wavered. Territorial defense was out, international peace-building was in. In these "postmodern militaries," consummate professionalism took the place of warrior culture.¹⁰ In short, as the conditions facilitating militarism waned in the Global North, it seemed reasonable to expect that militarism would taper off.

In the Global South, superpower meddling had long sustained civil wars and repressive regimes. Local armed forces committed massive human rights violations, military officers overthrew elected governments and seized power for themselves, and military-led governments reaped the benefits of corruption while running the economy into the ground and suppressing political opponents. Such behavior hardly endeared soldiers and officers to the mass of citizens. With the Cold War's end, the superpowers' proxy wars lost steam, but peace and stability did not follow. Instead, across Africa and Asia, civil war broke out anew, driven by the breakdown of state institutions, the pressures of global capitalism and the opportunities for profit, and the international community's insistence on democratization and elections. Yet these wars' civilian victims did not confront faceless structural forces. They suffered at the hands of government and rebel militaries, who forcibly conscripted their children, violated and raped their daughters (and sometimes their sons), tortured, pillaged, and murdered. Amidst the chaos, and brutality of civil war, there could be no veneration of the armed forces and its members. In the 1990s, many believed the Global North and South to be headed on radically different trajectories—toward, respectively, stable Kantian peace and Hobbesian anarchy¹¹—but militarism did not seem a likely feature of *either's* future.

Yet militarism has nevertheless spread around the world over the last three decades, as Chapter 2 records. In the United States, during the frenzied years of the War on Terror, its rise was unmistakable. Other Anglo regimes, which had once seemed to most embody an anti-militarist spirit, followed suit. But militarism is not just an American-social-network phenomenon. It has diffused across the world. Veneration of the armed forces stretches across countries that recruit their armies via conscription and the many other nations that fill the ranks with volunteers. It is prominent in countries whose militaries are busy intervening in faraway lands, in countries whose militaries have been active only in their region, in countries

whose militaries have embraced a global humanitarian ethic and mission, and in countries whose militaries have not done much in decades, at least when it comes to their domain of professional expertise. It is present in nations in which traditional masculinity is in decline, but also in countries where it is alive and well. Militaries responsible for brutal repression at home are predictably not much respected, yet many law-abiding armed forces have not enjoyed widespread popular acclaim. Victory in brief popular wars has sparked admiration for the military, but it has certainly not guaranteed the military's veneration. Some militaries emerge from protracted, unpopular military defeats with their reputations in tatters, while others come home to a public that hated the war but loves the troops more than ever. Militarism naturally does not manifest in the same ways or to the same degree everywhere, but it has been woven into the rhythms, practices, and symbols of everyday life across the world. Chapter 2 shows why intuitive explanations for militarism's global rise and spread remain wanting.

Military Veneration since the Cold War: A Historical Puzzle

Post-Cold War militarism revolves centrally around venerating soldiers and officers. It is puzzling in its global reach and trajectory. It is also puzzling in historical context.

I use the word militarism with some trepidation, because it has long been such a loaded term. So many meanings have been piled on to it that it has often seemed to groan under their weight. The early twentieth-century German socialist Karl Liebknecht wrote an entire book, which landed him in jail, assailing his country's militarism, but without bothering to define the term.¹² Accusations of militarism often say as much about the values and politics of the person levying the charge as they do about their target. After all, when was the last time you heard anyone proudly declare themselves a militarist? Since the early 20th century, militarism has nearly always been only a word of opprobrium, grievance, and incrimination. But selectively exploring past understandings of militarism can perhaps help us better specify its contemporary nature.

Consider, for instance, the common definition of militarism as the excessive and even reflexive use of military force. From this standpoint, militaristic states have a powerful military hammer and see only a world of nails. It sounds reasonable. Some countries do seem more inclined to use military force to solve political problems. Some do seem to think little of bombing others into oblivion. Some seem to confuse tactical with strategic success, falling prey to the error of measuring military effectiveness in terms of "body counts."¹³ In his magisterial 1937 history of militarism, Alfred Vagts thus distinguished between "the military way," which he defined as "winning specific objectives of power with the utmost efficiency," and militarism, whose uses of force primarily serve the interests of the military itself.¹⁴

This typical way of thinking about militarism, however, may blind us to its most notable contemporary manifestations. To be clear, this conceptualization of militarism has always been problematic. It wrongly assumes that there are widely accepted standards drawing the line between legitimate, defensible, and effective uses of force and their illegitimate, indefensible, and ineffective—that is, militaristic—cousins. Notwithstanding the aspirations of ethicists and strategists, such benchmarks are elusive. But it is even more problematic today. If militarism were about turning to the use of force too often and too swiftly, it is not clear that any country—even Russia and the United States—would deserve the label. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 seemed to be shocking evidence of its militaristic instincts. But Russia had long

tried to tame Ukrainian politics without recourse to overt, full-scale military force. Nor was the fact that the war turned out to be a bloody slog a sign that Russia had deployed military force reflexively. Its march to Kyiv had been expected to be a romp—not just by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s yes-men, but by military analysts around the globe and even by the Ukrainians. As for the United States, its military’s global footprint grew after the Cold War, and after 9/11, it threw its soldiers into futile campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and it deployed drones to hunt militants and extremists around the world. But the United States declined to pursue far more military interventions than it took up. US leaders often deployed force only after long resisting its siren call. In Libya, the United States was at best a reluctant militarist, “leading from behind.” In Syria, President Barack Obama, after much delay, ordered only half-hearted half measures. When it came to Ukraine, President Joe Biden made clear there would not be US boots on the ground, and his administration was cautious about sending Ukraine weapons that it feared would provoke the Russian bear.

Or consider the understanding of militarism as a political program to infuse military values—the “spirit of the uniform”—into the broader society and culture. Militarism promotes the view that war serves the collective good, not the interests of the rarefied few. It represents military service as an obligation for all (at least male) citizens. It intertwines masculinity with soldiering, while casting women as, in Jean Bethke Elshtain’s powerful turn of phrase, “beautiful souls” who require physical protection but who themselves help men remain “just warriors.”¹⁵ Waging war requires resources—human bodies (historically men) and money—and militarism makes it easier for citizens to part with both.

However, this standard, while arguably true to the militarism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, might wrongly lead to the conclusion that militarism is today dead. After all, until recently many states were abandoning conscription and reducing spending on their armed forces. In 1960 countries on average spent 6.3% of their national economic output on the military, versus just 2.2% in 2021. In just ten nations—nearly all in the Middle East—did defense spending exceed 5% of gross domestic product. Even Israel, which in the 1970s routinely spent more than 20% of its GDP on defense, had, in the decade preceding the attacks of October 7 (2023), spent just north of 5%.¹⁶ Meanwhile, far fewer countries are today using a large-scale draft to staff their armed forces. Many exceptions—such as the Baltics, Finland, Israel, South Korea, Taiwan—are small, front-line states facing numerically superior foes. Even autocratic regimes are wary of demanding military service of their unwilling citizens. Vladimir Putin has been reluctant since 2022 to call Russian men to the colors even as the “special military operation” in Ukraine faltered, and he has preferred to pay foreign mercenaries and free prisoners to fight rather than impose conscription. By the measure of pervasive military values, even the United States after 9/11 was not militaristic. President George W. Bush did not want Americans to sacrifice in any way amidst the War on Terror. He urged them to “get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed.” His vision was one of “consumer patriotism,” not militarized nationalism.¹⁷ Nor has the Russian invasion of Ukraine tilted Europe toward a militaristic posture by this definition. When in November 2025 France’s top general warned that the country must be “prepared to accept losing its children,” he sparked a huge public outcry and was derided as a “warmonger.”¹⁸

Writers on militarism in its early 20th century heyday saw the cultural glorification of war, mass conscription, and military dominance over policymaking as an interlocking set of

institutions, ideologies, and practices designed to mobilize society for total war. They would have been confused by the contemporary penchant for venerating a nation's soldiers in countries where civilian control over the military seems largely assured, where soldiers are recruited via voluntary means, where the portion of the population under arms is quite small, and where there is little popular enthusiasm for war. Focusing on this core element of militarism brings the puzzle of modern militarism into sharper focus.

Venerating military men is hardly a 21st century innovation. Cultures and societies across history have identified warriors as worthy of admiration. In ancient Greece, service in the city's army was a mark of moral excellence, and those who died in battle were praised as "good men." In Republican Rome, male civic virtue (*virtus*) was chiefly demonstrated through bravery on the battlefield. In the Persian Empire, social standing depended on performing heroic deeds that warranted the king's attention. Early modern Europe was, on the whole, "filled with a military spirit": "Second only to prayer, the exercise of arms was accorded the highest respect among all human activities by the societies of the ancient regime." Between the 14th and 16th centuries in Japan, samurai warriors commanded not only the halls of power, but also the heights of culture. In Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868), the warrior was to model for other subjects the idealized balance among martial ardor, spiritual development, and intellectual cultivation.¹⁹

Within religious traditions too, warriors have often occupied pride of place.²⁰ In the Jewish Torah, as often as God is depicted as Israel's adoring father, God is a righteous warrior on their behalf. Despite Jesus' praise of "the meek," Christian attitudes changed when the Emperor Constantine converted. Ethicists like Augustine worked to reconcile Christian faith with warfare, and medieval Christians embraced as "martyrs" the Crusaders who perished while waging just war against the heathen. In Islam, calls for jihad against non-Muslims—from 7th century Arabia to 16th century Malabar to 21st century Palestine—have portrayed those who answer as the most faithful. A commonly cited *hadith* advises that "the gates of Paradise are under the shadows of the swords." In Hinduism, the warrior Kshatriya caste ranked very near the apex of the caste hierarchy. The Rig Veda granted the dead warrior the same credit as one who had donated 1,000 cows to the temple, and the Bhagavad Gita declared the fallen warrior worthy of entry into the Heaven of the Heroes.²¹

In the second half of the 19th century, militarism spread across increasingly febrile Europe and beyond. Common soldiers became eligible for decorations for battlefield performance, military service became a mark of good citizenship, and the army came to be seen as "a school for the nation."²² In Britain, the soldier was so intensely admired in this period that one critic acidly penned, "At the very back of their theology is, I suspect, a belief that if uniforms had been worn in the Garden of Eden there would have been no Fall." In Germany, too, glorification of the army and "the soldierly spirit" was commonplace, bolstered by large and active veterans' organizations.²³ In Australia, around World War I, the "digger" became a national hero, epitomizing creativity, initiative, and "mateship." In the United States, General William Tecumseh Sherman, who had noted during the Civil War that "war is cruelty, and you cannot refine it," was declaring by 1890 that "there is nothing in life more beautiful than the soldier." In 1906 the Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James found war frightful and irrational, but he spoke approvingly of the "martial character."²⁴ Especially after the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese military's prestige skyrocketed, the government-promoted cult of "the honorable war death" gained traction, war heroes seized the public's imagination,

and *Bushidō* ideals celebrated the samurai as a model for modern Japan's citizenry. In the new nation of Turkey, official history textbooks hailed the country for having "the most developed military spirit" and described the Turkish soldier as "strong, dashing, combatant, intelligent, diligent, brave" and as serving "as an example of morality and virtue for all of humanity."²⁵

But—and this is the key—there is nothing *natural* about militarism. Soldiers and officers have not always and everywhere been objects of universal admiration, and sometimes they have even been openly reviled. In the Byzantine empire, in the 10th century, rural and urban residents found soldiers' presence oppressive. Around the same time in Japan, provincial governors' private armies terrorized peasants so terribly, according to one grievance deposited with the royal Court, that their behavior was "essentially no different from barbarians." From the late 17th century on, as Europe grew wealthy, observes the military historian Michael Howard, the ranks were reputed to be populated by "social drop-outs, criminals, dupes, and half-wits who could only be kept under control by ferocious discipline and who when the opportunity presented itself were liable to behave with quite bestial savagery." Frederick the Great of Prussia admitted as much, and the Duke of Wellington himself called his soldiers "the scum of the earth, enlisted for drink." This was certainly what American soldiers thought of the Redcoats in the War of Independence, according to the historian David McCullough: "the sweepings of the London and Liverpool slums, debtors, drunks, common criminals and the like, who had been bullied and beaten into mindless obedience." As a rule, Enlightenment figures thought little of standing armies and their soldiers. The Prussian philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder dismissed the army as "a hired thoughtless, strengthless, will-less machine," and others scoffed at soldiers as mere "automatons." In the nineteenth century, British citizens felt "repugnance and antipathy to the soldier," the Army Quartermaster testified to Parliament in 1879, and military depots commonly fell prey to classic NIMBY objections.²⁶

Since its apex around the turn of the 20th century, the presence and intensity of militarism has continually wavered. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, despite its catastrophic defeat, the French Army became chic. But the Dreyfus Affair of the 1890s thrust the officer corps back into disrepute. In 1905, one captain wrote to a French Army magazine, "Ten or twenty years ago the officer with his mind set on marriage attired himself in dress uniform and white gloves in order to seek out his prospective father-in-law. Today he scarcely dares confess that he is an officer." Literature from the late Russian Empire is filled with portraits of officers as "lazy, ignorant, uncouth, homicidal and frequently drunk." Two decades later, Americans displaced their disillusion with the Great War onto veterans. After the 1932 Bonus March, many saw veterans as self-interested and even greedy. In 1936 Princeton undergraduates sardonically announced the formation of the Veterans of Future Wars. They demanded immediate payment of \$1,000 to men of military age while they were still alive to spend the money. What started as a joke spread swiftly, complete with an "itchy palm" greeting that inverted the fascist salute.²⁷

Nor were soldiers and officers universally respected after the Second World War. In newly independent India, elite families increasingly declined to send their sons into the officer corps or to see officers as suitable marriage matches for their daughters. French soldiers who after 1953 returned from Southeast Asia felt rejected. US veterans of the Vietnam War reportedly endured abuse at the hands of their fellow Americans. In the late Soviet Union, the *Afgantsy* veterans became synonymous with corruption, looting, desertion, and drug abuse. Among their own countrymen, through the 1970s, Mexican soldiers were thought to hail from "the worst

elements of society.” In Serbia, after the 1990s Balkan Wars, veterans were often viewed as war criminals or “losers.” In eastern portions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, wracked by war from the late 1990s on, only the “desperate” pursue military service: “I have never seen a family that respects a soldier, they will say of him that he has become a bandit.”²⁸

In fact, even militaristic societies and cultures have often regarded soldiers with a certain ambivalence. In the Bible, God rejects King David’s bid to build the Temple in Jerusalem because “you are a man of battles and have shed blood.” From as early as the 4th century, many Christian theologians believed that all killing, even in a just war, was sinful. Famously, the Norman knights who fought with William the Conqueror were required to perform penance after the Battle of Hastings. The warrior aristocrats of 10th century Japan could never reach the highest ranks at court because, ethically and religiously besmirched, they ran afoul of Shinto prohibitions against pollution.²⁹ This view of killing—as always morally transgressive and requiring repentance—finds expression today in the claim that soldiers often suffer from unseen “moral injury.”³⁰ Combat veterans are commonly portrayed as damaged, wracked by demons, unstable, and dangerous.³¹ In left-wing circles, volunteer soldiers are pitied both because they have been traumatized by combat and because they were compelled into service by poverty, by having “no other options.”³²

This brief journey through the history of militarism yields at least three lessons. First, veneration of the military is not a historical constant—which means that its emergence in any particular time and place needs to be explored and explained. Second, post-Cold War militarism has taken shape in a historical moment and configuration that seems unique: a world in which democratic governance is widespread, the web of international institutions is dense, military service is largely voluntary, traditional gender roles are eroding, war is generally not glorified, civilian control is often stable, production chains are still globalized, and international debt markets are highly sophisticated. Whatever the drivers of militarism were in the past, they may well not be at work now. Third, precisely because post-Cold War militarism centers on veneration of soldiers and officers, but does not systematically exalt warfare or saturate society and culture with military values, and in fact often seeks to maintain a strict line between these spheres, contemporary militarism’s political associations and ramifications are uncertain. Whatever followed from militarism in the past may not follow from militarism today.

Making Sense of Military Veneration since the Cold War

Why do we find ourselves today in an age of militarism? Because veneration of the armed forces has been an appealing solution to the problems that politicians and governments have had legitimating authority especially since (and in some cases even before) the end of the Cold War. As Chapter 3 shows, militaries often enjoy public trust by default. But they particularly enjoy the public’s confidence when trust in the political branches of government declines. When people lose faith in the political wings of government, they naturally put it instead in “aspirationally apolitical” state institutions—like the armed forces, the courts, and the police—that claim legitimacy on the grounds that they serve the nation as a whole, without favor. Chapter 4 tells the story of how, as the Cold War came to a close, both autocracies and liberal democracies confronted legitimacy challenges. In an age of democratic capitalism and economic globalization, authoritarian regimes had difficulty justifying their rule. Meanwhile, political paralysis and polarization eroded trust in democratic government and empowered

unelected judges and bureaucrats. With the Cold War's end, and with optimism for global peace and security abundant, militaries around the world entered the 1990s with less claim on national budgets—but, ironically, also better positioned to secure elevated social status.

Militarism, however, is more a matter of social practice and ritual than bottom-up public opinion. Soldiers and officers do not become objects of veneration simply because members of the mass public sour on politicians. It requires elites across different domains to produce and reproduce militaristic tropes and images in speeches and public ceremonies to the point that they become normal, conventional, even common-sense. Militarism thus arises as a top-down response to challenging political circumstances. Vulnerable post-Cold War political elites promoted militarism precisely because they hoped thereby to stabilize their uncertain and unsettled claim to legitimate rule. At the very least, perhaps some of the public's adulation for the military would rub off on them. Ideally, though, the more that widely respected and admired soldiers and officers recognized their political authority, the more that the public would too. In autocracies and democracies alike, in the decades after the Cold War, flailing politicians embraced militarism for instrumental reasons.

Authoritarian regimes, we will see in Chapter 5, have turned to militarism to firm up their claim to rule in a historical moment in which democratic elections seem the sole basis for political legitimacy. After the disorienting turmoil of the 1990s, President Vladimir Putin of Russia leaned heavily into militarism and especially the memory of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) to steady the fragile regime he had inherited from Boris Yeltsin. When in 2012 mass demonstrations broke out all over the country, in protest of Putin's return to the presidency after a four-year hiatus, he doubled down on militarism as a source of regime legitimacy. It is not an accident that, as Putin's rule has become more authoritarian, militaristic initiatives in Russia have proliferated.

Liberal-democratic leaders—the focus of Chapter 6—have also found militarism appealing as democratic institutions began to falter and as political polarization picked up, partly as a result of the Cold War's end. Since the 1990s, Democrats and Republicans in the United States have not been able to agree on much—except that America's professional soldiers and officers are paragons of patriotic virtue and good citizenship. In the United Kingdom, a fractured public daily confronting decaying infrastructure and crumbling services has grown distrustful of their elected leaders. But they have rallied around the nation's military heroes, allegedly mistreated on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq and upon their return home.

Even democracies with fairly well-functioning governments have turned to militarism in response to post-Cold War crises of identity. Denmark did not suffer the political paralysis and governance failures that undermined other European countries after the Cold War. Yet Danes nevertheless found the end of the Cold War deeply discomfiting. The Nordics in general, and the Danes in particular, had long defined themselves as offering a “third way,” between the communist and capitalist extremes and in opposition to Cold War militarization. But, in the 1990s, communism was no longer a viable alternative, and Europe as a whole turned its back on large-scale military investment and mobilization. The old way of being “Danish” was no longer distinctive. Denmark's politicians and populace responded to their post-Cold War identity crisis by reversing course—embracing a new commitment to the utility of military force, developing the corresponding battlefield capabilities and expertise, and fostering a novel culture of respect and admiration for Denmark's military personnel.

Finally, right-wing populists, Chapter 7 contends, have also promoted the veneration of soldiers, especially fallen soldiers, as model citizens. Right-wing populists gained significant political traction partly in response to post-Cold War political paralysis, governance failures, and demographic and cultural change. Like soldier veneration, their rise is a symptom of post-Cold War politics. But populists face unique legitimacy challenges that also incline them to militarism. They need to mobilize the energy of “the people” while rendering the public otherwise passive and voiceless. Populists would love a nation of soldier-like citizens, who—as in militarist mythology—obediently march off to battle without hesitation and even with good cheer. Fallen soldiers are especially ideal subjects for populist propaganda, because they cannot protest the exploitation of their memories. On taking office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India swiftly built a long-delayed national war memorial in central Delhi and introduced a brand-new veterans day, and the social standing of Indian soldiers and officers has risen markedly since the populist Modi took office.

Perhaps though veneration of the military is basically innocuous or even beneficial. The fact that it serves politicians’ interests does not necessarily mean that it has harmful, let alone ruinous, effects on citizens and soldiers alike. That is wishful thinking. In Chapter 8, I show that military veneration is associated with greater public deference to the views of unelected soldiers and officers regarding even basic questions about *whether*, not merely *how*, to use force. Soliciting and carefully considering military experts’ opinions is essential to informed decision-making. But deference means that civilians adopt military experts’ views as their own. That is at odds with the basic principles of democracy, with its emphasis on deliberation and accountability. Militarism also shifts the terms of the social contract against soldiers by weakening public restraints on the use of force. Portraying soldiers as enlisting for reasons of patriotism, rather than more extrinsic motives, makes people more supportive of sending them into harm’s way. However, militarism does not seem to bring any greater concrete benefits for soldiers. Thinking of soldiers as exemplary patriots does not seem to incline people to greater generosity to soldiers and veterans. Knowledge of the UK’s Armed Forces Covenant, which is expressly about what society owes its soldiers, does not seem to have beneficial effects. In short, military veneration seems like a pretty bad deal for democracy, national security, and soldiers themselves.

Veneration of soldiers and the armed forces has a further downside, especially in populist regimes—as detailed in Chapter 9. It corrodes military professionalism from within, by persuading soldiers of their own superiority and encouraging them to cross over the blurry line into politics and policy. When Jair Bolsonaro became president of Brazil in 2019, many officers leapt at the chance to get into politics, serving at all levels of the government. It corrodes military professionalism from without, by tempting politicians to try to fill the ranks with loyalists and turn the military into their personal political instrument. Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan purged the officer corps twice in one decade, “stacking” the military with those he believed would do his bidding. If the professional military resists its politicization, valorization gives way to vilification. Politicians come to see senior military officers as their enemy, and they accuse the officer corps of being incompetent, politically motivated, or both. Since fall 2020, when President Donald Trump at a press conference first publicly alleged that America’s generals were fundamentally corrupt, attacking the “woke” military has become a standard page in Republican politicians’ and right-wing pundits’ playbook. Over the next four

years, it often appeared that tearing into the top brass was a successful way of auditioning to be a leading member of a second Trump administration's national security team.

The chapters to come back these arguments with a range of complementary evidence.³³ You will be presented with analyses of global public opinion data, the results of novel experiments, and quantitative evidence of the military's place in national rituals and holidays. You will also read about how new military-themed holidays were recently introduced in peace-loving, Good Samaritan Norway and Sweden, how democratic leaders in Australia raised and appropriated millions of dollars to build military memorials to wars that ended long ago, how China has, all over the country, built shrines to its "martyrs" complete with AI facial reconstruction, how both autocrats like Russia's Vladimir Putin and democratically elected leaders in, among others, Spain (in the 1990s), India (in the 2000s), and Poland (in the 2010s) militarized their national independence day celebrations, and many more.

I can hear the retorts at the ready. Should we not admire soldiers' devotion to the community of citizens? Would not all societies be healthier if everyone followed soldiers' example and put the community before themselves? I have great sympathy for a republican ethic of citizenship that gives responsibilities and rights equal billing. But not everyone can serve in the military or in other branches of public service that come with significant risk to one's life and physical well-being. There are so many other pressing social needs, so many other valuable ways of serving the collective with distinction and advancing the common good. The public good does not require everyone to risk their lives in the name of the collective. Rather, society benefits most if everyone contributes as befits their talents and proclivities. When putting on a military uniform ranks above all others in the hierarchy of public service, people are discouraged from giving back in other ways to which they might well be better suited. We should not ridicule state bureaucrats as moles with green eyeshades whose professional lives are consumed with boredom and pettiness. We should not dismiss teachers as those who "can't do." We should honor *all* those who sacrifice some personal gain for the collective good. We should *not* put on a pedestal only those who wear a military uniform. When soldiers and officers are singled out as exemplars, other forms of public service pale by comparison, and those who are not able or willing to shoulder a gun often opt out of public service entirely.

I am all for reviving the spirit of republicanism, for placing the performance of public duty at the center of the social contract. But a romanticized, false narrative of military service will not succeed in breathing new life into republican citizenship. It clearly has not succeeded so far—as Americans, despite ubiquitous public veneration for the armed forces and its members, seem in practice to value most highly the accumulation of personal wealth and celebrity.

How then should we relate to soldiers and officers? We ignore the armed forces at our peril, and disparaging soldiers and officers is at least as dangerous as valorizing them. We need a way to engage our military men and women that avoids the extremes of veneration and denigration, that bolsters democratic politics and preserves military professionalism. The alternative to unquestioning deference to the military, Chapter 10 suggests in conclusion, should not be reflexive rejection, but respectful skepticism. The alternative to mythologizing our professional soldiers should not be ascribing to them base motives, but rather speaking more honestly about soldiers and officers as human beings, in their full complexity, with foibles as well as strengths. The alternative to thanking all soldiers (even those who have done nothing

especially heroic) for serving heroically should not involve belittling them, but thanking them for serving democratically—for obeying the will of the people and their elected representatives.

This will not be easy. Challenging hegemony never is.

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² Rasmus Mariager and Anders Wivel, "From Nordic Peacekeeper to NATO Peacemaker: Denmark's Journey from Semi-neutral to Super Ally," in Anne-Marie Brady and Baldur Thorhallsson, eds., *Small States and the New Security Environment* (Cham: Springer, 2021), p. 108.

³ Ulf Hedetoft, "National Identity and Mentalities of war in Three EC Countries," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1993), pp. 281-300; Niels Bo Paulsen and Jakob Brink Rasmussen, "The Long Road towards an Official Danish Veterans Policy, 1848–2010," *Contemporary Military Challenges*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017), pp. 89-105.

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⁵ Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Jens Ringmose, "In Denmark, Afghanistan is Worth Dying For: How Public Support for the War was Maintained in the Face of Mounting Casualties and Elusive Success," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2015), pp. 211-227; Peter Viggo Jakobsen et al., "Prestige-seeking Small States: Danish and Norwegian Military Contributions to US-led Operations," *European Journal of International Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2018), pp. 256-277.

⁶ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, "'What's the Use of It?': Danish Strategic Culture and the Utility of Armed Force," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2005), pp. 67-89; Tea Dahl Christensen, "The Figure of the Soldier: Discourses of Indisputability and Heroism in a New Danish Commemorative Practice," *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2015), pp. 347-363; Cecelia Åse and Maria Wendt, "Gendering the New Hero Narratives: Military Death in Denmark and Sweden," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2017), pp. 23-41; Kristian Frisk, "'But When I Tell Them About Heroes, Then They Listen': The Soldier Hero and Transformations of the Danish Welfare State," *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2017), pp. 176-189; Paulsen and Rasmussen, pp. 89-105; Kristian Frisk, "Heroes in Helmand: Military Heroism and National Identity in Denmark" (Ph.D. Diss, University of Southern Denmark, 2018). Danish soldiers are also sometimes seen and portrayed as "damaged" or "victims": see Ann-Katrine Schmidt Nielsen, "Mobilizing and Countering 'the Bad Story': The Role of Media Narratives about Traumatized Veterans in Danish Militarization Processes," *National Identities* (2024), pp. 1-18.

⁷ On Denmark as "laggard," see Peter Viggo Jakobsen, "Denmark in NATO: From Laggard to Leader to Loyal?," in Michele Testoni, ed. *NATO and Transatlantic Relations in the 21st Century: Foreign and Security Policy Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2020), esp. pp. 87-89. On Denmark as "warrior nation," see Mads Daugbjerg and Birgitte Refslund Sørensen, "Becoming a Warring Nation: The Danish 'Military Moment' and its Repercussions," *Critical Military Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1-6; Birgitte Refslund Sørensen, "Public Commemorations of Danish Soldiers: Monuments, Memorials, and Tombstones," *Critical Military Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), pp. 27-49; Jesper Vind Jensen, "Danmark, den evige krigernation" [Denmark, the eternal warrior nation], *Weekendavisen*, 4 June 2010, p. 3.

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³³ This book is written for the curious general reader. As for you data hounds, statistics nerds, and masochists! See the first endnote at the start of each relevant section. It will direct you to a published article and/or a posted technical appendix online.

Chapter 3

The Origins of Military Veneration

The age of militarism has taken shape as a common strategic solution that state leaders around the world pursued to address a common political problem: the mounting challenges that democratic and authoritarian leaders alike faced in legitimizing their rule as the Cold War came to a close. But militarism presented itself as an appealing answer because a bottom-up, popular process created a rich soil in which it could thrive. When people lose faith in partisan-political institutions, they look to place their trust elsewhere, specifically in institutions like the armed forces that claim to lie above the dispiriting political melee. When it comes to public trust, the government's loss is the armed forces' gain. Politicians, desperate to right the regime ship, seek to exploit the military's rising status. They revel in public performances of political theater, in which soldier-citizens treat the political class and system as authoritative. They promote militarism so that these soldiers become, in their fellow citizens' eyes, paragons of patriotism and commitment to the public good. The hope: that these model citizens' respect for political authority rubs off on the rest and restores the regime's luster.

Why Militaries Typically Enjoy the Public's Trust¹

The military as an institution has long sat at the center of culture and politics.² As far back as ancient Greece, societies and governments have identified and transmitted values through the military. The Renaissance thinker Niccolo Machiavelli believed that regular armed training would rekindle the virtues of republican Rome in his degenerate contemporaries. Building on that tradition, the French Revolutionaries firmly tied together citizenship and military service at the end of the 18th century: service on the battlefield was a critical duty of citizenship, and citizens proved themselves worthy of membership in the political community by fighting for it. The German sociologist Max Weber saw in military discipline a means of transforming ordinary citizens into members of a heroic society. In the late 19th century, European policymakers and ideologues put this vision into practice. They installed large-scale male conscription primarily for battlefield reasons, but they also saw social benefits. The army, they imagined, could serve as a "a school for the nation," transforming their deeply divided societies into cohesive national communities. Over the next century, nation-building elites, in late-industrializing powers and postcolonial regimes alike, from the Americas to Africa to Asia, looked to military service as a means of overcoming parochial kinship structures and forging national unity.

Because the armed forces occupy an unusually prominent place in the nation's cultural matrix, they have long been critical sites of contestation and debate over membership in the political community. Barring ethnic, racial, and religious minorities from military service can send an especially clear signal of their marginal status. From the start, Israel did not permit its Arab citizens to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, partly because it feared they would betray their new country, which had they been forced to join unwillingly, and partly because service in the IDF defined what it meant to be an Israeli. Assigning minority soldiers to the front lines, often with poor gear and little training, is another way of communicating how little the state values the lives of these citizens. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where Sunni Muslims dominated the corridors of power, Shiite Muslims from the country's south served in the military, but were treated as mere cannon fodder.

Disadvantaged groups have commonly focused their mobilization for social equality on the military. Black Americans famously embraced the “Double V for Victory” campaign during World War II, serving with loyalty and distinction for victory against racism both at home and abroad. The status of women, gays, and transgender people in the US armed forces has been a focus of intense ongoing political contest for well over 30 years—not because liberals have thought that sexual and gender equality in the armed forces would make a massive difference to the career prospects of large numbers of women, gay, and trans Americans, and not because conservatives have thought that there were so many women, gay, and trans Americans in the military that their full inclusion would severely harm military effectiveness. At stake for both liberals and conservatives was a much larger and more significant question: whether women, gay, and trans Americans were equally and fully recognized citizens of the United States.

The armed forces often enjoys the public’s confidence by default.³ The institution’s status as a cultural and political focal point could easily have the opposite effect: it could invite citizens to carefully and critically scrutinize it. Rather, people trust the armed forces for the same reasons they trust other institutions. The difference is that these two critical conditions normally apply in spades to the armed forces. Trusting another—whether a person or an institution—is potentially dangerous, because it leaves the truster vulnerable to betrayal.⁴ This basic premise has two implications. First, given the ever-present possibility of deception, people bestow trust only on institutions they need. In an international environment where physical safety is never fully assured, even peace-loving states must maintain significant military force. Only that way can they have confidence that the most basic of collective goods—physical security—will be sufficiently supplied. The armed forces enjoy a privileged position in the hierarchy of institutions because, as the psychologist Abraham Maslow put it decades ago, “safety needs” enjoy a privileged position in the hierarchy of human values.⁵

Second, people trust only institutions that have performed well in the past and are likely to continue delivering on their promise. This implies that institutions whose strong performance is visible and easily measured are more likely to be trusted. But it also implies that institutions whose *poor* performance is *not* perceptible or straightforwardly appraised are *also* more likely to be trusted. For several reasons, militaries today often fall into the latter category. First of all, since the Second World War, states have fought very few interstate wars by which to evaluate militaries’ performance. The Soviet military did not fight between the end of the Second World War and the fiasco in Afghanistan in the 1980s, except for border skirmishes with China in 1969. Aside from its brief “peace enforcement” operation against mighty Georgia in 2008, the Russian military did not again openly wage war beyond its borders until it invaded Ukraine in 2022. At that time, analysts on all sides gave the Russian military the benefit of the doubt—which is why its floundering against Ukraine early on came as a huge surprise not only to Russian intelligence analysts and policymakers, but to their Ukrainian, European, and American counterparts.

Moreover, even when operations and wars go unexpectedly badly, the armed forces often emerge with their reputation less sullied, if not unscathed. Typically civilian government figures are held liable. They take the blame for ordering the military to fight an unwinnable war. The reason: politicians who do not control the reins of power have little to gain from holding the military accountable, and they have everything to gain from pinning guilt on their political adversaries who preside over the apparatus of government. This is not simply a dynamic of democratic politics. Political competition exists in virtually all autocracies too (with the

exception of personalist dictatorships). After defeat, in fact, autocrats are more likely than their democratically elected counterparts to lose their heads, not merely their jobs.⁶ Assigning primary fault to the armed forces is in no one's interest except sitting politicians.

Militaries cannot always evade blame for battlefield defeat. First, when the military itself rules, when top generals are also government decision-makers, the buck cannot be passed to anyone else. The military may still escape accountability due to its sheer power, but not because it succeeds in assigning responsibility to any other organ of government. Second, militaries are vulnerable when there are clear signs of professional incompetence, such as organizational and disciplinary failures for which only the armed forces can be responsible. Yet militaries work hard to keep organizational failings under wraps, so that they only rarely come to light.⁷

Bottom-Up: How Militaries Gain—and Lose—Public Trust

However, there are times when the public invests more faith in the armed forces.⁸ Good performance helps, and so do higher levels of external threat, which convey the clear need for the military's competent provision of security. But so too does the military's perceived legitimacy. The more civilians in the political branches of government fritter away public trust, the more the armed forces gain—as long as they stay out of the political fray.

Militaries, like courts, claim to lie above the cut-and-parry of politics. Courts profit from a “myth of legality” that produces and reinforces the conceits that the law is apolitical, that judges simply follow the law, and that courts are insulated from everyday politics.⁹ Militaries profit from parallel myth-making that they loyally serve the “nation” or the “constitution,” not a political faction. In this myth, officers and soldiers are civic warrior-priests who sacrifice themselves for enduring values, not the government of the day. In both courts and militaries, rituals, practices, and symbols sustain the pretense.

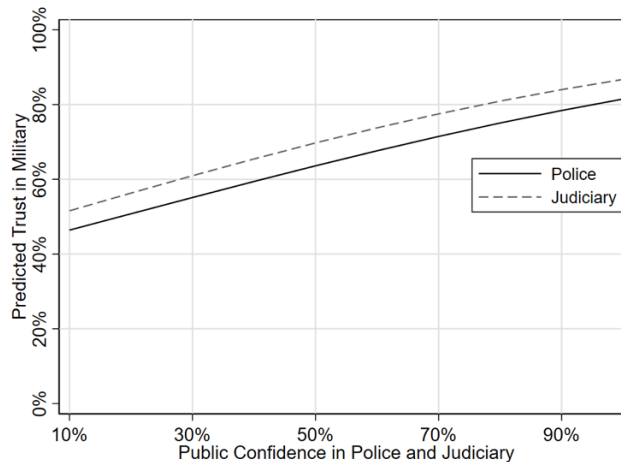
In reality, of course, militaries can, and often do, act in ways contrary to their apolitical, non-partisan legitimation. Yet it is revealing that, when Latin American militaries in the 1960s and 1970s seized the reins of government, they said they were “saving the nation” from venal politicians or “upholding the constitution” against threats from within or without.¹⁰ Militaries have read from this same script for decades. The 2019 soft coup against Evo Morales was, according to the head of the armed forces, “for the good of our Bolivia.” In Mali in 2020, the officers who forced the president to resign styled themselves the “National Committee for the Salvation of the People.” Their spokesman explained that they had acted “to take our responsibilities before the people and before history.” The next year, in Guinea, the putschists asserted that they had dissolved the government and declared the constitution invalid because “the duty of a soldier is to save the country.”¹¹ Even when militaries have waded into politics, their standard playbook reaffirms their commitment to being apolitical. They paradoxically claim the right to intervene in the nation's politics *because* only they stand above politics.

Distrust of partisan-political state institutions, like the legislature, redounds to the benefit of aspirationally non-partisan institutions like the armed forces. When partisan institutions fail to provide public goods and when allegations of corruption dog politicians, aspirationally non-partisan institutions are not guilty by association. Rather, they enjoy a “halo” effect: they appear to be saints when others seem to be sinners. When civilian officials are seen as incompetent, the military appears relatively competent. When civilian officials are perceived as corrupt, the military seems relatively unimpeachable. When political institutions have frittered away the

public's trust, the military appears relatively trustworthy. The underlying logic is rooted in the psychology of motivated bias. People have needs that they cannot provide for themselves. When government fails to satisfy those needs, they have psychological incentives to invest other institutions, especially those legitimated in radically different terms, with more trust—unless and until those institutions prove wanting. As a result, partisan-political institutions' loss of trust and legitimacy is the military's gain.

Public opinion on confidence in the military around the world between 2006 and 2021, collected by Gallup, buttresses this argument. As Figure 1 shows, public confidence in the judicial system and in the police are highly correlated with confidence in the armed forces. When trust in judges and police officers climbs (moving to the right along the X axis), confidence in the armed forces climbs too (moving upwards along the Y axis). To give you a sense of the strength of this association, in a country ranking in the 25th percentile in trust in the police in a given year—places as varied as Belarus (2018), Romania (2010), Mongolia (2014), and Argentina (2021)—on average 64 percent of people are likely to express confidence in the armed forces. In a country ranking in the 75th percentile in trust in the police—which includes wealthy nations like Italy (2012), the Netherlands (2016), Spain (2015), and Sweden (2017), but also poorer countries like Burkina Faso (2013), Cambodia (2017), and Madagascar (2011)—74 percent on average similarly trust the military. This analysis takes into account (in the language of statistics, controls for) a wide range of other factors that can affect confidence in the armed forces, including its recent performance, perceived quality, international threat level and the public's need for the institution, the military's involvement in politics, as well as measures of the country's democracy, population, wealth, and development.¹²

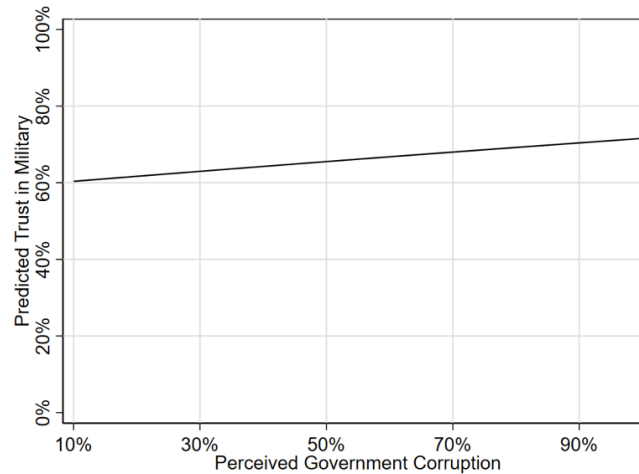
Figure 1
Confidence in the Judiciary and Police & Trust in the Armed Forces



However, per Figure 2, the more people perceive their government as corrupt, the more they place their trust in the armed forces. Other ways of measuring public confidence in major political institutions—such as, perception of improving living standards or direct measures of confidence in the “national government”—have similar effects.¹³ Countries whose governments are generally thought to be highly corrupt—such as Italy or Nigeria—trust their militaries

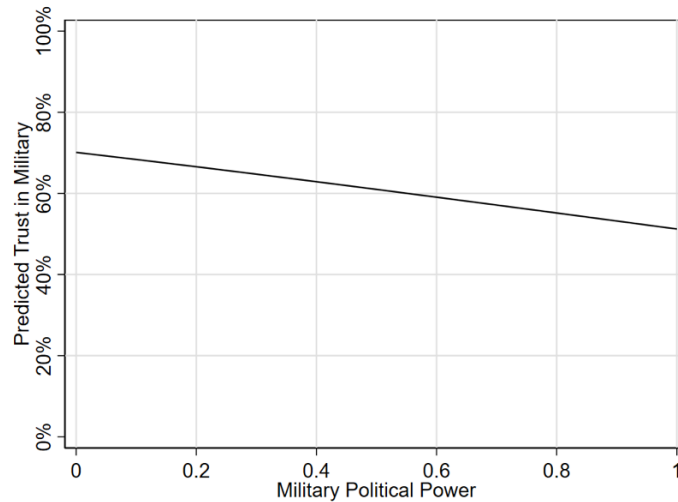
significantly *more* than countries whose governments are not perceived as corrupt—such as Sweden. In other words, there does seem to be a substantial “halo” effect: when government is perceived as venal and dishonest, the military seems relatively pure and trustworthy.

Figure 2
Perceived Government Corruption & Trust in the Armed Forces



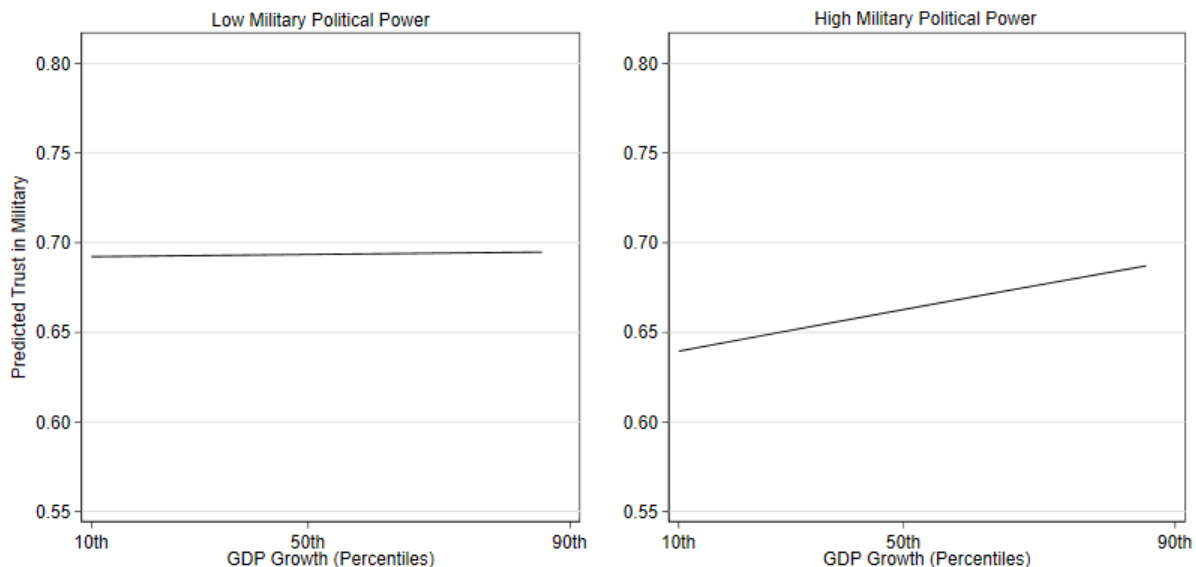
This follows as long as the military remains more or less true to its non-partisan claims to legitimacy. However, when the military does not distance itself from partisan political institutions, when people see the armed forces as penetrated by political interests, and when the military is central to everyday governance, its legitimacy erodes. As Figure 3 shows, the more government relies on the military for critical political support—that is, as the military’s political power rises—the less the public trusts the armed forces.¹⁴ Countries where the military’s political power is very limited—such as Portugal, Australia, and other consolidated democracies—have on average nearly 20 percent more confidence in the armed forces than do countries under direct military rule, like Egypt. Other ways of measuring military influence over politics—such as whether the military rules directly or whether the head of state is a former military officer¹⁵—have similar effects.¹⁶

Figure 3
Military Political Power & Confidence in the Armed Forces



The underlying logic, however, suggests a more nuanced and interesting claim: the more the military becomes a partisan-political actor like any other, the more people judge it by the standards they apply to all partisan-political institutions—performance. When the military-influenced (or -ruled) government delivers the public goods people expect—such as economic growth and protection from human rights abuses—the military shares some of the credit, and confidence in the armed forces rises. When it falls short by those measures, the military shares some of the blame, and confidence in the armed forces falls. That is precisely what I find. The left side of Figure 4 portrays the relationship between economic performance, measured in terms of growth, and trust in the military when the military exercises little domestic political power. In that circumstance, the line is essentially flat: the government’s economic performance has no effect on public confidence in the military. That is not true when the military is politically influential, as in the right side of Figure 4. Under those conditions, the line slopes upward: higher economic growth is associated with significantly more public trust in the military. Notice as well that, when government delivers the economic goods—that is, GDP growth is in the 90th percentile—confidence in the armed forces is basically the same regardless of whether the military holds political power.¹⁷

Figure 4
Military Political Power, Economic Performance & Confidence in the Armed Forces



Might these results, however, overstate the public's trust in the armed forces? After all, people have good reason to be afraid of those holding the guns, and they may claim to have confidence in the armed forces even when they do not. People also tend to inflate their support for positions that they think are "socially desirable," like holding a good opinion of the military.¹⁸ These dynamics are surely at work in different places. However, if people especially hold their tongues when the military is politically powerful, that buttresses my findings; it implies that, when the military is politically influential and active, *actual* public confidence in the armed forces is even lower than I find. And if people express trust in the armed forces out of social pressure, that is itself evidence of militarism at work. Finally, the core finding—that lower trust in partisan-political institutions drives trust in the armed forces—holds even when I account for respondents' "preference falsification." When I exclude from the analysis cases in which people are most likely to exaggerate their trust in the armed forces—countries where confidence in the military is already very high (above 70 percent) or countries where the military has a significant level of influence over the government and political system—the findings are unaltered.¹⁹

Top-Down: Why Politicians Turn to Militarism

Soldiers and officers do not become objects of veneration simply because the mass public loses faith in politicians. Falling trust in political institutions certainly primes people to place their trust instead in institutions like the military that claim to lie outside, and indeed above, political competition. It creates a welcoming social foundation for militaristic initiatives. It inclines people to believe that soldiers and officers are paragons of patriotism and exemplars of good citizenship. But it takes political and cultural elites to push at that open door. Only they can transform amorphous pro-military public sentiment into concrete social and public practices and rituals that valorize soldiers and veterans. Only they can commission new public works of art and popular culture, transform educational curricula, authorize civil society and

youth groups, and promote new histories and national narratives that center on military sacrifice. Only they can seek legally to suppress more critical histories and alternative narratives.²⁰ Only their interventions into politics, history, and culture can make the veneration of soldiers and officers seem utterly normal and conventional.

Why though would governments whose authority is flagging and politicians who are distrusted push militaristic myths in their speeches, organize military parades, arrange militaristic displays, and surround themselves with glittering medals? Because militarism can help mitigate their legitimacy problems. When highly respected military men and women participate in ceremonies and rituals that treat the politician as a legitimate authority and that convey their subordination to civilian authority, they implicitly proclaim that the civilian office-holder wields power rightfully. At military parades, soldiers and officers salute politicians at the dais as they process past. When national leaders deliver major policy speeches before military audiences, soldiers and officers' presence, whether cheering or in respectful silence, conveys their acceptance and affirmation of the leader's right to speak. When politicians greet soldiers in informal settings, soldiers typically offer an enthusiastic welcome, regardless of party affiliation, indicating both their devotion to the constitutional order and their certification of the politician as a legitimate representative of that order. These public events not only attest to and elevate the military's status, but are public, ritualized performances of political authority. They send a powerful signal to the broader public that the political branches of government are, notwithstanding their flaws, still worthy. They communicate that, no matter how self-interested politicians may seem and no matter how crass they may appear in dealing with their political adversaries, they—like the honorable, self-sacrificing soldiers and officers surrounding them—still recognize and serve the common good.

From the flailing politician's vantage point, the more romanticized the soldier, the greater the political benefit. The more socially valorized soldiers are, and the more virtuous people believe them to be, the greater the good they do for the prospects of the faltering politician and the larger political system. These public displays invite everyday citizens to ask themselves: if the exemplary military citizen invests the elected office-holder or bureaucratic appointee with legitimate authority, then should not I, a far less than unimpeachable citizen? The power of that rhetorical question is directly related to the perceived social distance between heroic, self-sacrificing, patriotic soldier-citizens and their real civilian counterparts. When common citizens perceive that gap to be large, the signal communicated by soldiers' and officers' participation in ceremonies and rituals reaffirming political authority is especially great. Political elites, across the political spectrum, consequently have incentives to idealize active-duty soldiers and officers as well as veterans and to promote their social veneration. Militarism increases the gap between soldiers and non-serving citizens and thereby bolsters the system's legitimacy as well as politicians' authority.

Militarism is not a risk-free political strategy. Proclaiming the military's virtues can cast politicians' vices into sharper relief. The more the soldier seems like the epitome of a noble, public-minded, self-sacrificing citizen, the more people may be reminded that the stereotypical politician is scheming, self-interested, and corrupt. The more they are exposed to militaristic rhetoric and rites, the more people may be inclined to compare these very different public figures and find the politician wanting. Militarism can then bind politicians' hands and insulate military leaders from criticism. It can embolden officers to resist civilians, and it may even make

officers confident that the populace would welcome their intervention in politics. Citizens were supposedly enthusiastic when General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the Egyptian military overthrew President Mohammed Morsi in 2013, when the Bolivian military “suggested” to President Evo Morales in 2019 that he resign after large-scale sustained popular protests, and when the Guinean military ousted President Alpha Conde in 2021.²¹ If officers truly drink the militaristic Kool-Aid, they may even come to believe that they really are superior.²²

The fact is though that politicians routinely overlook these risks. How politicians romanticize the armed forces varies. In many countries, militarism takes a traditional form. In these nations, politicians do not acknowledge the diverse and often pecuniary motives that bring soldiers into the ranks, but celebrate soldiers as exemplary patriots. They do not concede the reality that, in modern militaries, fewer and fewer soldiers are located at the tip of the spear. They do not acknowledge that the lines between civilian and military expertise have become quite blurry, that many soldiers and officers primarily perform tasks that are largely indistinguishable from those they might perform outside the armed forces—as, among others, logistics experts, mechanics, land surveyors, health professionals, and lawyers. They continue to depict soldiers as if all were warriors whose greatest ambition was to be, in US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth’s favorite term, “lethal.” They hail compensated volunteer soldiers for their “sacrifices for the nation.” They oddly speak of long-serving professionals as if they were “citizen-soldiers.”

The United States is a prime example of traditional militarism, but it is not alone. In the mid-2000s, the Canadian Armed Forces abandoned its peacekeeping orientation in favor of a warrior posture. The Harper government rebranded the military as the Canadian *Armed Forces* (rather than the Canadian Forces, as they had been known since the 1990s), and male-only special-forces teams became its most prestigious units. The only partial concession made to its previous peacekeeping identity was that its soldiers were commonly cast as “helpful heroes.” In that same period, Denmark fully embraced its identity as a “warrior nation,” and its soldiers who died in Afghanistan were portrayed as “heroic patriots defending national values.” China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) recruitment videos of the 2010s embraced a bloodlust that makes US military advertising seem relatively tame: “Roar with animal spirit, from the center to the border. Let’s go to war, let’s fight to win! There is no time to waste, the moment of life and death has arrived / you are not afraid / just wait for the command to kill! Kill! Kill!” These advertisements tended to associate top-notch military performance with bare-chested, muscled masculinity: “army service has made me into a manly man,” and “always remember that a man should strive to perform immortal feats!” They also reinforced traditional gender roles. One called upon women to demonstrate their devotion to the nation not by serving in the PLA, but by washing soldiers’ clothes, like “camp followers” of yore.²³

In other countries, however, soldiers are equally idealized, but in the service of a very different set of values. In these countries, soldiers are less lethal warriors than generous humanitarians and peacemakers, less gung-ho patriots than consummate professionals, less nationalists than cosmopolitans.²⁴ The Dutch soldier, for instance, should be—in an oft-rehearsed adage—“as civilian as possible, as military as necessary.” In Germany, initial reluctance in the 1990s to embrace the Bundeswehr’s involvement in “out-of-area” peacekeeping operations swiftly gave way to enthusiastic acceptance. During its intervention in Afghanistan, even referring to the operation as “war,” rather than “armed humanitarianism,” produced an outcry in a country that since World War II has been a “pacifist society at heart.”

Sweden was proud of its tradition of “armed neutrality”—before the war in Ukraine led it to join NATO.²⁵ If militarism means aggressive nationalism, these countries’ cultures represent its very antithesis. But if militarism means, as I employ the term here, the veneration and idealization of soldiers and officers, then these countries are equally militaristic. Because it is *military* men and women who are being put forward as exemplars of what it means to be a 21st century Dutchman or Swede. Nursery school teachers, employees of the Agriculture Ministry, foreign service officers, NGO workers, and captains of industry might all have been touted as models of good citizenship. But they were not—and soldiers were.

Promoting militarism is a strategic choice that political, social, and culture elites make. It carries significant risks, but politicians embrace militarism anyway—as at least part of the answer to their systemic challenges of political legitimacy and authority. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, those challenges revolved in Europe around class politics, the appeal of socialism, and pressures for democratization. The Cold War was a global conflict, which reverberated around the world. Its end was no less momentous. With the Cold War over, democracies and autocracies alike confronted different but equally significant challenges to their political legitimacy. For both, militarism proved appealing.

¹ The scholarly literature uses trust and confidence interchangeably, as do the surveys themselves. I use the terms interchangeably as well.

² The next three paragraphs draw freely on Ronald R. Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2004), pp. 85-124; Ronald R. Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

³ The next two paragraphs build on Pedro Accorsi and Ronald R. Krebs, “The Soldier in the State: Explaining Public Trust in the Armed Forces,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 13 (2025), pp. 2795-2830.

⁴ Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker, “Political Trust in a Cynical Age,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 21 (2018), pp. 49-70, .

⁵ Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).

⁶ Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷ Fraggings—killing superior officers by fragmentation grenade—was well-known to be fairly common among US forces in Vietnam. But the Vietnam War was an unpopular war that was a focus of intense public protest and in which the US military relied on a large-scale draft that was rife with exceptions for the relatively privileged.

⁸ The discussion that follows draws upon Accorsi and Krebs, pp. 2795-2830. For technical details, and more nuanced discussion of the theoretical arguments, findings, and methods, see that article and its online technical appendix.

⁹ James L. Gibson and Michael J. Nelson, “The Legitimacy of the US Supreme Court: Conventional Wisdoms and Recent Challenges Thereto,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, Vol. 10 (2014), pp. 201-219.

¹⁰ Brian Loveman, *For la Patria: Politics and the Armed Forces in Latin America* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1999).

¹¹ “Bolivian Army Chief Urges Morales to Step Down,” *BBC*, 10 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-50369591>; “Mali: Mutinous Soldiers Call on the Population to Resume their Activities,” *Radio France Internationale*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200819-mali-militaires-mutins-appellent-transition-civile-%C3%A9lections>; Boubacar Diallo and Krista Larson, “Soldiers Detain Guinea’s President, Dissolve Government,” *Associated Press*, 5 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-guinea-army-government-dissolved-214f607402a533c581bbd7ef91d5bb0f>.

¹² For technical details on the operationalization of these variables and the statistical modeling, as well as the full statistical results including the control variables, see Accorsi and Krebs, pp. 2795-2830.

¹³ See Appendix **, Figure **.

¹⁴ The Varieties of Democracy Project, from which I have drawn this data, calls this variable the Military Dimension Index (MDI). It measures the extent to which the armed forces constitute an essential “power base” of the chief executive. This variable is measured continuously on a scale of 0-1. A score of 0 represents minimal military interference—as in Canada, Chile, and Germany. A score close to 1 implies that the current regime came to power through the military and can be dismissed by the military—as in Guinea and Mali. The Index recognizes, however, that the armed forces may exert significant influence short of ruling directly. An MDI score of 0.5 implies that the military appoints the head of state or can dismiss heads of state, but does not itself rule. Pakistan earned roughly this score between 2006 and 2008, as did Thailand between 2008 and 2018. 56 percent of the data have an MDI score above 0, indicating some significant degree of military involvement in and power over politics. As MDI is a rather cryptic name, I have opted for the more straightforward title: Military Political Power.

¹⁵ Military rule is rare—just 7.6 percent of the data. Senior military officers more often shed the uniform and become government leaders, but such cases still constitute only roughly 10 percent of the data.

¹⁶ Appendix **, Figure **.

¹⁷ For analysis of the data on the relationship between economic performance or human rights violations, confidence in the armed forces, and military political power, see Accorsi and Krebs, pp. 2795-2830.

¹⁸ Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), chap. 7; Meredith Kleykamp et al., “Who Supports U.S. Veterans and Who Exaggerates Their Support?,” *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2018), pp. 92-115; Kevin Koehler et al., “Who Fakes Support for the Military? Experimental Evidence from Tunisia,” *Democratization*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2022), pp. 1055-1076; Aila M. Matanock and Miguel García-Sánchez, “Does Counterinsurgent Success Match Social Support? Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Colombia,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (2017), pp. 800-814.

¹⁹ For further discussion of these analyses that seek to control for potential “preference falsification,” see Accorsi and Krebs, pp. 2795-2830.

²⁰ See, among others, Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Katie Stallard, *Dancing on Bones: History and Power in China, Russia, and North Korea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

²¹ Egypt, Patrick Kingsley, “Egypt in turmoil as defiant Morsi stands firm over ‘coup’ threat,” *Guardian*, 1 July 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/01/egypt-army-mohamed-morsi-coup>; Max Fisher, “Is what happened in Egypt a coup or a revolution? It’s both,” *Washington Post*, 3 July 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/07/03/is-what-happened-in-egypt-a-coup-or-a-revolution-its-both/>; David D. Kirkpatrick, “Egyptian Liberals Embrace the Military, Brooking No Dissent,” *New York Times*, 15 July 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/world/middleeast/egypt-morsi.html>. Bolivia, Ernesto Londoño, “Bolivian Leader Evo Morales Steps Down,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/10/world/americas/evo-morales-bolivia.html>; Zeeshan Aleem, “Bolivia’s Coup is Still Happening,” *The Nation*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-coup-morales/>; Drew Holland Kinney, “Learning from the Banality and Aftermath of Bolivia’s Coup,” *War on the Rocks*, 26 February 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/learning-from-the-banality-and-aftermath-of-bolivias-coup/>. Guinea, “Many Guineans celebrate as soldiers seize power,” *Al Jazeera*, 6 September 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/9/6/many-guineans-celebrate-as-soldiers-seize-power>; “Guinea’s Coup Stems from Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Financial Times*, 7 September 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/0ba38cf4-2ebf-4846-9f62-6191f6d2735c>; James Courtright, “Popular Support for Guinea’s Coup is Real,” *Institute of Current World Affairs*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.icwa.org/support-for-guinea-coup/>.

²² For evidence that such beliefs have begun to penetrate the US officer corps, see Susan Bryant et al., “From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint: The Societal Implications of Military Exceptionalism,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2021), pp. 9-24; Risa Brooks and Sharan Grewal, “‘Twice the Citizen’: How Military Attitudes of Superiority Undermine Civilian Control in the United States,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 66, No. 4-5 (2022), pp. 623-650.

²³ Canada, Andrea Lane, “Special Men: The Gendered Militarization of the Canadian Armed Forces,” *International Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2017), pp. 463-483; Nicole Wegner, “Helpful heroes and the political utility of militarized masculinities,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2021), pp. 5-26. Denmark, Kaare Dahl Martinsen, *Soldier Repatriation: Popular and Political Responses* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 123. China, quoted in Orna Naftali, “‘Life is Wonderful Because of the Military’: People’s Liberation Army Recruitment Campaigns in Contemporary China,” in Brendan Maartens and Thomas Bivins, eds., *Propaganda and Public Relations in Military*

Recruitment: Promoting Military Service in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 184-186; Robert Foyle Hunwick, "How Chinese Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Their Military Again," *Foreign Policy*, 5 August 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/05/how-chinese-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-their-military-again-pla-tiananmen-comeback-china/>.

²⁴ On professionalism as the defining feature of contemporary military life, see Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On portraits of soldiers in recent UK military obituaries, see Maja Zehfuss, "Hierarchies of Grief and the Possibility of War: Remembering UK Fatalities in Iraq," *Millennium*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2009), pp. 419-440; Anthony King, "The Afghan War and 'Postmodern' Memory: Commemoration and the Dead of Helmand," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Mar 2010), pp. 1-25.

²⁵ Quoted in Tine Molendijk, "War Is Back in Post-Heroic Europe: Change and Continuity in the Relationship Between the Armed Forces and Society," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2026), pp. 29-53; also Cecilia Åse, "Rationalizing Military Death: The Politics of the New Military Monuments in Berlin and Stockholm," *Critical Military Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2022), pp. 77-98; Sabine Collmer, "To Go with the Flow? Change and Persistence in Patterns of Civil-Military Relations in Germany before and after the End of the Cold War," in Gerhard Kümmel, et al., eds., *Armed Forces, Soldiers and Civil-Military Relations: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Kuhlmann* (GWV Fachverlage GmbH, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009).

Chapter 2 Militarism Gone Global

Since the end of the Cold War, Americans' penchant for militaristic gestures and displays has known no bounds. Militarism has become so deeply interwoven into the fabric of daily American life that Americans are more surprised when emcees at sporting events do *not* prompt them to give thanks to honored veterans than when they do. They are shocked when they hear of politicians expressing disrespect toward soldiers. Even Donald Trump—a politician whose very brand is norm transgression—vociferously denied media reports from credible sources that he had denigrated injured and dead soldiers.¹ James Fallows put it well in *The Atlantic* in 2015. “[M]odern America ... gazes admiringly at its [military] heroes,” he wrote. Its politicians routinely, when it comes to the armed forces, delight in “overblown, limitless praise, absent the caveats or public skepticism we would apply to other American institutions, especially ones that run on taxpayer money.”² Americans abroad often note how militaristic rituals that are familiar to Americans are absent or relatively muted elsewhere. One American journalist living in Germany observed in 2009, “ ‘Support the troops’ can start to sound like a hollow mantra until you live in a country that just doesn’t do it... To this American, the talk show hosts’ and football announcers’ greetings to the soldiers had begun to sound a bit obligatory until I returned from Afghanistan and started really paying attention to German television, hoping to catch just one similar gesture. So far I haven’t.”³

When it comes to militarism, the United States may be exceptional in degree, but it is not exceptional either in kind or in general trajectory. Veneration of the military has been rising in many countries around the world since the 1990s. This shared developmental path has been easily overlooked in part because the United States’ military profile—not just its militaristic practices, but also its spending and kinetic activity—has long overshadowed all other countries and in part because the military’s growing cultural prominence has, in many places, not been accompanied by greater military expenditure or greater interest in military careers. It also stems though from the sheer diversity of how countries display their regard for soldiers and veterans. Certain practices—like honoring veterans at public sporting events—are distinctively American, but others, common elsewhere, are not part of the American repertoire. For instance, in Israel, when the siren blasts, the entire country, even traffic on the highways, comes to a halt for one minute on *Yom HaZikaron* (Memorial Day). Americans with close familial connections to the fallen may visit their loved ones’ graves on Memorial Day, but the nation as a whole seems to honor the military fallen annually with retail sales and barbecues and a good deal less solemnity.⁴ In France, the annual multi-day celebration of Bastille Day has long included impressive displays of the nation’s military might. The United States has occasionally held military parades after victory in war, but not on July 4th. In fact, in 2017, President Donald Trump came home inspired by his visit to France, only to be told by the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that military parades are “what dictators do.”⁵ During the War on Terror, Britons from all over lined the streets of a small town, Wootton Bassett, through which fallen soldiers’ hearses passed on the way to the Coroner’s Office in Oxford. There was no parallel grassroots honoring of “repatriated” US soldiers’ sacrifice at Dover Air Force Base. However, just because other countries honor their soldiers differently does not mean that they necessarily honor them less.

If countries and their citizens convey respect (or disrespect) for soldiers in countless, locally expressed forms, how do I know that soldier veneration has risen within nations and spread across them over the last few decades? Three sources of data, each imperfect on its own, warrant this conclusion: surveys of public confidence in the armed forces; the role of the military in the celebration of national independence days; and the introduction of new military-themed holidays. In recent decades, public trust in the military has been high, and generally rising, in most regions of the globe. Between the 1990s and the 2010s, national celebrations of independence days increasingly revolved around the armed forces. A surprising number of new military-themed holidays were introduced onto national calendars since the end of the Cold War. Taken together, these data points suggest that militarism has gone global in recent decades. The last section of the chapter draws on common accounts of militarism to try to explain this development. It remains a puzzle.

In the Military We Trust

Around the world, the armed forces have become one of the most—and often *the* most—trusted central state institution.⁶ This was not always the case. Notably undisciplined and corrupt during the Vietnam War, and weighed down by an unequal and unfair draft, the US military had squandered Americans’ trust by the early 1970s. In 1975 just 27% of Americans said they had “a great deal” of confidence in the military, even fewer—22%—said the same in 1981 when the All-Volunteer Force seemed to be struggling, and under 25% had “a great deal” of confidence in the military as late as September 1988. Eastern Europeans emerged out of communism with little trust in their militaries, whose professional competence they doubted and whose leadership was beholden to the communist regimes the populace had rejected. Across Europe as a whole, the military was in 1990 less trusted than the police, the church, the European Union, and the educational system. In Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, where militaries had often looked inward more than outward, repeatedly seized power, and repressed political opponents, publics for good reason expressed little trust in the institution and its members.⁷

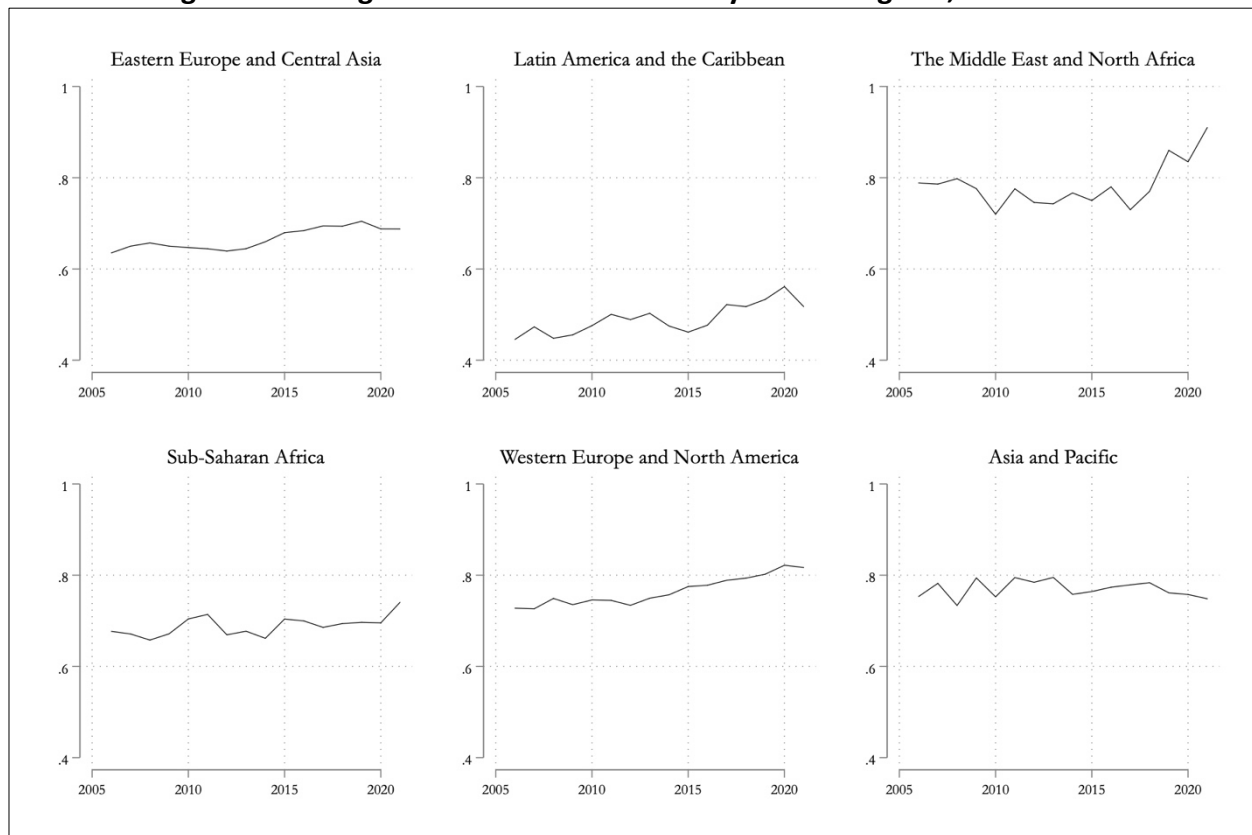
Trust in the military rebounded substantially after the Cold War.⁸ In the United States, confidence in the armed forces began to recover with the 1991 Gulf War. Between 30 and 35% of Americans had “a great deal of confidence” in the armed forces throughout the 1990s. That figure climbed into the 40-48% range after 9/11 and remained at that remarkable level for nearly 20 years, through 2020.⁹ Over the course of the 1990s, trust in the military across Europe rose so much that it was second only to the educational system by 2000; within the EU, the military ranked first among 16 institutions, exceeding even trust in the school system.¹⁰ Residents of most countries included in the periodic World Values Survey expressed significantly more confidence in their nation’s armed forces in 2017-2022 (Wave 7) than they had in 1981-1984 (Wave 1). In the earlier period, 66% of Australians expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the armed forces (versus “not very much” and “none at all”), compared to 82% in the later span—a relative increase (RI) of nearly 25%. Confidence among Canadians rose from 58% to 75% (RI 29%), among Finns from 71% to 88% (RI 24%), and among Japanese from 35% to 67% (RI 91%).¹¹

We have much better regional and global data in the 2000s, courtesy of Gallup.¹² After 2006, Gallup regularly asked people around the world whether they had confidence in a series

of institutions, including the armed forces.¹³ Across the world, between 2006 and 2021, average trust in the military was very high: over 68% of people said they had confidence in the armed forces. There was of course significant variation across regions, per Figure 1. Reflecting their region's history of corrupt and incompetent military rule and of brutal violence in combating insurgents, Latin American states displayed the lowest levels of trust, with an average of just 49%. In all other regions, however, annual trust in the armed forces averaged 65% or more. There were especially high levels of trust in Western Europe and North America, the Middle East and North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region. Average trust in the military in Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia—which also have long histories of military, intelligence, and security agencies abusing their power—was somewhat lower.

Figure 1 also reveals discontinuous changes within regions' confidence in the armed forces. Average trust dipped substantially in the Middle East and North Africa around the Arab Spring, but then rebounded after 2017; thereafter, the MENA region has enjoyed the highest trust in the armed forces. Trust in Latin American militaries climbed steadily over the span, though admittedly from a fairly low base. Trust in Western Europe and North America rose dependably as well. In contrast, Asians' and sub-Saharan Africans' trust in their militaries was stable, and Eastern Europeans' confidence increased more modestly.

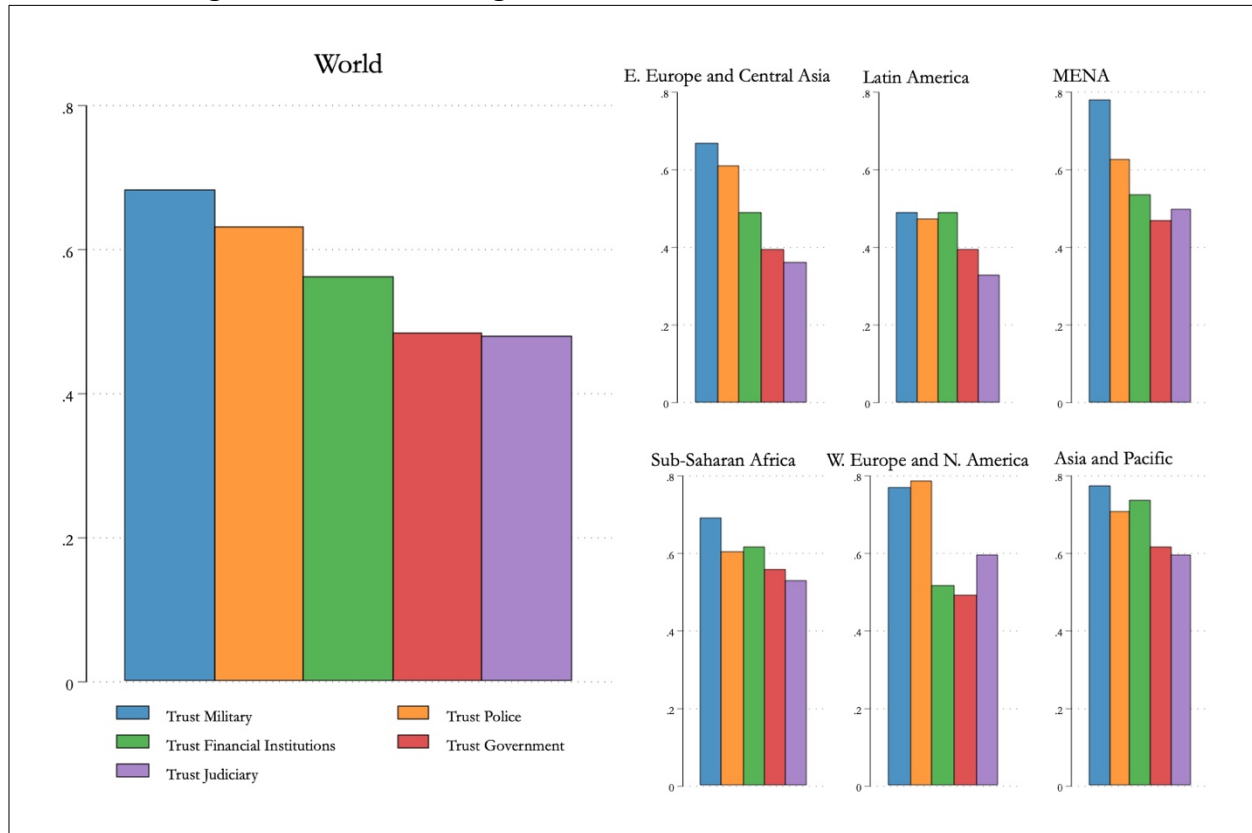
Figure 1. Average Confidence in the Military Across Regions, 2006-2021



Source: Gallup

In addition, average confidence in the military was higher between 2006 and 2021 than trust in other major institutions: the police, the justice system, financial institutions, and the national government—per Figure 2. Region-level data points in the same direction: the military was either the most trusted institution, or the second most trusted by a slim margin.

Figure 2. Global and Regional Confidence in Institutions, 2006-2021



Source: Gallup

It is fair to ask what these expressions of confidence in the military really mean to respondents. We know, for instance, that trust in the military is often trumped by political and partisan interests. In 2019, I surveyed Americans about whether presidents should (or should not) order a military intervention in line with senior military officers' guidance and against their own better judgment. I was initially surprised that those who most distrusted the US military were also, paradoxically, those most inclined to endorse presidential deference to military leaders. This puzzling finding became much less so, however, when I realized that those who most distrusted the US military were the same people who thought least favorably about the then-sitting president, Donald Trump. They distrusted senior military officers, but they distrusted Trump even more. They likely wanted the military to serve as a brake on a president they saw as uniquely solipsistic, impulsive, and reckless.¹⁴ Before Joe Biden's victory at the polls in November 2020, I thought that, were he to win, these self-declared liberal respondents would snap back to form, oppose the military's public involvement in policy debate, and embrace democratic norms of civil-military relations. In late June 2021, when I fielded the

survey, they mostly did not. Why? Because, in the meantime, right-wing politicians and pundits had started assailing the military for teaching “critical race theory,” and they blamed the recent history of poor US battlefield performance on the military’s alleged “wokeness.” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley had punched back at a congressional hearing. Americans on both sides of the aisle inferred that the professional military was no friend of Trump. It would only help Biden, all thought, if the generals waded into the political swamp.¹⁵

If trust in the military is so easily set aside in favor of political and partisan interest, maybe it does not mean all that much. In that same vein, some argue that expressed trust masks a shallow commitment to soldiers’ well-being.¹⁶ Others suggest that people may exaggerate their declared confidence in the armed forces either because they fear retribution or because they think pro-military views are expected—that is, in the jargon, they are “socially desirable.”¹⁷

Trust in the armed forces is a flawed indicator, but it still tells us something important. People who say that they have great trust in the military are more likely to back the use of force and higher defense spending. They are more likely to engage in public and private activities supporting the armed forces. They are more likely to recommend a military career to family and friends. They are more likely to grant the military freedom from oversight and to be open to the military’s participation in politics.¹⁸ Expressed confidence in the armed forces may be somewhat shallow or even forced, but it nevertheless has real consequences. Moreover, if people are inclined to profess confidence in the military because they think it is socially expected, then their answers are a sign of militarism’s sway—not despite being lies, but because they *are* lies!

Celebrating the Nation, through the Military

Independence days are revealing moments. In celebrating them, nations exhibit their values, produce and reproduce the boundaries of national membership, and give voice to their preferred historical narrative. These festivities do not express how everyday life is actually lived, but rather what life in the nation should look like, what sort of political community it imagines itself, or aspires, to be. These performances often enact hierarchies of citizenship—which are most valued, to what rights different classes are entitled, and what demands the state may legitimately make. Nearly a century ago, the historian Alfred Vagts identified the use of soldiers for ceremonial functions as a classic form of militarism. “In a world which becomes increasingly secularized, the ceremonial function of soldiers and the military arrangement of mass ceremonies grow in equal measure,” wrote Vagts. “Ever since the rise of standing armies, the soldier has been employed to a varying degree as a ceremonial appurtenance.”¹⁹

How soldiers serve as “ceremonial appurtenances” continues to be highly varied. Some countries feature large-scale military parades—columns of soldiers marching impeccably in formation, arrays of missiles and tanks and armored personnel carriers rolling past the grandstand, naval flotillas amassed in port, highly-trained personnel displaying their honed skills (shooting or parachuting or piloting aircraft). Whether to intimidate, impress, or both, these parades also indicate where the military ranks in the national pantheon. Some countries combine celebrations with rituals of militarized mourning. Amidst concerts, fireworks, and merrymaking, they insert a note of solemnity to express gratitude for soldiers’ sacrifices in earning the nation’s independence and safeguarding its security. In other cases, military displays are relatively tangential—with a small honor guard present, or a military band playing,

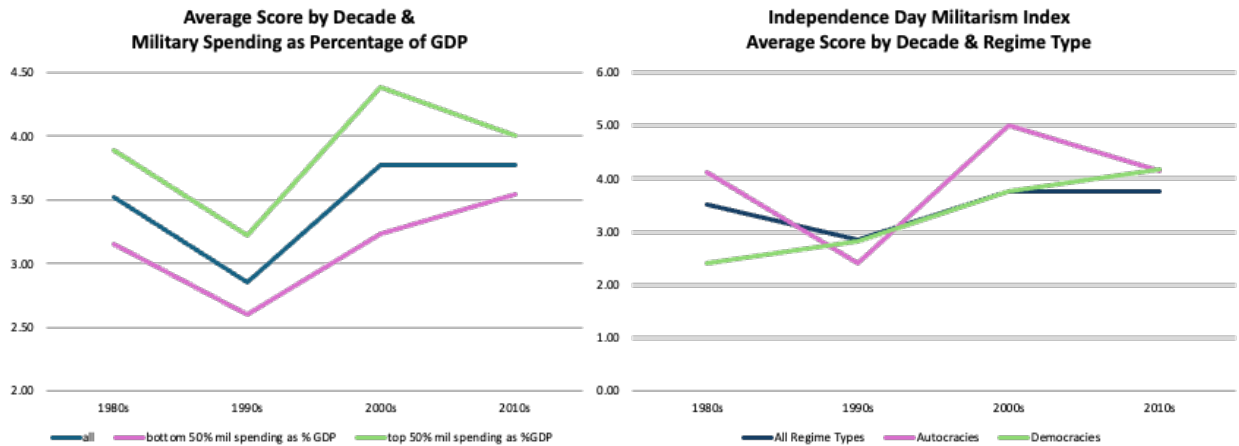
or a small performance force, like the US Air Force's Blue Angels, executing death-defying stunts. In some cases, the only military presence is in the reviewing stand, where top-ranking military officers sit alongside other elements of national leadership.

How countries around the world celebrate their independence days,²⁰ and specifically how they involve the armed forces in these celebrations, is another way of grasping militarism. When celebrations include larger military parades, with significant displays of cutting-edge weapons platforms,²¹ held at military sites, and alongside mourning of fallen soldiers, it seems reasonable to infer that the armed forces and battlefield sacrifice occupy a more central place in the nation's cultural complex. I combine these elements to create a Militarism Independence Day Index²² for the world's top 50 military spenders between 1980 and 2019.²³

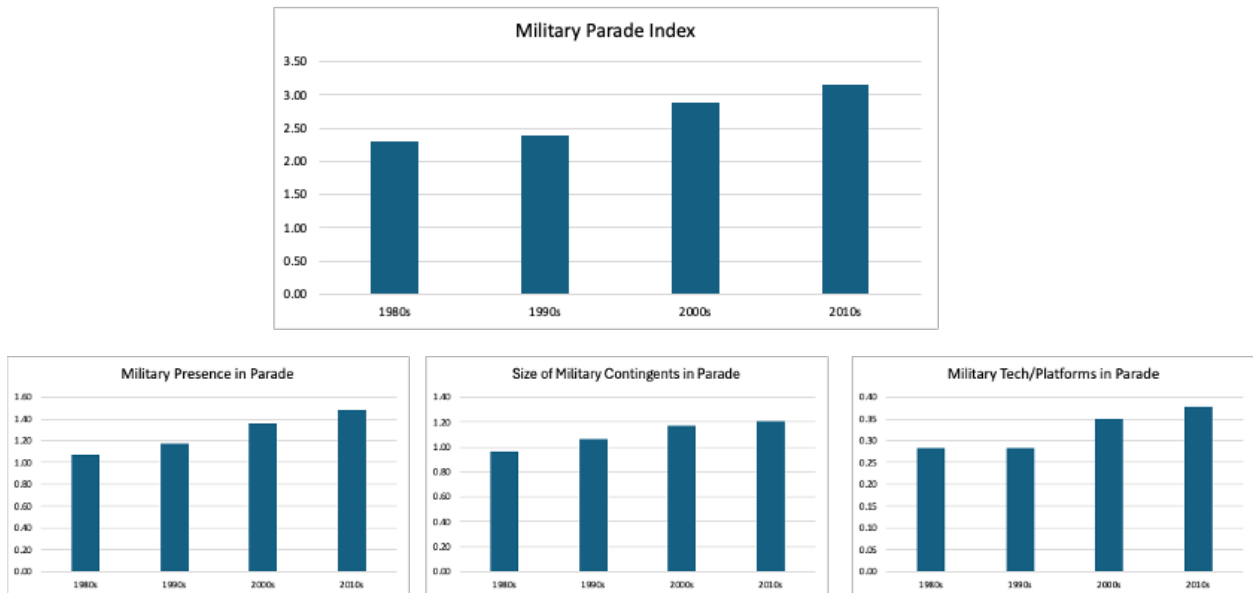
As reflected in the left-hand side of Figure 3, the global average Militarism Independence Day Index score fell from the 1980s to the 1990s. It is hardly surprising that the end of the Cold War brought not only less spending on defense and the armed forces—the vaunted “peace dividend”—but less militarism. The decline was particularly notable among countries that joined the “third wave” of democratization. Grandiose military parades had been a notable feature of public national celebrations in both Communist regimes and military dictatorships. Some countries—such as Romania and Chile—retained their highly militarized independence day celebrations even as they embraced democracy. But others, such as Poland and Taiwan, swiftly jettisoned their past militarized practices. They wanted to signal, to their populations, to the European Union and NATO, to the United States, and to the larger international community, that they had turned a political corner and there was no going back. Financial considerations may also have played a role in countries like Poland: military parades are expensive propositions, and their economies were floundering amidst the “shock therapy” transition to capitalism.

However, from around 2000 forward, the armed forces played an increasingly prominent role in nations' independence day celebrations. Not surprisingly, as the left-hand side of Figure 3 clearly shows, countries that spend more on their militaries (as a percentage of GDP) like to show them off more during national independence day festivities. But, overall, the Militarism Independence Day Index scores of high and low military spenders moved largely in parallel. Among both sets of countries, their scores fell dramatically when the Cold War came to an end and then rose substantially over the next decade. In the 2010s, high spenders dialed back their militaristic displays on independence day, but low spenders kept ramping them up, and overall the index stayed steady. Both high and low spenders' observances spotlighted the armed forces more in the 2010s than they had even amidst the Cold War in the 1980s.

One might have thought that autocracies would particularly revel in militarized independence day displays. As the right-hand side of Figure 3 shows, that was true in the 1980s, when autocracies scored significantly higher on the Independence Day Militarism Index than did democracies. With the end of the Cold War, autocratic regimes devoted less attention to militaristic displays than they had the decade before. But, from the 1990s through the 2010s, democracies' armed forces played an ever larger role in their independence day celebrations, and autocracies' Militarism Independence Day Index scores in the 2000s far surpassed their scores in the 1980s. By the end of the range, democracies and autocracies' index scores were essentially identical.²⁴

Figure 3. Independence Day Militarism Index, 1980s – 2010s

The chief driver of this increase was the military parade. Per Figure 4, each decade, between the 1990s and the 2010s, more countries' independence day celebrations featured a parade with a military presence, those parades increasingly displayed high-tech military platforms and weapons like tanks, airplanes, and missiles, and the size of the military contingents in the parades also grew.

Figure 4. Independence Day Military Parades, 1980s – 2010s

Just because a country's independence day celebrations do not feature the military does not necessarily mean that the country lack a militaristic temperament. Military veneration skyrocketed in the United States after the 1990s and especially during the War on Terror, but the US armed forces remained peripheral to national celebrations—until Donald Trump came along. The Israel Defense Forces has long enjoyed high levels of public confidence, even in the wake of failures, like the October 7th attacks. High-ranking IDF generals have smoothly

parachuted into positions of political leadership. Parents whose children were killed on the battlefield have long garnered special respect and social standing in Israel’s “culture of bereavement.” Yet the celebration of Israel’s independence day stopped including a military parade in the late 1960s, at the height of the country’s post-Six Day War hubris. Other countries love a good military parade, but not on independence day. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia heavily militarized its annual Victory Day ceremonies, celebrating its triumph in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), but generally downplayed Russia Day.

As a result, the Independence Day Militarism Index scores may well *understate* the presence and rise of military veneration around the globe. At the same time, because these data come from only the top 50 military spenders around the world, I cannot confidently assert that militarism everywhere is on the upswing. It seems likely that smaller, poorer countries that spend less on their armed forces would also have lower baseline Militarism Index scores—though their scores may still have risen from those lower baselines. It is possible that some countries spend less not because they cannot afford to, but because their leaders or populations are committed to spending more on the welfare state, on butter rather than guns. But there would have to be many such states for such ideological and political considerations to have a large impact on global data.

The top 50 spenders are quite a diverse group. Wealthy, industrialized countries are heavily over-represented, but 1/3 of the countries in the dataset had per capita GDPs in 2015 of \$10,000 or less. Because democracies tend to be richer, they too are over-represented, but non-democracies constitute 40% of the dataset in the 1990s and roughly 1/3 in the 2000s and 2010s. For the same reason, Europe and North America are prominent on the list, but other continents also have significant representation—Africa (5), Asia (19), South America (6). The big military spenders often spend on guns *and* butter, more generously funding their social safety nets compared to the rest of the world. In 2019, the 20 OECD members in the dataset (out of 35 total OECD members) spent on average a sum equivalent to 21.6% of their GDP on public social expenditures—that is, slightly more than the OECD as a whole (20.1%).²⁵ Between 2010 and 2020, the high-income countries in the World Bank’s ASPIRE database—which already excludes the world’s wealthiest countries—gave each recipient 13 times more money for social protection and labor benefits than low-income countries, and between 2020 and 2022, they devoted nearly twice as high a percentage of their (far more sizable) GDPs to social assistance.²⁶ Finally, it is quite likely that these 50 big spenders set the tone for the rest of the world. Imitative behavior is common in global politics. Poorer, weaker, more peripheral states tend to copy, albeit not slavishly,²⁷ the behaviors of wealthier, more powerful, core states—if only to prove that they belong.²⁸ If the big spenders are sponsoring more militaristic displays in their national independence day celebrations, other countries probably are too.

Heroes, Martyrs, and Holidays

If you live in a country that has established national holidays honoring veterans and mourning war dead, you might well think that every country has roughly the same slate of holidays. I certainly did. After all, virtually all countries have military establishments, and nearly all have fought a war at one time or another. It is of course true that many countries do observe one or the other of these holidays, and many observe other military-themed holidays too—such as a day celebrating the serving armed forces as a whole, or its individual services, or both.

But it is also striking how many nations did not have these holidays on their national calendars throughout the Cold War and how many have added them in the years since.

Among the world's top 50 military spenders, many military-themed holidays were instituted decades ago. Some date back to the late 19th or early 20th centuries, introduced along with the spread of the mass army and the democratization of honor. But it is remarkable how many countries have added such holidays in the last three decades. Our database contains 261 military-themed holidays. We were able to ascertain the date of establishment for 175 (67%) of them. Romania is alone responsible for over half of the 86 undated holidays, as it has obscure days on the official books celebrating every military sub-specialty imaginable—from engineers to radar operators to hydrographers to even financiers! At least 108 of these military-themed holidays—over 40 percent of the total—were established after 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. At least another 82—over 30 percent—came since the start of the War on Terror in 2001. Some were, for obvious reasons, instituted in countries that were newly independent or had installed fundamentally different regimes. Romania, Poland, and Ukraine in particular are responsible for more than their fair share of holidays confirmed to have been established after 1991: 65 (!) out of 108. The vast majority of these days, which honor particular military specialties and sub-specialties, seem not to be publicly celebrated. Nevertheless, that still leaves an impressive number of new holidays introduced in nations with long military histories.

The wide range of countries that have introduced such holidays in the last 35 years is surprising. It seems rather straightforward why Ukraine would establish Defenders Day in 2015, soon after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and amidst the ongoing Russia-sponsored insurgency in Ukraine's eastern provinces. Hived off from the Soviet Union in 1991, independent Ukraine had not yet fought a war as an independent nation. We can understand why Germany, of all countries, would honor its military veterans for the first time in 2024—as a mark of its post-Ukraine *zeitenwende*, or turning point, aimed at bolstering its military capabilities and perhaps as a means of boosting recruitment.

But many other holidays inaugurated since 1991 are not so readily explicable. Argentina in 1994, Canada in 2002, the United Kingdom in 2009, South Africa in 2012, and Afghanistan in 2017 instituted Armed Forces Day. Belgium in 1998, Turkey in 2002, Spain in 2003, the Netherlands in 2005, Romania in 2007, Denmark in 2009, Norway in 2010, Indonesia in 2014, India in 2016, Sweden in 2018, Colombia in 2019, Germany in 2024, and New Zealand in 2026 began celebrating their military veterans. Australia in 1997, Uruguay in 2002, Colombia and Iran in 2004 (and Iran again in 2024), Norway in 2007, Italy in 2009, Pakistan in 2010, Afghanistan in 2012, China in 2014, Poland and the United Arab Emirates in 2015, Ukraine in 2019, put in place holidays mourning those who died in military service or operations. Many other “minor” holidays celebrating individual services (e.g. army, navy, air force) and military sub-specialties (e.g. radar operators or bomb disposal units), commemorating the fallen of individual services, or honoring the veterans and casualties of particular military operations have also been introduced since the end of the Cold War. Table 1 contains the full list of military-themed holidays that were newly established after 1991 in the countries that ranked in the top 50 in defense expenditures. In addition, as we will see in subsequent chapters, some countries have markedly ramped up their military displays on long-established holidays.

Table 1. Military-Themed Holidays since 2000

Country	Holiday	Date Est.	Country	Holiday	Date Est.
Ukraine	Signal Corps Day	2000	Poland	Military Geography Day	2013
Poland	Military Gendarmerie Day	2001	Poland	Military Fire Protection Day	2013
Italy	Day of Remembrance for Sailors Missing at Sea	2002	Poland	Military Economic Units Day	2013
Canada	Canadian Armed Forces Day	2002	Poland	Airmobile Forces Day	2013
Turkey	Canakkale Victory and Martyrs' Day	2002	Poland	Military Infrastructure Day	2013
Poland	Chemical Forces Day	2002	Poland	Military Metrology Service Day	2013
Uruguay	Day of the Fallen Soldier in the Line of Duty	2002	Ukraine	Day of Ukrainian Peacekeepers	2013
Spain	Veterans Day	2003	China	Martyrs' Day	2014
Vietnam	Border Guard Traditional Day & All People's Border Defense Day	2003	Russia	Day of the Unknown Soldier	2014
Iran	Martyr's Day/ Martyr's Commemoration Day	2004	Poland	Military Health Service Day	2014
Colombia	Day of the Heroes of the Nation and their Families	2004	Poland	Military Transport Day	2014
Indonesia	Military Police Day	2004	Poland	Day of the General Command of the Armed Forces	2014
Romania	Navy Day	2004	Indonesia	National Veterans Day	2014
Netherlands	Veterans Day	2005	Ukraine	Day of the Defenders of Ukraine	2014
Poland	Day of Military Organizational Units of the Prosecutor's Office	2005	Ukraine	Day of the Marine Corps	2014
Poland	Radio Technical Forces Day	2005	Romania	Day of Veterans in Theaters of Operations	2014
Russia	Heroes of the Fatherland Day	2007	United Arab Emirates	Commemoration Day	2015
Poland	Special Forces Day	2007	Poland	Reconnaissance and Electronic Warfare Day	2015
Norway	Armed Forces Remembrance Day	2007	Poland	Day of Remembrance for the Fallen and Deceased in Military Missions and Operations Abroad	2015
Ukraine	Day of Military Intelligence	2007	India	Armed Forces Veterans Day	2016
Romania	War Veterans Day	2007	Ukraine	Special Operations Forces Day	2016
Canada	National Peacekeepers Day	2008	Afghanistan	Armed Forces Day	2017
Iran	Air Defence Day	2008	Poland	Territorial Defense Forces Day	2018
Ukraine	Day of the Aviation Navigation Service of the Armed Forces	2008	Sweden	Veterans Day	2018
United Kingdom	Armed Forces Day	2009	Poland	Reserve Soldiers Day	2019
Italy	Day of Remembrance for Military and Civilian Fallen in International Peace Missions	2009	Poland	Uniformed Services Day	2019
Poland	Polish Cavalry Day	2009	Colombia	Veterans Day	2019
Poland	Armament and Electronic Services Day	2009	Vietnam	Vietnam Militia and Self-Defense Force Traditional Day	2019
Poland	Armored and Mechanized Forces Day	2009	Ukraine	Day of Remembrance of Defenders of Ukraine	2019
Denmark	National Flag Day (Veterans)	2009	Ukraine	Day of the Sergeants and Warrant Officers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine	2019
United States	Gold Star Spouses Day	2010	Ukraine	Day of the Infantry of the Armed Forces of Ukraine	2019
Poland	Tank-Vehicle Service Day	2010	Ukraine	Day of the Reservist of Ukraine	2019
Pakistan	Martyrs Day	2010	Italy	National Day of Remembrance and Sacrifice of the Alpine Troops	2022
Norway	Liberation and Veterans Day	2010	Poland	Combat Equipment Service Day	2023
Ukraine	Day of Radio Engineering Troops	2010	Poland	Civil-Military Cooperation Day	2023
Ukraine	Day of Aviation Engineering of the Armed Forces	2010	Germany	Veterans' Day	2024
Romania	Military Reservist Day	2010	Iran	Service Martyr's Day	2024
Poland	Day for Veterans of Foreign Missions	2011	Poland	Day of the Representative Bodies of Professional Soldiers	2025
Ukraine	Day of the Anti-Aircraft Missile Forces	2011	Poland	Military Family Day	2025
Afghanistan	Martyrs Day	2012	Ukraine	Day of Army Aviation of the Ground Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine	2025
Poland	Armed Forces Hydrometeorological Services Day	2012	Ukraine	Day of Electronic Warfare Troops	2025
Poland	Day of the Local Military Administration Bodies	2012	New Zealand	Anzac Day -- all veterans	2026
South Africa	Armed Forces Day	2012			

Modern-day militarism is real, and it has quietly spread around the world over the last 35 years. It has even taken root in the wealthy European countries that analysts on both sides of the Atlantic thought had taken a very different cultural turn in the wake of the Cold War. Some two decades ago, in the run-up to the Iraq War, the commentator Robert Kagan memorably wrote that “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.” A few years later, the historian James Sheehan published a book on postwar Europe with the evocative title, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?*²⁹ The question was rhetorical. Everyone knew the answer. Yet, as this consensus took shape, a little-noticed contrary trend was gathering steam. Military veneration was making a comeback—not just in Europe, but around the world.

Explaining Contemporary Militarism?

Militarism is not always culturally and contextually available. Venerating soldiers is naturally a much harder sell when they have recently been responsible for large-scale repression and human-rights violations. When soldiers and officers are corrupt, and support themselves by demanding protection-racket money from local businesses or by simply taking whatever they want, propaganda campaigns cannot overcome traumatic lived experience. When the military has taken the blame for a recent, costly, unpopular war, it necessarily needs time to rebuild its reputation. But just because promoting militarism is *possible* does not explain when it actually becomes a prominent feature of national and global politics.

At least five factors—increasing nationalism, a backlash against gender equality, growing social distance from the military, triumphant battlefield outcomes, and a more threatening international environment—might conceivably explain militarism’s rise and spread since the end of the Cold War. Any phenomenon as complex as militarism will have many sources. These five factors have some merit, but their explanatory reach remains limited.

Nationalism. The rise of militarism in Europe in the second half of the 19th century went hand in hand with the spread of nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s classic account of nations as “imagined communities” identifies the ubiquitous “tomb of the unknown soldier” as the quintessential, secular symbol binding the political community together around shared sacrifice for the common good.³⁰ Perhaps post-Cold War militarism is simply a manifestation of growing nationalism around the world. After all, venerating soldiers and officers as self-sacrificing patriots is obviously an expression of nationalist myth-making.

But nationalism and militarism are not reducible to each other. On the one hand, people can, and often do, take pride in diverse national accomplishments—from the Scandinavian “third way” to the Japanese economic miracle to Canadian multiculturalism. Even nationalism claiming the superiority of one’s own political community need not take a militarized form. Nationalist competition can take place according to many yardsticks—among others, cultural, economic, moral, environmental, or political.³¹ Moreover, contemporary militarism has risen and spread even though nationalism has been declining. Patriotic sentiment and willingness to sacrifice for the public good fell dramatically in the world’s wealthier nations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.³² Meanwhile, high levels of trust in the armed forces have not translated into higher rates of military recruitment—which is lagging in many countries, even in the United States, where the armed services have often had to lower admissions standards to hit their numbers.³³

Gender Backlash. Militarism and traditional gender roles are deeply intertwined as well. Historically, fighting was a male enterprise, martial virtues were masculine, boys were groomed to be warriors, and the association between citizenship ideals and battlefield sacrifice denied women a place in the public political sphere.³⁴ Militarism reinforced patriarchy. The more societies venerated soldiers, the more inimical they were to women's quest for equal rights. Even as women have secured entry to the armed forces, increasingly including combat functions, gendered discourses continue to shape how their service and sacrifice are narrated.³⁵

Perhaps militarism is growing as part of a cultural backlash against the erosion of traditional masculinity. It is true that right-wing populists in Europe and North America have embraced cultural conservatism and specifically gender traditionalism as part of their politics and personas.³⁶ They have also embraced militarist messaging, centering soldiers' devotion and sacrifice in the national narrative.³⁷ However, this cannot be the *central* driver of post-Cold War militarism. Militarism has done very well in countries where women have broken down many gender barriers—as in Europe—but also where women have made much less progress—like Russia, India, China, and many others. In the United States and Europe, meanwhile, the post-Cold War militarist turn predates the sharp increase in right-wing populism's popularity and prominence in the 2010s.

Social Distance. Some have attributed growing veneration of the military in the United States to the end of the draft. The journalist James Fallows observes that, during the Cold War, "most Americans were familiar enough with the military to respect it while being sharply aware of its shortcomings." Movies and television shows poked gentle, and sometimes brutal, fun at the army. Ever since, however, the military has become "exotic territory" for Americans, and the result has been military hero-worship.³⁸ Psychologists find that people tend to view objects and figures that are distant—in physical space, time, and social relations—in stereotypical terms.³⁹ As the military became less familiar, real, flawed soldiers gave way to romanticized ideals. Americans attributed to soldiers customary values, like bravery, honor, and patriotism.

However, this extrapolation from the American experience is not persuasive. Theoretically, it does not hold water. Stereotypes can be pejorative as well as complimentary. When white people see young Black men walking toward them far off in the distance, they rely on stereotypical beliefs and cross the street. Less admirable qualities—cruelty and sadism, PTSD and mental illness, anger management issues, lack of discipline—are also sometimes popularly associated with soldiers. Distance from the military could as easily have led to disdain for the armed forces and its service-members. Empirically, the end of conscription cannot have such effects, because the armed forces are highly trusted in many countries that still have a large-scale draft, such as Finland, South Korea, Switzerland, and Israel. In recent years, Scandinavian and Baltic states have expanded or reinstituted the draft, with seemingly no negative effect on public opinion. In fact, between 2006 and 2021, whether a country recruited soldiers via conscription had no significant effect on public confidence in the armed forces.⁴⁰

Battlefield Outcomes. Victory and defeat on the battlefield have profound effects on politics, from state-building to alliance choices to the fate of military reform.⁴¹ It is intuitive that militarism should have greater traction in the wake of victory, when the armed forces' reputation is riding high, and less appeal when a defeated armed forces is licking its wounds. Perhaps militaries systematically seek to trade on their recent triumphs to bolster their social

standing—and thereby attain greater influence over politics, national security, and, most important of all, budgets.

However, there are strong conceptual and empirical reasons to think that battlefield outcomes have not been major causes of contemporary militarism. Conceptually, victory and defeat are plastic categories, driven by subjective expectations more than objective facts. The Finnish military lost the Winter War of 1939-1940, but it performed much better than anticipated against its larger, better armed Soviet foe.⁴² By any measure, the Israel Defense Forces scored an impressive victory in 1973,⁴³ but the Egyptian armed forces' surprising and initially successful attack across the Suez Canal led Israelis to look back on the war as a whole as a *mehdal* (blunder), while Egyptians hailed it as a great victory.

Even if we grant that what really matters are *perceptions* of victory and defeat, civilian politicians commonly take the blame for ordering the military into an unwinnable war.⁴⁴ Because the US public saddled politicians with the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military emerged from these long, fruitless wars with its reputation for patriotism and tactical and operational competence intact. Similarly, amidst the ongoing intervention in Afghanistan, Denmark's centrist Social Liberal Party declared that "Danish soldiers are heroes. It is not they who failed, but we politicians who sent them out on an impossible task."⁴⁵ The military is often held relatively blameless partly because the buck stops with civilians and partly because other civilian politicians have strong incentives to hold liable their political adversaries in office.

Empirically, this account of post-Cold War militarism lacks *prima facie* credibility. If militarism requires victory, there should be little confidence in the armed forces around the world. On the one hand, most militaries have fought very little since the 1990s. On the other hand, when countries have fought, battlefield triumph has mostly eluded them. There are a handful of exceptions, such as the 1991 Gulf War and the 2023 Azerbaijani lightning strike retaking Nagorno-Karabakh. But inconclusiveness and defeat have been the norm. More than a decade after the US military and its "coalition of the willing" departed Iraq, and five years after the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force left Afghanistan, their accomplishments in those missions seem meager at best. Israel's wars in South Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2023-2025) ended indecisively. Russia's grinding trudge through eastern Ukraine will at best result in a pyrrhic victory. Nevertheless, public confidence in the armed forces has remained high, and criticism of military professionals has remained subdued.

Military Threats & Functional Need. Policymakers may promote the veneration of soldiers because they believe that it helps recruits more soldiers at lower cost.⁴⁶ Boosting the social prestige of military service is particularly appealing when the security situation demands a larger army, the armed forces are having difficulty recruiting, and/or budgets are tight. This motivation for militaristic initiatives is plausible, and in some cases, it is certainly correct. Soldier veneration skyrocketed in the United States during the Iraq War, as casualties rose and recruitment lagged. Faced with a revanchist Russia after 2022, German leaders have been eager to recruit a larger military, but young people have been reluctant to sign up. Since then, the German military has launched a PR blitz, and in 2024 parliament, after years of dithering, finally created a Veterans Day.⁴⁷

On the whole, though, this account does not fit the empirical pattern. Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Western European nations were not generally seeking to expand their armies and recruit more soldiers. Russian militarism intensified from the early 2000s, well

before it had any pressing manpower need. Chinese efforts to venerate soldiers have been building since the early 2010s, and it has been plowing funds into the armed forces, but focusing primarily on increasing the quantity and improving the quality of its military platforms and materiel. South American countries like Chile and Uruguay introduced new military holidays even though they did not face markedly increased threats. Why would New Zealand, of all places, institute a new Veterans Day? Meanwhile, public confidence in the armed forces has been growing in the 21st century in regions, from Latin America to sub-Saharan Africa, whose security profile has, if anything, only improved over the decades.

Each of these accounts contains a nugget of insight, but only that. The emergence and spread of military veneration since the Cold War remains a mystery. The next chapters offer a complementary account. Chapter 3 lays out the story in abstract terms. As people lose faith in the political branches of government, they look instead to “aspirationally apolitical” institutions like the armed forces. Politicians respond to their eroding legitimacy by investing in militaristic initiatives that they hope will rebuild their authority. Chapter 4 sets the empirical foundation, showing how developments from the 1960s forward, and especially from the end of the Cold War, created legitimacy challenges for autocratic and democratic regimes alike. Chapters 5-7 explore in fine-grained detail how different kinds of regimes responded to their crumbling legitimacy by promoting veneration of active-duty soldiers and officers and of veterans.

¹ See, for instance, Jeffrey Goldberg, “Trump: Americans Who Died in War Are ‘Losers’ and ‘Suckers,’” *The Atlantic*, 3 September 2020.

² James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2015.

³ Nicholas Kulish, “No Parade for Hans,” *New York Times*, 14 November 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/weekinreview/15kulish.html>.

⁴ In 2000, Congress passed the National Moment of Remembrance Act, asking Americans to stop and remember the fallen at 3:00 pm on Memorial Day. It is likely that few Americans are even aware of the practice or its roots in legislation. In fact, until I ran across it in research for this book, I myself was not.

⁵ Quoted in Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021* (New York: Doubleday, 2022), p. 126.

⁶ See also Maja Garb, “Public Trust in the Military: The Slovenian Armed Forces in a Comparative Analysis,” *Current Sociology*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2015), pp. 450-469; Marjan Malešič and Maja Garb, “Public Trust in the Military from Global, Regional and National Perspectives,” in Giuseppe Caforio and Marina Nuciari, eds., *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018); Nicholas J. Lotito and Renanah Miles Joyce, “In the Army We Trust: Public Confidence in Global South Militaries,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 69, No. 6 (2025), pp. 1089-1115.

⁷ Gallup, “Military and National Defense,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1666/military-national-defense.aspx>, accessed 13 June 2025; Giuseppe Caforio, “The Military Profession, Public Trust, and Public Interest,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2008), pp. 95-110.

⁸ Outside the United States, consistent annual data is lacking. Existing public opinion surveys have long asked about people’s confidence in various public and private institutions, but the military has not always made the list, even in Europe. The cost of fielding surveys in poorer nations, and the danger of doing so in civil war zones, have meant that coverage of certain parts of the world has been spotty and selective.

⁹ Gallup, “Military and National Defense,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1666/military-national-defense.aspx>, accessed 13 June 2025.

¹⁰ Caforio, pp. 95-110; Malešič and Garb, p. 150 and passim.

¹¹ Calculated using the World Values Survey online time series tool, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp>. Other countries with increases included the Argentina and the United States. Confidence in the Swedish military was quite stable and strong over time (50-55%), and very few

Swedes (4-8%) had no confidence in their armed forces. Confidence in the Mexican military fluctuated, presumably due to human rights violations and its failure to rein in the cartels, and a significant number of Mexicans (15-20%) have consistently had no trust in the armed forces over the entire span. Confidence in the armed forces fell in South Korea from the early 1980s on, but a consistently small number of South Koreans have had no faith in their armed forces (5-8%).

¹² For technical details, see Pedro Accorsi and Ronald R. Krebs, "The Soldier in the State: Explaining Public Trust in the Armed Forces," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 13 (2025), pp. 2795-2830.

¹³ The dataset that I constructed from the Gallup data with colleagues runs through 2021 and covers 91 countries, with 732 data points over these 15 years—an average of nearly 50 countries surveyed per year. An alternative dataset based on various annual regional surveys (Eurobarometer, Latinbarometer, etc.), along with national data from the United States, generated poorer coverage (fewer countries in total and fewer observations per year) but substantively similar results.

¹⁴ For details and further discussion, see Ronald R. Krebs et al., "No Right to Be Wrong: What Americans Think About Civil-Military Relations," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2023), pp. 606-624.

¹⁵ For further discussion and details, see Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, "Why Conservatives Turned on the U.S. Military: Right-Wing Attacks are Eroding Trust in the Armed Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, (28 September 2021).

¹⁶ Peter Feaver has made this argument most thoroughly and rigorously. See Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹⁷ On so-called "preference falsification" with respect to the military, see Aila M. Matanock and Miguel García-Sánchez, "Does Counterinsurgent Success Match Social Support? Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Colombia," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (2017), pp. 800-814; Meredith Kleykamp et al., "Who Supports U.S. Veterans and Who Exaggerates Their Support?," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2018), pp. 92-115; Kevin Koehler et al., "Who Fakes Support for the Military? Experimental Evidence from Tunisia," *Democratization*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2022), pp. 1055-1076; Feaver, chap. 7.

¹⁸ Octavio Amorim Neto and Pedro Accorsi, "Presidents and Generals: Systems of Government and the Selection of Defense Ministers," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (February 26, 2020 2022), pp. 136-163; Heiko Biehl, "Just Paying Lip Service? Public Trust and Public Support for Armed Forces in Germany," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (February 5 2023), pp. 395-418; Krebs et al., pp. 606-624.

¹⁹ Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism: Civilian and Military*, Revised ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1959 [1937]), p. 21.

²⁰ A handful of countries do not celebrate a national independence day. Among relatively large countries, the United Kingdom is a notable example. But it is also the only country among the top 50 military spenders that has not designated, and does not celebrate, an independence day.

²¹ These are the prestigious weapons that Jennifer Spindel has characterized as symbolically desirable, both when they are "bling" (cutting-edge, regardless of tactical efficacy) and "boom" (destructive and tactically effective). See Jennifer Spindel, "Beyond Military Power: The Symbolic Politics of Conventional Weapons Transfers" (Ph.D. Diss, University of Minnesota, 2018); Jennifer Spindel, "Boom, Bling, Backbone, or Blip? The Signaling Inherent in Arms Transfers," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2024/2025), pp. 164-204.

²² The Militarism Independence Day Index ranges from 1 to 10. Its formula is: $[(\text{Military Parade (0-3)} + \text{Technology/Platforms (0/1)}) \times \text{Size (0-2)}] + \text{Military Site (0/1)} + \text{Mourning (0/1)} = 0 - 10$. The formula assumes that celebrations that include larger military parades, with significant displays of cutting-edge weapons platforms, held at military sites, and alongside mourning of fallen soldiers, are more military-centric than celebrations that rank lower on these measures. I did consider alternative formulas, but the results were largely unaltered. For further details and for the data, see the **Online Appendix, Part **.

²³ I focused on the top 50 military spenders (total spending) because collecting data on independence day celebrations for even these countries, let alone smaller ones, was extremely difficult. Data collection centered on decades, not particular years, because finding consistent annual data was impossible; each code is based on 3 confirmed data points per decade. I halted the project at the end of the 2010s because, in 2020, the COVID pandemic suppressed big public celebrations of independence day, and some countries took their time bringing the celebrations back.

²⁴ I follow scholarly convention in defining an autocracy as a regime that lies between -10 and -6 on the Polity scale and a democracy as a regime that lies between 6 and 10. Countries whose Polity scores lie between -5 and 5 are

called anocracies. Anocracies ranked highest on the Militarism Independence Day Index in the 1980s. However, the number of anocracies declined very substantially between the 1980s and the 2010s, and the few remaining anocracies featured the military in independence day celebrations less than did democracies and autocracies.

²⁵ William Adema, Pauline Fron, and Maxime Ladaïque, "Sizing Up Welfare States: How do OECD Countries Compare?", OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, 2 February 2023, <https://oecdstatistics.blog/2023/02/02/sizing-up-welfare-states-how-do-oecd-countries-compare/>.

²⁶ "Adequacy of All SPL Benefits in Total Population," World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/datatopics/aspire/region/income-group-comparison>; calculated from World Bank ASPIRE data on social assistance programs, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/b48fbbe1d8f0f2b91775cbe0abbd99c8-0380082021/original/EXP-SA-expenditure-GDP.xlsx>.

²⁷ Which is why scholars generally prefer the term mimesis/mimetic to imitation/imitative.

²⁸ Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Ted Hopf, "The Logic of Habit in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2010), pp. 539-561; Roberto Farneti, *Mimetic Politics: Dyadic Patterns in Global Politics* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

²⁹ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003); James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 9-10.

³¹ Alexander Cooley and Jack Snyder, eds., *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool for Global Governance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³² Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³³ On challenges of military recruitment in the United States, see Katherine L. Kuzminski and Taren Dillon Sylvester, *Short Supply: Identifying and Addressing the Root Causes of Declining Propensity for Military Service* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2025); Dennis Laich, "Population Demographics and Recruiting Considerations from a Macro Perspective," in Jaron S. Wharton, et al., eds., *Bend But Do Not Break: Shaping the Future of the All-Volunteer Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026); Marybeth Ulrich, "The Civil-Military Gap and the Future of Recruiting and Mobilization," in Jaron S. Wharton, et al., eds., *Bend But Do Not Break: Shaping the Future of the All-Volunteer Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026); David Philipps, "With Few Able and Fewer Willing, U.S. Military Can't Find Recruits," *New York Times*, 14 July 2022; Dexter Filkins, "The U.S. Military's Recruiting Crisis," *New Yorker*, 3 February 2025.

³⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Rights to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998).

³⁵ See, among many, many others, Orna Sasson-Levy, "Feminism and Military Gender Practices: Israeli Women Soldiers in 'Masculine' Roles," *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (2003), pp. 440-465; Rachel Woodward and Patricia Winter, "Discourses of Gender in the Contemporary British Army," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004), pp. 279-301; Jennifer K. Lobasz, "The Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman: Representations of Female Soldiers in the Iraq War," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2008), pp. 305-334; Laura Sjöberg and Sandra Via, eds., *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010); Laura J. Shepherd, ed., *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2010); Mercy Ette, "Gendered Frontlines: British Press Coverage of Women Soldiers Killed in Iraq," *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2013), pp. 249-262; Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson, eds., *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Edna Lomsky-Feder and Orna Sasson-Levy, *Women Soldiers and Citizenship in Israel: Gendered Encounters with the State* (London: Routledge, 2018).

³⁶ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³⁷ Ronald R. Krebs, "Why Populists Love Dead Soldiers and Hate Live Officers," *International Security*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Winter 2025/2026), pp. 7-54.

³⁸ Fallows.

³⁹ This is the core insight of "construal level theory." See Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, "Temporal Construal," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 110, No. 3 (2003), pp. 403-421; Kentaro Fujita et al., "Spatial Distance and Mental Construal of Social Events," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2006), pp. 278-282; Nira Liberman and Yaacov Trope, "The Psychology of Transcending the Here and Now," *Science*, Vol. 322 (21 November 2008), pp. 1201-1205. For an important application to related themes in international security, see Aaron Rapport, *Waging War, Planning Peace: U.S. Noncombat Operations and Major Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁴⁰ Accorsi and Krebs, pp. 2795-2830.

⁴¹ Luis Schenoni, *Bringing War Back In: Victory, Defeat, and the State in Nineteenth Century Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Dan Reiter, *Crucible of Beliefs: Learning, Alliances, and World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Pedro Accorsi, "A 'See You Soon' To Arms: A Study on Post-War Military Reforms" (Ph.D. Diss, University of Minnesota, 2023).

⁴² Kimmo Rentola, *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War, 1939-1950*, trans. Richard Robinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), pp. 56-57, 62-64.

⁴³ Martin van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), pp. 241-242.

⁴⁴ My thinking on this subject has been especially influenced by Pedro Accorsi's excellent dissertation. See Accorsi, "A 'See You Soon' To Arms."

⁴⁵ Quoted in Kristian Frisk, "'But When I Tell Them About Heroes, Then They Listen': The Soldier Hero and Transformations of the Danish Welfare State," *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2017), pp. 176-189.

⁴⁶ Andrew Bacevich makes essentially this argument in explaining American militarism amidst the War on Terror. See Andrew J. Bacevich, "Warrior Politics," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 299, No. 4 (May 2007), pp. 25-26.

⁴⁷ Nina Werkhäuser, "How Germany Plans to Celebrate its First Veterans Day," *DW*, 15 June 2025; Geir Moulson, "Germany Hopes to Attract Tens of Thousands More Military Recruits as NATO Strengthens Its Defenses," *AP*, 23 September 2025; Kate Connolly, "'Times have Changed': Germany's Military Seeks Recruits as it Confronts New Era," *Guardian*, 28 December 2025; Bertrand Benoit, "Germany's Military Recruitment Drive Has a Gen Z Problem," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2026.