

Making Endless War:

Neoliberal War-Making and the Social Transformation of the US Military-Industrial Complex

Abstract

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This dissertation aims to make sense of the seemingly ‘endless’ character of US wars in the twenty-first century by investigating the changing labor relations of war-making in the neoliberal era. Using archival materials and newly compiled quantitative data, I trace the transnational entanglements of war and capitalism from warzones in Vietnam and Iraq to bases and supply chains circling the globe. I show how, in response to the multiple crises of the 1970s, military-industrial elites embraced organizational and technological transformations of war at three key moments of its making: On the battlefield, a conscript army was replaced by capital-intensive weapons systems and small, rapid-deployment forces. At the point of production, armaments workers’ structural and associational bargaining power was undermined by geographical and organizational fixes. And in global military supply chains, just-in-time techniques meant increasing emphasis on non-white, non-citizen migrant service workers in the networks of war. I find that the restructuring of the labor relations of the global US military-industrial complex resulted in fewer social and political constraints on elites, contributing to ‘endless’ war in the twenty-first century. At the same time, this restructuring hollowed out industrial capacity and weakened supply chain resiliency, leaving a military-industrial complex ripe for disruption at its chokepoints.

Undergirding these transformations in war-making is the dramatic expansion of finance in recent decades, as capitalists sought out new sources of profitability by buying government debt, providing credit to military firms, and investing in the armaments industry. The dissertation thus finds that financialization facilitated the technological and organizational transformations of US war-making. In the process, it shaped the direction of transformation towards avenues that were the most profitable for finance capital. The result has been a vicious circle of financialization and militarization that has created a broad elite base of support for militarism in the United States. This financialized war-making yields extraordinary profits, but its organization is militarily ineffective, and its social consequences are even more unequally distributed than in the twentieth century era of military Keynesianism.