



# United States War-Culture and the Political Economy of the United States

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**F**or people in the United States, perhaps especially people in church settings, addressing the topic of war is exceedingly difficult, as many church leaders have come to know. I have reached the conclusion that, if we are to make any justifiable ethical decisions with respect to war, we must first more deeply understand and face our own reality in the United States with respect to our “war-culture.” I say this theologically, borrowing from liberation theologian Jon Sobrino: “In short, the preliminary step of all theology is—as it is for Christology—an adequate incarnation into reality as it is.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the first step of any theology is to strive for honesty toward our reality. Yet being honest toward reality is very hard to do. As I will try to demonstrate, we are anything but honest in the United States about the war-culture that so shapes our lives.

To continue with Sobrino’s analysis, we live in a world that is characterized by systems of injustice and structuralized violence. But the problem is even greater than this because the inherent injustice and violence in our systems and structures

<sup>1</sup>Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994) 36.

*What President Eisenhower termed the “Military-Industrial Complex” has grown into a largely unexamined “war-culture” in which we in the United States live. It is difficult for people to see and speak about this, especially in our churches, but we must do so in order to take charge of our own reality.*

frequently are masked or concealed. In other words, we live in a “covered up world.” Reading further about the nature of the economics of US war-culture will help the reader to see just how this is the case. Exploring US war-culture not only means investigating its entwined interrelationships with all kinds of institutions and social practices that interconnect with our lives twenty-four hours a day, every day; it also involves examining profound systems of concealment of war-culture’s very existence.

### WHAT IS “WAR-CULTURE”?

Let us begin with just one example of the tentacles of war-culture and its concealment. In 2008, a major US newspaper reported on activities of retired military officers who were involved in a symbiotic relationship with a variety of dominant US institutions, all embedded with the ways of war, and all working quite seamlessly together to present a certain face of war. These retired officers had been approached by the Pentagon and coached on “talking points” to buttress a positive view of the Iraq War in media outlets across the country. The Department of Defense (DOD) referred to them as “message force multipliers.” These “expert analysts” then searched for opportunities to spread these talking points as widely as possible. At the same time, many of the retired officers also held board positions connected to various military contracting corporations, a serious conflict of interest for any neutral analysis. One such corporation, called Omnitec Solutions, was paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by the Pentagon to monitor media databases for any appearance of these same “analysts” in the media in order to evaluate their effectiveness as “branding experts.”<sup>2</sup>

Think about the internal dynamics involved in the example above. This not only represents the revolving employment door in US war-culture through which people move from one influential position in the “Iron Triangle” to another: from military institutions, to government, to weapons/war corporations, to think tanks, and back. This also is a perfect example of the process I call “interpenetration”: war-culture persists as the ethos, with institutions and practices of war interpenetrating with countless other arenas of human life, frequently in ways that are below the surface of conscious awareness of the majority of the population. Not only does this example demonstrate interpenetration, but also concealment. Government officials, the corporate world devoted to weapons and militarization, and media and military leaders all take part in a social structure that at once promotes and protects war, while concealing this same mechanism of “branding.”

In the United States, many of our troubling decisions regarding war are connected to our failure to examine and take charge of such realities. Even many ethical investigations of war are unconscious about the “water” of war-culture in which we swim. Of course, it’s difficult for fish to be aware of their liquid environ-

<sup>2</sup>David Barstow, “Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon’s Hidden Hand,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2008.

ment! And we can trace many causes behind the general lack of awareness regarding the structures of war-culture that promote concealment. However, to engage in ethics about war without increasing our consciousness about US war-culture makes as little sense as engaging in ethics about domestic violence without any understanding of gender constructions. It's like making a plan to begin a vegetable garden without having any knowledge about the soil, the climate, or the availability of water.

I am far from the first to point to the urgency of growing in greater awareness. Many theologians have spoken in the strongest possible terms regarding the need for us to examine the links between our religious, political, economic, and social realities more closely. As Douglas John Hall writes, "The association of Christian religion with white Western/Northern economic, military, and cultural imperialism constitutes possibly the single most insidious cause of global peril."<sup>3</sup>

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At the same time, we must recognize that it is painful for people in the United States to examine their own reality. In church settings this is even more acute. Wary of issues that seem to increase polarization, we avoid them. Parishioners tell us that "politics don't belong in the church." Though all of us are complicit in war-culture, the conversation becomes especially thorny for individuals whose lives are most directly involved by way of employment, family connections, and traditions. In addition, Christian liturgy and doctrine draw deeply from cognitive metaphors of war and sacrifice (see, for example, the articles in this issue about hymnody<sup>4</sup>), and quasi-religious practices of honoring veterans and remembering war frequently lead to the silencing of protests, honest questioning, and critique of war and war-culture.<sup>5</sup> It is painful to investigate something that is so deeply buried in our status quo and to raise questions about whether we should resist and struggle for change.

#### WAR-CULTURE AND "THE COMPLEX"

No doubt many readers will remember or have read about President Eisenhower's famous warning in his 1961 farewell speech to the nation when he coined

<sup>3</sup>Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 4.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Palo Cherwien, "Trutzlied or Trostlied?: A Hymnist Looks at Martin Luther's 'Ein feste Burg,'" 387–397, and Paul Westermeyer, "'A Mighty Fortress' and Psalm 46 in Context," 398–407 (*Word & World* 34/4 [2014]).

<sup>5</sup>Cognitive metaphors involve "common patterns of thinking...that are widely shared in the public discursive realm...Humans draw upon conceptual metaphors, through which they use one domain of experience to help interpret another." Kelly Denton-Borhaug, *U.S. War-culture, Sacrifice and Salvation* (London: Acumen, 2011) 114. See also George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

the term “the Military-Industrial Complex” (MIC).<sup>6</sup> Eisenhower saw that the interpenetration of government, corporate, and military institutions represented a distinct danger to the nation and warned citizens about deleterious consequences of its economic, political, and spiritual impact. Today, however, this “complex” has achieved, without our really being aware of it, a breadth and depth that we find difficult to conceive. Compare Eisenhower’s terminology of “the Military-Industrial Complex,” for example, with the expansion that is suggested by contemporary sociologist Nick Turse to more adequately describe our context in the twenty-first century: “this new military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homeland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex.”<sup>7</sup>

“War-culture” involves the interpenetration of the ethos, practices, and institutions of war with ever-increasing sites of culture in the United States. These cultural sites include the economy, educational and judicial institutions, religious institutions, popular and especially youth culture, patterns of production, labor and consumption, and even our capacity for imagination. In other words, not only is the United States a deeply militarized society, but militarization shapes our society’s institutions, our perceptions, imaginations, and even our conceptions of identity. Militarization does not stand apart as an isolated element, but has become a powerful force that impacts the dynamics of collective power, identity, memory, and daily experience. Yet just as fish swim unconsciously in their watery world, citizens of the United States mostly are unaware of the air of war-culture we breathe.

Readers are encouraged to explore the interconnection of various facets of war-culture further in my analysis *U.S. War-culture, Sacrifice and Salvation*. In what follows here, however, I will explore just one important site of US war-culture with the help of a new, masterful, and in-depth study by historian Paul A. C. Koistinen, *State of War: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1945–2011*.<sup>8</sup> This is a very useful resource for a number of reasons; not only does Koistinen help us see the pervasive impact of war-culture in the US political economy, he also assists us to better understand the *dynamics* of interpenetration and concealment.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF US WAR-CULTURE

According to Koistinen, we are living in an era unlike any earlier period in US history with respect to war. He should know. This book is the fifth volume in a series through which the author painstakingly analyzed the political economy of war over the entire course of US history. But why is this era of the twentieth and begin-

<sup>6</sup>“Eisenhower’s Farewell Address to the Nation,” January 17, 1961, at [http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online\\_documents/farewell\\_address.html](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/farewell_address.html) (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>7</sup>Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008) 16.

<sup>8</sup>Paul A. C. Koistinen, *State of War: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1945–2011* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

ning of the twenty-first centuries different from earlier periods? According to Koistinen,

The multiple trillions of dollars expended for national defense since 1945 have fundamentally impacted the nation's economy. . . . A corporate financial system that stressed profits over production and defense budgets that drained America's coffers and its creative talent without strengthening the economy have badly damaged the nation.<sup>9</sup>

Yes, it's quite a dire diagnosis. But we have to back up to understand it. One place to begin is the history between the end of the Great Depression and the World War II era. The fast recovery and growth of the US economy during and after WWII led many to assume that war and war production are important elements of economic health for the United States. Koistinen believes this to be a mistaken assumption with very destructive consequences.

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With much of the rest of the world's infrastructure devastated by years of war, in the 1950s and '60s the United States shot ahead economically with relatively little competition. Koistinen writes, “After World War II, America's manufacturers had ideal, enviable market conditions. . . . In a world destroyed and distressed, the United States accounted for more than 50 percent of international output capacity.”<sup>10</sup> However, by the early 1970s this situation had changed. What happened?

Koistinen is unrelenting about the extent of the US economic decline that began in the 1970s and continues today. He writes,

For most of the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the American industrial economy has been in a state of decline. The U.S. standard of living has eroded, and its infrastructure and basic social services suffer from serious neglect. Other than arms, its exports consist principally of agricultural goods and raw materials, along with computer software and hardware, services, and entertainment, while imports of manufactured goods increase. . . . As things stand, conditions will continue to decline, not stabilize or improve, unless there is far-reaching change.<sup>11</sup>

Economists are generally in agreement about this state of continuing economic decline in the United States, but they have offered differing reasons to explain it. Some

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 189–190.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 199.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 190.

suggest that undue government spending and regulation are to blame. Others blame foreign oil, industrial development, unequal trade and business practices, the development of highly advanced technology, or globalization.<sup>12</sup>

But Koistinen has a different analysis. While all these factors may have been present, he does not think they are enough to explain how the United States so rapidly fell from its economic high place in the world, a country in which “demand for U.S. goods knew no bounds,” to one in which currently, as he puts it, the economy is “tanking.”<sup>13</sup>

Let’s return to the history leading to this diagnosis. Actually, Koistinen argues, the steady growth of US productivity, the main ingredient of American prosperity, can be traced to the nineteenth century. We were the envy of much of the world and maintained a positive trade balance (meaning that we exported more goods and services than we imported) until the early 1970s. Two overriding trends in the United States merged in our political economy, according to Koistinen, as the pivots of greatest change.

#### THE FIRST TREND: A CORPORATE “PROFIT-MAXIMIZING ORIENTATION”

First, facing greater economic competition and pressure from the rest of the world in the post-WWII era, the corporate world in the United States over time chose a specific path to meet that pressure. One possibility might have involved slow and steady work to improve products and productivity, updating facilities, rethinking a hierarchical system of management and labor, and dedicating research and development to more cost-effective, smart, and innovative products. But the most powerful businesses and corporations in the United States instead largely turned to “maximizing profits,” a shorter-term process with high payoffs for a smaller elite, but with longer-term consequences of economic decline of productivity overall. Footwear, apparel, textiles, steel, autos, and electronics all were negatively affected through this type of corporate decision making.

We can look at the manufacture of machine tools as an example since, as Koistinen says, “they are the seed-corn industry of any advanced economic system.” From the end of the Civil War through 1965, the United States led the world as the “premier producer” of these products and was “world renowned for innovative, high-quality and affordable machines.” But like other industries mentioned above, corporate leaders in machine tools corporations mostly decided against innovation and investment as a way to face growing global competition. Europe, Japan, and Russia began to improve their engineering of methods of production of machine tools, and the length of time necessary for mass production, and soon outstripped the United States. By 1980, the United States was importing 25 percent of all machine tools to meet domestic demand.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, US corporate leaders

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 214.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 199, 223.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 196–197.

increasingly turned to investment abroad, mergers, and financial mechanisms, leading to a “profit-maximizing orientation of post-World War II corporate America.” Koistinen writes,

Concerns about product quality, the labor force, and communities were secondary, if they were considered in corporate strategizing at all. The consequences for localities, states, the nation, the economy, and the society as a whole could be dire.<sup>15</sup>

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Overall, this same orientation, the “New Economic Business Model,” would be characterized by more severe boom and bust cycles, inequitable wealth distribution, and, for workers, unstable and uncertain compensation and decreasing benefits. These economic dynamics have shaped life for increasing numbers of Americans since the middle of the twentieth century. But this first trend is not enough alone to explain US economic decline, according to Koistinen. The trend of “profit maximization” interpenetrated with a second trend, the exponential growth of national defense spending and the emergence of a permanent national security state. As we will see, the growth of “the complex” had distinct consequences for all kinds of American institutions, including corporate America, educational institutions, the infrastructure of social safety nets and health, the impact on Congress for meaningful governance, and many other costs overall.

#### THE SECOND TREND: A PERMANENT WAR ECONOMY

Many economists do not focus very strongly on military spending and production in their analyses of the US economy; instead, defense spending is considered to be equivalent to civilian economic activity. Koistinen explains why: “Most assumed that spending for World War II put a final end to the Great Depression,” and further war-related spending “revived the sagging postwar economy.”<sup>16</sup> And indeed, Koistinen argues, for much of the 1950s and ’60s, the unequaled power of the US economy meant that permanently increasing budgets for militarism could be withstood. “As long as the American economy grew and prospered in the 1950s and 1960s, DOD [Department of Defense] budgets generally continued to be viewed in a positive way.”<sup>17</sup> For many, perhaps even most Americans, this economic perspective remains the dominant view.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 201.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 214.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 234.



The origins of the MIC can be seen as far back as the late nineteenth century, as the building of a modern navy drew together shipbuilding and steel industries with military and government institutions and leaders. Congress became involved in authorizing procurement and industrial mobilization planning, and eventually the government created agencies such as the War Industries Board (1918) and later the War Production Board (1941).

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Following WWII, at first, emerging Cold War foreign policies determined the types of national security policies that were developed in the United States. However, as the growth of an advanced technological defense led to the interpenetration of the MIC, all too quickly the interests of the “warfare cohort” joined seamlessly with the efforts of Cold War policymakers. “Civilian and military systems were combining in a way that affected and reshaped fundamental aspects of American life.”<sup>18</sup> The permanent war economy came into being, the “Gunbelt” formed along the west and east coasts and in the south and southwest parts of the country, and corporations sprang up in aerospace, military and space electronics, aircraft, and other high-technology weapons production.<sup>19</sup> These also are the centers for many domestic military bases. An “unprecedented population migration...generally financed by the Department of Defense”—including scientists, engineers, technicians, and skilled labor—created new population centers, requiring enormous building of infrastructure. “Billions of dollars have been spent to transform the Gunbelt to accommodate the migrating millions.” Meanwhile, this same population tends to act as a “built-in lobby” for ever-increasing defense budgets.<sup>20</sup> What developed was a kind of “state capitalism,” according to Koistinen. Defense corporations were not subject to the same market pressures experienced in civilian economic enterprises and “became characterized by inefficiency, waste and corruption.”<sup>21</sup> Today, the appalling nature of DOD lack of financial accountability is so extensive that some senators have proposed that all defense budgets be frozen until the DOD passes an audit.<sup>22</sup>

Military money also impacted research in universities and think tanks, especially many located along the Gunbelt. By 1980, fully one-third of university and college research budgets were funded by defense dollars. Top-tier universities especially were affected, leading to a “brain drain” as many of the best and brightest sci-

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 237.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 105–106.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 231, 227.



entists and even humanities and social science scholars were courted by generous salaries and educational and research grants supplied by DOD budgets.<sup>23</sup> This corresponds with “declining discoveries in the civilian sector” and the number of patents for new innovations falling 30 percent between 1966 and 1973. Currently, about one-third of all the nation’s engineers and scientists—many of them the best in their fields—are employed by defense contractors.<sup>24</sup>

By the early 1970s, with the nation largely turning away from industrial innovation and investment and facing increasing international economic competition and pressure, the enormous budget outlays for militarization could no longer be easily absorbed by the American economy. Though for a short time Congress tried to rein in defense spending in the 1970s, and even though economic decline was growing, “Congress grew more determined to protect the jobs and economic stimulus the defense industry provides.”<sup>25</sup> Of course, this only contributed to the problem. The emphasis on corporate profit maximization, combined with “unchecked defense budgets” became “nearly intolerable in economic terms.” But America’s political leadership seemed unable or unwilling to change foreign policy, reduce militarization’s expenditures, or address the economic system in any substantive way, which “allowed the nation to drift toward further decline.”<sup>26</sup>

All in all, Koistinen summarizes, the bipartisan defense establishment, including the defense industry, the Pentagon, the White House, Congress, and think tanks responsible for the expenditure of multiple trillions of dollars over the past six decades, “forcefully resists change.”<sup>27</sup> And this same interpenetration of institutions is insistently defended by the many millions of Americans whose employment is directly or indirectly connected to this “complex,” making acknowledgement of the problem—much less meaningful change—all the more difficult. Thus, our own reality is concealed from us in ways we willfully encourage, as well as through systems well beyond individual control. Yet, “according to numerous critics,” Koistinen writes, “DOD budgets have distorted public priorities and spending, denying adequate attention to infrastructure, education, medical care, and other public services and interests.”<sup>28</sup> These “dysfunctions” of the American political economy have only increased in the early years of the twenty-first century, and we seem less capable of addressing and dealing with them than ever.

#### BEGINNING A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

The reality of war-culture presents church leaders with many challenges, but the most important need before us is to take time seriously to study and learn in

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 127–130.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 208–209.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 225.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 235.

order to be well equipped to lead others. In other words, before anything else, we need to improve the complexity and depth of our *thought*, so that we may face and take charge of our own reality in the United States.

For Jon Sobrino, facing reality means opening our eyes to a world steeped in suffering. He writes, “Reality gives rise to *thought* insofar as it stirs admiration, promises something radically new, or displays massive suffering that cries for liberation.”<sup>29</sup> What might our increased thought involve and address, as we work to more honestly face the war-culture of the United States? When I led a retreat about a year ago with church leaders, and practiced thinking with them about how to raise awareness of war-culture within their congregations, they came up with a wide range of possibilities:

- Use common sense. Increase our own awareness. Find allies.
- Tell the truth about war-culture.
- Counter dominant messages and practices (for example, video war games).
- Talk with people across differences: interfaith, rural/urban, civilian/veteran.
- Seek alternatives to war taxes.
- Question and resist war-culture’s norms.
- Study and question images of Christian salvation. Resist and challenge religious images/language used to glorify or mystify war.
- Study and develop creative means to counteract war recruitment strategies.
- “Follow the money!” Engage in economic analysis of war-culture.
- Emphasize forgiveness, not retribution. Start afresh, not wallowing in the past.<sup>30</sup>

Many Americans assume that our vast military might and infrastructure is a “global force for good” (this is the latest branding mechanism that is used by the US Navy, featured in sophisticated commercials that commonly are viewed among other film trailers in movie theaters).<sup>31</sup> But Koistinen would remind us of a different reality. As the MIC’s corporations search for new markets outside of the United States for their products, and with increasing cooperation from government (beginning with the Reagan administration and escalating since the Clinton administration), in this new millennium we begin to enter an era of “a multinational arms complex,” and Koistinen warns that “such a complex could lead to more threats and damage abroad than the MIC has caused at home.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy*, 42. Emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup>This list was created in a Peace Retreat with Mennonite church leaders that took place in the Poconos mountains of Pennsylvania in the winter of 2013.

<sup>31</sup>Many of these commercials also may be seen on YouTube. For example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3wtUCPWmel> (accessed July 27, 2014). In my work with congregations, one exercise I have developed involves our common watching, deconstructing, and analyzing the messages in such examples of war-culture. We then attempt to imagine how to use humor, theology, and creativity to counteract these dynamics and suggest alternatives.

<sup>32</sup>Koistinen, *State of War*, 236.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to have hope, despite the enormity of the monolith of war-culture. For as we intentionally study, think, and engage with one another about the nature of our reality, consciousness begins to dawn upon us. We realize that we do not begin our ethical deliberations about war in the United States with a blank slate. We begin to *see* what before was concealed: our immersion in this water, this air, the disciplining function of US war-culture upon our imaginations. We perceive more clearly the need for intervention, and the importance of serious, deep analysis of our reality. And facing reality, we may begin to exercise our sleeping imaginations to conceive of alternatives to the narratives of war that surround us. Conscientization is a way of hope. Otherwise, breathing this air and swimming in this sea, we remain inevitably, and largely unconsciously, predisposed towards war-culture and war. ⊕

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