

## BOOK REVIEW

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# The Morality of Militarization

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Dobos Ned. *Ethics, Security, and The War Machine: The True Cost of the Military*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020. 192 pp., \$60.00 hardback (ISBN: 978-0198860518).

*Ethics, Security, and The War Machine* offers a timely and sophisticated critique of the military-industrial paradigm. Dobos contends that after weighing the benefits of having a military against its true costs—more numerous and harmful than commonly assumed—one finds powerful considerations in favor of demilitarization. This conclusion arises through an examination of *jus ante bellum*, the justice of preparing for war. War is costly, but so is constant preparation for it. These costs fall into three main categories: harm to soldiers, harm to society, and an increased likelihood of harmful war.

First, military conditioning desensitizes soldiers to violence, causing psychological, physical, and moral harm (pp. 14–39). As Dobos notes, “there is something uniquely troubling about the profession of arms” (p. 39), mainly because military conditioning intends to abrade virtue; it is morally injurious. Many, however, hold the contrasting view that military service promotes virtue.

Second, militarization carries costs to society. Although a military may deter foreign aggression, it also increases the risk of inward-facing violence, *coups d'état* and resultant malevolent dictatorships (pp. 40–61). This risk results from a “civil-military gap,” an absence of shared values. Just as a foreign invader may not respect a society’s communal self-definition (i.e., its free expression of values and political will), so too the significant ideological, experiential, and cultural (i.e., values, ideologies, and attitudes) gaps between a society and its military mean that *coups* will likely result in oppressive regimes. Militaries are therefore inherently dangerous, even toward those they serve. Moreover, corrosive military values—such as forcefulness, hierarchy, toughness, a faith in force, and adversarial presumptions (or delusions)—can erode the institutions and norms designed to protect and promote the well-being of citizens (pp. 104–130). These include law enforcement (i.e., the militarization of equipment and weapons, tactics, and culture), business (i.e., the adoption of a war mentality and the relaxation of moral norms), and education (i.e., militarized pedagogies and power structures). Dobos argues that this moral erosion causes inefficiencies in these institutions. I think we can go further; the “seep” of military processes and values into civilian life is outright harmful.

Finally, militarization increases the likelihood of war. Militaries may deter “competitive” attacks; yet they also increase the likelihood of fear-based defensive (or preventive) aggression by posing (un)intentional threats to others (pp. 62–79). In the paranoia-infused international arena, it might be prudent to hit first, rather than to wait, thereby provoking wars of diffidence, mistrust, or insecurity. Militaries themselves create that paranoia (i.e., they threaten because they are consistently

aggressive), and, therefore, the risks that follow. Even though leaders often obfuscate amoral, realist motivations with moral rhetoric, recent history is full of preventive wars. In addition, militaries are prone to overuse; they make unjust wars possible, and leaders may mistake unjust wars for just ones (pp. 80–103). They might fail to see a war’s futility, wrongly think it is necessary and thus fail to consider alternatives, or believe it to be less harmful than it is (e.g., wrongly defining innocence, or exaggerating the military’s ability or desire to avoid civilian casualties).

Whether the above, when combined with the more obvious economic costs, can be justified depends on the viability of alternatives. The end of the book focuses on one such alternative, namely a civilian defence system (CDS). Grounded in the principles and tactics of nonviolent resistance (NVR), a CDS reduces an aggressor’s power through noncooperation and nonviolent intervention, avoiding the many costs of a standing military while retaining strong defensive capabilities (e.g., [Sharp 1973](#)). [Chenoweth and Stephan \(2011\)](#) show that NVR has succeeded against many violent oppressors, despite never receiving significant state focus, resourcing, or preparation. A trained, resourced, and empowered CDS could not only defend a population from aggressors, but also cultivate the values corroded by militarization. CDS training would promote those values while simultaneously enhancing the virtues of peace, solidarity, communality, and love. It could even “wage war” on a society’s inequality, injustice, or systemic oppression.

Because a strong moral imperative to avoid war exists, the *jus ad bellum* criterion that war be used as a last resort (whether “chronological” or “systematic”) cannot be satisfied unless decision-makers properly consider, test, and actualize all alternatives (pp. 86–90), including those that *could* and *should* have been prepared ahead of time ([Parkin 2016](#)). The *ante bellum* question, therefore, is inextricably linked to the *ad bellum* question. It is conditionally unjust to build for war, just as it is conditionally unjust to wage it. We cannot willfully bury our heads in the sand and then, when crisis hits, claim that war is the only option. Sometimes war is unavoidable *because* leaders failed to prepare alternatives. These alternatives include robust CDS preparation, theory, research, and training. War should not be considered a true last resort until they have been tried and tested.

Dobos does not reach “the strong conclusion that militaries are not justified in existing,” hoping instead “to shift the burden of argument onto the proponents of standing armies” (p. 132). I agree with the shift of onus, but this is not enough. The costs of war-building, combined with the well-proven economic and moral costs of war-making, mean that militarization is unjustifiable. As it is, modern war cannot be fought justly ([May 2015](#); [Parkin 2019](#)), and thus militaries should not be built, maintained, or used. The costs of militarization alone do not yield that stronger conclusion (which depends on one’s moral view of war-making), but it is a correct conclusion nonetheless.

## References

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