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“It’s What We Do Every Day”: Recruiting Tomorrow’s Robotic Warriors

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Employing content and discourse analysis, this paper examines the discursive strategies and practices behind a United States Air Force (USAF) recruitment advertisement featuring a new generation of hi-tech weapon systems: Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPAs), better known as drones. I locate this discussion in relation to critical scholarship on the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex and its implications for naturalizing a state of perpetual war. Following this, I chart the evolution of USAF commercials from the Vietnam era to the present. In this way, I highlight continuity and change in the visual rhetoric and discursive strategies deployed in these campaigns. Next, I perform a close reading of the drone spot with a discrete focus on the rhetoric of the technological sublime operating throughout. Doing so, I contend that the advertisement articulates the admixture of awe and fear, apprehension and wonder that has come to shape public understanding of drone technology. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the cultural work taken up by this commercial: the recruitment of next generation soldiers and the normalization of remote control warfare.

Keywords: armed forces, drone warfare, recruitment advertisements, technological sublime

INTRODUCTION

With the end of the draft in January 1973, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) has come to rely on recruitment campaigns and incentive programs to fill the ranks of America’s armed services. These enlistment efforts routinely target high school students, middle-class whites and people of color through the rhetoric of educational opportunity, personal growth, and, as I aim to demonstrate here, the technological sublime. This paper examines the discursive strategies and practices behind a United States Air Force (USAF) recruitment spot featuring a new generation of hi-tech weapon systems: Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA), better known as drones. I contend the advertisement’s persuasive appeal, drawn from the visual style and aesthetics of action-adventure films and video war games, articulates the admixture of awe and fear, apprehension and wonder that shapes public understanding of drone technology.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I trace the evolution of marketing strategies employed by the US Armed Forces in the era of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Doing so, I highlight the consumerist orientation at work in these recruitment campaigns. Next, I consider the Pentagon’s collaboration with Hollywood and Silicon Valley in light of concerns over the political, economic, and cultural influence of the military-industrial-entertainment complex (Der Derian, 2009; Stahl, 2010; Turse, 2003). While critics contend the synergistic relationship between the DoD and the culture industries serves as a powerful tool

for military propaganda and recruitment (Andersen & Kurti, 2009), proponents argue this relationship is essential for overcoming the civil-military divide that emerged with the end of the draft (Schulzke, 2013).

Following this, I analyze the USAF's Reaper drone advertisement, "It's Not Science Fiction," with a discrete focus on the rhetoric of the "technological sublime" (Marx, 1964; Nye, 1994) operating therein. As I have argued elsewhere, all manner of popular culture – from blockbuster films and viral videos to political cartoons and Internet memes – reflect and refract popular fascination with, and public misgivings about, drone technology (Howley, 2018). The Air Force recruitment spot epitomizes this discursive formation. The paper concludes with some thoughts on the implications of the commercial's explicit appeal to American technological superiority and its implicit endorsement of "everyday militarism" (Decker, Forester & Blackburn, 2016).

RECRUITING THE ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE: MARKETING STRATEGIES & TECHNIQUES

In 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, presidential candidate Richard Nixon campaigned to end conscription and bring a swift resolution to the conflict. At the time, Nixon's promise was seen as a ploy aimed at defusing the anti-war movement. In retrospect, his pledge to end the draft signaled the growing influence of free-market principles espoused by Milton Friedman and others associated with the Chicago School of economics (Bailey, 2007). Rooted in libertarian values of individual freedom and limited government, calls for ending the draft and replacing it with an all-volunteer force reflected the ascent of market-based approaches to public policy – an economic philosophy that continues to have profound implications for housing and healthcare, public education and financial markets, as well as the armed forces.

Despite predictable resistance, Pentagon officials quickly fell in line with this new reality – but not without making significant and lasting changes to marketing strategy and tactics. While free-market economists believed voluntary service would be driven by rational economic choice, the DoD understood the armed forces couldn't compete with higher education and civilian employment on those terms – especially in the wake of the costly and divisive Vietnam War. Instead, as political historian Beth Bailey has pointed out, the DoD "moved from models of free-market rationality to models of consumer capitalism, and with mixed feelings, they adopted consumer capitalism's most powerful tools" (2007, p. 49). Among those tools: paid advertising, direct mail, interactive displays, event sponsorships, and integrated marketing campaigns – all with a decidedly consumerist orientation. In stark contrast to the interpellating figure of Uncle Sam hailing able-bodied men to serve their country in a noble struggle to defeat the enemies of American democracy, the AVF would instead appeal to economic security, professional development, and personal fulfillment. As Bailey observes, "the US military has replaced public portrayals of shared sacrifice and obligation with the language of consumer dreams and images of individual opportunity" (50).

With these new recruitment pressures, the military's advertising budget grew exponentially. Between 1973, when the draft ended, and 1984, at the height of the Reagan Administration's profligate military spending, the Pentagon's advertising budget grew from \$10 million to \$100 million (Shyles & Hocking 1990). In the intervening years, this upward trajectory continued. Today, the federal government spends nearly \$1 billion per year on advertising, with the bulk of these expenditures going to the Postal Service, Health and Human Services, and the US Armed Forces (Pasquarelli & Graham, 2019). Equally important, for my purposes here, with the end of the draft, the Pentagon abandoned the staid and somber approach of traditional public service announcements (PSAs) it relied upon in the past, in favor of more sophisticated, dramatic, and eye-catching advertisements promising new recruits money for college, travel to exotic locations, and unparalleled job training opportunities. While each branch of the US Armed Forces was compelled to reorient its recruitment and retention efforts, the Army's situation was especially challenging given the slaughter of the Vietnamese ground war.

Preparing for the transition from the draft to the AVF in 1970, Army Chief of Staff General William Westmoreland identified changes in both the army's organizational culture and its persuasive appeals that

would be needed to recruit the Modern Volunteer Army. Westmoreland declared that serving in the Army should be “more enjoyable, more professionally rewarding, and less burdensome in its impact on our people and their families” (quoted in Bailey, p. 59). Westmoreland’s instinct to pitch young people and their parents (so-called influencers) with aspirational appeals – predicated on state-of-the-art market research – rather than patriotic sentiment, continues to inform military recruitment today (O’Brien, 2005). A brief discussion of several recruitment campaigns offers revealing insights into the military’s marketing efforts in the AVF era.

Consider the US Army’s “Be All You Can Be” campaign produced by Madison Avenue powerhouse N.W. Ayer. Launched during a nationally telecast college bowl game on New Year’s Day 1981, the “Be All You Can Be” campaign was just the “head turner” Westmoreland advocated a decade earlier. Not only did the campaign reverse the Army’s declining recruitment numbers, it dramatically improved the service’s public image. Significantly, the campaign was less successful for retention purposes; enlisted personnel found it deceptive, unrealistic, and misleading (Shyles & Hocking). Nevertheless, for military brass leery of using modern advertising techniques to recruit the next generation of soldiers, the campaign was a game changer. In 1999, the trade publication *Advertising Age* named “Be All You Can Be” one of the top 100 campaigns of all time (Evans 2015).

The success of “Be All You Can Be” stands in sharp contrast to the ill-conceived “Army of One” campaign a decade later. Like its predecessor, “Army of One” features a pithy slogan, high production values, and an integrated marketing plan. However, the campaign’s radical individualism struck the wrong chord. While “Be All You Can Be” “skillfully emphasized the Army’s role of providing both ‘instrumental’ and ‘intrinsic’ rewards to soldiers” (Shyles & Hocking, p. 370), “Army of One’s” hyperbolic promotion of personal success and individual achievement contradicts a fundamental tenet of military service: the absolute necessity of a cohesive fighting force pursuing a common objective. The campaign reignited criticism that in the era of the AVF, Madison Avenue was producing a highly circumscribed and purposefully misleading picture of military service (e.g., Brady, 1991). Writing in the *National Review*, John Derbyshire succinctly captures one commercial’s absurd celebration of rugged individualism. “Seeing that solitary soldier being an ‘army of one’ out on his own in the desert, I could hear the voice of my own sergeant-instructor roaring: ‘GET BACK TO YOUR UNIT, SOLDIER!’” (2001, p. 30).

The USAF began running television ads after falling short of its recruitment goals in 1979. The following year, the service launched its long running “Aim High” campaign. The campaign’s evolution reveals the abandonment of traditional appeals to nostalgia and patriotism in favor of an explicit consumerist orientation. For instance, a television spot from 1984 is cast in the mold of Ronald Reagan’s iconic “Morning in America” campaign commercial of that same year. Set to a slow tempo instrumental version of the Air Force theme, “Wild Blue Yonder,” the thirty-second spot features idyllic scenes of ordinary Americans going about their daily lives, interspersed with shots of enlistees performing their daily routines. Gesturing toward racial integration of the armed forces, a brief sequence features an African-American crewman preparing an aircraft for a White pilot. Airborne, the fighter jet soars above the countryside as a somber voiceover intones: “America. It’s a great country. Protecting it is a great way of life. The United States Air Force, find out how you can be part of it. ... Aim High.” Throughout, the lifestyle appeal takes a backseat to the more prominent theme of national service and devotion to the country.

By 1987, this discursive strategy gave way to glamorized depictions of sophisticated technology. Premiered during a rebroadcast of ABC’s primetime dramedy *Moonlighting*, one spot features an upbeat jazz-inflected rendition of the Air Force theme. The commercial includes but a single shot of service personnel: an air traffic controller. The focus is squarely on military hardware: radar and communication systems, fighter jets, as well as cargo and refueling planes. In contrast to the soft focus imagery and languid pacing of the earlier spot, here the visuals and editing convey a sense of excitement and adventure. So too, the voice over makes no mention of national service. Instead, training and technology are the sum total of the commercial’s persuasive appeals. “The United States Air Force offers

opportunities for education and training. Training that will put you at the leading edge of today's technology. ... Aim High. Air Force."

Aim High remained the cornerstone of Air Force recruitment campaigns for two decades. But in 1999, confronted for a second time with a missed recruitment target, the Air Force reengineered its marketing strategy. For Colonel Terry Tyrell, then director of strategic communication for the US Air Force, the Aim High tagline was clichéd. The new campaign's emphasis on the Air Force's role in space and its growing reliance on electronics, surveillance, and satellite communication, came with a hefty price tag. According to a report in *Advertising Age*: "The Air Force spent \$12 million on marketing last fiscal year, but is expected to boost that to more than \$50 million" (Chura, 1999).

Today, the Pentagon reaches potential enlistees through a constellation of digital devices –television sets and game consoles, smartphones and tablet computers –offering recruiters unprecedented opportunity for ever more subtle and sophisticated persuasive appeals. Hence, the proliferation of recruitment messages and related forms of "martial propaganda" (Sirota, 2011) beyond the realm of traditional advertising and marketing discourse and into the discursive arena of entertainment products and services.

MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL-ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX: TECHNOLOGY & RECRUITMENT

Initially marked by ambivalence, the Pentagon's relationship with Madison Avenue has evolved from suspicion and skepticism to admiration and respect. Long before the military embraced modern advertising techniques, however, the armed forces nurtured a close and cooperative partnership with another powerful tool of consumer capitalism: Hollywood. Although the nascent studio system proved instrumental in supporting the war effort during World War I, World War II represents the high-water mark of collaboration between the film industry and the armed services. Hollywood famously bolstered the war effort through propaganda films, most famously the *Why We Fight* series. Likewise, box office favorites, including Jimmy Stewart and Carole Lombard, used their star power to support the war effort.

The relationship between the military and filmmakers soured during the Cold War only to reach a low point with a spate of anti-war films produced by "New Hollywood" in the 1960s and 70s. The Reagan-era saw renewed cooperation and support between the film industry and the Pentagon. In exchange for expert consultants and access to the latest military hardware, the Department of Defense secured unprecedented supervision over Hollywood films, including blockbusters such as *Top Gun* and *Black Hawk Down*. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the hastily organized Entertainment Liaison Office formalized the synergistic relationship between America's movie capital and its war-making machine. Today, the Pentagon relentlessly pursues a strategy of cultural collaboration beyond Hollywood, with giant tech firms and leading players in game design and app development. The unprecedented success of the government-sponsored video game *America's Army* is a case in point.

In 1999, the US Army fell short of its recruitment goals for two years running. Under the direction of Colonel Casey Wardynski, head of the Army's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, the service embarked on a new recruitment strategy that sought to leverage the enormous appeal of video gaming for its target demographic. In a story pegged to the latest release of the game, *Time* magazine noted:

The military has a long history of playing around with war games for their educational benefit, but *America's Army* was a different animal altogether. The game is also a giant ad aimed at the public – at the 13-24-year-old demographic, to be specific, and has hit its target squarely. (Grossman, 2005)

America's Army stands apart from other military games on several counts. Unlike its commercial competition, the game and its frequent updates are available for free download – and on disk at Army recruitment centers across the country. Equally important, *America's Army* features a hotlink from the game's main menu directly to the Army's recruitment website. Finally, according to Pentagon officials, the game's authenticity is unrivaled for training purposes, as is the simulated environment's emphasis on

collaboration and strict adherence to the military's rules of engagement. Supporters highlight *America's Army's* pedagogical role in giving players an experience that is far more comprehensive – and authentic – than most war games.

There is, of course, nothing new in this. Taking a historical perspective on the relationship between gaming and warfare, Roger Smith reminds us: “The military has been using games for training, tactics analysis, mission preparation, and systems analysis for centuries” (2010, p. 6). Nonetheless, for critics, video games embody the encroachment of military culture into key sectors of civil society: education, economics, and entertainment. Of special concern is the integration of digital technologies, interactive games and simulations with military planning, training, and recruitment. As Andersen and Kurti put it, in the early twenty-first century “creating virtual worlds of war became a mutual enterprise uniting the media and military industries” (2009, p. 46). With its fantastic imagery and visual effects, the Air Force drone advertisement analyzed below conjures the virtual worlds of Hollywood sci-fi epics and war game simulations. Viewed in this light, it is difficult to take issue with critiques that suggests gaming is fast becoming a “breeding ground for war propaganda in the entertainment segment” (Ottosen, 2009).

Consider the promotional copy for *Drone Wars: Second Strike!* available through Google Play. The tagline for the free mobile game succinctly captures the search and destroy ethos behind such entertainment: “Aim. Fire. ELIMINATE!” Players are encouraged to “command and dominate the sky” with “BADASS WEAPONS!” Using interactive features and “insane enhancements,” players can customize their drone and do battle – based on “real world” scenarios – with conventional forces and terrorist threats. All while earning “cash, prestige, and components to build your drone and weapon arsenal.” The consumerist orientation is unmistakable: economic reward, social status, and acquisitiveness coalesce around the sublime appeal of “piloting” high tech killing machines. This thrilling – but altogether risk-free experience – is ideally suited to recruit young people enamored with immersive simulations of fantastic weaponry and futuristic battlegrounds. More troubling still, the ability to play the game anywhere, “in the subway ... in the car ... or even on the toilet!” underscores the routinization, if not the banality, of remote control warfare.

“IT’S NOT SCIENCE FICTION”: DRONES & THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Like other branches of the armed services, the Air Force faced recruitment shortfalls as it struggled to redefine its role in the post-Cold War era. Writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, in early 2001, Greg Jaffe recounts the competition between creative staff from Bozell Group, the USAF's longtime ad agency, and relative newcomer GSD&M, for a lucrative seven-year, \$350 million contract. The Air Force eventually awarded the contract to GSD&M, the firm behind the “It’s Not Science Fiction” campaign that ran between 2009-2011. Significantly, the proposals from each creative team could not be more different. Bozell's romanticized appeals lionized Air Force personnel for their valor and service. By contrast, Jaffe notes, GSD&M's “bloodless and bombless” spots “didn’t demand a deep emotional response from viewers but rather sought to wow them with technical smarts.”

Engaging audiences through technological wonderment epitomizes the rhetoric of the sublime operating in Hollywood blockbusters, war-themed video games and, as I want to suggest here, recruitment campaigns featuring the hi-tech weapon systems: from stealth bombers and Apache helicopters to Predator drones. After all, as David Nye reminds us, “the constant is not the technological object *per se*, it is the continual redeployment of the sublime itself, as a preferred American trope” (p. xiv). The “It’s Not Science Fiction” campaign vividly demonstrates the sublime's persistence in media discourse surrounding new and emerging technology. In one spot, depicting the Air Force's role in humanitarian missions, a C-17 cargo plane rescues evacuees with a series of fantastic maneuvers and the spectacular – and wholly unrealistic – conversion of the C-17 into an altogether different aircraft. Likening the commercial to Michael Bay's *Transformers* franchise, national security correspondent Spencer Ackerman (2001) pressed an Air Force spokesperson into conceding: “It’s a very cinematic, sci-fi sort of campaign.”

So too, the Air Force recruitment advertisement considered here invokes the sublime through fantastic imagery, awe-inspiring technological feats, and futuristic battle spaces – all designed to excite potential recruits. The setting is a remote and forbidding landscape, the storm clouds and mountainous terrain an otherworldly shade of reddish orange. As a small troop formation surveys the scene, the commanding officer (CO) reports to an unseen interlocutor: “This is Titan 1-4. No signs of life.” Invoking space travel to the Mars – the red planet named after the Roman god of war and subject of centuries of human fascination and fear – the spot opens with a familiar science fiction trope: a landing party sets out to explore a strange new world.

Just then, a fast-moving aircraft materializes, as if from nowhere, its sudden and unnerving appearance heightened by a high-pitched crescendo on the soundtrack. Cut to a reverse high angle shot, the plane enters the frame with a swoosh, its enormous wingspan dominating the horizon. As the vehicle proceeds toward the landing party, cut to a close up of the plane’s underbelly, an infrared camera surveys the landscape, followed by another cut, this time to a wide shot of the Martian landscape, a computer grid superimposed as the camera locates and locks on a target, alarm signals blaring. The weird and futuristic aircraft appears to be an imminent threat to the landing party. This is the stuff of the technological sublime, as David Nye puts it: “experiences of awe and wonder, often tinged with an element of terror” (xiv).

With the dramatic tension established, we zoom out from an overhead shot of the menacing plane to an aerial perspective from low earth orbit where a satellite relays data, optical and infra-red images from the battlefield to a ground control station (GCS) half a world away. Here, the matter of fact depiction of the drone’s ability to annihilate space and time invokes earlier expressions of the technological sublime: the mechanical sublime of winged aircraft combined with the electric sublime of the telegraph. Swish pan right to a pair of remote operators who calmly collect and interpret information on an enormous video wall. The crew calmly relays vital information to their comrades in the field: “Titan 1-4, hold your position.” “What have you got?” asks the CO. “Unmanned aircraft is identifying enemy sniper.” Cut to single shot of African American remote pilot from behind: the wall displays infrared images of armed individuals; a computer graphic confirms “Enemy Sniper.” Throughout this sequence, a global surveillance and assassination platform is depicted as a sublime technological marvel, a triumph of human ingenuity and a breathtaking demonstration of our mastery of time and space.

Cut to the CO viewing the same image on a portable device. The danger, it turns out, is not the mysterious aircraft, rather it is a pair of spectral figures, rendered here as infrared silhouettes – alien Others of the highest order – making their way through a ravine and toward the otherwise unsuspecting landing party. Invoking the sublime of sci-fi action adventures, the commercial’s allusion to the war on terror comes into sharp relief (Allison, 2016). The alien landscape and mysterious enemy stand in for Muslim communities across the Afghan-Pakistan border that have borne the brunt of the US drone campaign for decades. In this way, the recruitment advertisement performs significant cultural work: justifying America’s secretive, controversial, and by some accounts, illegal use of drone technology against tribal Islam.

“Let’s move,” barks the CO as the ground troops make their way to safer ground. Zoom up and in to the friendly aircraft flying overhead – the unblinking stare of the hi-tech plane assures the landing party’s safety. No firefight ensues. Nor does the fearsome aircraft “find, fix and finish” – to use military parlance – the enemy combatants. In this way, like the official statements issued by government officials, and corporate news accounts that rely on unnamed sources, the recruitment advertisement offers a highly circumscribed version of drone warfare. On the one hand, the commercial succinctly captures the what I have described elsewhere as the “distributed intimacies” (Howley) between remote pilots and special operations forces engendered by remote warfare. On the other hand, however, like dozens of recruitment commercials celebrating the technological sublime of the modern weapon systems, this spot elides the bombs, blood, and trauma of the targeted killing program.

Instead, what unfolds is the flawless execution of a hi-tech reconnaissance mission: a complex and multifaceted operation expertly conducted by a racially integrated team engaged in full spectrum operations to secure the homeland and ensure the safety of our troops. The commercial’s appeal to the

sublime of technological superiority, and proficiency, is unmistakable. Equally important, by employing Hollywood iconography and aesthetics, including state-of-the-art CGI and intensified continuity editing, the drone advertisement targets potential recruits where they live: the virtual worlds of action adventure films and simulated game environments. Curiously, this recruitment spot employs another familiar trope; the figure of the Magic Negro underpins this celebration of sublime technology. Typically, this stock character of American popular culture aids a white protagonist through mystical insights and semi-divine powers. In the person of the African-American remote pilot, the Magic Negro proves to be all knowing and all seeing – albeit through the use of hi-tech communication and surveillance technologies. More Lucius Fox than Bagger Vance, the African-American airman delivers the white heroes from the evil Other.

With a peel away effect, the camouflaged aircraft transforms into a clearly recognizable USAF drone. A graphic reads: “It’s Not Science Fiction.” Pan right across the interior of a ground control system. The single video display is gone. Now a three-man crew – image analyst, sensor operator, and remote pilot – is seated before an array of screens. Each wears a headset and performs their respective tasks with joysticks and computer keyboards; the same gear gamers use when they access the virtual worlds produced by the military-industrial-entertainment complex. Another graphic reads: “It’s What We Do Every Day.” Thus the fantastic sublimity of robotic warfare is rendered familiar, comprehensible and commonplace. The take away is clear: The sleek immersive GCS station maybe futuristic, but conducting globe spanning reconnaissance missions using leading edge technologies is a reality for today’s USAF.

CONCLUSION: THE SUBLIME OF ENDLESS WAR

In conclusion, I want to briefly consider the implications of the cultural work taken up by this advertisement. First and foremost, while this iteration of the “It’s Not Science Fiction” campaign may not participate in the same Hollywood-infused hyperbole as the aforementioned C-17 spot, its cool depiction of the drone program is unrealistic and misleading. The commercial purposefully elides the brutality of killing by remote control – carnage made intimate by the drone’s advanced optical and imaging systems – as well as the psychological trauma that comes from witnessing the effect of a Hellfire missile on flesh and bone (Howley). So too, the ad’s evocation of the technological sublime obscures the mundane aspects of the drone program. Veterans lament the tedious nature of their work – frequently working 10 and 12-hour shifts, six days a week, in cramped and uncomfortable working conditions. Adding insult to injury, members of the so-called “chair force,” rarely command the same dignity and respect afforded their airborne colleagues (McCloskey, 2009).

Instead, the drone program’s daily routine is depicted as an arena to work as part of a loyal, dependable, and above all, technically proficient team conducting exciting missions using futuristic weapon systems and keeping one step ahead of mysterious adversaries. While it may be asking too much for any advertisement, not least a military recruitment commercial, to be a study in realism, the spot’s emphasis on the everydayness of robotic warfare renders drone assassination ordinary—just another day at the office trailer. Missing in action is any mention of the “presence bleed,” to borrow Melissa Gregg’s (2011) phrase, that constitutes the everyday lived experience of remote pilots, who leave the virtual battlefield and return home to family and friends, only to find the cognitive dissonance of drone warfare psychologically disorienting and emotionally unsettling.

Finally, and perhaps most alarming, through its invocation of the everydayness of robotic war “It’s Not Science Fiction” naturalizes a state of perpetual conflict. Put differently, killing by remote control is the technological embodiment of a sentiment long cultivated by politicians and pundits: War made easy (Solomon, 2005). A sublime state of affairs that trains young people to use fearsome new technologies and wage endless war across time and space—in our names and on our behalf—or so we are led to believe in the era of robotic war.

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