

Gangsters for Capitalism

Why the US Working Class Enlists

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Through its reliance on the relationship between labour and capital, fortified by state-enforced protections for private property to facilitate this relationship, capitalism creates a natural dependency on wages for the vast majority. With the removal of 'the commons' during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the peasantry was transformed into a working-class majority that now must serve as both commodities and tools for those who own the means of production.

While those of us born into the working-class majority have little or no choice but to submit to our ritualistic commodification, we are sometimes presented with degrees of options regarding how far we allow capitalists, landlords, corporations, and their politicians to dehumanize us as their tools.

While we are forced into the labour market, for example, we can sometimes choose public jobs over private, therefore limiting the degree of exploitation. While we are forced to find housing, we may sometimes choose to live in communal situations with family or friends.

One of the areas where total choice is allowed is in the business of Empire, particularly in the maintenance and proliferation of the modern US Empire. Although governments worldwide are using technological advances in robotics to replace human bodies in their military ranks, and thus lessen their dependence on the working class, there is still a heavy reliance on people to act as tools of war. In 'all-volunteer' militaries like that of the United States', 'willingness' is still a crucial component to the mission.

As global capitalism's forerunner and guardian, the US military has nearly 3 million employees worldwide, including active duty and reserve personnel and 'civilian full-time equivalents'. The US Department of Defense's official proposed budget for FY 2017 is \$582.7 billion, which, combined with corollary systems of 'security', swells to over \$1 trillion.

According to public Pentagon reports, the US Empire officially comprises of 662 overseas military bases across 38 countries. Since the birth of the United States in 1776, the country has been involved in a war or military conflict in 219 of these 240 years.

Throughout this history, the US government, which has directly represented and acted upon the interests of capital and economic elites, has required the participation of many millions of its working-class citizens to join its military ranks in order to carry out its missions by force.

For many generations, the US working class has answered this call to serve as what US Marine General Smedley Butler once deemed, 'gangsters for capitalism'. Millions upon millions have lost life and limb to clear the path for new global markets, steal and extract valuable natural resources from other lands, and ensure the procurement of trillions of dollars of corporate profit for a privileged few.

Why? Why does the working class willingly, even enthusiastically, join to serve in a military that bolsters the very system which undermines and alienates them in their everyday lives?

Cultural Hegemony and Capitalist Indoctrination

We can start to answer this question by drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to see how capitalist interests have shaped the dominant culture in US society. Utilising Hegel's binary of social influence, where societal power is jockeyed between 'political society' and 'civil society' Gramsci suggested that power is based on two forms: coercion (*Dominio*) or consensus (*Direzione*).

According to Gramsci, the battle over ideology between the ruling and subaltern classes is ultimately won through 'the hegemony of one social group over the whole of society exercised through so-called private organizations, such as the church, trade unions, schools, etc.'

Under capitalism, the hierarchy relies on the state to control and dictate these central organs of ideological influence, thus establishing cultural hegemony. This isn't necessarily done in a highly centralized or coordinated manner by a tight-knit group, but rather occurs naturally through the mechanisms of the economic system.

Just as the economic base shapes society's 'superstructure', the superstructure in turn solidifies the interests of the economic base. In this cycle, the interests of the capitalist class are morphed into the interests of the working class.

Unearthing these dynamics allows us to explain why impoverished Americans living in dilapidated trailers and depending on government projects still proudly wave the red, white, and blue cloth; why tens of millions of impoverished people measure their value according to which designer clothes or sneakers they're wearing; why these same tens of millions, who can barely afford basic necessities to survive, spend much of their waking time gawking at and worshipping obscenely wealthy celebrities; or why over 100 million working-class people show up every few years to vote for politicians that do not represent them.

It also allows us to explain, at least in part, why members of the working class so willingly carry out the brutalization of their class peers by serving in imperialistic militaries and militarized police forces.

This culture, which is ultimately shaped by capitalism, receives its values through many different channels, formal and informal. Part of this is accomplished through formal education, where traditional intellectuals become more specialized, and where the process of learning and thinking is replaced by indoctrination.

In his 1926 examination of the 'Southern Question', Gramsci wrote of this phenomenon:

The old type of intellectual was the organizing element in a society with a mainly peasant and artisanal basis. To organize the State, to organize commerce, the dominant class bred a particular type of intellectual... the technical organizer, the specialist in applied science... it is this second type of intellectual which has prevailed, with all his characteristics of order and intellectual discipline.

While Gramsci was specifically referring to the dominant intellectuals in northern Italy during his time, and how they influenced the 'rural bourgeoisie' and their 'crazy fear of the peasants', he was also expounding on the general development of a cultural hegemony that characterizes the capitalist system:

The first problem to resolve... was how to modify the political stance and general ideology of the proletariat itself, as a national element which exists within the ensemble of State life and is unconsciously subjected to the influence of bourgeois education, the bourgeois press and bourgeois traditions.

Uncovering these hegemonic elements stemming from society's economic base, according to Gramsci, was crucial in exposing the ruling-class propaganda that seeped through layer upon layer of working-class and peasant cultures of the time.

So, how does Gramsci's analysis play out today? Within systems of formal education, it exposes the strict parameters set by the capitalist modes of production and the social norms that result. It explains why formal education, even at its highest level, often takes the form of indoctrination.

A prime example of this indoctrination can be seen in the field of Economics, whose students at the most prestigious institutions and earning the highest academic achievements seem unable to apply their thought beyond the narrow confines of classical liberalism and its modern form of neoliberal capitalism.

They may be Ivy League PhDs, members of the Federal Reserve, or highly influential presidential cabinet members, but all exhibit an unwillingness or inability to see the most obvious of contradictions within their theory.

The indoctrination that has essentially taken over all fields of formal 'study' and 'expertise' inevitably flows throughout society, originating from elite institutions that are specifically designed to justify and maintain the economic base, and transferred from there into so-called public policy.

In turn, public education programmes that are shaped by the capitalist hierarchy are not concerned with the students' ability to comprehend or critically think, but rather with turning them into 'docile and passive tools of production'.

Part of this process is focused on the creation of obedient workers who are minimally competent to fulfil their exploitative labour role; and another part is focused on preventing the same workers from being able to critically think about, and thus recognize, their exploited labour role within this system. The former fetishizes obedience, control, and 'work ethic'; the latter obstructs awareness and resistance.

These formal, 'public' structures of dominant ideology are naturally coupled with more informal arrangements deriving from the market system, notably the consumption process. As such, workers are moulded through a structured progression that begins at birth.

In fulfilling this role, workers become consumers in the market for both necessary and conspicuous consumption. As the US capitalist system has become ever more reliant on conspicuous consumption (evidenced in the 'supply-side' phenomenon of the 1980s), this way of life once reserved for the 'leisure class' has now taken hold of the 'industrious class' (working class).

This intensification of the consumption process has exposed the working class to informal channels of indoctrination, established through advertising and marketing, popular entertainment such as television shows, movies, and video games, and the arrival of a billion-dollar voyeur industry based on worshipping the 'cult of personality' and celebrity (and, thus, wealth).

Clearly, when consumption becomes the only goal in life, people are pushed to consume more and more. In doing so, the working class is serving capitalist culture even in its 'personal life'. And through this manufactured encouragement to consume lies a complementary ideology that convinces working-class folks to literally buy into, become vested in, and thus serve and protect, the capitalist system.

Whose Security?

In a class-based society, fear becomes a convenient and effective tool in shaping ideology and pushing through ruling-class agendas with widespread working-class approval.

As in Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, where the interests of the owners and facilitators of capital are gradually accepted as the interests of the masses, issues of security also become blurred between those designed to protect the powerful and those designed to protect the powerless.

The modern security culture that has come to fruition in the US, especially after 9/11, compels masses of citizens to not only be subjected to increasing measures of authority and surveillance, but also to join in the effort to carry out these measures. Americans do so with a shocking willingness.

The reasons for this unquestioned submission to authority can be found in the most blatant of examples: the formation of the US Patriot Act. With the threat of 'extreme Islam' and 'global terrorism,' such legislation passed with ease because, like all such measures, it exploits the emotional (and irrational) needs brought on by fear.

Mark Neocleous tells us :

Security presupposes exclusion. Take the piece of legislation passed just a few weeks after the attack on the World Trade Centre, called the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act. Coming in at over 340 pages and carrying twenty-one legal amendments, the Act was said to be necessary and essential to the new security project about to be unleashed on the world.

It changed criminal law and immigration procedures to allow people to be held indefinitely, altered intelligence-gathering procedures to allow for the monitoring of people's reading habits through surveillance of library and bookshop records, and introduced measures to allow for greater access to property, email, computers, and financial and educational records. But if the Act is about security, it is also immediately notable for the wordy title, designed for the acronym it produces: USA PATRIOT. The implication is clear: this is an Act for American patriotism. To oppose it is unpatriotic .

This modern security culture has also taken on an extremely broad and vague agenda of 'national security', a term that represents a very specific construction of government strategy designed to create a catch-all apparatus that accommodates the never-ending growth of the military-industrial complex.

In fact, the term was deliberately chosen as a play of words with 'national defense', used during post-World War II reconfiguration efforts aimed at creating 'a unified military establishment along with a national defense council'.

'By 1947, "common defense" had been dropped and replaced with "national security" - hence the creation of the National Security Council and the National Security Act.' The purpose of this change in wording was tipped by Navy Secretary James Forrestal, who 'commented that "national security" can only be secured with a broad and comprehensive front', while explaining, 'I am using the word "security" here consistently and continuously rather than "defense".'

As Neocleous notes, "security" was a far more expansive term than "defense", which was seen as too narrowly military, and far more suggestive than "national interest", seen by many as either too weak a concept to form the basis of the exercise of state power or, with its selfish connotations, simply too negative'.

This conscious shift from 'defense' to 'security' was made for fairly obvious reasons. President Dwight Eisenhower's outgoing speech in 1961, which included an eerie warning of a creeping military-industrial complex that had become largely unaccountable, exposed the underlying reason in a rare act of deep truth coming from a major political figure.

In a similar act some four decades earlier, US Major General Smedley Butler exposed the embryo of this insidious institution , famously equating his 33-year military career to serving 'as a high-class muscle man for big business, Wall St., and the bankers' and 'a racketeer and gangster for capitalism' by making:

Mexico, and especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested.

This shift also highlights the importance of understanding Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and how it plays out in the real world.

By examining the focus of US domestic policy over the past century, we can see how forms of 'security' can be dissected into two parts: those focusing on the interests of the ruling-class minority, and those focusing on the interests of the working-class majority.

An example of the latter, which can aptly be described as 'social security', can be seen in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the subsequent focus on working-class (social) security in the New Deal. Neocleous points to the literature of the time to highlight this culture rooted in social security :

The economist Abraham Epstein, for example, had published a book called 'Insecurity: A Challenge to America,' in which he spoke of 'the specter of insecurity' as the bane of the worker's life under capitalism, while Max Rubinow had been articulating demands for 'a complete structure of security' in a book called 'The Quest for Security'.

A 2012 report issued by The Corner House provides a very clear and useful differentiation between what is referred to as 'lower-case' and 'upper-case' security.

The first type, which they label as 'lower-case' (which Neocleous refers to as 'social'), specifically applies to that of the working-class majority. This type of security, which relates to us all, include 'the mundane, plural protections of subsistence: holding the land you work and depend on; having a roof over your head; being able to count on clean water and regular seasons; knowing you can walk home without being assaulted by thieves or marauders; getting a good enough price for your crop to make ends meet; above all, knowing you have the right to the wherewithal for survival'.

The second type of security, which they label as 'upper-case' (and which Neocleous refers to as 'national'), applies specifically to the capitalist class. 'This is the Security that matters particularly to ruling elites: security of property and privilege, as well as access to enough force to contain any gains made by, or to counter the resistance of, the dispossessed or deprived.'

Actions taken under the umbrella of national security are done so for two main reasons: to protect ruling-class interests, and to feed the immensely profitable military-industrial complex. When major political figures own personal financial stock in the arms industry, as they often do in the US, these dual purposes go hand in hand. The fact that it has developed so intensely within the global epicentre of capitalist power (the US) is expected.

Karl Kautsky's 1914 essay on 'ultra-imperialism' described this inevitable stage clearly, stating that, as capitalist governments, in representing their profit sectors, were forced to seek out new industrial zones, 'the sweet dream of international harmony (free trade) quickly came to an end' because, 'as a rule, industrial zones overmaster and dominate agrarian zones'.

Hence, the massive outgrowth of industrial capitalism, in its constant search for new markets to exploit, can be accomplished only through widespread shows of force and power. Once the ball is rolling, this forceful expansion becomes a perpetual cycle through the opening of markets,

the manufacturing and deployment of massively destructive armaments, and the rebuilding of markets.

In this process, the enormous loss of human life is viewed as a necessary and acceptable sacrifice in light of the potential profit to be made.

The final stage of capitalism, which has materialized over the course of the last 50 years or so, confirms these power relations based in the obsessive search for more profit. It is occupied by corporations that 'gobble down government expenditures, in essence taxpayer money, like pigs at a trough', and are facilitated by a 'security' industry that is funded 'with its official \$612 billion defense authorization bill' that contributes to 'real expenditures on national security expenses to over \$1 trillion a year' and 'has gotten the government this year (2015) to commit to spending \$348 billion over the next decade to modernize our nuclear weapons and build 12 new Ohio-class nuclear submarines, estimated at \$8 billion each'.

Ironically, by upholding upper-case Security, the working-class majority undermines its own security. As upper-case Security strengthens so too does our insecurity. Despite this, we remain active participants in maintaining the highly militarized status quo.

Patriotism and Penury

Realizing the difference between 'lower-case' and 'upper-case' security allows us to see how the interests of the ruling class can be inherited by the working-class majority through the construction of an 'outside threat' or common enemy:

Traditionally the business of lord or state, Security has always had an uneasy, ambivalent relationship with the lower-case 'securities' of the commons. The law was used to take people's land and subsistence away, but it could also occasionally be mobilised in their defence. The lord or the state's ability to make war was typically used against many of the common people both at home and abroad, but could also enlist a willing community to defend territory and livelihoods against common enemies.

Today, outside threats and common enemies are constructed through popular culture. Corporate news stations that are concerned only with ratings (thus, profit) choose sensationalist narratives that strike fear and shock in the viewer.

In this realm of profit-based 'news', there is no need for government propaganda because corporate 'news' outlets fill this role through sensationalism. The successful creation of foreign threats runs hand in hand with the dominant narrative of safety that is centred in upper-case Security.

It is also made possible through an intense conditioning of patriotism to which every US citizen is subjected from an early age, where as children we are forced to stand in formation in school classrooms with our hands to our hearts, citing a pledge of allegiance in drone-like fashion.

Children as young as five are made to participate in this ritual, with absolutely no idea what they're saying, why they're saying it, and what this odd pledge to a piece of cloth hanging in the corner means. As we grow older, this forced allegiance is layered with vague notions of pride and loyalty, all of which remain defined in the eyes of the beholder, with virtually no substance.

The notion of American exceptionalism serves as the foundation for this conditioning, and has roots in the cultural and religious practices of the original European settler-colonists. 'It's

there in the first settlers' belief that they were conducting a special errand into the wilderness to construct a city on a hill in the name of their heavenly father', explains Ron Jacobs :

It is this belief that gave the Pilgrims their heavenly go-ahead to murder Pequot women and children and it was this belief that gave General Custer his approval to kill as many Sioux as he could. It made the mass murder of Korean and Vietnamese civilians acceptable to the soldiers at No Gun Ri and My Lai, and exonerated the officers who tried to hide those and many other war crimes from the world. It [gave] George Bush the only rationale he needed to continue his crusade against the part of the world that stands in the way of the more mercenary men and women behind his throne as they pursue their project for a new American century.

This notion has motivated the ruling classes of the US (and subsequently, the global capitalist order) to ride roughshod over the world's people in order to establish a global hegemony conducive to capitalist growth.

And it is this notion, often rooted in white-Christian supremacy, that has given many working-class Americans a false sense of superiority over the global population - whether labelled 'savages', 'uncivilized heathens', 'filthy Communists', 'backwards Arabs', or 'Muslim extremists'.

Because of its Eurocentric organization, the global capitalist onslaught that has dominated the modern world has blatantly racial underpinnings. The 'core nations' that have led this global hegemony (US, UK, France, Germany) tend to be 'lighter' on the skin-colour scale, while the 'periphery nations' that make up its dominated group (primarily in the global South) tend to be 'darker'.

This oppression based in white makes it easier for core-nation ruling classes to justify their actions to their own. As world-systems theorist Samir Amin tells us , for the peoples who live within periphery nations, 'colonization was (and is) atrocious. Like slavery, it was (and is) an attack on fundamental rights', and its perpetuation is motivated by material gain.

'If you want to understand why these rights were trampled on and why they still are being trodden on in the world today', explains Amin, 'you have to get rid of the idea that colonialism was the result of some sort of conspiracy. What was at stake was the economic and social logic that must be called by its real name: capitalism'.

In relation to the trajectory of imperialism, notions of American exceptionalism and patriotism are almost always fronts for deeper emotional calls to obey capitalism and white supremacy. These are effective and powerful tools.

Most answer this call because, quite frankly, we are incapable of comprehending the systemic exploitation that plagues us under capitalism. It is difficult for many to understand that cheering for the carpet-bombing of Arab and Muslim peoples worldwide, or publicly calling for the mass killing of black protestors in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, only strengthens the proverbial boot that crushes us in our daily lives.

This inability to understand is rooted in the aforementioned formal education system that prioritizes obedience over enquiry, with the ultimate goal of obstructing any degree of class consciousness from forming among American citizens.

For working-class kids in the US, this 'manufactured consent' doubles down on the existing desperation that materializes through a forced dependence on wage labour. Jobs and income are needed to sustain us, but often these do not exist. In the US, unemployment, a staple of capitalism, consistently fluctuates between 4% and 8%.

Underemployment, or the lack of jobs that provide a living wage, plagues another 25-30% of the population, with some estimates as high as 40% in the age of neoliberalism and globalization,

where many former unionized, 'middle-class' jobs have been sent overseas. The poverty rate, as defined by the government, consistently rests between 13% and 15% of the US population. As of 2015, 15.8 million households (42.2 million Americans) suffer food insecurity.

Because of this bleak economic landscape, many in the US are forced to consider military enlistment. My own entry into military service, for which I served four years in the US Army, was strongly influenced by a lack of options. With college appearing too costly, the job market appearing too scarce, and with few resources to explore life as an adult, it was a relatively easy decision despite the severity that it posed.

Choosing an unknown future where I could find myself anywhere in the world, fighting whichever enemy my government chooses, and ultimately risking my life and well-being was, I concluded, a better option than wandering aimlessly into a world where my basic needs were not guaranteed, and where jobs, living wages, and affordable housing were scarce.

During my time in basic military training, I recall each soldier being asked why they enlisted. The most common answers were, 'because I needed a job' or 'I need money for college'.

My personal experience is confirmed by a 2015 field study conducted by Brad Thomson for the Institute of Anarchist Studies, where a series interviews with veterans concluded that 'a significant common thread is that they came from working-class backgrounds and overwhelmingly named financial reasons as their motivation to enlist'.

As one veteran, Crystal Colon, said: 'Most of them [recruits] are people that just want money for college, or medical care, or have a family and need money.'

Another veteran, Seth Manzel, sacrificed personal beliefs in order to satisfy material needs, saying: 'I was aware of the war in Afghanistan - it seemed misguided but I was willing to go. I heard the drums beating for Iraq. We hadn't invaded yet but it was pretty clear that we were going to. I was opposed to the idea, but again I didn't really have a lot of options as far as skills that could transfer to other jobs.'

In the face of material desperation, the addition of spiritual and emotional calls to duty becomes even more effective. As one interviewee recalled: 'When I joined, in all honesty, I was very, well, that way I would put it now is indoctrinated... your thinking is that this is your country, you're giving back, it harkens on those strings, and then there's the pragmatic side - how am I going to pay for college? I've got these problems, my family didn't plan well, financially, so I've gotta take care of my own, and how am I going to do that?' For me, the calls to duty were firmly planted through the repetitive ritual of pledging allegiance.

And, growing up in the 1980s, Hollywood had no shortage of blockbusters that glorified war and military service. From *Red Dawn* to *Rambo* to *Top Gun*, working-class kids like myself were (and continue to be) inundated with films that delivered passionate and emotional calls to serve.

It is no coincidence that US military recruiters strategically seek out economically marginalized populations to fill their ranks - which explains why the ranks are disproportionately Black, Latino, poor, and working class.

This modern practice reflects historical precedence. During the Vietnam War, African Americans and poor whites were drafted at much higher rates than their middle-class counterparts, leading to numerous allegations that 'blacks and the poor were intentionally used as cannon fodder'.

Today, African Americans represent 20% of the military population, but only 13% of the general population. In contrast, Whites make up about 60% of the military ranks, despite representing 78% of the general population. Only 7% of all enlistees hold a Bachelor's degree. Nearly 30% of

military recruits in 2008 did not possess a high-school diploma, a large proportion of whom came from families with incomes of less than \$40,000 a year.

The military (all branches combined) spends roughly \$1 billion per year on advertising, which is specifically designed to pull at these emotional strings. The content of these ads, along with recruitment promises, are largely misleading. The money for college, whether through the GI Bill or the College Fund, is overestimated; the supposed job skills that can transfer to the civilian sector are almost always non-existent; and the compensation itself, which is skewed by 'housing' and 'meal' adjustments, is drastically overvalued.

During my time in service, it wasn't unusual to see soldiers using public assistance programmes and receiving Article-15 punishment for writing bad cheques in order to buy groceries.

At each of my duty stations - Ft. Jackson (South Carolina), Ft. Sill (Oklahoma), and Ft. Campbell (Kentucky) - pawnbrokers and cheque-cashing establishments were strategically positioned nearby, ready to exploit the many soldiers who needed their services. My last two years in service were sustained by using cheque-cashing services that charged up to 40% interest on advancing money one or two weeks ahead. For me, as for many, this was a necessary evil to sustain any semblance of a reasonable standard of living.

Conclusion

Under capitalism, the working-class majority constantly finds itself in a paradoxical state. Our entire lives are dominated by activities that directly benefit those who own the houses we live in, control the production of the commodities we buy, and own the businesses we work for. Our participation in these activities both strengthens those owners while also further alienating us from what would otherwise be productive and creative lives. Our activities increase the owners' social and political capital while at the same time separating us from our own families and communities.

This soul-sapping existence takes on a more severe form when we are called upon to fight and die in wars that, once again, only benefit these owners.

In our social capacities, we are conditioned to follow the status quo, despite its propensity to subject many of us to authoritative and militaristic avenues. The vague notion of patriotism ironically leaves us vulnerable to direct repression from our own government. For those who run our worlds, the use of the term 'patriot' in the Patriot Act was not arbitrary, just as the decision to replace 'defense' with 'security' in official policy discussions was not.

This play on words is very effective to an already dumbed-down population. And the cognitive dissonance it creates is blatant - while over 80% of Americans do not believe the government represents our interests, most of us go along with the authoritative policies stemming from this same government, as long as they're labelled patriotic or presented as being designed to keep 'the Other' in check.

Even blind faith in a Constitution that was written 229 years ago by wealthy elite landowners (many of whom were also slave-owners) strengthens this method of control, for it creates another vague form of Americanism that can be used for coercive means.

Just as patriotism is a naturally vague notion, so too are our respective ideas of freedom, liberty, justice, loyalty, and service to our country. So, when called upon to give our lives for the 'greater good', 'for God and country', for 'defense of the homeland', or 'for freedom', working-

class Americans volunteer en masse, without question, are slaughtered and maimed en masse, and remain socially and economically disenfranchised en masse, despite our 'service'.

Capitalism's tendency toward mass dependence on wage labour (and, thus, widespread desperation) serves the military-industrial complex well. The politicians who facilitate the system know this, and actively seek to maintain this advantageous breeding ground. Arizona Senator John McCain's off-hand comments during his 2008 presidential campaign, warning about the dangers of 'making veterans' benefits so good that nobody will stay in service', alluded to this fact.

When tens of millions of working-class kids are faced with the dire options of McDonald's or the military, or perhaps college followed by impotent job markets and lifelong student-loan debt, the coercive nature of military recruitment tends to set in.

So, we join en masse, travel the world in metal machines, kill impoverished people whom we've never met, fight, get maimed, sometimes die... and return home still broke, living paycheque-to-paycheque, with inadequate benefits and medical care, struggling to support our families and keep our heads above proverbial water. All the while, arms manufacturers enjoy skyrocketing stock prices and unfathomable profits. And the American military machine keeps churning, spitting us all out in its tracks.

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