



Open Research Online

Citation

Burridge, Joseph and Mcsorley, Kevin (2015). Too Fat to Fight? Obesity, Bio-Politics and the Militarization of Children's Bodies. In: Mcsorley, Kevin ed. War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience. War, Politics and Experience. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 62–77.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/73207/>

License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

Author's Accepted Manuscript. From: McSorley, K. (ed.) (2012) *War and the Body: militarization, practice and experience* London: Routledge

Too Fat To Fight? Obesity, Bio-Politics and the Militarization of Children's Bodies

Joseph Burridge and Kevin McSorley

The United States military stands ready to protect the American people, but if our nation does not help ensure that future generations grow up to be healthy and fit, that will become increasingly difficult. The health of our children and our national security are at risk.

(Mission: Readiness, 2010: 7)

Introduction

On the 13th December 2010 US President Barack Obama signed into law a piece of legislation commonly referred to as the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*. The law had passed a vote in the House of Representatives eleven days earlier, with near unanimous bipartisan support, and had been designed to, among other things, move towards provision of more healthy food for school children across the entire United States via establishing higher nutritional standards through a revised *National School Food Lunch Program*. One prominent organisation that lobbied strongly for this legislation, garnering significant media attention (BBC 2010, Shalikashvili and Shelton 2010), was *Mission: Readiness*. This campaign group, populated largely by retired senior members of the US military, addresses a range of issues connected with children, but in this case directly addressed itself to their food consumption, its impact upon rates of obesity, and the consequences that they argued this was having upon American military recruitment. Specifically, *Mission: Readiness'* contributions to the debate used an anticipatory logic, and were addressed to an alleged need to do something about American children's bodies because, increasingly, too many such bodies were considered at risk of becoming 'Too Fat To Fight' – the title of one of the organisation's reports (*Mission: Readiness* 2010) and this chapter.

The situation described by this *Mission: Readiness* report was one in which the consequences of prevalent childhood food consumption patterns constituted a national security threat, something requiring ameliorative action. It is fair to say that generally, the national security implications of food consumption have become a rhetorical commonplace (Billig 1996) in other recent discussions of health issues in the United States. For example, they also featured as part of Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign – designed to 'raise a healthier generation of kids' (Let's Move 2011).

Taken together, the campaigning activity of *Mission: Readiness* and the passage of the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*, bring into sharp relief a range of issues of interest to social scientists. They mobilise the contemporary politics of the body – including bio-political and governmental concerns – particularly the attention given to a so-called 'obesity epidemic' and its focus upon children. Moreover, because of the degree to which *Mission: Readiness'* contributions were framed by, and addressed to, a perceived need to ensure that bodies of US children are not 'Too Fat To Fight', they are also pertinent to those interested in ongoing processes of the militarization of social life, and the multiple historic connections between food and war. This paper engages with these issues by interrogating the key 'Too Fat To Fight' report produced by *Mission: Readiness* (2010) as part of its campaign for legislative change.

We begin this chapter by discussing work on militarization, and particularly the claim that contemporary Western societies are marked by complex processes of both demilitarization and, in particular domains, re-militarization. We proceed by discussing the influence of the 'bio-political' turn in Foucault's work and his development of specific understandings of governmental strategy which resonate with the logic of multiple aspects of *Mission: Readiness'* narrative. The chapter then moves on to discuss the ways in which reference to historical precedent plays a role in the anticipatory justification of federal legislative intervention, before we address the specificity of childhood as a politically legitimate site for such intervention. We conclude by considering the bodily imperatives of *Mission: Readiness* as an example of what we call, following Billig's (1995) analysis of banal nationalism, banal militarism.

Militarization

The wider social relations and institutional arrangements of military power changed radically in the final decades of the twentieth century in most nations in the advanced industrial West. Traditional forms of mass military participation such as universal or draft conscription rapidly declined, having been the subject of much political opposition in the 1960s and 1970s. Militaries became much more capital rather than labour intensive, and smaller, all-volunteer and professionalized forces developed, increasingly transformed by technological reconfiguration and, in recent decades, by privatisation. In terms of a lessening of direct disciplinary engagement with civilian bodies then, Western societies arguably underwent a certain demilitarization over the last four decades. However, in other crucial political and economic respects, the preparation, support, and prosecution of war remains undiminished or indeed heightened.

Military spending has been consistently high over the past four decades in the Western world, and has increased significantly in the decade since 9/11 (SIPRI 2011). As Bacevich (2006) notes, the political economy of the US in particular is still heavily militarized, in terms of the political influence of the defence sector; the percentage of the federal discretionary budget (approx. 60%) that goes on military spending; and the unanimity of thinking about war, security and foreign policy that emerges amongst political leaders – a ‘military metaphysics – the cast of mind that defines international reality as basically military’, as Mills (1956: 222) put it over 50 years ago. Not only does this ‘military metaphysics’ remain sacrosanct in Washington (Bacevich 2011), Lutz argues that support for the military and the legitimacy of having and deploying vast military force have become key tenets of American political and cultural life more generally, referring to such extensively-held beliefs as the ‘military normal’. There is no institution more widely revered in the US and whose financial and moral support is thought more unquestionable both in the halls of Congress and in wider public life than the military (Lutz 2009, Bacevich 2006). Lutz points to the reproduction of the military normal, the normalization of warmaking as the American way of life, via multiple means including the work of the Pentagon media and public relations machine, whose \$3bn annual budget encourages civilians to support the activities of the troops.

Notwithstanding this support and the increase in vicarious engagement with war and the military via the media, the aforementioned key shift in *direct* military engagement with citizens' lives was one of the developments that led some commentators in the 1990s to propose the existence of 'post-military society' (Shaw 1991). Most civilian lives in the West had become increasingly insulated from direct war preparation, which had become the exclusive sequestered domain of third-party professionals. The socialisation of the young was increasingly pacific. In post-conscription states with progressively professionalized and privatised militaries then, it was difficult to see direct military service as an integral part of citizenship.

Indeed, debates around the meaning of 'active citizenship', an increasingly prominent motif within various, particularly neo-liberal, political discourses in the West in recent decades, invoked numerous figures – from the responsible job-seeker to the sovereign consumer, the engaged public sphere debater to the community stakeholder – but only rarely invoked any form of martial sacrifice within their remit. Citizenship thus increasingly became understood to be, and accepted as, post-military in the contemporary West. For example, in the UK, 2011 saw the introduction of the first formal legislation for a Military Covenant, instituting in law reciprocal relations and obligations between the Nation and those who choose to serve in the Armed Forces. While this development could be read on the surface as an example of re-militarization, establishing the idea of a national debt to a military that had been in continuous active service for the past decade, it also spoke of an attempt to shore up an understanding of duty that had previously been unnecessary to articulate. The subtext to this legislation was that this understanding might otherwise wane in the public consciousness, as it was no longer implicit through any sort of universal experience.

Our analysis of *Too Fat To Fight* is located within this curious, somewhat contradictory context of processes of both demilitarization as well as, often cultural and affective, processes of re-militarization in the West in recent decades. As Geyer notes, militarization – 'the contradictory and tense social process by which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence' (1989: 79) – is a wide-ranging, multi-faceted and sometimes uneven development rather than a simple, homogenous process. It is also worth thinking about the arguments of *Too Fat Too Fight* in a context where the dominant modes of destruction employed by Western militaries

have been reshaped so radically in recent decades that it is no longer entirely clear that universal standards of physical fitness bear any obvious, direct, and consistently meaningful, relation to these new forms of warfighting and the defence of the nation.

This eponymous concern, of what it might actually mean ‘to fight’, now and in the future, is an issue that receives minimal attention in *Too Fat To Fight*. However, it is worth noting here that Shaw (2005) claims that the central guiding principle of what he calls the new way of Western warfighting that emerged from the 1990s onwards was the transfer of risk away from the body of the Western soldier. While this often meant relying on others to take bodily risks on the ground, such as local allies or private military contractors, most importantly it meant a heightened role for technology and specifically for air power. Increasingly then, Western warfighting in many recent conflicts has meant bombing from afar, and the physical demands of occupying hostile territory have necessarily receded as and when the prosecution of war followed this virtual/virtuous model (Ignatieff 2001, Der Derian 2009).

Clearly, the physical demands of the various manifestations of ‘fighting’ will differ, according to whether they involve, for example, elite aviation, signals operation, frontline combat or drone control. The point we wish to make is simply that some of the many activities that increasingly constitute Western ‘fighting’ may be becoming less obviously and meaningfully defined by a primary and undeniable reliance upon physical fitness and martial prowess. Of course, that Western military cultures nonetheless continue to place great emphasis upon cultivating specific regimes of physicality amongst all recruits should clearly be understood partly in terms of the subjective entrainment of other qualities and values beyond physical prowess – particularly collective traits such as solidarity, teamwork, command, and discipline. The extent to which such inculcation is now becoming the primary function of what is arguably an otherwise zombie idiom of physicality and traditional martial training, potentially unconnected to some contemporary forms of Western war-fighting, is a question that lies beyond the remit of this chapter. However, it is also worth noting here that the heart of muscular physicality beats extremely strongly beyond the official domains of basic training, into the makeshift gyms that soldiers build for themselves in every desert encampment or floating base they occupy – arguably leisure-time arenas for the simulated performance of a muscular military identity that may be increasingly denied in the surveillant working mode.

Official and unofficial military cultures are thus partly characterized by forms and modes of embodiment that may be symptomatic and even baroque. In the context of this chapter, however, the issue we wish to flag is simply that, alongside the aforementioned shifts in direct disciplinary engagement with civilian bodies in post-conscription states, any straightforward equation of ‘fighting’ with physical prowess is questionable even for those militarized bodies that are involved in contemporary Western warfare.

We now turn to further analysis of some of the details of *Too Fat To Fight*, initially via an engagement with Foucault’s work on governmentality and bio-power.

Governmentality and bio-power

The relatively recent translation of many of Foucault’s lectures (specifically Foucault 2003, 2007, and 2008) has added to the body of material available in which he is concerned with aspects of the rationality of government – usually framed as his work on ‘governmentality’. Work in this area has been developed notably by people such as Dean (1999) and Rose (1999a, 1999b, 1998) in order to make sense of the operation of neoliberalism in particular. Neoliberalism is understood, by such authors, as a mobile political formation, or a form of bio-power, which deals with bodies, the emergence and regulation of life, and the ways in which attempts are made to conduct the conduct of others in particular ways. That is, action is taken upon actions in pursuit of disposing people to do things (Foucault 1982: 220). In such work, the term bio-power is used to refer to the ‘the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy’ (Foucault 2007: 1).

Recently this work on bio-power, bio-politics, and governmentality has been very influential upon social scientists operating at the intersection between sociology and geography (Guthman 2011, Evans 2010, Guthman and DuPuis 2006) in relation to food security, and the body, as well as upon other sociological studies of nutritional science (Coveney, 2006), television documentaries, and reality TV dealing with obesity/fatness (Rich 2011, Inthorn and Boyce 2010, Ouellete and Hay 2008). It has also been central to work exploring the regulation of life in the War on Terror and the wider ‘liberal way of war’ (Reid 2006, Dillon and Reid, 2009) as

well as the anticipatory bio-political governance of insurgency (Gregory 2010, Anderson 2010, 2011, 2012).

According to Rose (1999a: 154), one key process under neoliberalism is best understood via the term ‘responsibilization’, whereby people are expected to be ‘active citizens’, and, in effect, govern themselves. They are expected to make their choices responsibly, and negotiate various risks on the basis of the expert knowledge put into circulation (Dean 1999: 146). As Rose puts it, health, specifically, is expected to come from ‘the market, expertise and a regulated autonomy’ (Rose 1998: 162). We get a fairly clear idea that this is one type of logic that is at stake in this context by looking at how *Mission: Readiness* articulates a mode of addressing the so-called obesity epidemic: ‘To reverse this epidemic of childhood and adult obesity will take a concerted effort by individuals, the private sector, and various governmental and non-governmental agencies’ (*Mission: Readiness* 2010: 4). The order of presentation of who is involved – individuals, private companies, government – is perhaps revealing of a particular hierarchy of valorisation and responsibilization. Certainly, in this regard, it is interesting that *Mission: Readiness*’ (2010) report contains some superficially curious praise for food companies, even as they make clear that their actions are insufficient to provide a solution: ‘The snack food and beverage industries are to be commended for current efforts to voluntarily improve the nutrition of products sold in schools, but in the long run the only way to be certain that science-based guidelines are implemented nationwide is by setting national standards.’ (*Mission: Readiness* 2010: 5). This cannot simply be explained by reference to the affinity of interest between food industry, health professionals, government and mass media as captured by Dixon and Banwell’s (2004) notion of the ‘Diets-Making-Complex’.

However, there are other logics at stake in *Mission: Readiness*. In his recently published lectures, Foucault refines aspects of some of his well known earlier work by supplementing his distinction between sovereignty and discipline as ways of organising politics, by adding in reference to security. Security, he suggests, is related directly to a specific ‘unit of regulation’ – that is the ‘population’ (see Guthman and Dupuis 2006: 443). Security tends to involve processes other than exclusion or quarantine, utilises an epidemiological diagnostic logic, and involves a tactical engagement with ‘epidemics’, aiming to prevent their spread (see Foucault 2007: 10). This bio-politics relies upon the measurement of aspects of a population, followed

by interventions aimed at encouraging movement in a particular direction. In the context of an epidemic – say a so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ – it is therefore reliant upon diagnosis of a problematic situation, often a situation constructed as likely to intensify and get worse, followed by provision of a solution aimed at turning the tide. This preventative, and pre-emptive, logic requires a strategy that is ‘focused on a possible event, an event that could take place, and which one tries to prevent before it becomes a reality’ (Foucault 2007: 33). As Anderson (2010) notes, anticipatory action, folding the future into the here and now as a cause and justification for current activity, has increasingly become a key means through which the emergence and regulation of life is governed in contemporary liberal democracies, particularly in the domain of security. He points out how specific strategies of pre-emption, precaution and preparedness are being ‘deployed once specific futures have been made present through practices of calculation, performance and imagination’ (p.791). Further, it is worth noting that pre-emption rather than deterrence has become the hallmark of recent US foreign policy, and is arguably now ‘the official military strategy of the United States’ (Massumi 2007: 4). Indeed, Anderson (2012: 34) suggests that emerging logics of ‘counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency may herald a “new normal” of perpetual peace-war in which threats are acted on before they emerge as threats’. Further, as Virilio reminds us, the militarized state’s pre-emptive gaze is not only directed outwards but also turns inwards, exhibiting a ‘panicked anticipation of internal war’ (2002 cited in Shapiro 2009: 28).

We suggest here that the rhetoric of the Too Fat To Fight report from *Mission: Readiness*, and the legislation that was ultimately passed, may be understood in terms of this logic of threat and anticipatory action. The epidemiological calculation that a proportion (specifically, 27% of young people between 17 and 24) of the current population are beyond a certain BMI threshold, making them potentially unsuitable for future military service, is specifically imagined as something which will ‘threaten [...] the future strength of our military’ (*Mission: Readiness* 2010: 1) and therefore threaten US national security. An indication of a possible future – one in which a higher proportion of the population will be unfit for military service, considered too fat to fight – is thus constructed as a situation that can be anticipated and should be avoided. Furthermore, this anticipatory action should be pursued by targeting a specific population – children, and on a national level.

Historical precedent

Analytically, it is important not to proceed at this point as if the proposal and passage of the *Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act* 2010, was some brand new notion without historical precedent. Indeed, the supposed national security implications of rising rates of obesity have been debated publicly in the US fairly regularly within the US during this century (Guthman 2011: 55, also see Marchione 2005), being repeatedly described as a ‘national security issue’ as is the case also in *Mission: Readiness*’ report.

There is, of course, historical precedent for the type of concern that underpins *Mission: Readiness*’ position, and for interventions targeted specifically at school food provision. The health of the nation has often been ‘read off’ the bodies of its citizens, or, at least, off the proportion of such bodies that are regarded as fit for military service, and action taken to address any problem, or potential future problem (pre-emptively). As well as being epidemiological, this form of reasoning is also cosmological in Mary Douglas’ sense in that: ‘Images of the “microcosm” – the physical body – may symbolically reproduce central vulnerabilities and anxieties of the “macrocosm” – the social body’ (as discussed in Bordo 1993: 186, see specifically Douglas 1966: 115 and 128).

According to Carden-Coyne (2005: 80), in the USA of the 1920s: ‘Fat men were seen as a direct reflection of the degraded state of the nation’. Similarly, there was, according to Helstosky (2004: 119) much discussion of ‘racial degeneration’ centred on the fitness to fight, or lack thereof, of the population under Italian Fascism. Related concerns about what was euphemistically known as ‘national efficiency’ (see Searle 1971) also arose in the early twentieth century United Kingdom in response to the Boer War, and the frequency with which men were rejected as physically unsuitable for military service – 34.6% between 1884 and 1902. The debate that ensued resulted in the passage of the Education (Provision of Meals Act) 1906 which established UK local government responsibility for meal provision for school pupils living below a threshold of poverty (see Burnett 2004 and 1989, Gustafsson 2002).

Returning to the United States specifically, Federal government involvement in school meals began in earnest in the 1930s after forty years of much less formal organisation on a local scale

(Poppendieck 2010). Broadly speaking, according to Nestle (2007) there was initially an incitement to eat more so as to address dietary deficiency and malnutrition from 1890 until the 1960s, including an intense period of attention during the food crises of 1907-1917 that led to the use of school lunch programs to address malnutrition and undernourishment (Levenstein 2003: 112-113). After that, in the 1960s, there was a contrary incitement to eat less in the face of surplus/abundance with an accompanying interest in school meals (Nestle 2007, Levenstein 2003).

Previous political entanglements with school meal provision in the US have also included their specific targeting as a site for repeated so-called ‘wars’ with the attendant moral polarisations around patriotism – and the possibility of being ‘with us or against us’. According to Poppendieck (2010: 53-83) in her recent account of these ‘food fights’, US school lunch provision has been, at various times, attributed significance in relation to five such wars. There was the ‘war on poverty’ and the ‘war on hunger’ in the 1960s. Then, in the 1970s, there was the ‘war on waste’ and the ‘war on spending’. And, of course, more recently we have the ‘war on fat/obesity’ which is of most interest here.

Of course, advocating any sort of (uniform) national regulatory standard is a difficult prospect in the United States’ Federal system, potentially inviting counter-arguments equivalent to those made about ‘nanny-statism’ in the UK. Indeed, writing about US obesity during George Bush Junior’s second term as President, Ouellette and Hay (2008: 476) make precisely this point. Despite their focus upon individuals, the private sector and then government being the entities involved in addressing the problem of fitness to fight, *Mission: Readiness* do acknowledge that the nature of the problem requires a rather systematic approach – hence their advocacy of federal/national intervention in the form of the legislation. As the report puts it: ‘creating the right conditions to move a whole society to become more fit is a national challenge’ (*Mission: Readiness* 2010: 4). A national challenge logically requires a national solution, and hence justification for national legislation.

Because of the ideological difficulty faced in advocating federal intervention of this type, *Mission: Readiness* specifically orients itself to historical examples of similar intervention and their apparent past successes. Specifically, under the heading ‘America’s Military Leaders Have Sounded the Alarm in the Past’, the report makes reference to the role of General Lewis

Hershey in facilitating the passage of the post-World War Two National Food Lunch Program in 1946:

Military leaders have stood up before to make sure America's youth had proper nutrition for a healthy start in life [...] Once again, America's retired military leaders are alerting Congress to a threat to national security. The basic fact is that too many young American men and women are too fat to fight

(Mission: Readiness 2010: 2, emphasis added).

The intervention of 1946 is therefore constructed as a form of legitimating 'precedent' for the current intervention, with the generals of *Mission: Readiness* cast in the role of Hershey, sounding the alarm. It is important to note that, in 1946, shortly after World War Two, the emphasis of the intervention was solely upon addressing nutritional inadequacy and providing more nourishment for those identified as underfed. While the proposed legislation in the current case, the *Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act*, is also partly directed towards 'inadequacy' on the level of the population – the stated desire to produce freedom from hunger – it is also firmly directed at producing 'health' via the prevention of obesity and overweight. These are aims which are, in part, likely to be in tension with one another. While this tension is acknowledged by the report, the legislation and the intervention in relation to School Lunches specifically is constructed as a strategy to provide a future that is both healthy *and* hunger-free (*Mission: Readiness 2010: 6*). In the following section, we explore the reasons for the recurrence of this focus upon schools, and therefore upon children, as the site for regulation.

Children as a suitable site for intervention

School lunches, and therefore children, and their bodies, are deemed a suitable and legitimate site for intervention of this sort for several reasons. The sovereignty of children as social actors tends to be considered problematical, so they can be a legitimate 'site' for state intervention – usually enabling government to side-step claims about 'nanny statism' (Colls and Evans 2008, Bacchi and Beasley 2002). Children are very often assumed not to be fully responsible for their own risks and choices; they are considered to be not (yet) active citizens/consumers. They are, instead, unfinished citizens, 'human becomings' rather than human beings in Lee's (2001)

formulation. They are works in progress, who can be helped, or ‘disposed’ towards a future of active citizenship, but who are not there yet. As Beier (2011) notes, childhood is thus also an important site for the maintenance and reproduction of militarized knowledges and practices.

Moreover, even in a context in which neoliberal bio-power is in operation, there is a persistent sense that society has some sort of collective responsibility for children. As James, Jenks and Prout (1998) put it, there is considerable social capital tied up in children as the future. Since they are viewed as ‘future adults (and the future nation)’ (Evans 2010: 34) they are seen as being in need of protection from various forms of social evil – obesity included. The extent to which the children of the US constitute the future of the nation – and are constructed as the potential well from which future soldiers are drawn – is also clear from *Mission: Readiness*’ document and the arguments contained therein

In discussions of both public policy and in marketing, children are, according to Colls and Evans (2008: 625), constructed as being marked by both an *incapacity* and an *unwillingness* to eat healthily (see also Burridge 2009). The extent to which they are assumed to prioritise pleasure over health, and need to be disposed to do otherwise is captured neatly by Coveney’s (2006) term: ‘nutri-pedagogy’. As unable *and* unwilling to eat properly without being equipped with the tools to exercise their active citizenship, children are therefore constructed as a legitimate site for intervention – they need ‘nutri-pedagogy’ to dispose them to future suitable behaviour.

As well as being more legitimate ideologically, due to the unfinished status of children as ‘non-citizens’ (Bacchi and Beasley 2002), there is, of course, also a sense in which action upon children – directed towards a future – fits with the preventative, pre-emptive logic identified by Foucault’s work on ‘security’. As Evans (2010: 30) puts it: ‘Action taken on children is [...] deemed more likely to succeed because it is more *pre-emptive*’. Indeed, in her account of the ways in which discussion of the future threat posed by obesity functions affectively, Evans (2010: 23, original emphasis) analyses some of the ways in which a focus upon children works to ‘make dystopian [obese] futures *felt* as present realities’. Such possible futures are invoked to justify change in the present. These include the future to be avoided – the possible future of

a higher proportion of people not being able to serve in the military which represents a ‘potential threat to our national security’ (General Johnnie E. Wilson cited in *Mission: Readiness* 2010: 1) – as well as the future to be facilitated – where a higher proportion of eventual adults are capable of meeting the military’s criteria for service, with less of them being considered ‘too fat to fight’.

The situation is one in which present action upon children is constructed as disposing them *in* the present, and disposing them *for* a future, equipping them with the knowledge to make future (responsible) healthy choices as active consumer/citizens. The legislation is about conducting their future conduct, disposing them to be healthier in the present and immediate future by restricting what they can access at school, and equipping them to be active consumer-citizens in the longer-term future. And, for *Mission: Readiness*, it is therefore about making a higher proportion of adults than is currently the case potentially available for military service in the future – by intervening before those adults are fully formed.

Conclusion: banal militarism

At this juncture, and having highlighted some of the details and rhetorical construction of *Mission Readiness*’ narrative, we will conclude by returning to our opening discussion of militarization. Despite our point there that we should question the basis of any analysis that sees universal standards of physical prowess as clearly linked to the security of the nation – particularly given a post-conscription landscape but additionally given that the activities that constitute contemporary warfighting are being radically reshaped – our argument here is not that we should hence not take the pre-emptive, anticipatory logic of *Mission: Readiness* seriously. Rather, it is that we should take it very seriously as, and perhaps as nothing else than, an explicit performance of what we call *banal militarism*. That the legislation passed through Congress so effortlessly, with such bipartisan support, clearly speaks of an absolutely unproblematic cultural resonance of the ‘military normal’ (Lutz 2009), of asserting the utility, even the necessity, of permanent war readiness; of the accompanying idea that war and soldiering bring positive benefits to the nation and to individuals; as well as of the standing within which (retired) military opinion is held in the United States.

Militarism is classically understood as ‘a set of attitudes and social practices which regards war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity’ (Mann 1987: 35). We adapt the term banal militarism from Billig’s (1995) discussion of ‘banal nationalism’. The two concepts are clearly related in many cases, although it is conceivable that instances of banal nationalism could emphasize a pacific tradition in the national imagination (notwithstanding that, as scholars such as Weber (2004), Giddens (1985) and Mann (1993) all note, the emergence of the nation state is fundamentally tied up with developing a monopoly of violence). For Billig, nationalism is an underlying framework for thought and action, explicitly articulated only rarely, but nonetheless reproduced and inculcated in everyday life at a continuous, subtle and often fundamentally embodied and affective level through mundane cultural interactions – for example, it is expressed in and inhabited through the musical stirrings of national anthems. Banal nationalism does not just rely upon the exceptional, sacrificial bodies of war then, and can be best thought of not as an explicit cognitive belief system but as the underlying and typically unexamined ‘habitus’ of the national body politic – a collective, socialised and inhabited orientation which, as Bourdieu (1977: 94) argues, is beyond consciousness – incommunicable and inimitable. As Scarry further argues, ‘the body’s loyalty to these political realms is likely to be [...] more permanently there, less easily shed, than those disembodied forms of patriotism that exist in verbal habits or in thoughts about one’s national identity. The political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly and very early’ (1985: 109).

In deploying the concept of banal militarism, we are attempting to draw attention to the various everyday practices, techniques, and metaphors – in education, training, fashion, diet and so on – through which war occupies bodies and militarist principles and ideals are inculcated in civilian life. The practices, in other words, through which bodies may be transformed, engendered and incorporated into military ‘service’, with this more broadly conceived, in a post-conscription age, in terms of wide military support. Relatedly, Stahl (2010) understands contemporary consumers’ embracing of the seductive, and uncritical, culture of interactive ‘militainment’ over recent decades in terms of a broad, affective entrainment. For Stahl, in an age of predominantly professionalized and privatized soldiering, military ‘recruitment’ should now be understood as a much more generalised cultural condition, the embodied pleasures of

this culture ultimately being felt at the expense of developing capacities for critical engagement with matters of military might.

Our related argument is that the reproduction of war, and war readiness – the inculcation of the military normal – can be productively analysed in terms of a broad militarization of sensation, affect, and bodies that operates over time and across multiple and broad constituencies, a normalisation that is pervasive, subtle and at times arises in unexpected places, such as the school canteen.

It is through such mundane cultural practices that the legitimacy of having vast military force may ultimately assume an implicitness, becomes something not simply thought but also routinely felt in everyday life. In contrast to any simple post-military society thesis then, we would argue that *Too Fat To Fight* is one example of the myriad ways in which many Western states have been marked by a profound remilitarization in the last decade, a mobilisation that has often been fundamentally embodied, performed and affective. This broad remilitarization of the everyday involves anticipating, cultivating, potentially unleashing the inner soldier. As the tagline to the most financially successful series of cultural products ever, the *Call of Duty* videogame series, has it: ‘There’s a soldier in all of us’. We argue that this has become a dominant motif, a cultural imperative even if no longer strictly a military requirement. As such, we argue that *Too Fat To Fight* can be best understood in terms of such an embodiment of banal militarism. It represents an anticipatory, bio-political strategy of military recruitment – one that is in line with wider pacific, neo-liberal discourses of health and body image, and one that we argue is not a direct response to the straightforward corporeal needs of the contemporary military. It is a form of recruitment but recruitment as a generalized, embodied condition.

References

- Anderson, B. (2010). “Preemption, precaution, preparedness: Anticipatory action and future geographies.” *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (6): 777-98.
- Anderson, B. (2011). “Facing the Future Enemy: US Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Pre-Insurgent.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 28 (7-8): 216-40.

- Anderson, B. (2012). "Affect and biopower: towards a politics of life." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37 (1): 28-43.
- Bacevich, A. (2006). *The New American Militarism: how Americans are seduced by war*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bacevich, A. (2011). "The Tyranny of Defense Inc." *The Atlantic* Jan-Feb.
- Beier, J. (2011). *The Militarization of Childhood*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BBC News (2010). "US youngsters are too fat to fight, warn generals", available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8655651.stm>
- Billig, M.G. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Billig, M.G. (1996). *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley, CA: California University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burnett, J. (2004). *England Eats Out: A Social History of Eating Out in England from 1830 to the Present*. London: Pearson.
- Burnett, J. (1989). *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day*. London: Routledge.
- Burridge, J.D. (2009). "'I Don't Care If It Does Me Good, I Like It': Childhood, Health and Enjoyment in British Women's Magazine Food Advertising." (pp.192-212) in James, A., Kjörholt, A.T., and Tingstad, V. (eds.) *Children, Food and Identity in Everyday Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Carden-Coyne, A. (2005). 'American Guts and Military Manhood' (pp.71-85) in Forth, C., and Carden-Coyne, A. (eds.) *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion, and Fat in the Modern World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Colls, R., and Evans, B. (2008). "Embodying Responsibility: Children's Health and Supermarket Initiatives." *Environment and Planning A* 40 (3): 615-631.
- Coveney, J. (2006). *Food, Morals and Meanings: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Der Derian, J. (2009). *Virtuous War*. New York: Routledge.
- Dillon, M., & Reid, J. (2009). *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Dixon, J., and Banwell, C. (2004). "Re-embedding Trust: Unravelling the Construction of Modern Diets." *Critical Public Health* 14 (2): 117-131.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge.
- Evans, B. (2010). "Anticipating Fatness: Childhood, Affect and the Pre-emptive 'War on Obesity'", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35(1): 21-38.
- Foucault, M. (1982). "Afterword: The Subject and Power." (pp.208-226) in Dreyfus, H.L., and Rabinow, P. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1991). "Governmentality." (pp.87-104) in Burchell, G., Gordon, C., Miller, P. (eds.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*. Translation: Macey, D. London: Allen Lane.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*. Translation: Burchell, G. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*. Translation: Burchell, G. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Geyer, M. (1989). "The Militarization of Europe, 1914–1945." (pp. 65–102) in J. Gillis (ed.) *The Militarization of the Western World*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1985). *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism: Volume 2, The Nation State and Violence* Cambridge: Polity
- Gregory, D. (2010). "War and Peace." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2): 154-86.
- Gustafsson, U. (2002). "School Meals Policy: The Problem with Governing Children." *Social Policy and Administration* 36 (6): 685-697.
- Guthman, J. (2011). *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Guthman J., and DuPuis M. (2006). "Embodying Neoliberalism: Economy, Culture, and the Politics of Fat." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (3): 427-448.
- Helstosky, C. (2004). *Garlic and Oil: Food and Politics in Italy*. Oxford: Berg.
- Ignatieff, M. (2001). *Virtual War*. London: Vintage.

- Inthorn, S., and Boyce, T. (2010). “It’s disgusting how much salt you eat!: Television discourses of obesity, health and morality’.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (1): 83-100.
- James, A., Jenks, C. and Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lee, N. (2001). *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Let’s Move (2011). *Let’s Move Campaign Homepage*, available at: <http://www.letsmove.gov/>
- Levenstein, H. (2003). *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Lutz, C. (2009). “The Military Normal: Feeling at Home with Counterinsurgency in the United States” (pp. 23-37) in Network of Concerned Anthropologists (ed.), *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Mann, M. (1987). “The Roots and Contradictions of Modern Militarism.” *New Left Review* 162 (March-April): 35-50.
- Mann, M. (1993). *The Sources of Social Power; Vol.2, The rise of classes and nation-states, 1760-1914* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press
- Marchione, M. (2005). “Military Gears Up for a New Battle of the Bulge.” *Los Angeles Times*, 10th July, available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jul/10/news/adna-fat10>
- Massumi, B. (2007). “Potential Politics and the Primacy of Preemption.” *Theory and Event* 10(2).
- Mills, C. W. (1956). *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mission: Readiness (2010). *Too Fat to Fight: retired Military Leaders Want Junk Food Out of America’s Schools*, available online from: http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/MR_Too_Fat_to_Fight-1.pdf, accessed 15th February 2011.
- Nestle, M. (2007). *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. 2nd edition, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ouellette, L. and Hay, J. (2008). “Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen.” *Continuum* 22 (4): 471-484.
- Poppendieck, J. (2010). *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reid, J. (2006). *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Rich, E. (2011). “ ‘I See Her Being Obesed!’: Public Pedagogy, Reality Media and the Obesity Crisis.” *Health* 15 (1): 3-21.
- Rose, N. (1999a). *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, N. (1999b). *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, 2nd edition. London: Free Association Press.
- Rose, N. (1998). *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scarry, E. (1985). *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, G.R. (1971). *The Quest for National Efficiency: A study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shalikhshvili, J.M. and Shelton, H. (2010). ‘The latest national security threat: obesity’, *Washington Post*, available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/29/AR2010042903669.html>
- Shapiro, M. (2009). *Cinematic Geopolitics*. London: Routledge.
- Shaw, M. (1991). *Post-Military Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Shaw, M. (2005). *The New Western Way of War*. Cambridge: Polity.
- SIPRI. (2011). *SIPRI Yearbook 2011: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stahl, R. (2010). *Militainment Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Weber, M. (2004) [1918]. ‘Politics as a Vocation’ (pp. 32-95) in *The Vocation Lectures* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.