COVID-19 Rapid Response Impact Initiative | White Paper 10

Responding to COVID-19:
Think through the Analogy of War

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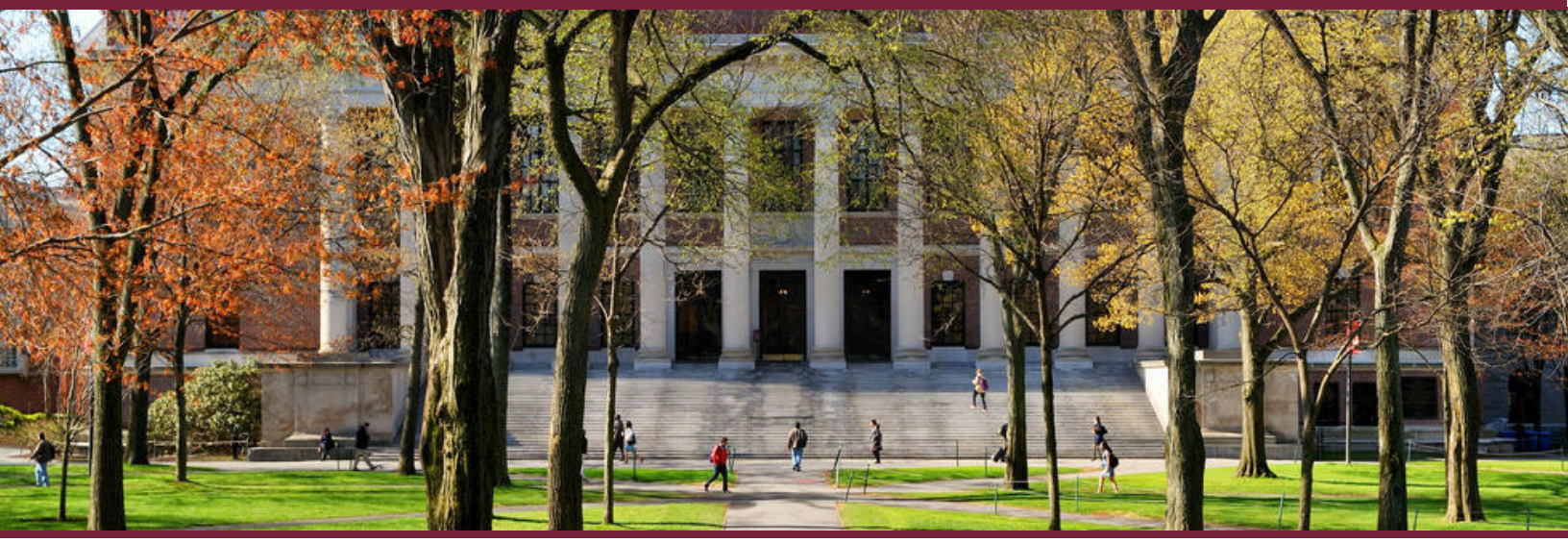

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Abstract

Americans reach for the analogy of war in times of national emergency and particularly use our collective memory of World War II. To some degree, the military analogy serves a useful purpose. It offers a reminder of the importance of leadership and a coordinated response in a time of crisis. Still, this paper points out that the heroic narrative of mobilization for war obscures a complex history that have lessons for our own response, and leaves unresolved the question of what sort of postwar era we should strive for. We will learn more by remembering that the achievement of victory in World War II did not come easily through some overnight sublimation of partisan purpose and resolution of economic inefficiencies. Moreover, in mobilizing our response to the current crisis, we should not defer the importance of planning for peace.

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01 Introduction

Americans reach for the analogy of war in times of national emergency and particularly our collective memory of World War II—"the good war," fought by "the greatest generation." In recent times we have also been summoned to a war on terror, a war on drugs, a war on cancer, a war on poverty—and of course many real wars, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and Korea, in addition to the two massive global conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century. Now we are summoned to war against the coronavirus, and the present emergency has evoked calls to mobilize as we did after Pearl Harbor with a single-minded purpose and a coherent national mission—qualities all the more compelling when presidential leadership seems in the last months to have been sometimes in denial, often incoherent, and devoid of urgency. In contrast, the Second World War provides a narrative of sudden awakening to a menacing danger, of soldiers' heroic sacrifice on behalf of those in a homeland sheltered by geography, and of awesome economic mobilization coordinated by the national government, all with the promise of total victory.

The military analogy is probably inevitable, and to a certain degree it serves a useful purpose. It offers a reminder of the importance of leadership and a coordinated response in a time of crisis. Recalling the achievement of the Second World War instills hope in a dark period, and not only of subduing the current danger to health and survival, but of overcoming longer-term American dysfunctionality—our deep political partisanship, persistent and even growing economic and racial inequalities, and the willful hostility to science.

Still, this brief paper points out that the heroic narrative of mobilization for war obscures a complex history that may have lessons for our own response, and leaves unresolved the question of what sort of postwar era we should strive for. We will learn more by remembering that the achievement of victory in World War II did not come easily through some overnight sublimation of partisan purpose and

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resolution of economic inefficiencies. By the second half of the war, the United States had summoned its massive industrial resources to equip its own military, create a huge air force, and send significant equipment to Great Britain and the Soviet Union. But all this did not happen without faltering steps, resistance, and confusion; neither did it assure all the postwar aspirations that motivated many of those who fought. In mobilizing our response to the current crisis, we should not neglect the importance of planning for peace.

02 Mobilizing the Economy

The U.S. performance in the Second World War—both economically and militarily—was impressive. But it was nevertheless subject to the rivalries and inefficiencies of organizational improvisation. In theory the president was granted tremendous executive authority. The First and Second War Powers Acts, passed in December 1941 and March 1942, conferred on the state the power to modify and negotiate contracts without competitive bidding, regulate all international commerce, and ultimately to direct all resources for defense as he saw necessary for the public interest. By January 1942, the federal government had created a National War Labor Board to impose wage settlements if necessary, as well as an Office of Price Administration, which was supposed to prevent profiteering and soon organized a rationing system for food, gasoline, and tires, and an Office of Production Management under pro-New Deal chairman of Sears, Roebuck, Donald Nelson. Their jurisdictions were often hard to keep separate, and the different and frequently morphing agencies for procurement and management of scarce materials often bid against each other and operated at cross purposes. The armed forces under the Secretary of War and the energetic undersecretary, Robert Patterson, along with General Brehon Somervell, the ambitious head of the Army Supply Program, had to organize their own expansion of manpower and sources of supplies. Undersecretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal supervised a vast expansion of shipbuilding. Initially many corporate leaders resisted the conversion of their plants. Small business was supposed to be protected, but inevitably giant assembly-line industries came to dominate the wartime economy. The fabled War Production Board (which superseded the Office of Production Management and more fragmented agencies) remained a relatively hesitant arbiter during many months of 1942 as it confronted competing military and civilian requirements, leading to a "feasibility" confrontation in the autumn of that year. One result was a Controlled Materials Plan, organized by a true American éminence grise, attorney Ferdinand Eberstadt, that gave government agencies the power to allocate copper, aluminum, and steel to their suppliers[3]. In 1943 FDR also found it advisable to place decisive power

[3] Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 628–29. See also Connery, *The Navy and the Industrial Mobilization in World War II*; Koistinen, *Arsenal of World War II*; Sparrow, *From the Outside In*.

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in yet another agency, the Office of War Mobilization, entrusted to a loyal adviser "Jimmy" Byrnes, who, having left the Senate to take a Supreme Court seat, departed from the Court to operate with decisive authority out of the White House.

Was the economy more susceptible to helter-skelter regulation and over-rated corporate executives (Sears' Nelson and GM's William Knudsen, who assisted Patterson as the War Department's Director of Production, proved disappointing economic coordinators) than the military, which also had its quota of willful egos? Despite the heroism and sacrifices of its early engagements, the armed forces also flailed in early campaigns. Obduracy could intervene. Admiral King resisted learning from the British the use of convoys to protect merchant ships from U-boat attacks. Both industry and the military came through finally, but the fundamental lesson of strategic thinking—that painful tradeoffs had to be accepted and priorities decided upon—proved difficult to absorb for both the military and industrial leaders. It was probably a more difficult task for the economy, since there was no equivalent command structure and, despite the War Production Board, no equivalent of George Marshall and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. More profoundly, as both the military and civilian organizations demonstrated, the "friction" that military theorist Carl von Clausewitz had identified in conducting warfare over a century earlier remained unavoidable, as they probably will in the early stages of our current responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Large-scale collective efforts confront unforeseen difficulties and false starts. That hardly means political, military, and organizational ineptitude does not exist. And it certainly does not mean that willful ignoring of facts must be accepted as inevitable. Just that a residual of disorganization, shortages, mistaken tactics, and unforeseen contingencies will beset any mobilization.

Nonetheless, the market economy on its own could not have met the urgency of conversion to war production. Instead the key to organizing both national efforts in both of the wars was overcoming the market economics of peacetime. Allocation by price makes sense for much of what an economy oriented

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toward satisfying consumption can produce (although most advanced societies have increasingly decided that some goods, such as health and education, are too fundamental to allocate according to market pricing). Mobilization and war presented the opposite problem for the United States. Military authorities enjoyed budgets they had never dreamed of and would have unleashed an inflationary competition for strategic material, while inflation for household goods would have led to an invidious sentiments of privilege and victimization. In fact, price controls, rationing, planning, and centralized allocation kept inflation to a minimum. New technical tools also contributed: operations research in Britain and input-output analysis at home.

03 Not Your Grandfather's War

It is important to remember the differences between the United States' situation as it faces a national medical and economic emergency today and what was at stake at the outset of World War II. The country then faced both a military emergency for which it was still underprepared and the economic challenge of converting productive resources to military ends. Gearing up for war involved moving masses of people (including women) from daytime household or farm locations into factories and shipyards. But industrial mobilization paradoxically benefited from the idle capacity lingering from the Great Depression—15 percent unemployment and sometimes up to 50 percent of industrial plants idle as late as 1940. Mobilizing these reserves, as well as recruiting women and domestic workers, allowed manufacturing output to double from 1940 to 1944. Manufacturing industries did not easily abandon their customary product lines; they had to be guided toward industrial conversion. But once the transition was made, they benefitted from assured prices and favorable contracts, even as they faced a 95 percent excess-profits tax on their net earnings beyond peacetime levels.

The current economic situation has followed a reverse course. Employment was at an all-time high before the pandemic hit; the crisis has led not to a soaking up of slack resources, but rather to the highest level of at least temporary joblessness (over 22 million have filed for unemployment in the last four weeks) since the early 1930s. Most of the current emergency measures—including the CARES Act, with its small business loans and checks to individuals—are devoted to helping people stay out of work, not to reallocating their labor. For now, the economy is on the Federal Reserve's ventilator, and the administration tends to assume that once the medical crisis has past economic life will quickly revive. Thus, while the onset of wartime remedied joblessness in the early 1940s, today renewed employment waits upon the retreat of the virus.

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The United States today thus faces twin though interlocking crises, and they require different remedies. So did the country in 1941. Americans acknowledged that the military slog would be protracted and the economic one must be as well. Today there is less willingness and capacity to gauge the extent of the ramifications of the pandemic. What seems essential, though far from easy, is the need to strengthen and clarify the role of our public-health institutions. From the beginning of the pandemic, neither the CDC nor the FDA has furnished unerring guidance, especially with respect to testing, but those agencies certainly have more impressive medical and scientific credentials than the president, and their independence from political influence should be strengthened. Scientific advice can never be completely separated from bureaucratic interests and political and moral values. How many lives should one put at risk—and what are the likely ranges of risk—to get people back to work? Still, there should be a transparent structure in which the trade-offs are clarified and debated.

The current crisis calls for a much clearer delineation of administrative responsibility. In handling COVID-19, the absence of either a coordinated response or clear and consistent messaging on the federal level has pushed state and local authorities to fashion a wide array of sometimes divergent policies and initiatives. The experience of World War II, as recounted above, shows that initial confusion is not easy to overcome in the short term. Nonetheless, a central body with nationwide authority would help avoid some of the frictions that have thus far inhibited efficient testing and resource distribution[4]. For such a body to be maximally effective, policymakers would need to clearly designate the boundaries of its mission and authority. For the long run, our administration of public health and related fields of national welfare need renewed scrutiny. Perhaps it is time to disaggregate the cabinet office of Health, Education, and Welfare into separate agencies so that advocates of each priority have a stronger voice at the

[4] A central body with nationwide authority, such as the Pandemic Testing Board suggested by Danielle Allen and Glen Weyl, would help avoid some of the frictions that have thus far inhibited efficient testing and resource distribution. See their proposal, "The Mechanics of the COVID-19 Testing Supply Chain."
https://ethics.harvard.edu/war-analogy

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presidential level. (This assumes that ideologues will not be appointed to head them.) It is time also to add health-emergency equipment to our strategic stockpiles. Viruses are recurrent visitors.

The other imperative—rescuing the economy—will be a long-term challenge. The general assumption has been that once the virus is mastered, we will quickly restore the vigorous economy we enjoyed through last year. This scenario may well be unrealistic. Leading economists Larry Summers and Kenneth Rogoff have suggested that the current downturn is likely to be far more profound and protracted than some assume, perhaps on the level of the Great Depression after 1929, all the more so since the frothy prosperity of the last few years depended on continued interest-rate reductions in Europe and the U.S.'s vast credit creation in China[5].

So far, the goal of recent emergency measures is to support the unemployed and prevent bankruptcies. The degree of financial support in the recent CARES Act may have seemed awesome a month ago, but it is already perceived as insufficient. To a degree this has followed upon earlier precedents. The Hoover administration initiated a Reconstruction Finance Corporation to help corporations, and the New Dealers kept it on as a weapon in their fiscal arsenal. The Roosevelt administration had to tackle emergency relief from its assumption of power in March 1933. Measures that followed brought a more enduring legacy that transformed our sense of possibilities for public policy. They included powerful agencies to expand national infrastructure (the Public Works Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority), and the Works Progress Administration to get construction employment quickly underway and to support cultural and artistic endeavors. The promise of infrastructure development has been one of President Trump's tantalizing slogans for quite some time; now is the time to develop substantive projects.

[5] Rogoff, "Mapping the COVID-19 Recession."

04 Planning for "Peace"

Given the severity of the current economic contraction and the need for massive federal intervention, we should be asking whether restoring the prosperity of the last decade is a sufficient goal. The current crisis has already shifted the terms of debate on medical care such that the calls for universal medical insurance supported by Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren may well emerge as a plausible outcome.

The current crisis invites, indeed should compel, us to think about national and global institutions for the longer term after the pandemic, an event that has exposed so many of the fissures in American society. It is normal to dream of a "return to normalcy," the phrase used after World War I. The aftermath of World War II also brought the reaffirmation of the private sector in many respects. Many economists of that time feared a relapse into a depression, but pent-up consumer demand assured the maintenance of higher employment. Aside from the G. I. Bill that gave veterans access to higher education, public goals remained secondary to the recovery of traditional family roles and ongoing prosperity. The advance of suburbanization confirmed the success of American capitalism. But African Americans returned from the front to face ongoing segregation, and Congressional Republicans rolled back labor-union gains by 1947 and resisted general health insurance. A drumbeat of male-dominated media escorted middle-class women back to glorified household domesticity. The Second World War left an ambiguous legacy for postwar American equality and democracy: it both widened aspirations and deferred them.

The outcome was not foreordained. World War II brought different results in the United Kingdom and the United States. With victory secured in Europe, in 1945 the British electorate voted for an ambitious Labour Party program that included nationalization and welfare state expansion, including by 1948 a National Health Service. In the United States, New Deal programs proved more precarious as Republicans gained control of the 80th Congress in 1946. The Temporary National Economic Committee had

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been seriously examining the impact of monopolies in the late 1930s, but the war effectively ended that debate and consolidated the role of the large corporations that had been the principal suppliers and of the business leaders who had staffed government agencies. As FDR said in 1943, Dr. New Deal had yielded to Dr. Win the War.

The major public development in postwar America, historians have suggested, was the development of an enduring national security state that was reinforced by the Cold War. The very successes of economic and military mobilization in World War II demonstrated how efficiently government and the private sector—universities as well as industry—might work together. FDR left us the TVA but also the Manhattan Project. The creation of RAND, Bell Labs, Lockheed-Martin, and NASA, and implementation of the National Defense Education Act represented impressive achievements of the postwar decades. Unsurprisingly they had their shadow side: what President Eisenhower memorably labelled the military-industrial complex has remained vigorous ever since. The line between private gain and public policy erodes in many potentially abusive ways, whether through pervasive lobbying or what political scientist Alison Stanger has called the contracting state in which tasks once assigned to government agencies are outsourced to private providers[6]. U.S. policies rely on public-private partnerships, but accountability in a liberal democratic society requires keeping the public domain distinct from the private domain and not simply entrusting national policy to private agents, whether they are corporations, court flatterers, or family members.

Happily, the now-long history of postwar American achievements suggests there is a recurring opportunity for institutional innovation. After World War II, American politics and civil society did renew itself in important ways thanks in part to the war experience. One was domestic: the halting progress toward legal desegregation, initially under President Truman in the armed forces and then through the civil rights

[6] Stanger, *One Nation Under Contract*, esp. chapter 5

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transformation of the the 1960s, pressed by the African-American community and responded to by President Johnson before he became so entrapped in Vietnam. Those legal changes, of course, did not erase the vast handicaps of race, nor did the war on poverty erase the inequalities of wealth and opportunity. Today, the fact that COVID-19 has disproportionatedly affected people of color should drive us to confront and remedy the disparities that continue to affect our society[7]. Not surprisingly, twenty-first-century Americans have been debating whether and how to remedy the vast disparities of income and property, employment security, educational funding, and indeed social capital in general. The long stagnation of real incomes (disguised by the expansion of two-worker families or double job-holding), and the precarious nature of employment in the service economy was also coming into question. The emergency response to the current crisis may put on hold the increasing dissatisfaction with some of the current trends of American capitalism, including the structural role of such new giants as Amazon, Google, Facebook, or Microsoft. It isn't the place of this brief paper to suggest particular policy responses, but it is important to urge that, no matter what the depth and length of the current depression, Americans should not let these important debates lapse in the rush to avert catastrophe for millions of families and businesses.

We should recall, too, that a second sphere of post–World War II accomplishment comprised international affairs. Policy makers—including a substantial segment of the Republican Party—decided after 1941 that a continuing engagement with multilateral institutions would strengthen the country over the long run. Clearly American elites wanted to grasp the opportunities for global leadership—to fulfill Henry Luce's summons for an American Century—but in so doing they built networks and organizations that provided international public goods, such as economic assistance and military security. Furthermore, U.S. leaders demonstrated a willingness to debate (a value totally underrated today) in global public forums, preeminently the UN. Despite much understandable disillusion with the results of American

[7] Kendi, "Stop Blaming Black People for Dying of the Coronavirus."
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power and influence, there remains a responsible international role that avoids a pattern of continual military intervention or self-regarding isolation. The post-pandemic era will provide a moment to renew the post-1945 commitments and reverse the contempt into which they have fallen. No international treaty is ever perfect, but working for revision is better than mere disavowal.

Finally, there is an important cautionary lesson to learn from America's wartime experiences. Effective action in a crisis does not always require and is not assured by continued delegation of unlimited emergency powers. The analogy of war tempts legislators to equip the president with extraordinary authority. The Congress responded to Pearl Harbor with blanket delegations of executive prerogative and did so again after September 11, 2001, with the Patriot Acts. These votes raise delicate constitutional issues, not only of presidential power, but of the balance of powers between the states and the federal government. President Trump has implied that his authority under Article 2 of the Constitution, even without emergency delegation, was supreme, although his declarations are frequently retracted or apparently ignored in practice. It is legitimate to take note that such powers are delegated to a particular leader as well as to an office, and different presidents and their advisers may interpret them more broadly than those who grant them. We can never avoid the question of whom we trust. During the George W. Bush administration, John Yoo and David Addington urged an alarmingly broad concept of presidential power, as does William Barr for the current administration. Especially when the claims of wartime emergency have justified executive incursions on usually accepted constitutional rights—including President Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus (overturned after his death by the Supreme Court) and the Roosevelt administration's mass relocation of Japanese Americans away from the Pacific Coast into bleak internment camps—subsequent legal opinion disagreed. Crying war can suspend critical thinking even as it may expedite needed action.

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There is a final aspect about the analogy of war that should be given thought, and that is inherent in the idea of war itself. Is a mentality of unremitting national conflict the best way to overcome the challenges we face, whether the current COVID-19 threat (this spring and perhaps autumn) or its future mutations, or the long-term menace of environmental degradation and the transformations of our climate? A country may learn to seek allies in war (and that would be a salutary lesson for an administration that has withdrawn from key international agreements), but after the war one needs companions in a common global life. Before we become enamored by the wartime analogy, let’s remember that what we really need is a way to meet the transformed demands of peace.

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