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Is the American Psychological Association Addicted to Militarism and War?



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

When hijacked planes hit their targets on the morning of September 11, 2001, the American Psychological Association (APA) sprang into action. Within hours, through its disaster response network the APA mobilized expert practitioners and worked with the American Red Cross to provide psychological support to families of the victims and to rescue workers. The APA's public affairs office moved quickly as well to assist the public—and especially families, children, and schools—by developing and disseminating [materials](#) that provided psychological guidance about coping with fear and trauma.

But with comparable urgency, the APA also ensured that the Bush Administration would view the association as a valued partner in the military and intelligence operations central to

the new “war on terror.” Within days, the APA’s science directorate called upon research psychologists to identify how psychological science might contribute to counter-terrorism initiatives. Shortly thereafter, a newly established APA subcommittee on psychology’s response to terrorism [directed](#) its attention to “offering psychologists’ expertise to decision-makers in the military, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of State and related agencies” and to “inventorying members’ expertise and asking government psychologists how agencies could put that expertise to use.”

These two responses are clearly very different from each other. The first—providing expert, research-informed psychological assistance to a grieving and traumatized nation—captures the stated [mission](#) of the APA quite well: “advancing psychology to benefit society and improve people’s lives.” The second—offering zealous support to the military-intelligence establishment after the White House had [promised](#) a “crusade” in which adversaries would face the “full wrath” of the United States and in which our operatives would “spend time in the shadows” working “the dark side” and using “any means at our disposal”—certainly does *not*.

Yet in various forms, this troubling dichotomy has appeared again and again in the years since the 9/11 attacks. On the one hand, at times the APA has taken public stands on key perils and injustices associated with issues such as [climate change](#), [poverty](#), [racism](#), [gun violence](#), [consumerism](#), and [immigration](#). But when the focus shifts to conquering the [third](#) of Martin Luther King’s “giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism,” the APA turns silent, or worse. With large segments of the American public so readily and regularly enticed by the bipartisan glorification of war and all things military, the world’s largest association of psychologists could play an important moderating and cautionary role. Unfortunately, the APA instead often acts like the “impaired professional” who is unable (or unwilling) to intervene because they too suffer from the same addiction. Here are several examples.

Torture

The arena that has received the most attention is the disturbing [involvement](#) of psychologists—including [members](#) of the APA—in the government-authorized torture and abuse of “war on terror” detainees. As revelations of this wrongdoing and abandonment of professional ethics emerged and then spread well over a decade ago, for years the APA’s primary responses were a combination of stonewalling, denials, and attacks against critics. The APA’s ethics office director [insisted](#) that psychologists knew not to participate in

activities that harmed detainees, and an APA president [wrote](#) that those who raised concerns were merely “opportunistic commentators masquerading as scholars.”

In 2005, facing growing outrage, the APA created a controversial task force to examine psychological ethics in national security settings ([PENS](#)). Stacked with representatives from the military-intelligence establishment, the task force met for three days and, unsurprisingly, asserted that psychologists helped to keep detention and interrogation operations “[safe, legal, ethical, and effective](#)”—despite multiple [accounts](#) that health professionals, including psychologists, were among the perpetrators of detainee mistreatment. The APA board of directors then quickly approved the PENS report in an “emergency” vote, bypassing the association’s full governing body.

Finally, in 2015, following a months-long investigation based on analysis of over 50,000 documents and 150 interviews, an [independent report](#) authorized by the APA presented extensive evidence of secret collaboration—conducted over a period of years—between APA leaders and Department of Defense officials. These secret efforts were apparently aimed at ensuring that the APA’s ethics policies would not constrain interrogation-related activities, and that psychologists would remain in operational roles at Guantánamo Bay and other U.S. overseas detention centers. The report led to a few much-needed [reforms](#), but it also produced a backlash from some military psychologists who, along with their supporters, responded with defamation lawsuits, a formal ethics [complaint](#) and more threats of the same, and calls for public suppression of the report itself. Responding to an [article](#) by this author, the APA’s CEO again reached for old falsehoods, portraying the profession’s dark-side participation as limited to the actions of “two rogue psychologists” involved in the CIA’s torture program.

Terrorism

As the U.S. propaganda-driven and illegal invasion of Iraq was unfolding in 2003, a former APA president offered a polarizing [warning](#): “The civilized world is at war with Jihad Islamic terrorism. It takes a bomb in the office of some academics to make them realize that their most basic values are now threatened.” During that same period, the APA’s leadership authorized an expert [task force](#) to produce a report examining the psychological effects on the American public of government efforts to prevent terrorism. According to the task force chair, members [recommended](#) that “psychologists become involved in the development, implementation and evaluations of new programs about terrorism and efforts to prevent it,” and that they do so by using “knowledge about enemy images, stereotyping of other groups, and the processes of groupthink to develop guidelines and recommendations to help national,

state, and local leaders tailor their public communications about terrorism so that their messages minimize known deleterious effects upon the populace.”

The task force also expressed concern about the weaponization of fear by the Bush Administration in its rhetoric about the “war on terror,” which emphasized ideas about “us versus them,” the importance of loyalty to a central authority, and the belief that our cultural norms are universal truths. One task force member noted that the government’s response could prove more dangerous than the terrorists themselves. These conclusions were met with alarm by the APA’s senior staff, who privately worried that publicizing the report could significantly damage the APA’s public image, and likely cause friction with the White House. The final report was quashed. A few years later, it was elaborated and published as a book. The task force chair was reportedly advised by the APA’s legal counsel that there should be no suggestion that the association endorsed the book in any manner.

Comprehensive Soldier Fitness

In 2011, the APA devoted an entire special issue of its flagship journal, the *American Psychologist*, to a series of uncritical articles waxing enthusiastic about the U.S. Army’s new Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program. Based on a “positive psychology” framework, CSF was developed under the guidance of psychologists, and all of the journal’s 13 articles were written by individuals involved in designing and implementing the resilience program. The avowed goals of CSF were to “enhance soldiers’ ability to handle adversity, prevent depression and anxiety, prevent PTSD, and enhance overall well-being and performance.” These may be worthy aspirations, but CSF quickly became *mandatory* for one million soldiers *without* pilot testing or compelling evidence that it could achieve these objectives. Not surprisingly, subsequent analyses, including those conducted by authoritative scientific institutions, have shown that CSF falls well short of its stated goals.

This APA special journal issue offered little discussion of conceptual challenges or ethical considerations, nor did it provide any forum for independent critical or cautionary voices. In sum, the APA’s stance toward CSF was little more than cheerleading for an untested military research project—one with enormous ramifications—about which many crucial questions should have been asked. For example, might the program be harmful for some soldiers, perhaps by undermining previously learned successful coping strategies? Or, by fortifying perseverance in the face of adversity, might CSF lead soldiers to engage in actions—including harm to civilians—that later cause deep regret and moral injury, thereby increasing the potential for PTSD and other post-combat psychological difficulties? Or, might this resilience program lead some to deny, for a time at least, the adverse effects of their traumatic

experiences, heightening the likelihood of premature redeployment to battle zones with further risk of serious disability?

The APA's promotion of the flawed CSF program is yet further evidence of the organization's failure to adequately confront the often-staggering consequences that flow from uncritical support of our country's military ambitions, all too frequently yoked to the [interests](#) of mega-corporations and their largest shareholders. "Blind patriotism"—a topic psychologists have [studied](#)—serves to advance policies, framed as "national security" endeavors, that inevitably endanger the well-being of our own soldiers, combatants on the other side, and many innocent civilians—all while squandering precious resources.

Drone Warfare

With names like the Predator and the Reaper, weaponized drones used by the U.S. military and the CIA should [raise](#) significant concerns for the profession of psychology. A detailed multi-university [report](#) examining U.S. drone policy found that "Their presence terrorizes men, women, and children, giving rise to anxiety and psychological trauma among civilian communities. Those living under drones have to face the constant worry that a deadly strike may be fired at any moment, and the knowledge that they are powerless to protect themselves." Similarly, the director of the human rights organization Reprieve has [described](#) the use of these drones as "a form of psychological torture and collective punishment."

These realities raise compelling questions about the ethics of psychologists' involvement in such operations. In 2013, members of the APA's peace psychology division (including the author) wrote to the APA's ethics office requesting guidance as to whether, according to the ethics code, it is permissible for a psychologist to be involved in the operation of a weaponized drone; to work as an intelligence consultant in the targeting of drone strikes; to participate in programs designed to select drone operators or train them to overcome the natural psychological aversion to killing other people; or to assist in promoting public support for the use of these drones by misrepresenting evidence of the harm caused by such attacks. Sadly, but perhaps predictably, this request was never answered by the APA's ethics office.

It is difficult to obtain detailed information about the ways in which psychologists may be participating in drone-related operations, especially when that work is classified. But we do know that psychologists are conducting research with drone pilots. One area involves figuring out which skills and attributes make for a top-notch pilot. Some of this research [examines](#) how a pilot's belief system and "moral motivation" may *negatively* affect their performance when it comes to the deployment of weapons. Another research area

apparently involves looking at how to reduce the high levels of stress, PTSD, depression, and substance abuse among drone operators. According to one [account](#), the development of a Siri-like user interface aims to anthropomorphize the drone—so that the pilot feels less responsible for the death and destruction wrought. Seemingly *not* under investigation is whether wars will become more likely and more frequent as we become enthralled with the prospect of discomfort-free and risk-free killing from afar.

The Defense Budget

In an address shortly after becoming U.S. president in 1953, General Dwight D. Eisenhower [said](#), “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.” Nevertheless, there is near unanimous bipartisan support in Congress for our ever-growing defense budget—a budget now [exceeding](#) that of the next seven largest countries combined. The most direct [beneficiaries](#) of this outsized spending are, regrettably, often giant defense contractors and weapons builders. The United States is also the [largest](#) international arms seller—with ongoing efforts to promote even bigger markets that include countries ruled by ruthless autocrats. But none of this seems to garner meaningful comment from the APA, even though psychology offers valuable insights into the potentially destructive consequences of individual and collective choices driven by fear, greed, conformity, or blind patriotism.

When the federal budget is under discussion in Washington, DC, at times the APA does indeed [warn](#) against cuts to key domestic programs, including those that involve practice opportunities for psychologists. But the association rarely if ever speaks out against the enormous financial drain that is today’s military-intelligence establishment. In fact, when the APA gives testimony before defense appropriations committees, it routinely calls for *more* funding for psychological research with military applications. Moreover, the APA members selected to argue this case are usually high-level staffers at the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), a defense contractor first [established](#) decades ago to develop “psychological warfare” techniques. HumRRO’s [connections](#) with the APA are long, deep, and arguably problematic. The company has received tens of millions of defense dollars, and its research projects have included [work](#) on developing “overwhelmingly lethal” combat systems.

Professional Ethics

Leaders of the APA’s military psychology [division](#) have been among the most outspoken proponents of modifying our understanding of the profession’s ethics. Some of them

have [participated](#) in the harsh detention and interrogation operations at Guantánamo. Others have [argued](#) that the U.S. government is the psychologist's primary client in military contexts, and that society's interests—as determined by the government—should override other professional ethical considerations for psychologists. And another military psychologist has [recommended](#) that psychotherapy techniques be used to train soldiers in “adaptive killing”—to help them overcome the natural aversion to taking another life, and the tendency to feel guilty after doing so. These same interests were also behind recent [efforts](#) to change an APA policy that currently restricts psychologists from working at Guantánamo and other U.S. detention facilities that violate international law. Although that resolution was soundly defeated by the association's governing body, the APA's president nevertheless [sent](#) a follow-up letter assuring the Department of Defense that the prohibition was merely “aspirational” and not enforceable.

Many of these issues reflect a worrisome and growing trend toward what this author and colleagues have [called](#) “adversarial operational psychology.” This area of practice diverges from the profession's traditional do-no-harm ethical principles in three ways: psychologists engage in military-intelligence activities where individuals or groups are targeted for harm; these targets have not provided their voluntary informed consent; and these psychologists are shielded from professional ethical oversight by a maze of classified projects and security clearances. To be clear, most psychologists whose work supports the U.S. military and other defense-related agencies do not serve in these roles. But ongoing efforts to build and promote this specialization reflect the further weaponization of psychology and can jeopardize the public's trust in the profession. At the same time, they also pose a threat to a psychological science that depends upon transparency, data sharing, and peer review.

Breaking Free from the Addiction

There are undoubtedly multiple reasons why the APA seems to lose its scientific rudder, moral compass, and independent voice in the military-intelligence arena, where violence, domination, and oppression are too often the preferred tools of U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps it is in part because the Department of Defense is a valued employer of psychologists, a significant funder of psychological research, and a key source of internships for graduate students in clinical psychology. As well, in influential circles strong connections with the Pentagon can bring an organization considerable stature and a proverbial “seat at the table” for policy deliberations with national and international ramifications. And we should not overlook the reality that, when couched as “patriotism,” calls to action—and obedience—are

never easy to resist for individuals or groups. After all, that is why they have been standard fare for demagogues across time and place.

But what does the mission of “advancing psychology to benefit society and improve people’s lives” truly mean if the APA refuses to counter fearmongering propaganda, the manipulative nurturing of enemy images, and the misuse of military might? The consequences of our failure to rein in these forces are stark: nearly 800 overseas military bases; massive weapons expenditures that hinder urgent domestic spending needs; assertions of exceptionalism that encourage a disturbing disregard for the lives and suffering of non-Americans; and unencumbered power for narrow interests that may find the threat and spoils of war far more profitable than diplomatic success or lasting peace.

What would “breaking free” look like for the APA? Here are several examples. The APA can advocate for an end to the indefinite detention of Guantánamo detainees and for closure of that infamous facility, where imprisonment violates [international law](#) and has caused severe [psychological harm](#). The APA can help the public better understand that the psychology fostering exaggerated fears of terrorism can also lead to unscientific [programs](#) that jeopardize civil liberties—especially for those who are already most vulnerable to prejudice and stereotyping. The APA can raise alarm about psychological strategies behind today’s military [recruitment](#) efforts, which increasingly target younger teens and those whose financial and educational circumstances make them especially susceptible to false assurances or misrepresentations. The APA can call for reductions in our massive and burgeoning military budget that chokes off funding for domestic [programs](#)—Medicare, Medicaid, affordable housing, public transportation, student aid—that are essential contributors to our nation’s psychological health. And the APA can implement stronger internal policies to ensure that its own deliberations are not [unduly influenced](#) by those who benefit from financial ties to the military-intelligence establishment.

Urging these and related changes at the APA does not diminish appreciation for the valuable work of psychologists—and other health professionals—who care for our soldiers and veterans. The stresses of military service are daunting, ranging from lengthy family dislocations to combat experiences that involve exposure to unspeakable brutality and the risk of injury and death. Even after returning home from the battlefield, heightened dangers of PTSD, substance use, and suicide remain. Certainly, those who serve deserve our abiding respect and compassionate support. But we do everyone a disservice when we fail to question and challenge a system and a culture that so readily place them—and others—in harm’s way.

It is time for the APA and its members to decide whether the world's largest psychological association is ready to overcome its "addiction" and help lead us forward.

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