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Christopher Griffin

- 1 It is not unusual for American administrations to declare war on an ideology (communism), a collection of chemical products (drugs), a socioeconomic condition (poverty), or a method of warfare (terrorism), none of which, strictly speaking, can be singly defeated on the battlefield. Importantly, despite talk of “war”, the U.S. government did not always mobilize all of its available national power to decisively defeat drugs, poverty, communism or terrorism. The latest “war” by the U.S. Government has been the “War on COVID-19.” The Trump administration employed rhetoric aimed at the justification of extraordinary measures to fight the virus, but as with the other examples of so-called “wars”, the U.S. Government did not actually put the country on a war footing. As argued by Moussa Bourekba (2020), a comparison between the other most recent war, the fight against terrorism, and the response to COVID-19, points to a shared argument to take “exceptional measures” to win the “war”.
- 2 One such exceptional measure came in April 2020, in the midst of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, when the U.S. Government sent a one-time economic stimulus check of \$1,200 to every adult American (U.S. Treasury 2020).¹ Along with the check, the Trump Administration sent a letter to all Americans, in both English and in Spanish, signed by the President (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Letter by Donald Trump accompanying the April 2020 stimulus check

Source: https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-04-26-20-intl/h_eed812a34119183144c4a46ca20763f9

- 3 In the letter, Trump stated: "Our top priority is your health and safety. As we wage total war on this invisible enemy, we are also working around the clock to protect hardworking Americans like you from the consequences of the economic shutdown." Certain media outlets criticized the letter, arguing that it was more about his reelection campaign than any genuine willingness to help struggling American families (Steakin 2020; Singletary 2020). Importantly, the stimulus letter represents a direct communication from the American President to the vast majority of his constituents in the midst of a major health crisis. In this article, I wish to focus on Trump's use in this letter of two highly symbolic words: "total war".
- 4 Trump is known for his tendency to use hyperbole. The expression "total war" in a letter signed by him is therefore an unlikely reference to the rich historical literature on this concept. Instead, Trump was no doubt employing a simple rhetorical device to indicate that a *major* effort was going to be made by the U.S. Government to fight the virus. But words have a tendency to signify more than what their authors may have had in mind, and I would like to argue that the expression warrants sustained analysis.
- 5 In this article, I will first examine what a "total war" against Covid *might* have looked like and highlight the *inappropriateness* of the concept to understand American policymaking during the pandemic, suggesting other, more appropriate terms. Given that Trump most likely did not use the notion of "total war" as an intentional reference to the historical literature on the subject, I will examine how the President conceived of the fight against the virus as a "war." I will attempt to show that the Trump administration's war on COVID-19 rather resembled a limited war than the two large-scale conflicts which have been historically quoted as being "total wars": the Civil War

(1861-1865), during which the North destroyed the South to put an end to attempts at Secession;² and World War II, when much of America’s military and economic power was used in its fight against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. I will contend that the Trump Administration, likely without having read Carl von Clausewitz’s works on war, adopted a Clausewitzian approach, holding on defensively and accepting losses while waiting for the development of a solution (here, a vaccine). The need to protect the economy came above all else, an approach which ran into opposition from local and state authorities. Trump’s totalizing rhetoric also attempted, ultimately unsuccessfully, to make a limited approach to the problem look like a larger, comprehensive effort by the U.S. government in its fight against the virus.

- 6 I will then argue that despite Trump’s seemingly innocuous use of the hyperbolic expression “total war”, the more totalitarian aspects included in this notion may have resonated with a number of Trump’s far-right followers, thereby serving as both a typical hyberbole and as a coded word. Trump may not have had any real intention to launch a total war against the virus, but the idea of war may have generated a positive reaction amongst his far-right supporters. He tweeted in 2019 about “a Civil War fracture in this Nation” if he were to be forced to step down before the end of his term (Warzel 2019). The possibility of a new Civil War galvanized support from certain alt-right networks and militias in the U.S. For Justin Lane, the events of 2020, which included Black Lives Matter protests and the claim (long before the election) that Democrats would steal the presidential election in November, led to a situation in which certain groups believed that they had “lost control of the United States” (Lane 2021). The fear of a takeover of the country by anti-fascist groups was already prevalent in 2017 (Warzel 2019). Trump’s use of the concept of a “total war” against COVID-19 may have been interpreted by his followers as the first act in this new Civil War intended to keep Trump and his followers in power if the election was indeed “stolen.”
- 7 The paper finally compares Trump’s rhetoric with that employed in other countries. While not taking the discourse to the extremes of the Trump Administration, several European countries also employed war metaphors to explain the anti-Covid measures to the public. As suggested in a recent article by Elena Semino (2021), war discourse is a way to drum up public support for major government initiatives. The French and the British governments did not hesitate to use images of war to rally their populations around the extended lockdowns. What differentiates both the U.S. and the United Kingdom’s response is the framing of the conflict as a war between the economy and the virus, rather than first and foremost as a danger to public health.

“Total War” and “Absolute War”: Definitions

- 8 Total war poses at least two major problems that need to be addressed before applying it to the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, “total war” is most often used in a descriptive sense to apply to the two World Wars. The use of the concept as a separate analytical construct to create a theoretical category of conflicts is more difficult and not necessarily useful. Secondly, “total war” remains strongly linked to the geopolitical worldview of Nazi Germany.
- 9 Many scholars trace the origins of “total war” to the statements of French politicians during World War I, in particular Georges Clemenceau, who spoke of “guerre intégrale”

before the French Senate on November 20, 1917: “We are here before you with the sole idea to wage a total war” (“Nous nous présentons devant vous dans l’unique pensée d’une guerre intégrale”, Clemenceau 1917).³ The problem is that Clemenceau made little effort to explain what he meant. In fact, it is not at all certain that “guerre intégrale” means “total war” and Clemenceau may have possibly used the term as a synonym for “winning the war at all costs.”

- 10 The term “total war” was also used by another Frenchman, although in a fundamentally different way from Clemenceau, when Léon Daudet published a book entitled *La Guerre Totale* in 1918. Daudet was known for his anti-Semitism and was a member of the royalist *Action française* (Joly 2012). His book on total war exhibits the racist view of the concept that would later be taken up by German Field Marshal Erich von Ludendorff and the Nazi leadership. Daudet explained the concept in his book: “Armies fight, but so do traditions, institutions, customs, social and cultural codes, hearts and minds...” (“Ce ne sont pas seulement les armées qui se battent, mais ce sont aussi les traditions, les institutions, les coutumes, les codes, les esprits...”, Daudet 1918: 8) The identification of the war as part of certain “traditions” and “customs” implied that it extended beyond a conflict between states to become a confrontation between two races.
- 11 Ludendorff, commander of German forces at the end of World War I, developed the concept of “total war” more thoroughly in the 1920s and 1930s. His theory, rooted in his experience in the war, was essentially a critique of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* (discussed further below). Ludendorff argued for a subordination of civil powers to the military leadership in war so as to give the military the freedom to do what was necessary to win (Ludendorff 1936; Coutau-Bégarie 2003: 101-2). Hervé Coutau-Bégarie usefully sums up this theory of total war: “all political energy should be used in service to the war conceived as the State’s ultimate goal” (“toutes les énergies de la politique devaient être asservies aux besoins de la guerre conçue comme la finalité suprême de l’Etat”, Coutau-Bégarie 2003: 467). The racism of Hitler’s later policies was clearly present in Ludendorff’s work, *The Nation at War*, which advocated removing Jews, Socialists and pacifists to win a future war (Shannon 2014: 188).
- 12 Ludendorff famously had a severe nervous breakdown on September 28, 1918, but contemporaries claim that his judgement was already clouded by the summer of the same year (Zabecki 2018: 60). In the 1920s, he developed a close relationship with Hitler, which included his participation in the Beer Hall Putsch for which he was later acquitted (Kershaw 2000a: 216). While Ludendorff later disavowed Hitler (Kershaw 2000a: 377), it is clear that the latter had already picked up the Field Marshal’s ideas and would put them to use in World War II.
- 13 The Nazis pursued the concept of total war to its greatest extent. Josef Goebbels declared “total war” in his famous speech at the Sportpalast in Berlin on February 18, 1943, affirming:

We can no longer make only partial and careless use of the war potential at home and in the significant parts of Europe that we control. We must use our full resources, as quickly and thoroughly as it is organizationally and practically possible. (Goebbels 1943)
- 14 This is the sense of total war that is used in contemporary strategic thought, which is the mobilization of all available resources in a given country (Kershaw 2000b: 561-3). In this sense, one can see how the proposed subordination of all civil concerns to the war

effort proposed in Ludendorff’s writings was echoed by the Nazi concept of a total mobilization of the economy and available manpower to win the war.

- 15 As in Ludendorff, the Nazi concept of total war had racist overtones. As Raymond Aron pointed out, “Like Ludendorff, [Hitler] substitutes the State for the racial community as the subject of historical destiny” (“Comme Ludendorff, [Hitler] substitue la communauté raciale à l’Etat en tant que sujet du destin historique”, Aron 1976b: 77). It follows that if the state is a “racial community,” total war means the removal of all elements that threaten that race, be they external or internal. Total war then becomes the mobilization of a racial community, itself synonymous with the state. Aron also argued that the pretext of total war and the mobilization of the population gave Hitler an argument to attack civilians without restraint on a large scale in occupied areas (Aron 1976b: 129). All this should caution against using the term “total war” as a conceptual framework to understand other wars in history.
- 16 Surely, President Trump’s talk of “total war” against COVID-19 was not intended to invoke images of the Nazis when he sent out his stimulus letter, using “total” as a rhetorical, rather than a historical, term. However, as mentioned above, it may have been received differently by some of his far-right followers who believed in the need to wage war against “a plot to rule America” which originated in the 1930s and was led by “Jewish academic Marxists” (Mirrlees 2018: 56). A certain number of White Nationalists supporting Trump have neo-Nazi sympathies, as when Richard Spencer and his followers gave Nazi salutes at a conference in Washington DC in 2016 to celebrate Trump’s victory (Hatiwanger 2020). Thus, the term “total war” may have been embraced by a minority of Trump’s followers with its full Nazi, anti-Semitic, and racist subtext.
- 17 Intention and reception aside, however, the term remains a problematic one, despite its frequent use in strategic and political literature to describe, in the words of historian Donald Stoker, a “big war” (Stoker 2016). The usefulness of total war theory for understanding the war against COVID-19 is thus rather limited for both theoretical and historical reasons. But there is another, perhaps more useful, concept regarding what might be called a totalizing kind of war: Clausewitz’s notion of “absolute war.”
- 18 Ludendorff’s concept of “total war” was explicitly a critique of Clausewitz’s earlier theories about the character of war. Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian military officer during the Napoleonic Wars who is most famous for his theoretical work, *On War*.⁴ In the first chapter of his treatise, Clausewitz already points at the impossibility of total war (even though his writing predated the concept by nearly a century). For Clausewitz, “the very nature of war impedes the simultaneous concentration of all forces” (Clausewitz 1984: 79-80). Absolute war, or the maximum use of force, is an ideal type, and humans cannot logically go this far (Clausewitz 1984: 78; Aron 1976a: 113).
- 19 Clausewitz’s argument, which runs counter to that of Ludendorff and Hitler, is that politics and the state necessarily limit the run-up to absolute war. He argues that “the political object — the original motive for the war — will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.” (Clausewitz 1984: 81) This moderation of war’s aims by the state necessarily precludes the notion of total war, as there is always a political limit to the extremes of warfare.
- 20 This does not mean that Clausewitz was calling for moderation in warfare, however. In Book 8 of *On War*, he openly admires Napoleon Bonaparte’s way of waging war, saying it

came close to “absolute perfection” (Clausewitz 1984: 580). According to Clausewitz, this is the closest that war came to the extremes described by theory, i.e. the maximum employment of military forces to destroy the enemy. It would be a mistake to apply this to other wars, however, as there are other factors that change the character of each conflict (Clausewitz 1984: 580). Limited war, where the objective is less than total defeat of the enemy, is possible under certain circumstances, and will be discussed further below (Clausewitz 1984: 611-6). The Trump Administration ended up deliberately limiting the “war” effort against COVID-19 in the way that Clausewitzian analysis predicted.

Total War, Absolute War and COVID-19

- 21 How is this theoretical and historical discussion on “total” and “absolute” war useful for understanding the fight against COVID-19? A key element is the involvement of the civilian population in the “war” effort against the virus. This is in contrast with Clausewitz’s theories, where military forces only target enemy military forces.⁵ Contrariwise, the war on COVID-19 necessarily involves all types of people, as the virus does not discriminate between its victims. Although the virus has disproportionately affected minorities and lower-income groups within society (CDC 2021), the “enemy” (i.e. the virus) does not target one specific national group that could mobilize all of its forces for a counterattack.
- 22 An additional problem is that COVID-19 does not offer visible targets which could be identified and defeated with military force, especially given the existence of asymptomatic cases which have made it even more difficult to isolate virus-bearers and eradicate contaminations (Kortepeter 2020).⁶ This does not mean that mobilization against the virus is impossible, but it has to come from other sources.
- 23 Mobilization against the virus has involved the health sector, first and foremost: hospitals and clinics to treat victims of the virus, and biotech companies to search for vaccines. For New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, “This [the vaccine] is the weapon that is going to win the war” (“COVID-19 Vaccines” 2020).
- 24 Total war would imply that all citizens in non-essential work be mobilized to support the health sector (which takes up the role of the military in this “war”) to contribute to the fight against the virus. But this did not occur, firstly because retraining the general population to become health specialists would take a great deal of time, and secondly because it would have exposed a greater share of the population to the virus, which would have been counterproductive.
- 25 Absolute war theory might help better understand the mobilization against the virus. If the vaccine is the war-winning weapon (one part of an arsenal including other weapons such as masks, social distancing, lockdown measures, etc.), then maximizing resources available for the research, development and distribution of the vaccine would be the most likely way to defeat the enemy. At this point, Clausewitz becomes relevant. The redistribution of resources to fight the pandemic using a vaccine would resemble the extremes (in terms of financial and manpower output) used to develop the Manhattan Project in World War II. This parallel was made clearly in a briefing on May 15, 2020, when Trump explicitly compared its vaccine development program, Operation Warp Speed, with the Manhattan Project which had developed the nuclear bomb:

Today I want to update you on the next stage of this momentous medical initiative. It's called Operation Warp Speed. That means big and it means fast. A massive scientific, industrial, and logistical endeavor unlike anything our country has seen since the Manhattan Project. You could really say that nobody has seen anything like we're doing, whether it's ventilators or testing. Nobody has seen anything like we're doing now, within our country, since the Second World War. Incredible (2020-15-05).

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- 26 The implication was that the U.S. was willing to do whatever was necessary, at least on paper, to develop the weapons necessary to defeat the virus on the "battlefield" in a Clausewitzian sense. The reference to World War II also reinforced the contextual overtones discussed earlier when Trump used the term "total war" in the stimulus letter. This "incredible" mobilization only went so far, however, and the Administration's announcement was only really about developing weapons against the virus, rather than actually mobilizing the entire population to fight it.
- 27 In fact, even if Operation Warp Speed was a large investment, it did not resemble the national effort that went into the Manhattan Project. Operation Warp Speed invested \$12.4 billion in pharmaceutical companies to develop a vaccine. As Emily Barone (2020) has demonstrated, this may be a high-level of spending for a single program, but it is not unusual. The U.S. spent almost as much on relief for farmers in 2018. The Manhattan Project, on the other hand, cost \$23 billion adjusted for inflation in 2007 dollars (CTBTO 2007). The more significant contribution in monetary terms was the economic stimulus. The U.S. Government offered \$600 checks to American citizens in 2020 as well as \$1400 checks to each individual (unaccompanied by letters this time) in 2021, as well as a host of other measures to support businesses. A recent estimate claims that the U.S. spent the equivalent of 26.46% of its GDP on the stimulus packages as of May 2021 (Statista 2021). Germany, Italy and Japan all spent relatively more on stimulus to fight the virus.
- 28 A real mobilization of the whole population against the virus would likely involve lockdowns, if it did not implicate everyone's support of the health sector. Total war against the virus in its pure form (regardless of its racist terms) would mean that the people would be willing to self-isolate as long as it took, regardless of the costs to themselves, their jobs and their ways of life. This would imply heavy economic costs for individuals, including wage loss, job loss and the resulting hunger or want in other goods and services (IMF 2020). The sacrifices required are considerable for the population in general, and near-total lockdowns are most likely the closest thing to total war in the fight against COVID-19. Lockdowns are highly unpopular, however, due to the restrictions on civil liberties, and the hardships imposed on people, especially women, minorities and workers whose jobs cannot be carried out from home, as noted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2020: 69-73).
- 29 The varied implication of the population in fighting against the virus in 2020 mimicked what had occurred a century earlier. During the influenza epidemic of 1918 and 1919, lockdowns were implemented unevenly and for limited amounts of time in the U.S., despite the precedents for restrictions on liberties during the First World War.

Responses to the virus were largely local, and far from resembling a total war (Hatchett et al. 2007).

- 30 The resistance to lockdowns may also be in part due to the absence of a developed welfare state in the U.S. An OECD (2020) report showed that the U.S. lagged behind in job retention measures during the lockdowns in spring 2020, and even when new measures were introduced on a state-by-state basis, people did not frequently look for that aid.

The Trump Administration’s Strategy against COVID-19: A Far Cry from Total War

- 31 Trump’s speeches have frequently been singled out for the simplicity of their language, intended to target the largest part of the American population as possible (Kayam 2017). In this case, “total war” meant for most people “very big war.” This rhetorical use makes it difficult to discuss other options. For instance, when Trump stated that the American public education system “leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of *all* knowledge”, Jon Hesk showed that this did not make logical sense, by introducing a binary and exclusionary concept. “Imagine all those high school graduates going around literally knowing nothing at all” (Hesk 2017). The idea is that there is education or there is none, a stark distinction implied by the totalizing use of “all.” “Total” war may serve a similar purpose: Trump, at least rhetorically, does not admit the possibility that military action can have its limitations or, more generally, that American power can be limited. A war has to be “total” (again, likely meaning “big”) to be a war at all. Trump has always been honest about his tendency to exaggerate. In a widely quoted statement from his 1987 book *The Art of the Deal*, he claimed: “People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration — and a very effective form of promotion” (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 36).
- 32 Another specificity of Trump’s speeches is his taste for military terms. Albeit the President’s relationship with the armed services has been ambiguous, alternating between admiration and insulting wounded soldiers (Goldberg 2020), Trump often resorts to bellicose rhetoric, and it is worthwhile discussing why he presented COVID-19 as a *military* issue.
- 33 Early on in the crisis, in a briefing on March 18, Trump started by talking about the “war against the Chinese virus” (2020-18-03). This was not far from a declaration of war against China itself, and while it was not stated directly, the statement implicitly made China responsible for the spread of the virus.⁷ The President then went on to talk about the use of hospital ships by the military to help deal with the influx of COVID-19 patients. In the same briefing, Trump then invoked World War II, both to discuss the need for sacrifices as well as to highlight the fact that military production was taken to unprecedented levels to meet the demands of the war against COVID-19 (2020-18-03). Then he made a statement which came close to a definition of total war a few weeks *before* he issued the stimulus letter:

And now it’s our time. We must sacrifice together because we’re all in this together and we’ll come through together. It’s the invisible enemy. That’s always the toughest enemy: the invisible enemy. But we’re going to defeat the invisible enemy.

I think we’re going to do it even faster than we thought. And it will be a complete victory. It’ll be a total victory. (2020-18-03)

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- 34 The repeated expression “Invisible enemy” is borrowed from several sources, the most recent being the literature on counterinsurgency warfare which identifies insurgents as “invisible” due to their ability to blend into the rest of the population (Luttwak and Richard 2006). The *Times of Israel* protested openly at the U.S. Government’s use of this term, recalling that the term “invisible enemy” had also historically been used to promote anti-Semitism (Jacobson 2020). As suggested earlier, this could have resonated with some far-right Trump followers.
- 35 The day after this briefing, on March 19, Trump coined the term “medical war” (2020-19-03). The meaning of this expression is unclear, but the President used it again on April 7 (2020-07-04). In that briefing, Trump also said that the U.S. was intensifying “the military campaign against the virus” (2020-07-04). He described the airlift efforts of the military for COVID-19 patients and the successes of the Army Corps of Engineers. The role of the military was often first and foremost in his briefings. A few weeks later, on April 10, Trump tweeted that “the American people have launched the greatest mobilization of our society since World War II. [US flag emoticon]” [twitter:trump-greatest-mobilization]
- 36 In the May 15 briefing, Trump again talked about the involvement of the U.S. military in the fight against COVID-19 while discussing Operation Warp Speed:
- Operation Warp Speed has brought together all of the experts across the federal government from places like the NIH, CDC, FDA, and many other agencies. This historic partnership will now bring together the full resources of the Department of Health and Human Services with the Department of Defense. And we know what that means. That means the full power and strength of the military — the military. And that — really talking about the logistics — if we get it, when we get it. That means the logistics, getting it out, so that everybody can take it. (2020-15-05)
- 37 The delegation of logistics to the military for the vaccine effort and the vocabulary used by Trump indicated an overt move to militarize the vaccination project. Trump even appointed General Gus Perna as the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Operation Warp Speed, in a curious mix of administrative, business and military responsibilities (2020-15-05). In the same briefing, General Perna also couched the vaccination effort in military terms, saying “This mission is about defeating the enemy. We will defeat the enemy. Why? Because winning matters.” (2020-15-05)
- 38 Clausewitz’s conception of absolute war is a useful framework in which to analyze this statement from a theoretical point of view, as the ultimate goal is to militarily defeat the enemy, and all military resources are to be devoted to that goal. It is not total war, however, as both Trump and Perna made clear that the fight was a job reserved for the military, and that the military would be solely responsible for deploying the vaccine to the population, without civilian involvement. The general population here played a static role, waiting to be saved by the deployment of the country’s overwhelming military power, a phenomenon better understood in Clausewitz’s theories than in theories of total war.

- 39 During the last weeks of the 2020 presidential campaign, Trump again made frequent references to World War II, using well-worn quotes from political leaders of that time. On September 10, at a campaign rally in Michigan, he claimed:
- America will prevail over the China virus. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” That’s it. We’re doing very well. As the British government advised the British people in the face of World War II: Keep Calm and Carry On. (2020-10-09)
- 40 Trump again provided a clear enemy by calling COVID-19 “the China virus”, equating China with the virus, as when Roosevelt and the British Government were united against Nazi Germany.
- 41 When the vaccine was finally approved by U.S. health authorities, Trump thanked an unlikely source: the military. The President, true to form, first praised himself in a speech on November 13, and then went on to thank the generals and the admirals for the development of the vaccine, barely acknowledging the work of the scientists (2020-13-11). Invoking the Defense Production Act, he claimed he had been able to mobilize the necessary resources to develop the vaccine. This put the contribution of the state to the fore, instead of the private companies that ultimately came up with the vaccine, allowing the President to take personal credit for the vaccine development. A November 2020 study from the French École Militaire comparing international military contributions to the fight against COVID-19 suggests that the contribution of the Department of Defense (DOD) was mostly financial, rather than scientific, as funds were freed up for investment in medical research using the Defense Production Act (Delerue et al. 2020).
- 42 Even though Trump’s public *statements* show a clear militarization of the effort against COVID-19, the U.S. Government’s *actual* efforts turned out to be far more limited. This is in line with Clausewitz’s analysis of war in which he argues that there are situations where “the conditions for defeating the enemy” are not really in place, at which point there are two limited choices. One is offensive: taking a limited amount of enemy territory. The second is a defensive war or, as Clausewitz puts it, “holding one’s own until things take a better turn” (Clausewitz 1984: 601). He cautions that there must be a reasonable chance that things will get better, however, to justify a defensive war. If your side expects to get weaker, it is better to attack in force than to wait (601). The advantage of holding out is to exhaust the enemy (613-4), a strategy which did not work against COVID-19. Another alternative is to hold out long enough and accept losses, while waiting for better weapons or reinforcements to arrive—in this case, a vaccine.⁸
- 43 The Trump Administration adopted a defensive, limited strategy of holding out against the virus while waiting for a vaccine. While the Federal Government was heavily criticized for this strategy given the massive loss of life involved, the decisions that were made in 2020 were also determined by the particular political structure of the U.S. Individual states have the sole responsibility to mandate lockdowns or quarantines (“United States: Federal, State and Local Government” 2020: 11-2; Swindell 2020). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) stated clearly on its website that there was no national lockdown, and that “States and cities are responsible for announcing curfews, shelters in place, or other restrictions and safety measures” (FEMA 2020). This has led to conflicts between the Federal Government and local authorities, with Trump attempting to claim, unsuccessfully, powers over state lockdowns (Swindell 2020). In a notable incident, Washington State Governor Jay Inslee accused Trump in April of

“putting millions of people in danger of contracting COVID-19” in the President’s calls to reopen the country (Inslee 2020). Trump’s order to reopen churches nationwide was also rebuffed by Inslee, who said about the President, “we think he understands at this point that he can’t dictate what states can or cannot open” (Charles 2020). The lack of Federal Government power over health issues in the U.S. certainly limits possible strategies to fight the virus and impedes most efforts at implementing a nationwide “total war” effort.⁹

- 44 While it is true that the Trump Administration was hampered in its ability to undertake a nationwide strategy against COVID-19 as the Federal Government did not have the authority to mandate a national lockdown, it is also true that the President himself did not want to implement strict lockdown measures to stop the virus. In this sense, from the outset, the Trump Administration does not appear to have had any intention to actually wage a so-called “total war” at the national level, especially as in the first few weeks of the pandemic Trump significantly downplayed the risks posed by COVID-19 to avoid hurting his electoral prospects later that year. The more limited strategy which was adopted at a federal level may also have possibly been a recognition of the fundamental lack of federal authority in decision-making in a health crisis in U.S. domestic politics. It was also politically expedient for Trump to avoid calling for a national lockdown to shift blame to state and local authorities for the unavoidable economic hardships caused by local or statewide lockdowns (Bauer et al. 2020), while Trump himself could appear as being keen to preserve the economic health of the country which he considered to be one of his greatest electoral strengths. This strategy seems to have resonated with Republican voters: in an article in *The Atlantic* published after the November 2020 elections, Republican voters were at least partly willing to forgive Trump for the economic disaster and to focus on previous successes (Lowrey 2020).
- 45 Despite the legal and political limitations of the government’s actions, there was *some* federal response. On March 13, 2020 the White House issued a Proclamation declaring a “Public Health Emergency,” which included restrictions on travel to and from a number of foreign countries (2020-13-03). Repatriation of Americans from abroad had already begun in January and continued into June, with the U.S. State Department reporting 101,386 repatriations (U.S. State Department 2020). What was publicized to a lesser extent was that the repatriation flights came at a cost. Americans wanting a State Department flight back to the U.S. had to sign a “promissory note” agreeing to reimburse the U.S. Government later at an unspecified cost (Mintz 2020).¹⁰ This is in contrast to the March CARES Act and the stimulus checks, as well as other congressional and federal financial measures put in place to ease the economic problems and which came with no strings attached.
- 46 Another piece of evidence that the Federal Government deliberately limited its war on COVID-19 was that Trump ultimately did not override state authorities by invoking martial law. Many feared the possible seizure of direct power by the Trump Administration throughout 2020, not only because of COVID-19, but also due to the disruption provoked by Black Lives Matter protests in a number of American cities and after the contested elections in November (Smith and Strauss 2020; Sicard 2020). Ultimately, martial law was not invoked. Elizabeth Neumann, a former Trump official in the Department of Homeland Security, argued on CNN in December 2020 that a call from Trump for martial law would have signaled to a certain number of supporters that

it was time to “accelerate the chaos, accelerate the coming of the civil war” (Goodwin 2020). That Trump did not attempt to declare martial law indicates that, here again, he stopped short of total war. Perhaps surprisingly, even the attack on the Capitol in January 2021 was not followed by a call for martial law to be put in place.

- 47 For much of 2020, Trump devoted his efforts elsewhere. On April 16, 2020, Trump’s COVID-19 briefing called for a new “front in our war,” which involved “Opening Up America Again.” He claimed that “a national shutdown is not a sustainable long-term solution” and provided ways for governors to open up state economies (2020-16-04). The briefing demonstrated a number of different issues that would be evident in the Administration’s policy for the rest of the year. First, it showed that the President was fundamentally against lockdowns due to their adverse effects on the U.S. economy. Second, he was willing to attempt to tell state governors what to do in what had been established as their own jurisdiction, i.e. health policy. Third, by using the term of “opening” a new “front,” he demonstrated that one of the real objectives of the “war” was to sustain the economy, rather than preventing the spread of the virus. Trump continued to oppose any sort of calls for a national lockdown and was critical of strict state measures as well (Lovelace & Higgins-Dunn 2020). The President, despite contracting the virus himself, was consistently anti-mask, which some analysts have claimed resulted in a large loss of life (Pazzanesse 2020).
- 48 If we take the two possible total war strategies laid out above, the Federal Government neither mobilized the population into the health sector, nor did it recommend the total lockdown of the country. The limited strategy that was chosen in this “war” against the virus by the Trump administration was thus simply to invest vast sums of money in a vaccine, and to hold on and wait for its development, while supporting the economy. In other words, there was little attempt to hide the focus on the *economic* health of the country (Parke 2020), and any evaluations of the Administration’s policy during the crisis should perhaps be seen in this light. This is where one could rephrase Trump’s war against the virus not so much as a fight between the virus vs. the American *people*, but as a fight between the virus vs. the American *economy*.

War against COVID-19: A Comparison with France, Germany and the UK

- 49 To understand the Trump Administration’s military discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also useful to briefly compare it to the discourse in three other countries: France, Germany and the United Kingdom. As with Trump, French President Emmanuel Macron publicly declared “war” on the virus in a nationally televised address on March 16, 2020: “We are at war” (“Nous sommes en guerre”), calling for a “national mobilization” (“mobilisation générale”) of the French population (Pietralunga and Lemarié 2020). In the same speech, Macron used some of the other terms from Trump’s briefings, including referring to the “invisible enemy.” A week later, on March 25, Macron used the terminology of total war when speaking of mobilizing the whole country: “When you start a war, you commit to it completely, you mobilize as one” (“Lorsqu’on engage une guerre, on s’y engage tout entier, on s’y mobilise dans l’unité”, Macron 2020).

- 50 The French Government, unlike the U.S. Government, initiated two national lockdowns in 2020 with financial penalties for unauthorized activities. At the end of the first lockdown, Macron changed his tone, shifting from talk of war to one of “hope” (Lepelletier 2020). As the situation worsened again in the winter, however, the French President returned to talking about the war against the virus. Macron was visibly irritated after criticism regarding the slow start of the vaccination effort in France, arguing that he was “waging war from dawn to dusk”, adding “I expect everyone to be as committed” (“Moi, je fais la guerre matin, midi et soir. J’attends de tous le même engagement”, Robin 2021).
- 51 In France, the military participated in the transfer of COVID-19 patients from some parts of the country to another, with 3,100 French soldiers working on the operation. The French Army also treated patients directly in a military facility in Mulhouse (IRSEM 2020: 3-4).
- 52 Unlike in the U.S., the French Government had a host of social services to combat the economic effects of the lockdowns in the country. The temporary benefits for the jobless (“chômage partiel”) allowed French companies to keep employees on payroll, while the government paid a large part of their salary at a cost estimated at 27.1 billion euros (\$32.6 billion) in 2020 (BFM 2021). This example alone represented nearly three times the cost of Operation Warp Speed in the U.S., but less than the U.S. stimulus plans. Other measures, including corporate bailouts for companies such as Air France as well as the cost of universal health care in the pandemic, added up to a massive economic effort by the French state.
- 53 In Germany, the Army went so far as to employ 17,000 soldiers, even calling up reservists, for logistics and support missions for the civilian anti-Covid effort (IRSEM 2020: 7-8). Despite this high level of military commitment, the German political leadership consciously chose *not* to use terminology that evoked “war” when talking about COVID-19. The German President, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, made a speech explicitly rejecting the war metaphor in April 2020, saying: “No, this pandemic is not a war. Nations are not against nations, soldiers are not against soldiers. This is a test of our humanity. It is about the worst and the best of people. Let us show the best of ourselves! And let us show it in Europe too!” (Gros-Verheyde 2020)

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- 54 It has been suggested that, given Germany’s history, it would not have been internationally acceptable for Germany to talk about going to war. German leaders may also not have wanted to encourage far-right nationalist elements within the country, such as in the U.S. (Paulus 2020). In fact, Germany has expressed worry about the worldwide rise of nationalism in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis at the United Nations, which indicates that, unlike the U.S. and France, the German Government viewed the “war” discourse around the virus as an implicit danger (Besheer 2020).
- 55 Notwithstanding, Germany, like France, did make a large effort in both stimulus and the mobilization of social services to help alleviate the economic costs of lockdowns for its population. German efforts included 251 billion euros (\$300 billion) in tax deferrals as well as immediate spending of 284 billion euros (\$337 billion) to boost the economy in 2020 (Anderson et al. 2020). While Germany did not declare a “war,” it did bring its

considerable welfare state assets to contribute to relief for its citizens in a comprehensive fashion, like France and the U.S.

- 56 In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson also made reference to a “war” against COVID-19. Early on in the pandemic, he argued that “We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy” (Rawlinson 2020). This implicitly referenced Winston Churchill’s “wartime government”, suggesting that Johnson was comparable to Churchill and would also win the war. The comparisons to Churchill appeared frequently in the British press during the crisis, often but not always in a favorable light (Dobbs 2020). For the UK, the reference to World War II was reassuring for some, as it implied that the war would be won if given sufficient national effort and sacrifice. Johnson’s speech also shared Trump’s ideas that the “enemy” (the virus) was primarily attacking the economy. The war effort was about making sure the economy stayed afloat. Johnson’s Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, similarly emphasized the battle against the virus as “an economic fight” (Rawlinson 2020).

Conclusion – A Biden War on Covid?

- 57 Despite the call for total war in the stimulus letter, the Trump Administration was frequently criticized for not doing enough to fight the virus. As shown above, the U.S. population was never mobilized in any coherent way to fight a “total war.” The Trump Administration preferred a limited, defensive holding strategy intended to wait for a vaccine in the hope of protecting the economy, Trump’s main concern. This fits into the Clausewitzian framework of limited warfare rather than that of the theories of total war. Trump, however, ran into strong local and state opposition, resulting in a variety of specific approaches across the country, much like during the Influenza Epidemic in 1918 and 1919.
- 58 President Joe Biden has continued his predecessor’s use of military vocabulary to describe the fight against the virus. After his victory in the presidential election, he said Americans were at “war with the virus” (“Biden Thanksgiving Speech” 2020). Biden has not used the term “total war,” but has promised to be a “commander in chief” and to make greater efforts to fight the virus than his predecessor. This has included asking local authorities to make masks mandatory and to increase social distancing rules (Herman 2020). A national lockdown was ruled out expressly by the new President, however, in favor of attempts at a coordinated mask mandate (Sink 2020). As of the end of March 2021, while Biden’s administration could point to the very large proportion of vaccinated Americans, he told CNN on March 30 that the “war was far from won” and that “we’re in the life and death race with a virus that is spreading quickly” (CNN 2021). This is not a total war, but the “life and death race” indicates that the U.S. Government still thinks about COVID-19 in primarily military terms, or that the U.S. Government cannot help but frame any life-and-death threat against millions of its citizens in military terms.

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NOTES

1. The \$2 trillion CARES Act of 27 March 2020 also gave families an extra \$500. The relief threshold for individuals was \$99,000 in yearly income, meaning that the vast majority of American citizens received a check.
2. Even the definition of the American Civil War as a total war has been challenged by scholars. See Neely (1997), in particular.
3. All translations mine.
4. On Clausewitz, see Raymond Aron’s two-volume work (1976a; 1976b), and: <https://www.clausewitzstudies.org/mobile/cwzbiblenglish.htm>.
5. Clausewitz stated that “If, then, civilized nations do not put their prisoners to death or devastate cities and countries, it is because intelligence plays a larger part in the methods of warfare and has taught them more effective ways using force than the crude expression of instinct.” (Clausewitz 1984: 76) This statement should not be taken as a description of Clausewitz’s respect for human rights, which would be both questionable and anachronistic. It is rather an instrumental analysis in which Clausewitz is saying that attacks on civilians takes away necessary resources and effort from the true military goals of warfare.
6. Dr. Mark Kortepeter, a bioweapons expert, does not argue in his article (Kortepeter 2020) that COVID-19 was developed as a biological weapon, but assesses whether it could potentially be a “good” one. His conclusions are that the virus would not, in fact, be a useful biological weapon in the future. The article is purely technical and does not make any attempt to explore the ethical implications of using COVID-19 as a biological weapon.
7. A search of the Factba.se database of Trump’s speeches and tweets returned 358 references for a search for “China virus.” <https://factba.se/search#%22China%2Bvirus%22> (searching in the calendar year 2020), “Chinese virus” has 27 references, <https://factba.se/search#%22Chinese%2Bvirus%22>.
8. The British and French strategy of limiting offensives and waiting for American reinforcements to arrive and train in World War I is relevant here for comparative purposes.
9. It should be noted that during the Influenza Pandemic in 1918 and 1919, the response was largely local, with cities implementing varied responses that had very different results (Strochlic & Champine 2020). The Federal Government was not very involved and made little mention of the flu.
10. Some families may have been asked to pay up to \$2,500/person for the repatriation flights.

ABSTRACTS

In the Economic Impact Payment letter to American citizens in Spring 2020, President Donald Trump wrote that "we wage total war on this invisible enemy." Trump likely did not intend to explicitly link this to the rich theory about "total war" in military history, but this article examines the American rhetoric surrounding the war on COVID-19 to see whether it corresponds to definitions of total war in military strategic thought. The Clausewitzian origins of the idea of "absolute war" and limited war will also be examined to ascertain their relevance as a framework for understanding the American approach to the conflict with the virus. A total war strategy would have implied either mobilizing the entire population into the health sector or imposing a total national lockdown. This article examines both the strategy outlined by Donald Trump and the reality of what was undertaken by the Federal Government. The military was involved in the war effort against the virus in the U.S., but only in a logistical and financial sense. A national lockdown was never intended due to its potential adverse effects on the economy, and in any case, the Federal Government did not have the authority to impose health policy on individual states and local authorities. The result was a variety of local responses to the crisis with little federal coordination, much like what occurred with the Influenza Epidemic of 1918-19. Despite its military and hyperbolic rhetoric, the Trump Administration did not choose a total war strategy. Instead, it decided to adopt a limited holding strategy that accepted human losses while protecting the economy and waiting for a Government-sponsored vaccine to save the day.

Dans la lettre adressée aux citoyens américains au printemps 2020 qui accompagnait un versement censé diminuer l'impact économique de la pandémie, le président Donald Trump écrivait : « nous menons une guerre totale contre cet ennemi invisible. » Trump n'avait probablement pas l'intention d'établir un lien explicite avec la célèbre théorie de la « guerre totale » en histoire militaire, néanmoins cet article examine la rhétorique américaine autour de la guerre contre le COVID-19 pour voir dans quelle mesure elle peut correspondre aux définitions de la « guerre totale » dans la pensée stratégique militaire. Les origines clausewitziennes de la notion de « guerre absolue » et de « guerre limitée » seront également examinées afin de déterminer leur pertinence comme cadre conceptuel pour comprendre l'approche américaine dans sa lutte contre le virus. Une stratégie de guerre totale aurait impliqué soit la mobilisation de l'ensemble de la population dans le secteur de la santé, soit l'imposition d'un confinement national total. Cet article examine la stratégie exposée par Donald Trump et la réalité de ce qui a été entrepris par le gouvernement fédéral. Si l'armée a bien participé à l'effort de guerre contre le virus aux États-Unis, cet effort était uniquement logistique et financier. Un confinement national n'a jamais été envisagé en raison de ses effets négatifs potentiels sur l'économie et, de toutes façons, le gouvernement fédéral n'avait pas le pouvoir d'imposer une politique sanitaire aux différents États et autorités locales. Le résultat a été une variété de réponses locales à la crise avec peu de coordination fédérale, un peu comme ce qui s'est passé avec l'épidémie de grippe de 1918-19. Malgré son discours martial et hyperbolique, l'administration Trump n'a pas choisi une stratégie de guerre totale. Au lieu de cela, elle a adopté une stratégie d'attente limitée, acceptant les pertes humaines, tout en cherchant à protéger l'économie jusqu'à ce qu'un vaccin financé par le gouvernement vienne sauver la situation.

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