

Justifying War in an Insecure World

Understanding the Military Spending of the United States and the Discourse Used to Rationalize It

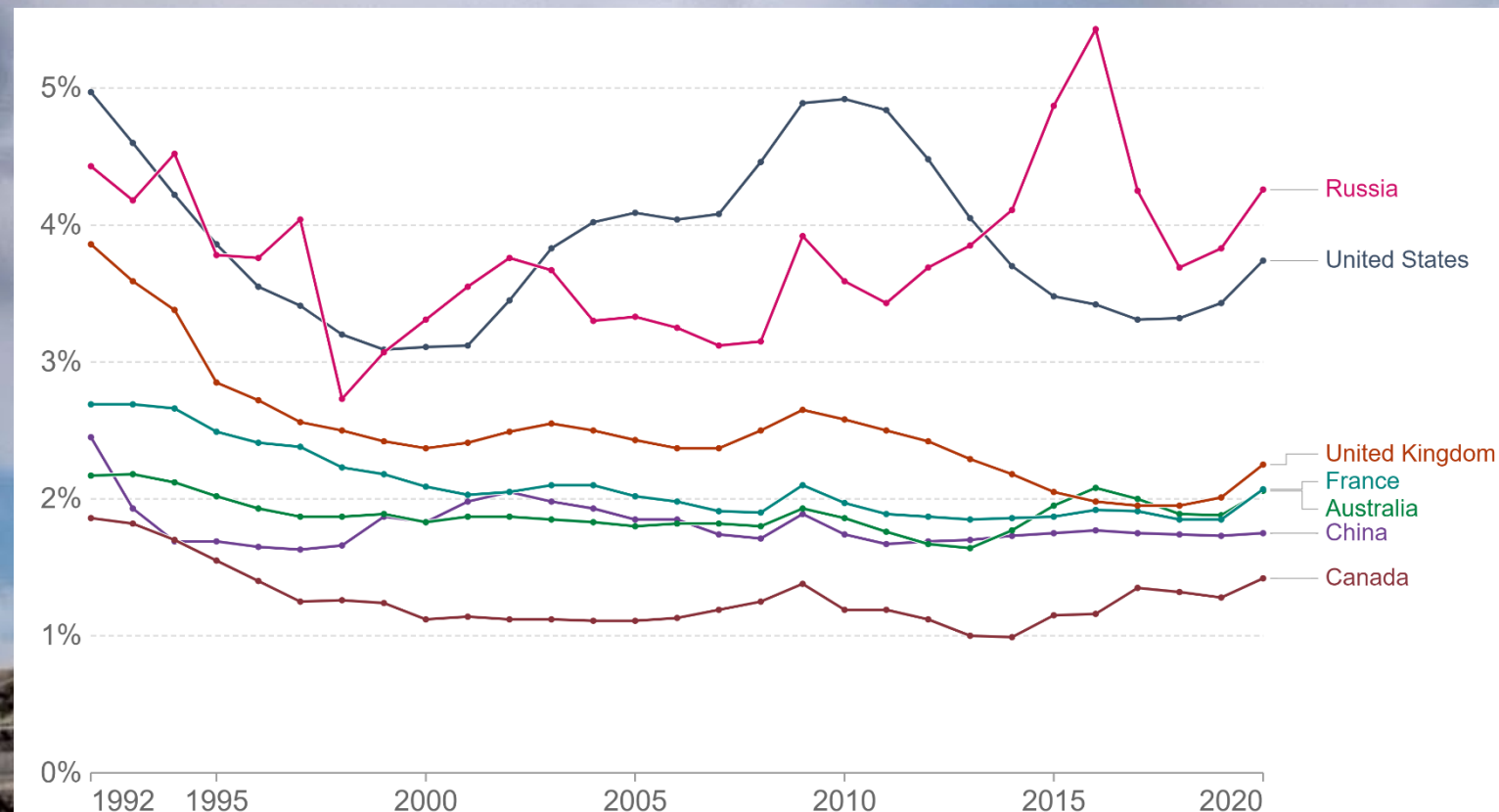
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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has been the world's leading military spender. The US spends more on its military than the next eleven countries combined (PGPF 2021). Even as a percentage of its GDP, the US still outspends other economic giants like China (3.4% of its GDP for the US compared to 1.9% for China) (Roser et al. 2013). Since democracies operate off a model of agency representation, where policy makers are held accountable to their constituents via elections, it is in some ways confounding that the world's leading military spender is a democracy (Lowi et al. 2021, 199). Autocracies don't need to rationalize military spending to a broader public, yet justifications for military spending must exist within a democratic polity. Given the sheer scale of US military spending, these narratives upholding the exercise of warfare must be considerable. **This work asks how the US military budget has been rationalized to the public.** Necessarily tied to this is the notion of security. Military action has long been coaxed in needing to preserve 'national security,' but how this idea of security has been framed to justify the creation of an American empire is of central importance.

Military Spending as a Proportion of Overall GDP (Roser et al. 2013)



US Elections
 1992: H.W. Bush v. Clinton
 1996: Clinton v. Perot
 1996: Dole v. Clinton
 2000: W. Bush v. Gore
 2004: W. Bush v. Kerry
 2008: McCain v. Obama
 2012: Romney v. Obama
 2016: Trump v. Clinton
 2020: Trump v. Biden

Primary Research Question: How has the US military budget been rationalized to the public by prominent figures within the US political system?

Secondary Research Question: How, in this rationalization of the US military budget, has 'national security' been defined?

Justification Type #1: American Exceptionalism

'American exceptionalism' is a collection of myths that interprets the US as having a unique and unprecedented role in promoting liberal values like democracy (Lumen n.d.). This responsibility/moral duty is often conceived as coming from a higher power. This unique role can justify the violation of international rules or norms. America's role as the 'hero' is contingent on possessing military superiority, thereby American exceptionalism rationalizes an increased role for the military.

Justification Type #2a): The Military Welfare State (MWS)

Military spending is often depicted as upholding the expansive MWS (Mittelstadt 2015). The MWS includes the healthcare benefits, childcare/housing support, and education opportunities that are afforded to those in the military and the 'army family.'

Justification Type #2b): Providing for Jobs

In the 1990s, an expansive military was justified by Republicans and Democrats for its role in providing people with jobs.

Blending Both Types: The Master Security Narrative

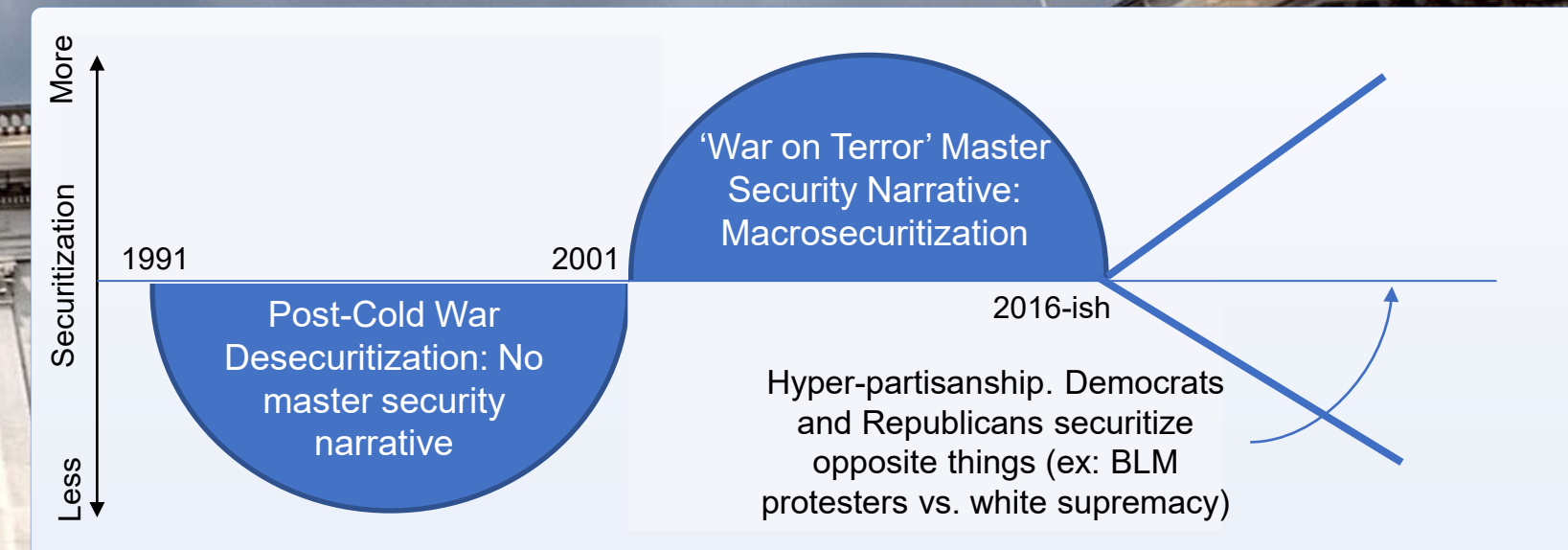
Key to the Copenhagen School is that not all threats are made equal. A *master security narrative* is a threat that operates as an umbrella, encapsulating smaller security threats within it (Buzan et al. 2009). Lower order threats become securitized for the sole purpose that addressing them deals with a larger master security framework (Buzan et al. 2009). A good example of this is the Cold War, in which all areas of policy were securitized to serve the wider goal of preserving Western Civilization against the Soviet threat (Campbell 1992).

After 9/11, we see a new master security narrative in the 'War on Terror.' This narrative justified extraordinary military spending to deal with the threat of terrorism and the rogue nation-states that supported them. Thus, this rationale is both of the abstract/normative type like American exceptionalism (security is socially constructed) and of the material type like the MWS (security has tangible consequences). Other things were securitized in this time, but only for the purposes of defending against this ultimate security threat, not because they were seen as issues in themselves.

Security threats were positioned as dominos, where the violation of one thing (**like education**), would cause the violation of another (**the economy**), leading to an ultimate violation of **military superiority**, thus seeing the securitization of almost anything.

CONCLUSION

- The discourse shows an incredible durability in the narrative that the US spends either an appropriate amount on US military spending or not enough. Since 1992, only four presidential candidates (out of thirteen) have ever argued for an allocation of military spending towards non-military endeavours; of those four only one served as president (Obama).
- Military spending has been rationalized through two camps of thought: ideal/abstract justifications (American exceptionalism) and practical/material justifications (jobs and the MWS). These rationalizations are overwhelmingly bipartisan (although Trump abandons some components of American exceptionalism).
- The master security narrative of the War on Terror skirts the line between both camps, and has been used to rationalize an extraordinary growth of the military post-9/11. This security narrative is all-consuming, positioning all efforts in society, from the economy, to education, to be in pursuit of preventing terrorism.
 - By the end of Obama's presidency, this master security narrative dissolves. Now security is hyper-partisan, with Democrats and Republicans conceptualizing security to mean widely different things, and have even gone so far as to securitize each other. This level of partisanship (and an ongoing influence of neoliberalism) has made forming a new master security narrative around climate change unsuccessful.
- Ultimately, rationalizations of military spending have reified a construction of American identity, if not in the form of American exceptionalism, then something similar to it, as a society with the military at its heart.**



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