

## Torn between war and peace: critiquing the use of war to mobilize peaceful climate action

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TORN BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE: CRITIQUING THE USE OF WAR TO MOBILIZE PEACEFUL  
CLIMATE ACTION

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**ABSTRACT:** Notable studies have suggested the potentiality of the WWII wartime mobilization as a model for climate change adaptation and/or mitigation. The argument being that we need a similar rapid and total shift in our industrial social and economic environment to prevent or at least address the pending impacts of climate change. This argument and these studies have inspired us to think with them on what it means to use the WWII war analogy as a security claim in energy and climate change debates. Here, we would like to use this opportunity to draw attention to some of the implicit dangers of a call to war in such discussions. Among others we observe, first, the absence of any attention to the actual mobilization policies, in terms of garnishing public support. Second, based on the insights from Critical Security Studies, we question the historical incongruence of the case study especially by comparing the perceived enemy in both cases. Lastly, building on that same security literature, we point to some undesirable and perhaps unintended consequences of the use of war analogies in climate change debates.

**KEYWORDS:** CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES; CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION; MILITARIZATION;  
SECURITIZATION; WAR ANALOGY

*Words are not only tools to think with, they are for all practical purposes the content of our thought.*

*The vocabulary of any semantic environment defines the reality with which the environment is concerned.*

Neil Postman, quoted in Gyi (1984), p. 138

## **Introduction**

To arms! The age-old rallying cry is taken up once more these days, now to mobilize planners, investors and consumers for climate change mitigation. As but one example, Delina and Diesendorf (2013) have written an admirable reflection in this journal on the mobilization policies during World War Two (WWII) as a potential policy model for the extent of the action that is required to tackle climate change. It is policy model and analogy that is increasingly invoked by a range of civil society actors spanning nongovernmental organizations, popular media and climate protestors, but can be traced linguistically to Carson's *Silent Spring* which 'coincided with the Cold War years in America and w[as] colored by them' (Glotfelty, 2000, p. 157. See Cohen, 2010, p. 201 for an overview on popular media; but also Brown, 2008; Delucchi & Jacobson, 2011; Wihbey, 2008). Indeed, one recent contribution to *Scientific American* intones that 'America's next president must declare war on climate change in the same way President Franklin Roosevelt fought the Axis powers during World War II' (Bolstad, 2016; referring to McKibben, 2016).

Instead of analysing these calls themselves, authors and advocates generally build on them (clear exceptions are studies like Cohen, 2010; Oreskes, 2010) while offering historical accounts of national mobilization practises during WWII as a potential policy model for the action necessary to tackle climate change. For example, after discussing the scale and magnitude of the deployment, the finances behind the mobilization (the war bonds), the organization and reduction in labour regulations and the actual institutional governmental arrangements, Delina and Diesendorf argue that a war-like mobilization, while more complex in the case of climate change, might be what is needed to combat it. They ease their zeal for this approach slightly by noting that such a mobilization could be costly in

terms of sacrificing democratic procedures and probably slowed down by the physical limits behind technological innovation and deployment (2013).

The article by Delina and Diesendorf falls within a longer list of contributions on the policy models behind WWII in debates on climate change. Besides the more popular contributions above by climate advocates, the most recent academic contribution to our knowledge has been Delina (2016), with earlier assessments coming from Bartels (2001) focussing primarily on the historic WWII mobilization parallel of Canada, Cohen (2010) looking at the use of the war analogy in the United Kingdom, Oreskes (2010) taking a more reflective perspective on the war analogy, and Malm (2015) who discusses the analogy from a Marxist perspective. To be clear, we do not reject the important historic insights that can be gained from a comparison of mobilization practices during WWII. In fact, one of us (Sovacool, 2010) even referred to World War I and the nationalization of energy resources, when U.S. President Woodrow Wilson created the United States Fuel Administration in 1917 to manually control the distribution of oil and coal, as a possible model of “hard” command-and-control models that planners may want to consider in forcing consumers off carbon.

However, what we observe is a shift from the rhetorical use of war (including metaphors like ‘combat’, etc.) to increase the urgency of climate change as a problem, to the use of WWII as an actual policy model to tackle it. While we are highly sympathetic to the first and, as mentioned above, not against the latter, we would like to reflect on the utilitarianism behind both of them and use this opportunity to draw out two theoretically inspired arguments. First, following the initial remarks by Bartels (2001), we would like to draw more attention to the actual *mobilization* that was going on in terms of support for the war, instead of the organisation of the war effort. Second, we would like to draw upon the insights from social theory literatures and critical security studies, in particular those working on environmental securitization (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015; De Wilde, 2008; Oels, 2013; Rothe, 2011; Scott, 2012; Trombetta, 2008), to ruminate theoretically on what it means to call upon the discourse and logic of war as a means to increase the urgency and

legitimization of, in this case, actions against climate change. Primarily because we feel that the WWII policy model, in offering a threat analogy as well as a solution, offers an even stronger security claim than earlier war metaphors alone.

In offering these two points, we try to further the debate on what we see as the core problem when it comes to climate change action: the public acceptance of climate change as an imminent threat. We do this, not from the climate change debates but from a security perspective. Taking Delina and Diesendorf's paper as a starting point, we are aware that we shift the focus away from their intended policy model and towards the discourses and assumptions underpinning it (while also ignoring later work which dwells more critically on these aspects, see Delina, Diesendorf, & Merson, 2014). However, we feel that the authors finish at a similar position when they start by discussing the threat of climate change and 'the need to develop contingency plans' (2013, p. 371), for which they reflect back on the WWII mobilization, only to conclude that the biggest counter to such a war-like mobilisation is the potential damage to democracy. To us that is simultaneously correct and paradoxical. The claim is correct because strong security rhetoric does indeed affect democracy. Yet, it is also paradoxical because the whole point of using such a strong security claim (including analyzing its potentiality) is to move the debate out of the regular democratic routines and public debates (as per Securitization Theory, see Buzan et al., 1998). The instrumental use of security as a discursive source of power, in extreme, is precisely intended to justify notions of moving past normal democratic procedures into a wartime political economy that allows society to make sacrifices or compromises they would not ordinarily make. The relationship between security and regular (democratic) procedures is hence central, but also possess a conundrum for scholars because the acceptance of the perceived<sup>1</sup> threats by its intended audiences is highly context dependent and as such hard to "predict"

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<sup>1</sup> Starting from Critical Security Studies, in particular Securitization Theory, implies that climate change is taken to be a *perceived* threat as this branch of literature argues that all security claims are future oriented and as such always imagined: the moment a security threat comes true it no longer is a security concern but a problem to be solved. The latter working from a different social logic – more routine like politics – while the security concern itself shifts to a new imaginary: not the question if an event happens, but how long it continues, how to find the resources to survive, etc.

(Ciuta, 2009; Chester, 2010). With security being a future oriented affair, while adding 6 billion wilful variables to the already extremely complex climate change models, it is not only the threat that is 'perceived', but also the public acceptance of the threat. This, we feel, is an essential issue and one that merits closer attention.

### **Mobilizing the troops**

The war analogy extends the war metaphor which is an often used mobilizing claim for an increasing range of issues: against diseases and epidemics, drugs, poverty, crime, obesity, corruption and old age, to list only a few examples (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Friedman, 2003; Heineman & Heimann, 2006; Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005; Meierhenrich, 2006; Vincent, 2007). To be clear, besides the distinction that we see between the use of war as a rhetoric metaphor and as an analogical policy model, this type of utilization for climate change mitigation also makes it stand out from other discussions where war is used in relation to the environment. This includes discussions on the potential wars over future scarce natural resources (Klare, 2001), discussions on how war and conflict will result from climate change (Hsiang & Burke, 2014), or in relation to discussions on the relationship between climate change and military warfare itself (Saritas & Burmaoglu, 2016).

Describing the "fight" against Climate Change in terms of a war is not an innocent claim, which is the point of its use. Deploying it in this manner has at least three political intentions.<sup>2</sup> First, as Bartels (2001) notes, it, tries to bring across the urgency of a particular situation. In this sense, as Cohen (2010, p. 206) thoughtfully suggests, the horrors of WWII are used as a 'benchmark' for the urgency of climate change. Second, and more perniciously, attached to the claim are implicit calls for actions (explicit in the case of the war analogy) that would otherwise not be possible. It frees up resources, does away with standard procedures and legitimizes extreme actions. It is here that the war analogy and its policy

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<sup>2</sup> Turner (2005) also finds three purposes behind the use of war metaphors: justification, persuasion and as a heuristic tool that opens up to a reasoning by analogy to uncover novel insights and policy recommendations. Delina and Diesendorf's article falls in the latter category, while ours focusses more on the first two aspects.

model come to the fore and show its strength as it both draws on and strengthens the claim. Third, between the urgency and the legitimization of their rhetoric lies the hope of garnishing support, of enrolling consumers and other members of society into the discourse.

In this respect, a discussion of the social dynamics of this support is missing in the policy-focused work of Delina and Diesendorf, even though the creation of a shared understanding was a core aspect of the WWII mobilization policies themselves and there are clear links to the current climate change debates. Elsewhere, Bartels mentions the ‘large scale publicity campaigns to “sell” the [...] emergency measures’ in Canada but does not discuss them in-depth (2001, pp. 229–230). Instead he concludes that the support ‘was not surprising in light of the consequences of defeat’ and ‘increased after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor’ (2001, pp. 230–231, 230). In other words, as we will discuss below, the support builds on the imminence and coming about of the threat instead of the work done to actually sell the threat to legitimize the particular chosen extraordinary actions.

For example, even a brief glance at the literature that discusses the mobilization processes during WWII details the importance of the movie and music industry, but also the role played by the advertisement industry and the Treasury department. These efforts culminated in the hard work that was done to actually “sell” the war to the American public (Jones, 2006; Kimble, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Stole, 2012). Relevant for the climate change campaign is the fact that even the WWII “threat” itself was not always sufficient for parties to join the campaign. Stole (2012), for instance, argues that the advertisement industry only joined the war effort after it saw a strategic opportunity for itself, as it saw an opportunity to counter potential legal restraints hovering over them after a public discussion on the value of advertisement, and its company customers, in terms of increasing brand recognition. Another implication is evidenced by Kimble (2006), who describes how the same war message can be interpreted differently by the same audience. Kimble shows that whereas most government material was seen as propaganda, the war bonds of the Treasury were not. These bonds, however, just as much framed the people at home as soldiers taking part in the war, created strong enemy images, and

promoted the war as a temporary heroic thing to justify many of the sacrifices made (Kimble, 2006, p. 98, 130-; McLaughlin, 2006). This applied mobilization literature shows that it makes little sense to believe in the magnitude of a threat to convince a wider audience. It also shows that the field is in need of more analysis on the actual work done to sell threats, moving beyond purely linguistic and/or speech related studies to ones that contextualize these speech acts historically, materially, socioeconomically, organizationally, etc.

### **Historical incongruences**

In addition to the problems identified above, we also argue that, for a series of strong analytical reasons, the historical parallels between WWII and current climate change mitigation debate do not necessarily hold. Put in other terms, the cases are incongruent.

Continuing with the brief remarks from Bartels above, the mobilization during WWII was possible as the threat was seen as both tangible and imminent. Unfortunately, the threat of climate change is neither (see also the thought experiment in Delina & Diesendorf, 2013). It is not as causally imminent as ‘the immediacy and tangibility of aerial bombardment’ (Cohen, 2010, p. 216), nor would the “sacrifices” be short-term as the actions are needed for multiple generations to show effect (De Wilde, 2008; Oreskes, 2010). This sets it apart from wars, for even though they may take decades, inherent to fighting a war is the idea that extraordinary measures and sacrifices at some point do end. Climate change, unlike WWII, implicates people’s daily routes and lifestyle choices indefinitely, especially as they relate to energy consumption. Thus, instead of enlightened motivation, people may react with skepticism, denial, and even moral outrage (Markowitz & Shariff, 2012; Stoknes, 2014). Moreover, a major distinction is that many of the incumbent companies accepted strong intervention and regulation, and were even willing to promote the war effort themselves. In part because it all played out within their fossil fuel and steel driven sociotechnical system (compare Malm, 2015). In contrast,



in the case of climate action the incumbents actually have to shift away from fossil fuels towards a renewable powered sociotechnical system (Geels, 2010; Sovacool, 2016).

In addition, equally important is the distinction in the level of public support. During WWII, governments led the way. However, in the case of action against climate change, public institutions are seen as some of the most incumbent and unbending organizations (Ostrom, 2010). From the environmental securitization literature we learn that this means that climate change faces a different kind of securitization: not one by public governments to legitimize their actions, but one by private parties towards the government to call for a change in priorities (De Wilde, 2008, p. 596). Theoretically, the analogy between a mobilization for climate change and the mobilization in WWII does not work as the processes are different. In a sense, it would be more fitting to compare the climate debate with the run up to WWII when the war became seen as a possibility, lines were drawn and the call to arms was initiated.

Furthermore, WWII is characterized by the construction of an obvious and relatively simple enemy. In other words, it fits a true security logic of us-versus-them (Wæver, 1995). In the case of climate change, the enemy is more difficult to find. For some the enemy is CO<sub>2</sub>, GHG, or a broader reading of climate change and its effects on human civilization. For others the most obvious enemy is the fossil fuel industry or the 'carbon military-industrial complex' as Urry (2011) calls it. The enemy could very well be capitalism (Harvey, 2003) or government inaction (Victor, 2011). And for some there is no enemy, as climate change is something caused by all who eat, fly, drive or use electricity and hence to be solved by us all (Swyngedouw, 2010). Interestingly, from an environmental securitization perspective we again find a difference. This time between debates that treat climate change as an externality, as when discussing 'climate shocks' (Methmann & Rothe, 2012), or those which treat climate change endogenously as resulting from human activity. The value of this difference is limited for while a clear enemy might indeed be absent in the latter case, enemies are created nonetheless. As De Wilde argues: 'Though [environmental security] is not about good versus bad guys (as in the

cartoon series Captain Planet) the political debate does ultimately focus on specific groups (humans in certain professions and industries) who have to change their behaviour (2008, p. 600).’ This results in a different externality, one that shifts the blame and responsibility to the ‘other’.

Besides its theoretical incompatibility with WWII, there is also the question of desirability. Do we even want a mobilization mimicking the one during WWII? Bartels (2001, p. 231), puts forward the choice between the potential negativities of international wartime mobilization versus the wartime like consequences of climate change itself. In turn, Delina (2016, p. 175) translates the question into a choice between a prepared government (which has taken on board some of the mobilization lessons of WWII) and an unprepared government when the effects become apparent, just as Delina and Diesendorf (2013) highlight potentially negative impacts on democratic government. With the question of desirability, the “threat” is no longer climate change (broadly understood) but the consequences of a fully successful securitization based on the war analogy and a militarization of our response (Deudney, 1990). Put in very simple terms: the cure may be worse than the disease. A militarization of climate change action could take multiple shapes. In a worst-case scenario, it makes people fallback on their perception of nation-states locked in a perpetual Hobbesian struggle and returns us to a state of war perhaps best left behind. Or, in line with De Wilde above, militarization could take place on a societal level with conflict and violence between particular groups within society, either between have’s or have-not’s or between parties that consider themselves climate friendly and others that are deemed climate deniers/polluters (Hayes & Buxton, 2015).

While there could be physical cases of actual militarization and physical conflict, the impact of militarization already starts earlier on a discursive level in the friend/enemy distinction. ‘[P]eople who think of themselves as being at war will tend to behave at times as if they were at war. In other words, they will become more warlike, and their relationships will become more like war (Turner, 2005, p. 33).’ Other authors go beyond this and argue that the use of War or other apocalyptic scenarios as a mobilizer works counter to its intentions. For instance, Oreskes (2010, p. 223) describes it as an

unpleasantness that people try to avoid and which makes them reject the science as well as any perceived top-down intervention in their lives. Likewise, Yuen talks about the ‘paralyzing effects of fear’ (2012, p. 16; as quoted by Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015, p. 1). In other words, these authors argue that to call upon the threat level of WWII, one of the ultimate securitization claims together with apocalypses (Methmann & Rothe, 2012) and nuclear winters (Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015, p. 15), could in fact hinder the very actions that need to be taken by overstating their case or by giving an impression of inevitability (cf environmental psychology like Stoknes, 2014; O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

From a critical security perspective, those who use a war metaphor replace their political goals with a security logic that of itself has no substantive political argument. It is do or die. However, every securitization move still takes place in a political arena and needs to be accepted by its intended audience (Balzacq, 2005). The simplicity of the choice between accepting the premise or perishing therefore has the possible effect of making it harder for people to accept it. In turn, a war analogy (which combines the war metaphor as a rhetorical tool and the war as a policy model for its extraordinary solutions) is playing on two fields as it advocates the threat to those who do not agree with it yet while it opens up and influences the politics of the extraordinary measures to those who already agree with it. This layered, complex nature of security is confirmed by the environmental securitization literature, which is witness to many localized securitizing moves but cannot confirm the acceptance of extraordinary measures by the intended audience and as such the successful securitization of climate change (De Wilde, 2008; Oels, 2013; Trombetta, 2008).

### **Mobilising for Peace**

In the absence of a successful securitization, together with the inherent dangers of militarization, overstatement and historical incongruence, we propose to shift the discussion from *War* to the routine politics of security and risk with war’s counter-concept *Peace*. Discursively, it is impossible to discuss the one without referring to the other. Without each other these concepts would in fact lose meaning:

for just as ‘war always contains the expectation of peace[,] in peace the echo of war is never absent (De Wilde, 2013, p. 34).’ This is evident in climate change debates where the use of the war takes place within the politicization of climate risks (Oels, 2013). The many forms of climate activism, for instance, are definitely not war oriented. North (2011; also used by Delina et al., 2014) observes that most action against climate change currently stems from either ‘outward activists’ or ‘local niche activism’. The former he compares to the social organization of the peace movements (p1582), with their long marches and small activist outings, to gain media attention and a public ear. The latter North describes as local communities finding their own solutions to climate change, not unlike the communes of the peace movement. In other words, the climate movement and peace movement are closely related, especially as both use security logics to advance their cases.

While every actor should be allowed to securitize the causes she believes in (cf Turner, 2005, p. 34; Angus, 2013), the danger of war (or the securitization of climate change) is that it blindsides one by rooting for a sole cause. The logic of security does not know compassion, only survival. The above shows that this is not as clear-cut. In fact, in this tension between war and peace there will always be winners and losers, some intended but many others not. Simultaneously, the use of war without broad public acceptance might still entice individuals (e.g. eco-terrorists) to take it “upon themselves”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a partly successful mobilization that entices government support but not broad public acceptance would push towards a police state. Only full, broadly accepted, securitization would be acceptable. This, because the moment it would be accepted it would not be ‘out of the ordinary’ anymore: we would find ourselves in a new routine with a politicization of the precise exceptional measures that need to be taken. The war would become normal politics again and with the generations that these actions take, even the last traces would be displaced as part of a new routine. To paraphrase Oreskes: one way or the other ‘climate change would become the new normal. Therefore, whatever mechanism is used to address it has to be normal, too (2010, p. 266).’

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<sup>3</sup> Which, of course, is a controversial security denotation on its own.

## **Conclusions and Policy Insights**

To conclude, we do thank Delina and Diesendorf (and others) for looking at WWII for policy insights and attempting to bring an air of urgency and security to the climate change mitigation debate. We emphasize with their concerns. We differ, however, with their (rhetorical) tactics. As we have explained above, one dangerous element to securitizing our response to climate change, besides overstatement, is a militarization of our climate and energy actions and policies. Not just the potential that the global system of international relations returns to one of zero-sum interstate competition, but also one that discursively constructs self-other distinctions and antagonizes particular groups within society. Every security call is based on a process wherein individuals devolve part of their sovereignty to a select few who decide what precisely is dangerous, what courses of action are needed and what people need to do to be part of the population that is protected. There is hence a constant tension between democracy and security (Wainwright & Mann, 2013).

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that whereas the war metaphor is an example of the use of a security argument to move beyond normal political routines, most of the security practices can actually be found within these routines. In other words, besides the need to act reflexively when using security arguments to advance a particular goal, we call for an awareness to the routines and risk practices that already govern our daily interactions (Foucault, 2007; Stripple & Bulkeley, 2013; compare: Cohen, 2010, p. 216; Oreskes, 2010; Sovacool & Brown, 2015). As part of everyday climate governance, security processes can be found in the risk models that are created for climate change estimations and the business assessments done by companies, but also in the monitoring programs that try to find and identify those who do not play by the rules of the game, be they eco-terrorists, fraudulent energy companies, free riders or irrational consumers, policymakers and planners. Security arguments play a role when they are called upon to increase the urgency of an issue, but it is when they are accepted or enacted that they influence people's lives.

In this respect, we caution that a thoroughly politicized use of security, based on ‘imaginative geographies’ of fear (Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015), has another side that is often left out of academic reflections on security practices like these. Namely, the performative realisation that even we academics, while trying to remain neutral, still give credence to the War that we evoke.<sup>4</sup> Arguing that we need a mobilization to counter the threat of climate change is in this sense controversial and political because it means that we help push forward one particular vision out from the political into the security sphere (Buzan et al., 1998). The fact is that people interpret and frame the threat of climate change (and energy technology) differently, even if they agree on the science (North, 2011, p. 1587; Oels, 2013). From a critical security perspective, this does not mean that people are uninformed, irrational, stubborn or stupid; it means that they have other security claims competing with their perceived individual or social vulnerability to climate change. Moreover, while a discussion on thresholds might not be as attractive as a discussion on catastrophes and the war that needs to be fought to prevent them; these nevertheless form the political process that Delina and Diesendorf try to protect at the end of their article.

The question remains therefore: do we really want the current politicization of climate change to become a government driven securitization, where ‘there is a danger that the militarist approach to deal with environmental issues leads to the militarization of the society’ (Kakonen 1994, 4 as quoted in Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015, p. 132)? Do we really want to go to War? The scholars studying the war analogy see merit in the organizational model of the war analogy yet offer several caveats as to its translation for climate change mitigation, whereas we caution against the unreflective discursive use of the analogy itself. For the words and discourses we use to define climate change as a problem are more than what Hajer (1995) calls simple “modes of talking.” Delina and Diesendorf remind us that such phrases and rhetorical cues can involve more complex modes of thought and particular ways of framing, thinking, and even acting. Despite at times their lack of coherence, such discursive practices

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<sup>4</sup> With this article, we clearly do so as well.

are at their core exclusionary and hegemonic as they only authorize certain people to participate and come with discursive forms of internal discipline to maintain order. Discourses such as the militarization of climate change are not to be seen merely as mediums through which to gain support for a cause. They become part of reality, naturalized and invisible. This is perhaps what makes the call to arms so seductive, but also so treacherous.

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