

## COMMENTARY

Special Section: Forever War: Anthropology and the Global War on Terror

## The forever war, foregone

Darryl Li 

Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Division of the Social Sciences, Chicago, Illinois, USA

## Correspondence

Darryl Li, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Division of the Social Sciences, Chicago, IL, USA.

Email: [darrylli@uchicago.edu](mailto:darrylli@uchicago.edu)

What is there to say about a war largely consigned to the past without ever having ended? For those who experienced September 11, 2001, as an epochal event, the twentieth anniversary may have seemed more like a millstone than a milestone—a ritual made especially hollow by the recent advent of an even more decisively world-making pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the appearance of this not-quite-anniversary collection several years later is a reminder not only of the collective exhaustion that we labor under but of a larger rearranging of priorities—or of proverbial deckchairs in the face of melting glaciers.

From its inception, cheerleaders and critics of what we can now call the “Forever War” warned that it would not end with the clarity of a surrender ritual or decisive battle. Instead, the Forever War’s normalization and its obsolescence seem to have gone hand in hand. On the one hand, it is safe to say that globalized counterinsurgency against an ill-defined “Islamic” terrorist threat no longer enjoys pride of place as a central animating principle of the US imperium, as Washington becomes increasingly preoccupied with both Russia and China. At the same time, the Forever War unquestionably endures: its clearest juridical expression, the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), continues to serve as the legal grounding for military operations from Afghanistan to Syria to Somalia.<sup>2</sup> Legislative discussions focus not on repeal, but on the extent of further expansion. The Forever War’s institutional reconfigurations of the American state, including the advent and metastasis of the Department of Homeland Security—a cabinet agency whose budget is second only to the Pentagon’s—will remain with us for many years to come. Somehow both forever and yet past, the Forever War may appear as *foregone*, in that it precedes the world we inhabit and shapes much of what is taken for granted about it.<sup>3</sup> And rather than ever being abolished or abrogated, the Forever War’s most likely fate is to simply be superseded in favor of other, even more terrifying, forms of violence.

Against this temporal morass and the oblivion that it invites, we can plant our feet in this moment and face the closest thing to an event marking a sense of closure: the September 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Even after the successful conclusion of a withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, the United States continues to assert a right to project lethal violence into the country from “over the horizon” at will, as it did with the 2022 drone strike that killed al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Less spectacular but far more consequential is the US decision to freeze billions of dollars in Afghan central bank assets deposited at the Federal Reserve in New York, a move that has pushed an already impoverished country further into immiseration and potential famine. To speak of the US war on Afghanistan in the past tense notwithstanding these ongoing forms of violence illustrates what it means for a war to be both forever and foregone. And the example of Iraq—in which the “nonlethal” lethality that Rubaii discusses in her article was inflicted through sanctions as a long precursor to invasion rather than coming in the aftermath of it—only further underscores the inadequacy of a linear or teleological concept of war’s temporality.

In the meantime of this foregone forever, anthropologists materially situated in the Anglophone Global North have continued to do their work.<sup>4</sup> Early commentaries—including two articles published in the same issue of this journal (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mamdani, 2002) and subsequently expanded into influential books—interrogated prevailing conceits in public discourse (see also Asad, 2007)<sup>5</sup> and set basic parameters for anthropological critiques of what Zoltán Glück in this section calls the “security encounter.” In the Forever War’s second decade, a wave of ethnographies took US militarism and security culture as primary targets of analysis (Gusterson, 2016; MacLeish, 2013; Masco, 2014; Wool, 2015). More recent years (cf. Rana, 2011) have finally witnessed the advent of ethnographic accounts rooted in theorizing the Forever War as an imperial and thus necessarily transnational assemblage, in which much of the jailing, torturing, killing, and fighting is done by postcolonial states (Al-Bulushi, forthcoming; Li, 2018; Tahir, 2017). Such a transnational perspective thinks at different scales and also produces rich studies of how the Forever War has unfolded

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2024 The Authors. *American Anthropologist* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association.

in “official” sites of war-making, such as Iraq (Rubaii, 2022) and Afghanistan (Mojaddedi, 2019), and even in the geographical heart of empire itself (Ghani, 2016; Razavi, 2022).

It is no coincidence, of course, that this turn has been largely pursued by diasporic scholars with connections to populations most directly exposed to the Forever War (al-Bulushi et al., 2023, 213–14) and often inflected by the kind of feminist sensibilities and praxes so poignantly illustrated by the Hakyemez and Yasak article in this section. Another, more prosaic, factor also accounts for the temporality of scholarly production: the ever-lengthening gestation period of monographs from graduate training through the gauntlet of temporary postings to (ever-fewer) tenure-track positions.<sup>6</sup> While there is much to value about the slower pace of scholarly production compared to journalism and policy research, one cannot help but notice how the anthropology of the Forever War is coming into its own as the war itself passes into public oblivion in US public discourse and the scholarly fads driven by it.

Further reflection on the discipline’s relationship with the Forever War is also instructive for the types of political postures and engagements that anthropology has permitted and punished. The Forever War came at a time when the discipline was emerging from a cycle of performative self-flagellation, whose own shortcomings and erasures have since attracted their own reassessments (Jobson & Allen, 2016). Anthropology’s own seemingly forever foregone lies in a commitment to celebrating one great “turn” after another in what may be a giant circle. As a result, “critical” stances on the war in published anthropological scholarship have been in no short supply, as Glück notes.<sup>7</sup> Yet the material consequences of this tilt have been ambiguous at best. Several resolutions criticizing aspects of the Forever War passed in a nonquorum vote at the 2003 business meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), only to be rejected or derailed by the executive board. Condemnation of the invasion of Iraq and US torture practices did not come until late 2006—in resolutions passed with quorum, and thus binding on the board—putting the AAA in lockstep with US elite public opinion, rather than ahead of it (Deeb & Winegar, 2016, 148–55, 160–61).<sup>8</sup>

The tension between peer-reviewed jeremiads and milquetoast concern trolling is symptomatic of a period in US history in which widespread antiwar sentiment couldn’t quite congeal into a robust antiwar movement. For the neoliberal era of capitalism was at the same time a postconscription era of US militarism, in which military labor under the flag was to be corralled through a combination of a “poverty draft” and private contractors (Moore, 2019)—a silver bullet for any budding cross-class and multiracial solidarities of anti-Vietnam War mobilizations.<sup>9</sup> These are the parameters that shape the struggles with “legibility” that Lutz and Savell detail in their contribution to this section on the Costs of War project. Here, one must acknowledge an important erasure in both scholarship and politics on the issue: that of class.

Take what is arguably the discipline’s finest moment in the Forever War: the widespread opposition to the appropriation of anthropological knowledge in the US Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) (Network of Concerned Anthropologists, 2009). This is a success story, if evidenced by official condemnations and the paucity of “real” anthropologists—defined as those holding doctorates in the discipline—in the program. But absent from the debate were the class dynamics, the combination of debt and do-gooding (Graeber, 2007), driving those who actually did join HTS. This disconnect was symptomatic of how the social worlds of both anthropology and the military had become narrower and more segregated, albeit in very different ways. And without a broader ecology of antiwar mobilization and class politicization to tap into, anthropology’s condemnation of HTS remained a moral gesture (albeit a necessary one) rather than an act of sabotage. The guild could go forth with a conscience unstained by militarism, practicing a politics blissfully unencumbered by consequence.

As the forever foregone of US hegemony forces into relief questions of imperial decline, multipolarity, and “great power” conflict, anthropologists who fashion themselves as critics of empire and capital will struggle to reorient themselves. The tendency to nuance and the elevation of complexity over clarity and commitment may in some cases serve them well in mapping the dilemmas and compromises of fighting from inside the belly of one beast without forgetting the other leviathans that lurk about. But unless and until opposition to militarism and imperialism can find a new and robust social base in which to situate our thought, the discipline will likely remain as something like a discussant at so many a AAA conference panel, nodding to itself in an empty room.

## ORCID

Darryl Li  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8041-1285>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For many, feelings of the Forever War’s eventfulness returned after the initial drafting of this essay—thanks to the genocidal violence unleashed in Palestine since October 7, 2023. This is consistent with a pattern whereby the rhythms of colonization and resistance in Palestine have long been syncopated to—rather than synchronized with—those of US imperialism. For instance, Israel’s suppression of the al-Aqsa Intifada from September 2000 onward predated and previewed responses to 9/11 and was in turn given a new lease on life by Washington’s declared “war on terror.” And yet despite considerable mutual influence, US and Israeli projects of state violence are also quite distinctive. A fuller conceptualization of this relationship is the subject of future work. But for now, in this revised version of the essay, resonances with Palestine will lurk in the footnotes as a kind of parallel commentary—not with the intention of marginalizing Palestine, but of noting its persistence and salience even when not center stage and marking the ever-present possibility of eruption and disruption.

<sup>2</sup> The 2001 AUMF—which names as its target perpetrators and supporters of the 9/11 attacks—was most recently cited by the United States as a legal basis for attacks on Iranian-supported armed groups in Iraq and Syria protesting Israel’s genocidal campaign on Gaza. See “Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House and President pro tempore of the Senate Consistent with the War Powers Resolution” (Public Law 93–148), Feb. 4, 2024. Strikingly, these groups not only lack a connection to 9/11 but were de facto US allies in the war against the self-declared Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

- <sup>3</sup> However, “if war is forever from the perspective of those who wage wars, then these are the end times for those on the other side of the wars that chase them around the world” (Rana, 2022, 565).
- <sup>4</sup> Hereafter problematically glossed as “anthropology” or “the discipline.”
- <sup>5</sup> Asad’s influential essay on the anxieties of liberalism provoked by the figure of the suicide bomber draws from US and Israeli discourses. The seamlessness with which the two discussions merge into one is remarkably unremarkable: after all, the US understanding was well primed by two decades of expert and public discourse in Israel responding to the rise of the suicide bombing tactic first in Lebanon and then in Palestine. What this merged US-Israeli discourse obscures—strategically for its proponents, but misleadingly for some critical readers—is how contemporary jihad practices can be distinct in their strategic logics and goals while nonetheless sharing tactics and exhibiting other affinities and solidarities (Li, 2020, 23–26, 106).
- <sup>6</sup> Although one prominent academic tastemaker purports to have discerned a silver lining in precarity’s cloud, opining that a “neoliberal motor actually produced something that was better for people’s writing” (Wilson, 2022). May a future civilization behold the wonders so produced.
- <sup>7</sup> Lest one be tempted to spin a tale of tenured antiwar radicals surging en masse to the barricades, never forget this paean from a distinguished scholar that appeared in *The New York Times*: “With his remarkable success in pursuing and bringing Osama bin Laden to his end, President Obama has once again demonstrated the virtues of patience and persistence in fighting the threats to our security and well-being, at home and abroad” (Das, 2011).
- <sup>8</sup> In the meantime, the most significant politicization of the AAA came not in debates over the Forever War but in struggles over Palestine and the 2014–2023 campaign to boycott Israeli academic institutions (Deeb & Winegar, 2024).
- <sup>9</sup> The presidential commission that ushered in the end of military conscription included Milton Friedman among its most influential members.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others.” *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783–90. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>.
- Al-Bulushi, Samar. Forthcoming. *War-Making as Worldmaking: Kenya, the United States, and the War on Terror*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Al-Bulushi, Samar, Sahana Ghosh, and Inderpal Grewal. 2023. “Security Regimes: Transnational and Imperial Entanglements.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52: 205–21. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-033213>.
- Asad, Talal. 2007. *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Das, Veena. 2011. “Letter to the Editor.” *New York Times*, May 3, 2011, A22.
- Deeb, Lara, and Jessica Winegar. 2016. *Anthropology’s Politics: Disciplining the Middle East*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Deeb, Lara, and Jessica Winegar. 2024. “Anthropology’s Good beyond the Discipline.” *American Ethnologist* 51(1): 140–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13233>.
- Ghani, Aisha. 2016. “Questioning Terrorism: Islam, Religious Violence, & Secular Law in America.” PhD diss., Stanford University.
- Graeber, David. 2007. “Army of Altruists: On the Alienated Right to do Good.” *Harper’s*, January 31–38, 2007.
- Gusterson, Hugh. 2016. *Drone: Remote Control Warfare*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jobson, Ryan C., and Jafari S. Allen. 2016. “The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties.” *Current Anthropology* 57(2): 129–48. <https://doi.org/10.1086/685502>.
- Li, Darryl. 2018. “From Exception to Empire: Sovereignty, Carceral Circulation, and the ‘Global War on Terror.’” In *Ethnographies of US Empire*, edited by Carole McGranahan and John Collins, 456–75. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Li, Darryl. 2020. *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- MacLeish, Kenneth. 2013. *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 2002. “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 766–75. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.766>.
- Masco, Joseph. 2014. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375999>.
- Mojaddedi, Fatima. 2019. “The Closing: Heart, Mouth, Word.” *Public Culture* 31(3): 497–20. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7532703>.
- Moore, Adam. 2019. *Empire’s Labor: The Global Army That Supports US Wars*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Network of Concerned Anthropologists. 2009. *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual Or, Notes on Demilitarizing American Society*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Rana, Junaid. 2011. *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393665>.
- Rana, Junaid. 2022. “Forever End Times: GWOT in Three Parts.” *American Quarterly* 74(3): 563–66. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2022.0037>.
- Razavi, Negar. 2022. “Navigating the ‘Middle East’ in Washington: Diasporic Experts and the Power of Multiplicitous Diplomacy.” *Social Text* 40(3): 105–123. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-9771091>.
- Rubaii, Kali. 2022. “Concrete Soldiers’: T-Walls and Coercive Landscaping in Iraq.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54(2): 357–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743822000435>.
- Tahir, Madiha. 2017. “The Containment Zone.” In *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, edited by Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan, 220–40. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372813-010>.
- Wilson, Jennifer. 2022. “The Editor Who Moves Theory Into the Mainstream.” *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2022.
- Wool, Zoë H. 2015. *After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

**How to cite this article:** Li, Darryl. 2024. “The forever war, foregone.” *American Anthropologist*: 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13976>