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TGI Fridays in Kandahar: Fast Food, Military Contracting, and Intimacies of Force in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars

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Introduction: “A Hamburger is Not Always Just a Hamburger”

“Guantánamo Bay”—simultaneously a referent for a Cuban harbor, a US Navy base, and a US military carceral site—is a space with two starkly different personalities. The detention center, sometimes dubbed “Gitmo,” is notorious for embodying a violently ambiguous space-outside-of-space where Vice President Dick Cheney’s “dark side” flourished. Yet, Guantánamo Bay as a zone occupied by the US military is quite unambiguously American space. One journalist describes “something resembling suburban American life” playing out on the other side of the wire, an “oddly small-town wholesome Guantánamo you rarely hear about.”¹ Thanks to five hundred million dollars’ worth of Pentagon renovations since 2001, Americans in Guantánamo live, relax, and especially eat like Americans on the mainland: cafes sell ice cream and Starbucks coffee; amenities like baseball fields and go-kart tracks offer entertainment; and restaurant options include Subway, KFC/Taco Bell, and the only McDonald’s in Cuba, located five and a half kilometers away from the detention center. The base’s commander justifies these amenities by claiming that Guantánamo’s isolation requires all services provided on location.² Yet the image Guantánamo evokes is striking. Roughly five hundred miles from Miami, on US-run land under a bright blue Caribbean sky, stand two neighbors separated by barbed wire, incongruous to the point of darkly comic irony: the infamous War on Terror prison, and the famous golden arches of McDonald’s.

This phenomenon of fast food restaurants in US military space is not anomalous and is in fact significant for the study of US imperialism and militarism in the twenty-

first century. Name-brand fast food (NBFF) such as Burger King and Subway have increasingly become fixtures on US military bases since the 1980s, but their immediate and outsize presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has provided unprecedented creature comforts for US and allied soldiers. Already in 2004, three NBFF franchises were operating in Afghanistan; in Iraq, eleven. By 2007, Iraq alone had more than fifty establishments. Troops and commanders alike agreed that “this is a good morale boost for sure,” and that it is “nice to have a little something from back home.”³ One planning chief remarked, “[t]he entire dining experience is designed to remind the Soldiers, Airmen, Marines and Sailors of home From the aroma of a burger sizzling on the broiler to the smell of fresh coffee, NBFF has an amazing ability to temporarily take troops from war zones.”⁴

These discourses of morale and home comfort were remarkably consistent across personal and journalistic accounts from the field: for US troops, NBFF added up to mean much more than just the sum of its parts, individual items such as hamburgers or french fries. What makes name-brand fast food distinctive is its taste—recognizable, consistent, and thus paradoxically unique. A McDonald’s burger tastes different from a Burger King burger, and both exist in physical and emotional contrast to a generic cafeteria burger. The flavors of NBFF transcend the foods themselves due to a combination of corporate brand recognition and product standardization, which constitute an experience that US service-members associate with familiarity and nostalgia, with “home.” While consumed at an individual, personal level, however, this affective experience requires a vast global infrastructure of material and labor to reproduce specific products. These two vectors of NBFF—the individual sensation it produces and the transnational political economy required to produce it—constitute *taste* as a lens of analysis for this essay.

Taste, I argue, plays a critical role in sustaining US hegemony through both (chemo)sensory experience and privately sub/contracted labor. NBFF in Iraq and Afghanistan served to uphold what I call *gastronomic morale* for US (and allied) troops: comfort food functioned as an enticing inducement for an all-volunteer military force to perform the necessary military labor to maintain US empire across two war zones. NBFF simultaneously provided a profitable opportunity for the expansion of US corporations and capital, as contractors and subcontractors from across the global logistical supply chain were mobilized to provide easy access to these comfort foods. Drawing on the work of Ann Laura Stoler and Lisa Lowe, I conceptualize these multi-scalar systemic relations, flowing between the molecular and the transnational, as *intimacies of force*. As conditions of war entangle countries, corporations, and bodies in violence, the nostalgic pleasure of consuming special food is one way in which some bodies are induced to serve—to maim and kill other bodies—while still other bodies are required to facilitate the logistics of these encounters. The common thread entangling these intimate relationships, I will show, is corporate power: through private military contracting, product branding, and labor subcontracting, corporations are crucial to the perpetuation of US military and imperial power.

My methodological approach is grounded in critical food studies, best summarized in Sarah Tracy's provocative adage, "[t]he sensory is molecular is affective is political."⁵ Indeed, in the words of Sidney Mintz, "[w]hat we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others."⁶ However, these intimate experiences and relations are the lived manifestations of broader political geographies of labor and capitalism, which they help to constitute. There is, as Adam Moore puts it, a "labor history" of US empire—a global matrix of "working people and labor systems" that "make US empire work."⁷ Food, especially fast food, is one such system. It is the interplay between these scales and scholarly fields—of intimate personal consumption, and national and global consumption under capitalism—that this essay seeks to explicate. I will begin, in the following section, with a historical discussion of how access to foods of certain quality during wartime has been integral to the national and global expression of American exceptionalism.

Tastes of Home: Food, War, and National Identity

In 1942, just after the United States entered the Second World War, an American artist brought to visual life the words of the American president, in an instantly popular and enduring vision of American prosperity. Norman Rockwell's widely disseminated painting "Freedom from Want" offered a warm, grounded image of abundance to complement the universalist language of President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms.⁸ Depicting a family sitting down to a Thanksgiving meal, the painting's center point is an enormous brown turkey being served by an aproned matriarch; the central through-line, a complementary constellation of side dishes. The table is ringed by well-groomed, anticipatory faces, their promised "healthy peacetime life" materialized through a home-cooked feast, despite wartime famine and starvation everywhere else. During and since the mid-twentieth century, Rockwell was not alone in defining a newly wealthy, globally powerful Americanness in terms of culinary plenty.

Throughout World War II, notes historian Lizzie Collingham, "American soldiers were the best fed in the world." Thanks in part to huge farm surpluses left languishing during the Great Depression, both American soldiers and civilians had access to higher quality and quantities of food. "In the end," Collingham writes, "most Americans felt that they were fighting to preserve the American way of life and one of the most powerful symbols of this lifestyle came to be the abundance of American food. The superior rations which US troops and ordinary civilians received thus became a powerful signifier of American strength and superiority, not only for the Americans themselves but also for their allies and enemies."⁹ Thanks to government agreements with corporations, US troops on the front had access to distinctly American goods, like Coca Cola, ice cream, and Hershey's chocolate.¹⁰ Further, Americans were able to mobilize the best fresh local resources from communities around US military bases. In northern

Australia, for example, small towns suffered massive shortages of milk, meat, and ice that were commandeered by American army camps. In England, too, British troops received about three thousand three hundred calories a day, while American troops received at least thirty-nine hundred, straining British supply chains of meat, dairy, fruit, and vegetables.¹¹ US troops still took issue with their rations—sometimes, out of repulsion and boredom, abandoning their packs in the field—but the reality of American economic and cultural ascendance on the world stage, in part through access to superior food, was clear to all.

Another key site of wartime consumption was the commissary. These military-operated grocery stores—each major military branch operates their own—make available various goods for purchase at reduced prices, especially foodstuffs. The system dated back to 1825, but it was after 1945 that commissaries expanded into “military-industrial and military-shopping complexes,” marking American space and consumer-citizenship on base wherever the base happened to be located.¹² The availability of branded products created an idealized lifestyle for military families that served a domestic purpose with global implications. According to Annessa Ann Babic, “For the military family, the package of Kraft Cheese Product Slices serves as a marker of American wealth, which probably does not exist for them off base.” Being able to access them on bases around the world, then, “meant that soldiers never went without the American dream, lived in a free and abundant society because of their proximity to these goods, and had middle class respectability and status through the attainment of recognizable products.”¹³

This access only became more important, as the country went to war across the world in the Cold War and the logistical “tail” of US military operations began to expand. As the Defense Commissary Agency notes, demand for services increased with the arrival of reporters, contractors, and civilian government workers during the Vietnam War, so commissaries maintained “stock lists that aimed to boost the morale of the service men and women,” including ice cream and chocolate milk supplied by American dairies now operating in Saigon.¹⁴ Thus the commissary, as Babic puts it, “serves as a global showcase for the US military at home and abroad, with its basic unit, the soldier, consuming American products, defending the nation that is fueled by them.”¹⁵

These broader processes of food logistics and identity formation—of name-brand processed food indexing a modern, middle-class American identity—converged in the 1980s, when the military started experimenting with fast food franchising on base. In a 1987 hearing by the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services dedicated to this subject, the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) Panel laid out the history of the fast food program, surveying its merits and drawbacks. The first NBFF establishments were opened in 1984 by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES), the largest and most powerful exchange in the military. AAFES is a type of retail manager, working with companies to offer more sophisticated, increasingly name-brand shops and services to American troops. In the early 1980s, AAFES looked

into constructing its own burger restaurants, but was directed by the MWR Panel to “look to the private sector to determine whether or not industry was interested in the military market.”¹⁶ In 1984, Burger King won a contract to franchise Burger King on Army and Air Force bases, while the Navy contracted with McDonald’s for its own bases. AAFES built and owned its facilities, while the Navy contracted with McDonald’s to run the franchises. The Readiness Subcommittee chairperson was explicit in his 1987 testimony about his 1984 rationale: “The panel recommended that the first fast-food operations be placed overseas [in order to] ensure a taste of home-away-from-home for those dedicated military members serving overseas.” Further, citing the popularity and profitability of the existing restaurants, he argued that military personnel were effectively funding their own morale programs during a budget crunch: “I personally believe that the military fast-food experiment represents an effective marriage between the private sector and the military.”¹⁷

Such discourses of morale, home, and the financial viability of contracting as “paying for itself” are deeply consequential in establishing the economic, metabolic, and political-emotional foundation upon which the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars would expand. A prepared statement by a lieutenant general in the Marine Corps presciently articulated the affective attachment NBFF inspires:

The exchanges have prepared and sold fast foods ... for as long as any of us can remember. The nationally-known, name brand products, however, represent top quality and the assurance of consistency and good service. The young men and women entering military service these days are used to franchised food and the quality they represent. ... On-base fast food franchises are in fact a welcome touch of home to all servicemen and their families—a touch they appreciate.¹⁸

Another high-level major general representing AAFES echoes: “A hamburger is not always just a hamburger By 1983, it had become clear that our military customer wanted a national brand-name hamburger like those made by McDonald’s or Burger King.”¹⁹ And, as the panel’s witnesses made clear, such a quality-of-life matter was justifiable because the sales came back to AAFES, mutually benefiting the military, the franchising corporation looking for new markets, and the soldier-consumer. The specific taste of NBFF—recognizable, familiar, therefore comforting—fulfilled a real material and logistical need for the US military, which had only fifteen years earlier abolished the draft. By recreating a taste that many soldiers strongly associated with their hometowns and upbringings, the military could fulfill the ultimate end of “morale, welfare, and recreation”: keeping recruits nourished enough that they would continue to voluntarily undertake the labor of maintaining US global power.

In 1987, the stakes were still relatively low. A large portion of the hearing was dedicated to domestic base operations—whether multiple franchises should compete for consumers, whether military dependents had job prospects, how troops appreciated not having to trek off-base during short lunch hours. AAFES noted that it was “having difficulty” opening a Burger King in Turkey because “the major issues to be resolved still focus on local government building issues and logistical support” in “remote sites.”²⁰ But already, among leadership and the rank-and-file, it was evident that, in the words of the Marine Corps lieutenant general, “We are talking about something more fundamental than food.”²¹ Within two decades, AAFES would work out its design flaws, help reshape the military’s social contract with its troops, and make multiple franchise chains ubiquitous across two inhospitable war-zones. As the following section will argue, NBFF was a popular and effective means by which the US military motivated its all-volunteer force to take on the country’s most ambitious and expansive campaigns since the Vietnam War.

Burger King in Baghdad, TGI Friday’s in Kandahar: Fast Food in Iraq and Afghanistan

The United States invaded and began waging war on Baghdad in March 2003; by May, Burger King opened for business at Baghdad International Airport, courtesy of AAFES, before the military was even able to set up any mess halls in-country.²² Six months later, in November 2003, this Burger King was already one of the top ten franchises in the world, selling five thousand patties a day and generating between fifteen thousand and eighteen thousand USD in daily sales. Edmonton Canada native Greg Witt, who ran the restaurant, told his local paper, “[i]t’s really wild having tanks and Humvees pulling up at the take-out window, and seeing soldiers with rifles lining up for a burger.” He went on: “[The troops] are just so thrilled to see us ... especially the soldiers who have been living on the dreaded MREs.”²³ It was a tiny operation—in AAFES’s own view, it was “little more than a take-out stand”—yet it immediately turned a considerable profit.²⁴ It was only a harbinger of amenities to come.

NBFF was pervasive across Iraq and Afghanistan during peak operations from 2003 to 2014. A Burger King opened in Iraq’s Green Zone in 2005—Whoppers and fries for sale to US/Allied troops and contractors inside the heavily fortified compound that was once the center of Saddam Hussein’s regime. On this Burger King’s opening day, it served eight hundred and eighty-eight Whoppers and three hundred and fifty-seven pounds of french fries. By 2007, there were sixty-three NBFF restaurants in Iraq, including twelve Subways, twelve Pizza Huts, ten Burger Kings, and five Taco Bells.²⁵ AAFES’s chief of contingency operations boasted, “AAFES started with absolutely nothing in Iraq While name-brand fast food was just a distant hope on that April day in 2003, troops deploying [in 2007] have convenient access not only to BX/PXs, but also dozens of recognizable restaurant brands including Burger King, Taco Bell and Popeyes Chicken and Biscuits.”²⁶ Dairy Queen even made it to the arid drylands of

Afghanistan; recalled one captain, “I was very lucky at Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2008. We had a coffee shop and a Dairy Queen.”²⁷

Perhaps the most unexpected offering in either Afghan or Iraqi territory, however, could be found in southern Afghanistan, amid the Taliban’s heartland and the worst of the fighting. Kandahar Airfield (KAF) was home to more than twenty thousand soldiers and contractors; one *Time* reporter described it as “an alternate universe that is ... more and more out of touch with the violence at its walls.”²⁸ The social centerpiece of this base city was the Kandahar Boardwalk, which featured a pizzeria, a cafe, an AT&T call center—and a full-service, sit-in TGI Fridays. It was an uncanny facsimile of the chain restaurants on the US mainland, with the brand’s kitschy American decorations (stars and stripes, street signs, a Levi’s logo) taking on new significance in the desert. One service member filmed himself walking inside, remarking how “weird” and “strange” it was to be there.²⁹ Another captain mused, “I couldn’t believe I was in Kandahar eating a double-dipped chocolate ice cream at sunset on a Saturday afternoon. ... I remember thinking, ‘We’re in the heart of the war-zone. The bad guys are 10 miles away. And here we are eating soft-service ice cream.’”³⁰

Surreal though it was, the overwhelming response to name-brand products was one of relief and homesick nostalgia, even from non-Americans. Captains in the British Armed Forces told *Esquire* that “you wouldn’t really know that you’re at a Pizza Hut in Afghanistan instead of Sussex or Ohio.”³¹ One US service member said that on the Kandahar Boardwalk it felt like being “right back home on the Jersey shore.”³² Bases have been described as “little oases in the middle of a dangerous and confusing world,” an “ersatz America” borne of an urge to “create a version of home in a hostile land.” The Pizza Hut at Bagram Airfield reminded one reporter of “home and of the free pizzas I’d earned reading books in the third grade.”³³ Another soldier quipped outright, “[a]re you telling me we can’t have a McDonald’s in Kandahar? Being able to do that, it’s just democracy, isn’t it?”³⁴

It is important to emphasize that cafeterias in both Iraq and Afghanistan were always well-stocked, laid out buffet style, and—unlike NBFF—already free of charge. One journalist described mess halls in Iraq as “shopping mall food courts, with salad bars, taco bars and ice cream stations,” where cheeseburgers and cheese steaks “hiss[ed] and pop[ped] on short-order grills.”³⁵ Another journalist commented that “unlike almost anywhere else in Baghdad, you could dine at the cafeteria in the Republican Palace for six months and never eat hummus, flatbread, or a lamb kebab.” The food was always American, often Southern, with plenty of bacon, sausages, and cheeseburgers. None of the fresh produce came from Iraq; US government regulations required that everything, even the water for boiling hot dogs, be shipped in from approved transnational suppliers.³⁶ Dining facilities in the larger bases across Afghanistan offered barbecued chicken, chocolate chip pancakes, sundae bars with whipped cream; Bagram frequently offered lobster.³⁷ Soldiers were susceptible to overeating, and many started gaining an average of fifteen pounds on a deployment.³⁸

Yet, despite this cornucopia of dietary possibilities, service members grew bored, craved NBFF, and ensured that lines for Burger King and Pizza Hut stayed long and therefore profitable. This taste, despite others freely available, was the one troops kept reaching for—making specifically NBFF the key to gastronomic morale. Within the US, NBFF often constitutes a public health crisis and moral panic—racialized with the specter of Blackness, stigmatized for downward class mobility. Lauren Berlant describes the way in which the “lure” of the “actually existing American four food groups (sugar, fat, salt, and caffeine)” represents morbidity and slow death, especially for poor and Black US workers.³⁹ In the context of war, however, NBFF could be at once affectively familiar and physically comforting—desirable in a stressful environment for the very reasons it was considered dangerous in a stable one.

Pleasure matters: in one study, Americans were asked to rank nutrition, taste, cost, convenience, and weight control in order of influence on their food-related decision-making, and taste consistently ranked first.⁴⁰ Sugar, fat, and salt—elements that human bodies crave—offer a glimmer of pleasure amid the structural violence of “normal” life in the US, let alone the stresses of complex warzones like Afghanistan and Iraq. Danger in the form of IEDs and suicide bombers lurked on every street, yet soldiers also found themselves frequently sitting around, bouncing from “boring to distressing in a matter of minutes.” Chronic paranoia and burn-out from multiple deployments made healthy eating difficult. One service-member in the Navy said that he didn’t blame friends who hunkered down with junk food after seeing fellow soldiers die from mortar fire in a next-door trailer.⁴¹ And if junk food such as Whoppers and cold Pepsi comforted soldiers—who cost roughly one hundred thousand dollars each to train—the military’s calculus was obvious. The expense of providing pizza and double scoops of ice cream was worth retaining talent in an all-volunteer military.⁴²

The attempt to ban NBFF from Afghanistan in 2010 proved the power of gastronomic morale. A command sergeant major made quite a stir in the military world when he posted a blog post in which he wrote, “Many of you have heard that there are plans to shut down some of the ‘amenities’” throughout Afghanistan. This is not rumor. It is fact. This is a warzone—not an amusement park.” He cited a need to refocus on the mission amid a troop surge: “Supplying nonessential luxuries to big bases like Bagram and Kandahar makes it harder to get essential items to combat outposts and forward operating bases, where troops who are in the fight each day need resupplied [sic] with ammunition, food and water.” Businesses employing Afghans could stay, but Burger King, Pizza Hut, and Dairy Queen could not.⁴³ This triggered considerable disappointment, even anger, directed at General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of international forces in Afghanistan, who implemented the policy. One army lieutenant lamented, “[y]ou just come back craving that American hamburger. ... [S]ome people here are going through withdrawal.” Another anonymous soldier took an earthier approach, scribbling inside a portable toilet on the Kandahar Boardwalk: “I want my Whopper. McChrystal sucks.”⁴⁴ Somewhere in-between was army engineer Kimberly Warner, who blogged, “[a]ll that remain are the severely over-

crowded DFACs (free food), the Green Beans Coffee Shop (expensive foo-foo coffees) and one tiny Subway on the far side of the base A couple of fast-food joints do not a country club make.” She continued, cutting to the crux of what NBFF signified:

I can tell you from first-hand experience that I look forward to and truly enjoy going to the little Subway whenever I get a chance to be over on the far side of base. And it’s not because of the Subway food in and of itself—you can create bigger and better fancy sandwiches at some of the DFACs (for free). What I love about the Subway is that when you walk in the door, pause and take a deep breath, it smells like *home*. It is familiar, fabulous, and unexpected. For one brief moment you can forget the heat and dust and mortar attacks and whatever a soldier is dealing with here in Afghanistan, and be reminded of the good things waiting back in the States. A reminder of the blessings that we are working and fighting for—a reinforcement of the reason we’re here.⁴⁵

In fact, the ban didn’t last long—Pizza Hut reopened in Camp Phoenix near Kabul in early 2011—as a result of changes made by General David Petraeus, who took over from McChrystal in June 2010. Petraeus’s new command sergeant major stated that “for troops to be able to go and grab a burger or a piece of chicken or whatever, I don’t really think it’s that bad.”⁴⁶

By the narrow rubric of troop retention, gastronomic morale certainly seemed like a reasonable cost. However, as the next section will demonstrate, that calculation exists in the broader political and economic context of private military contracting, which includes considerable human costs.

Serving the Troops Serving the Nation: Political Economy and Intimacies of Force

Access to NBFF was only possible as part of an extensive system of contracting that proliferated rapidly in and around the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Both conflicts were waged with record numbers of non-military workers, a shift that came out of both the specific post-Cold War context of downsizing military budgets and new kinds of security threats from ethnic conflict between nonstate actors, and the longer political and ideological shift towards privatization since the 1970s. Former military personnel in need of work, and governments in need of nontraditional solutions to nontraditional conflicts, fueled the rise of a new industry in the 1990s. US politics were already leaning towards what David Harvey calls the “corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets” as part of a broader neoliberal project of capital accumulation through the creation of new markets.⁴⁷ But the confluence of these factors meant that as the US government prepared for war against Iraq, it turned to private

contractors to heavily supplement a lean, all-volunteer military force. Virtually every imaginable task, from constructing new bases and cleaning latrines to guarding diplomats, became fair game for outsourcing.

The scale of this shift is unprecedented. In 2011, as the Iraq War began winding down military operations, the Congressional Research Service estimated that the Department of Defense had more contractor personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq than uniformed personnel; they made up fifty-two percent of the workforce in both countries.⁴⁸ According to the most recent Pentagon estimates available for July 2021 before the fall of Kabul, about two thousand US nationals were still working as contractors in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ The implications for this labor arrangement are profound: The entire political calculus of war changes, a reality acknowledged openly by Congress. In a 2007 hearing, Congressman John F. Tierney (D-MA) candidly remarked that outsourcing skirts political scrutiny. The American public would not be forced into the battlefield through the National Guard or the Reserve, so they had less incentive to scrutinize and protest the wars. The US would not have to rely on allies, either, who would demand a share of the power and decision-making. Thus, “private contractors have allowed, essentially, [the Bush] administration to add additional forces without paying any political capital.”⁵⁰

The names of the giants in the defense contracting world—KBR, Fluor, Bechtel—are still only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. When an entity of the US government signs a contract with a contractor directly, that contractor is designated the prime. Primes, however, further subcontract out specific and specialized services to other smaller companies, usually based in the Middle East, who are not subject to the same vetting or record-keeping standards as primes. The world of subcontracting is opaque, constituted by long global chains of migration and labor. Overwhelmingly subcontractors are “third-country nationals” (TCNs); coming from Sri Lanka, South Asia, the Philippines, and Bosnia, they find themselves in the indirect employ of the US military out of desperation to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Anthropologist Noah Coburn reports, “[t]hey were different from soldiers. None of them spoke of patriotism or other ideological motivations but were drawn to jobs that were not available in their home countries. Many paid brokers large sums, families falling deeply into debt, to secure their positions. Some had come legally; many had not. Most of them also tended to stay much longer than the majority of soldiers.”⁵¹ Due to their precarious status, subcontractors are highly vulnerable to trafficking, kidnap, abuse, wage theft, and imprisonment, without real options for recourse. Workers have been forced to sleep in crowded and flimsy trailers, toil in desert heat for uncompensated overtime hours, and risk their lives with improper safety procedures and equipment.⁵² While prime contractors rake in lush profits for their administrative overhead, stockholders, and CEOs, some subcontractors who undertake the physical labor on base allege they do not get paid at all.⁵³

The roles subcontractors have played are myriad. As journalist Sarah Stillman writes: “Filipinos launder soldiers’ uniforms, Kenyans truck frozen steaks and inflatable

tents, Bosnians repair electrical grids.” And subcontracted TCNs (usually South Asian) are the ones who handle the day-to-day of food service: “Indians provide iced mocha lattes,” as Stillman puts it. She interviewed three young Nepali and Bangladeshi workers at Popeye’s and Cinnabon in Iraq who paid a smuggler between three and four hundred dollars to bring them to the base with a forged authorization letter.⁵⁴ Indeed, South Asians make up the majority of food workers, both in dining halls and NBFF stalls. Another journalist, Pratap Chatterjee, visited a Green Zone restaurant and noted that, like elsewhere in Iraq, he found South Asians—a cook from a small village forty miles from Dhaka, a waiter from Delhi, a salad bar worker from the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan.⁵⁵ All of this subcontracted food service labor constitutes what Chatterjee calls a McArmy: “These Burger Kings, KFCs, McDonald’s, Pizza Huts, and Subway sandwich shops ... are run efficiently by polite Indian and Filipino migrant workers, who serve up espresso chai latte and mocha frappes or personalized pan pizzas and Whoppers to the soldiers.”⁵⁶ But these luxuries were for the Americans who could pay: subcontractors sometimes had access to dining halls run by the prime contractor, but quality of food was substandard, if indeed any was provided. Many subcontractors found themselves responsible for finding their own meals.⁵⁷

This mosaic of TCNs, put to work constructing and maintaining the American base-cities evoking the comforts of home for US troops while toiling far from their own, perform a kind of daily care work that invokes Stoler’s and Lowe’s conceptualizations of intimacy as a relation of labor, domesticity, and mundane violence. The purpose of a military base is to anchor the US war machine in space and material, such that it can carry out the mission of ostensibly justified violence far from the mainland. War itself generates a dreadful intimacy between peoples, forcing them into new and brutal proximities; but the vast logistical enterprise of sustaining combatant labor, creating a market for and around force expands the scale of peoples moving and clashing to a planetary scale. I call these intimacies of force for their depth—the act of feeding so personal and corporeal, the product of culinary labor entering into each individual’s digestive tract, their blood and vital organs—as it coexists with tremendous breadth, the US’s military footprint across the Middle East. US military bases may be what anthropologist David Vine calls “Little Americas,” “simulacrum of suburbia” with their name-brand food court malls—but it is an Americana grounded in explicit state violence, its homey veneer concealing interconnections of exploitation.⁵⁸ The production of its material comforts requires the exploitation of workers the world over. As Pratap Chatterjee mused, “[a]s I walked away, I thought about how ironic it was that the men who drove across a battle zone, dodging stones, bullets, and IEDs to bring ice cream, steak, lobster tails, and ammunition to US soldiers, had to beg for food themselves.”⁵⁹ Privatization and private contracting do contain dimensions of abstraction and distancing, as bureaucratic paperwork and layers of subcontractors insulate the American public from the up-close cost and materiality of war. And yet, the diverse masses of laborers working in and around US bases reveal the deeper entanglements enabled by corporate power.

NBFF, and the addictive taste so insistently demanded by military personnel, culminates in the epitome of this dynamic: Corporations turn quarterly profits by underpaying TCNs to prepare standardized, proprietary food products that fleetingly recreate the feeling of home for American soldiers, who have left their own homes to violently occupy the lands of Iraqi and Afghan civilians. That which fed and fueled US soldiers, fed and fueled the emergent logistical and corporate infrastructure of the ongoing War on Terror.

Conclusion: Consumption as a Means of Production

There are reasons to speculate that the abundance of NBFF that marked the experience of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars will remain limited to those conflicts. The Army appears to have concluded that the next war will be much more austere than Iraq or Afghanistan: according to *The New York Times*, training programs are now getting “back to basics,” making sure soldiers can cook their own meals, dig their own latrines, and live out of their rucksacks without contractors fixing equipment or taking care of the logistics of surviving.⁶⁰ In 2017, when the US Army entered Poland to take positions near the Russian border, *The Wall Street Journal* reported there were “no Whoppers. No foot-long Subway sandwiches. No Pizza Hut pies or caramel lattes.” One command sergeant major who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan argued, “[w]e went a little too far on some of the luxuries We set a climate that soldiers weren’t in a combat zone anymore.” The top US Army commander in Europe agreed: “You are never going to see Burger King Be ready for potatoes three meals a day for six months. The Irish have figured out how to make it interesting. I am sure you can, too.”⁶¹ US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan have shifted gears themselves. Base closures and transfers of control, particularly in Afghanistan, have changed the landscape yet again for the communities and labor pools that first sprang up to accommodate US forces in-country.⁶²

Yet, despite these indications of more traditional warfare ahead for US military forces, the US global footprint of military bases remains robust, and AAFES still operates PXs and serve NBFF elsewhere in the Middle East and around the world. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have formally ended, but the Guantánamo Bay McDonald’s is still open for business—and enjoys an online reputation for having a more functional ice cream machine than many McDonald’s restaurants in the contiguous United States.⁶³ Yet, far from being a quirky punch line, the ongoing existence of NBFF in US military space underscores not just the continued appetites of the US war apparatus and its laborers, but the ever more commodified and profitable nature of twenty-first century warfare. Eisenhower famously coined the phrase “military-industrial complex” in the wake of World War II, but the staggering scale of privatization in the Global War on Terror generally, and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars specifically, has created rapidly growing new markets for force.

Surveillance and militarism have long histories in the US, but contemporary militarism has become branded and commercialized—and thus normalized—in ways

that incentivize their continued existence. By expanding war space to include spaces marked affectively and chemosensationally as home, blurring the lived emotional distinctions between war/peace and home-front/battlefield, the US military and its corporate partners make the “forever wars” of the Global War on Terror thinkable and doable and even comfortable for those whose bodies work for US empire. Those on the flip side, the sub/contractors whose marginalized bodies make US empire work—the TCNs who are drawn into the labor economy of US militarism because of the structural violence of global neoliberal capitalism defended at gunpoint by the US military—are rendered acceptable sources of disposable, exploitable fuel. In other words, war is no longer merely politics by other means: it is a profitable apparatus in itself, one that is intimately lived and experienced and perpetuated through the bodies of those that serve it, either as soldiers or as contractors. Consumption, then, is a means of production that connects the molecular to the world-systemic, making possible both individual pleasure and systemic violence.

Notes

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