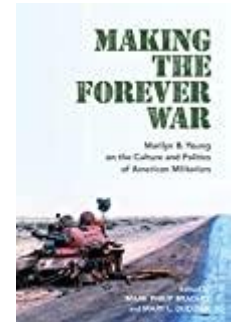


**Marilyn B. Young.** *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism.* Edited by Mark Philip Bradley and Mary L. Dudziak. Culture and Politics in the Cold War and Beyond Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. 232 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62534-569-1.



**Reviewed by** Aurelie Basha (University of Kent)

**Published on** H-War (December, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

*Making the Forever War* is a short collection of the late Marilyn B. Young's work. With the exception of one chapter, an unpublished essay from her personal archive, chapters are drawn from existing publications. As a whole, the book reminds us of how ground-breaking Young's contribution was to the field of US diplomatic and military history. It also illuminates the key themes that she returned to throughout her career, which focused on how war was processed and absorbed into the US national narrative often by glossing over or "abstracting" its violence.

As the editors Mary L. Dudziak and Mark Philip Bradley concede, Young's writing was not always the most approachable, but they have done our discipline, and our students, a great service in drawing out passages where her ideas and her contribution to the discipline are the clearest. Her writing is suffused both with an activist voice and an understated sharpness, for instance, when she wrote of "homeopathy" in describing George H. W. Bush and Ronald Reagan "fighting a series of short healing wars whose victorious conclusions might

eliminate the [Vietnam] syndrome, or at least ease its symptoms" (p. 124).

Young's work challenged the assumptions and language of her fellow historians. And her challenge is as relevant today as it was when she first began her career in the 1960s and became a key figure in New Left historiography. She showed that historians were themselves part of a process that reproduced the United States' self-image of a benevolent state on the international stage. Picking apart H. W. Brands's work, for instance, she noted that "he cannot concede that, apart from its power, [the United States] was a nation like any other" (p. 18). Taking on John Lewis Gaddis, she questioned his "assertion that the United States lacked 'imperial consciousness' as an empirical description of the American way of empire" (p. 21). Put differently, just because Americans could not *think* of themselves as imperial or violent that did not make it a *fact* on the international stage or to the "people on whom its power is visited" (p. 20).

Nowhere is her analysis more compelling than when she, much like George Orwell, focused attention on specific words and reminded us that we are complacent in uncritically co-opting official verbiage.[1] The language of “grunts” in the infantry and the “aces” in the air force, she wrote, contributed to making bombing appealing and the sense that “airpower embodies American technology at its most dashing” (p. 141). Likewise, euphemisms of war belied the violence whether in talking of “infrastructures” and “pacification” to describe assassination programs during the Phoenix Program in Vietnam, “limited” means and wars in Korea and Vietnam, or “effects-based operations” in the shock-and-awe bombings over Iraq (pp. 140, 156). And it was precisely because the violence of wars could be masked in euphemistic language, she argued, that war became an inevitable feature of the United States’ place in the world.

In addition to these more systemic challenges to the field, Young brought important nuances to our understanding of the postwar period. As a preeminent historian of the Vietnam War, she showed how ahistorical the field was in depicting Vietnam: by presenting it as somehow exceptional in its violence, it ignored the Korean War and, before that, the war in the Philippines. Nor was opposition to the war in Vietnam unique, she showed. The main difference between Korea and Vietnam was that opposition to Korea had been “*rendered* marginal” and “effectively crushed” under the weight of McCarthyism whereas opposition to Vietnam had been given “evident respectability” when key figures of the establishment, such as Senator William Fulbright, adopted its key ideas (p. 66). Crucially, Vietnam War opposition merged with the civil rights movement, which primed US audiences to question national narratives: “Vietnam was the acid bath in which received myths dissolved,” she powerfully wrote (p. 133).

Finally, she helped to pave the way for much of the scholarship that animates historians today in decentering US foreign relations and acknowledging that the dead (the “bodies”) of other countries *should* count in the retelling of the United States’ wars. However, unlike some of her contemporaries, she grappled more earnestly with the central paradox of this task, writing: “Decentering America in one’s head is a good thing. But it does not of itself create a world free of its overwhelming military and economic power, and it is crucial to remember the difference, or the effort to decenter American history will run the danger of obscuring what it means to illuminate” (p. 34).

The themes in Young’s writings recurred in various guises and proved to have enduring value. Her writing often seems prescient though; in fact, that prescience is evidence that the patterns she discerned are still with us today. In an undated essay, which the editors estimate was written in 2000, though it is difficult to imagine it was not a reaction to the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror that followed, she described the stifling of dissent during the Korean War: “Those who challenged any of its fundamental tenets were branded naïve, idealistic, or, with the Korean War, subversive, possibly traitorous” (p. 77). Later, in the same chapter, she explained that, “for students and young people in general, there was no political language in which to challenge the status quo directly” (p. 78). Reading this today, one cannot help but feel that Young gave us the language to challenge the “forever wars” before we spoke of “forever wars.”

In addition to challenging established truths, assumptions, and historians, Young invited new scholars to engage with her work. In a lecture delivered as president of SHAFR (Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations), and reproduced in the final chapter, she noted, “it is certainly our work to speak and write so that a time of war not be mistaken for peacetime.... I think our continuous task must be to make war visible,

vivid, an inescapable part of the country's self-consciousness, as inescapable as it is a reality" (p. 187). She elevated "our work" to something important beyond academia. She also paved the way for other historians to challenge the ahistorical or selectively historical approach of contemporary security studies. And on a more personal level, as one of only very few prominent women to feature on the syllabi of Vietnam War courses when I was an undergraduate, Young opened the door for other women to feel that they too might belong and

find their place within that scholarship. This legacy is carried forward in the fact that royalties for the book will be dedicated to encouraging scholarship in the field.

#### Note

[1]. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon* (April 1946): <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Aurelie Basha. Review of Young, Marilyn B, *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57115>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.