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“DO SOMETHING ETHICAL”

Critical Thinking, Theorizing, and Political Will

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Theologian Bernard Lonergan in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*¹ approaches human cognition as theoretically reflective action. Lonergan’s epistemology is tied to praxis; it posits a four-part sequence of experience, reflection, judgment, action. Action leads to new experiences in a constant cycle of evolving thought toward ethical outcomes. In “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian instructs that “theorizing” as a verb is dedicated to the service of community.² Barbara Christian observes that people of color theorize in narratives and prefer dynamic ideas that encourage the spirited resistance to attacks on their humanity. The action of theory and within theory is key for the literary theorist. Audre Lorde maintains that “silence will not protect you” and that the master’s tools will never dismantle the masters’ plantation house.³ Liberation pedagogies to contain violence and build communal futures are present in the works of Paulo Freire and Martin Luther King, Jr.⁴ All of these liberation pedagogies have positions on or theories of praxis. Indeed, all present pedagogies are important devices deployed for ethical acts. The argument here is that to do something intellectually rigorous, one must do some act of constructive good for the commons. That at face value seems to fly in the face of competitive and predatory systems that are Malthusian in their effect if not their intent. So, we can rephrase the philosophical and theoretical arguments into one injunction for pedagogy and instruction: if we wish to evolve beyond the predator–prey matrix of social (dis)order, then we must find the common good as tending toward health and protection of all, human and nature.

Where pedagogy is understood to represent learnedness, diligence, and moral character, uber-competitive nations built on the acquisitions taken from genocide and enslavement have a steep learning curve. US administrations, even when liberal, are excluded from the benign constructs that advocate and protect the poor and the disenfranchised (which includes all species). That is how empires,

even ones shaped by democracy, trend: they consolidate power by theft and coercion and posture as super humans or elites destined to rule by evolutionary dictates. If those administrations are riddled with duplicity, lies, incendiary propaganda, kleptocracy, sexism/misogyny, homophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-environmentalism, anti-prisoner rights, xenophobia, sexual predatory behaviors, then the flaws become not just liabilities but disabilities in terms of apprehending and pursuing the common good that is inclusive of all beings. Add allegations of involvement in organized crime (white or not white) and one has an ethical crisis, a democracy burning from within due to corruption, and from without due to disaffection and alienation of the citizenry overwhelmed with survival.

Moral statements are considered “unscientific” but without moral judgment guidelines or restraints on accumulation—of territory, water rights, animal parts, people—do not exist. The profile of this “era” is shaped by robber baron (the honorific title is self-aggrandizing, the adjective is meaningful). Theft and depletion of others and the commons for the monopoly of the few. Not because they are the most qualified to control (which is more of the descriptor of an authoritarian regime not a democracy); but because they have the concentrated power and violence that permits domination and expropriation and exploitation.

This brings us to the administration of the 45th POTUS or President of the United States, Donald Trump. POTUS 45’s disregard for law, democratic norms, compassion, equity and respect for marginalized or vulnerable groups—impoverished immigrants, LGBTQ communities, women, the poor, people of color, people of African descent, indigenous nations, environmentalists, human rights activists—indicates that the president is not a “good man.” He lacks empathy, veracity, honesty, and the capacity to sacrifice for others or for the greater good. His political performances are pugilistic, white supremacist, misogynist, violent, and narcissistic. The speeches and gestures of 45 are honed for “low-brow” television, right-wing radio talk shows, and beauty pageants that recycle auction blocks. They also work for “high-brow” (neo)Nazis, the “good people” on both sides disclaimer concerning an atrocity in which only an anti-racist, pacifist white woman was murdered in Charlottesville, VA.

As president of the United States his critics depict him as the consummate “snake-oil-salesman.” Reactionaries applied a similar descriptor to POTUS 44, Barack Obama; but 44 never leveled charges of “birtherism” and treason against a US politician. Insight eludes the current president and presidency, abetted by conservatives in Congress and a very conservative Supreme Court with two appointments made to the court by 45.

The anti-democratic norms, the valorization of a racist commons has not shamed or deterred Trump supporters, loyalists, combatants. His approval ratings poll at about 35–40%. Those who view 45 as their leader, and see themselves as his warriors and protectors, have found the prototype which they sought. In their pedagogy, he belongs to them as their anointed fighter and a consummate teacher. It is not instruction in rationalism that they seek. Lonergan’s insight is not

an epistemology that leads them out of an authoritarian wilderness where they believe they can survive. By all indications, those who are not wealthy will find their health, income, environmental protections, workers' rights, women's rights, disability rights, insurances for the survival and well-being of their families and kin diminished or damaged by policies that reject the consent of a shared planet with dignity and decency as the norm.

A billionaire who does not pay his share of federal taxes,⁵ a businessman who has been sued for scamming workers,⁶ students, and associates; a leader who consorts with or employs convicted felons;⁷ an open admirer of dictators and an apologist for torture,⁸ 45 illustrates the "master's tools" of which Audre Lorde warned. These are the tools capable of bulldozing a natural habitat to build a golf course or destroy an indigenous burial ground; disappear pristine public lands and parks into fields for oil and gas drilling; the tools capable of disappearing hundreds if not thousands of children from their parents on the southern border in order to terrorize already traumatized people; the tools fine-tuned to disappear hundreds *if not thousands* of children into foster care and adoption without their parents' permission—technically human trafficking; and exonerate police killings and paramilitary or fascist killings of blacks and people of color.

In the absence of rationalism or ethics for a shared commons, a white nationalist president can depict black/people of color as threats and competitors—for jobs, electoral votes, cultural productions. What pedagogy could undo such hatred and predatory power? There is a long tradition of intellectual and ethical interpretations of law, society, and ethics for the greater good. The presence of vice and violence as largely unrestrained inspire the virtue of critical thinking, ethical will and political action for the common or greater good (not restricted to a racial or economic or religious group).

"Virtue" in the Trump era will be defined as efficacy in containing the disruption of civic norms (admittedly, historically democratic norms have been applied in xenophobic or racist, heterosexist, and classist ways). That containment would recognize that a private real-estate and media mogul's empire benefited from shared affinities with individuals organizing crime and political chaos, while disparaging ethics, social justice and human rights. Such habits and protocols are increasingly operational as governmental norms. Civic law suits and oversight agencies proved more effective than a Republican congress to hold checks and balances among the branches of government.

Progressive pedagogies and instructions in civic duty would decry all of the above. Yet, in a profit-driven state sailing under the flag of racial capital and environmental depletion, a predatory POTUS did not invent a predatory democracy, rather he is the product of predatory democracy. Trump is not an anomaly. He is an extreme variant of a repressive norm that exceeded expectations, including its own, in consolidating domination over government and finance to shore up its legitimacy by writing law (through lobbyists and court appointments) that benefit the "haves" particularly those who accumulate with a robber baron code

of conduct. How to undo “virtue” as victory in predatory war? A critical ethical pedagogy would see the aberration not just in the individual(s) but also in the structures.

The “masters’ tools” will not build the beloved community. The pedagogy of the oppressed, labor on behalf of the liberation of the poor and on behalf of the propertied who benefit from their exploitation, can be theorized through insight and narratives. Yet when we turn our ethics into politics we will be faced with allies and enemies. Our ability to build alliances is fractured by vulnerable groups which prefer to sit at the masters’ table rather than labor outside for a greater democracy.

We can identify three instructions in the search for foundational ethics for democratic politics: 1. “sisterhood” is more of a projection than a reality given the rootedness and opportunism of white supremacy; 2. racism regenerates or reproduces itself rapidly in a combative arena; 3. military formations speak a language that recognizes their own ethical codes shaped by the mandates for victory through violence as superior to the ethics of civil society.

Lesson #1: Anti-Racist Sisterhood Is Unstable

Ideology does not seem to be a major feature in intersectional analyses; hence progressives seem at times surprised when coalitions with vulnerable groups do not materialize for ethical and political outcomes, such as women’s rights and the reduction of sexual assault. Seylah Benhabib’s writes in “The Pariah and Her Shadow” of Hannah Arendt’s biography on the 18th century Jewish intellectual Rahel Varnhagen and the appearance of salons as a female public sphere.⁹ Arendt began her biography on Varnhagen in 1929, finished it in 1938, and published the biography in 1957. For Benhabib:

Salons such as Varnhagen’s revealed the presence within modern society of an alternative form of public sphere, one that is more egalitarian, fluid, experimental, and in which lines between intimacy and sociability, the public and the private are renegotiated and resignified.¹⁰

Benhabib asserts that Arendt presents an alternative genealogy of modernity and a public sphere that resists the hierarchical male controlled spaces of the Greek polis; she argues that although uncomfortable with this “alternative account of modernity” Arendt never fully rejected its possibilities. Living the contradictions of being an assimilated Jewish woman, educated by elite German philosophers, including Martin Heidegger who became a Nazi (and was at one time her lover) made it imperative for Arendt to reflect on the meaning and contradictions of Varnhagen’s appearance in the world and the brief power that she wielded as an outsider. The contradictions are embodied in the choices that we all have: conform and acquiesce even to the unethical and evil or resist and remain an outcaste.

The choice for Varnhagen was between assimilation as "parvenu" or interloper or remain ostracized with political-intellectual independence of the self-conscious "pariah" who embraced her Jewish identity in an anti-Semitic world.

For Benhabib, the salon became a space of female power for privileged, albeit stigmatized, European women. Yet consider that both the parvenu and pariah would have been attended to by the captive maternal—a slave, maid, servant, waitress prohibited from public discourse and debate with the women seated at the table; the women who traversed the interior spaces of the salon (as opposed to parliament) who expressed insight, talked pedagogy, and lamented their exclusion from the masters' tools or their inability to consolidate their own skills. Consider that today our debates about ethics and Trumpian predations take place in campus dining halls or cafes and that our discourse does not invite the participation of the laboring women/men who serve tea and toast. This observation does not seek to shame anyone. It merely probes at the ties or bridges that connect us in a search for ethics and political tools for a global commons.

There are multiple tiers to traverse concerning subjugated feminized beings: whether parvenu or pariah women might seek sovereign powers by aligning themselves with a patriarchal or predatory white supremacy. Suffragettes' fight for the franchise led to the 19th amendment which granted women the right to vote. Some of those women argued that they should have the vote in order to counter the vote of emancipated black males. US democracy was built on racism. The year 2020 will be the 100th anniversary for this powerful tool won by feminists to benefit all women, including those hostile to feminism and female emancipation, and hostile to blacks and people of color. That white male candidates are marked by patriarchal politics and allegations of sexual predatory behavior toward *white* women seems to not alter the vote count or the base. The master's tools seem to be acceptable to the mistress if she has the power of gender parvenu within the house and can keep the pariah outside.

In 2016, Donald Trump won 53% of the white women's vote despite credible allegations of sexism and sexual aggression to defeat Hilary Clinton, the white democratic candidate who had the historic opportunity to become the first (white) woman POTUS, and further equal rights and legal protections for women.

In December 2017, the current democratic US Senator from Alabama, Doug Jones, defeated alleged pedophile and candidate of President Donald Trump, Roy Moore not because he received the majority of white female votes—but because he had received the majority of black votes, over 90% of men and women, with black women giving him the greatest percentage. Jones had prosecuted the Klansmen responsible for the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The four preteen and teen girls were civil rights activists. As slain captive maternals, their sacrifices were remembered over 50 years later in the special election.

In the 2018 midterm gubernatorial races in Florida and Georgia, white women gave the losing candidate Andrew Gillum, the black Florida

gubernatorial candidate 47% of their vote. They gave Stacey Abrams the black female gubernatorial candidate in Georgia who also lost in a hotly contested race only 25% of their vote. Abrams would have been the first black woman governor of Georgia. White women did not see Stacey Abrams, who would have become the first black woman governor in that state, as a parvenu with progressive politics, an outsider worthy of public leadership. White women overwhelmingly voted for Abrams' republican white male opponent, the secretary of state with oversight of elections who faced allegations of massive voter suppression likely because they saw Abrams as a pariah, actually perhaps more of a leper. To join with Abrams to focus on a "fair fight" campaign for all votes to count and be counted (in the future) should not distract from the disturbing fact a white nationalist in office might be preferable for considerable numbers of white voters, male and female.

Lesson #2: The Familiar Is Regenerative in Racist Warfare

Democracy was primed for POTUS 45 because the historical context of this presidency was shaped by the warfare of captivity and slavery. It was not just white supremacy that provided a platform for Donald Trump with his rhetorical war of birtherism, but democracy itself fueled by pedagogy and praxis that preceded POTUS 45. In this anti-democratic framework, warfare itself is a virtue; and epistemology reflects and ratifies it as right and just in ways in which unspoken or unspeakable forms of violence and predatory relations are normalized.

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* may or may not have influenced Donald Trump's ghost-written promotional *The Art of the Deal*.¹¹ The 2000-year-old text views war as permanent and the best war leader is the one that never enters the battle field. The pugilistic propaganda and constant punching of the Trump administration is tied to its realization that the best war leader is the one who never leaves the battle field if racist demagoguery for white supremacy and white nationalism has a compelling emotional pull in the United States and across the globe. Centuries old battles for capitalism and conspicuous consumption rendered captivity and dehumanization based in racism the de facto and de jure structures for civil society and political economies.

During February 2017, black history month, President Trump and Sean Spicer heralded Frederick Douglass for "doing a great job" that year in race relations; their language suggested that neither knew that Douglass was a deceased 19th century former slave fugitive turned abolitionist. Late night comedy seized this occasion to ridicule educational deficiencies within the White House, but they tended to underemphasize the willful denial among the citizenry of democracy's dependency on captivity. Later that month, on February 17, 2017, at a rally in Melbourne, Florida, President Trump invoked the slave era again as he condemned investigative reporting and independent journalism of the Fourth Estate:

I want to be among my friends and among the people. This was a great movement. ... I want to be here with you, and I will always be with you, I promise you that ... I also want to speak to you without the filter of the fake news. We are here today to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.¹²

The President denounced as "fake" mainstream media such as the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, MSNBC, CNN (Fox and Breitbart which championed his candidacy and presidency were spared). Welcoming his base with his brand of populism to discredit the *Post* and *Times*, Trump quoted President Thomas Jefferson's June 14, 1807: "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper."¹³ MSNBC's *Morning Joe* undermined Trump's attack on the critical press by pointing out that POTUS 45 quoted from Jefferson's (POTUS 3) attempt to deflect a journalist's attack on his morality due to his sexual relations with enslaved Sally Hemings. Jefferson sought to shield his lack of virtue and morality by attacking those who exposed him as a hypocrite.

A southern White House at Margo Largo, in Florida, two centuries after a southern White House at Monticello, Virginia, is a useful visual to contemplate if one wishes to argue that plantation style democracy increases the political-economic gains that disenfranchise minorities. The exploitation of captives and vulnerable groups can be elided if one denounces coverage of predatory behavior. As the Fourth Estate, the press has a duty to report malfeasance but malfeasance and corruption are protected not just by wealth but also by police and (para) military.

Lesson #3: Confronting the Ethics of Generals and Their Armies

Satirical depictions of Trump form a pedagogical practice. Some depict POTUS 45 as similar to Frances Ford Coppola's *Lt. Colonel Bill Kilgore* (played by Robert Duval) in the 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now*. In the film, Kilgore struts bare chested (an image also associated with Russian leader Vladimir Putin). Wearing a black Calvary cap, he squats in a field being shelled while young US troops desperately scramble for cover, and opines the infamous line: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." That grimly laughable moment diminishes tension because Kilgore promises the troops that the Vietnamese war will end (with the deaths of those attacked and occupied when the US invaded a sovereign country). No one of sound judgment believes that the "War on Terror" in the Middle East has a termination date. Begun in 2003 during the George W. Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq, which the administration falsely claimed had weapons of mass destruction, that US invasion led to a near-genocide and destabilized an entire region, allowing one terrorist act by a Saudi to become a catalyst for counter-terrorism that produces more terrorism in response to September 11, 2001. Kilgore's promise differs from

another anti-interventionist war film, Stanley Kubrick's 1964 *Dr. Strangelove*, in which Peter Sellers plays multiple characters including that of "Strangelove," an ex-Nazi scientist who inadvertently addresses the US president as "Mein Fuhrer" as he attempts to incite a nuclear holocaust.

Cultural images and art instruct us in ways that academic texts fail to do so: with humor, images, visual culture, and emotional intelligence. We can see the pathological violence military and police used to consolidate wealth: unethical and illegal wars, in recent memory from Vietnam to the invasion of Iraq under the false pretense of destroying "weapons of mass destruction." Violence that is predatory, not patriotic, can be masked when officers and politicians call for a blind loyalty to the state despite the racist tenets and investors behind most wars. Adam Gopnik addresses Trump's bombing of a Syrian air base as a response to the use of Sarin gas by President Bashar al-Assad. Gopnik dismisses the bombing as a "Trumpist ritual of lashing out at those who fail to submit, the ritual act of someone whose inner accounting is conducted exclusively in terms of wounds given, worship received, and winnings displayed."¹⁴ For Gopnik, "revisionist trends" by journalists and pundits assert a discernible plan in Trump's consistently aberrational behavior and blatant lies. Despite the "presidential mantel" that some attempt to place upon the shoulders of POTUS 45, Gopnik maintains that there "are no ideas, save a respect for authority evidencing itself in the use of force."¹⁵ Gopnik thereby concludes that the "Trump Syndrome" is 45's singular appetite "for announcing his authority through violence, a thing capable of an unimaginable resonance and devastation."¹⁶

Gopnik's reading of 45 offers a view of Trump commonly held by his critics. Yet one needs to also look over the President's shoulders to the three Generals who stood or stand in his shadow to project onto him a rationality and a civic virtue that he did and does not possess. The Trumpian praxis is the military ethos. When used in mergers and acquisitions and hostile takeovers in predatory capitalism and kleptocracy, the use of the emoluments clause in a law suit against 45 seems reasonable. Conflict of interest impacts not just 45 and his extended family but also those in his administration and in congress or on the courts. Corruption coexists with the rhetoric of a president continuously at war, with the democrats, with undocumented immigrants, with feminists, with environmentalists, with the transgendered communities, with anti-racists, etc. Former Attorney Jeff Sessions revived the war on drugs to reignite draconian policing and imprisonment because the war template was the norm for the cabinet. Fired as US Attorney General in November 2018, ostensibly for recusing himself from the FBI Mueller investigation into Russian meddling into US elections and white-collar crime, Sessions lobbed his parting salvo against civil rights: undoing the Obama era mandates to regulate police aggression in largely urban and poor communities of people of color.

Military and police strongly support the Trump administration. Three Generals worked to stabilize the Administration and project global power for the democracy

based on military strength. Between 2016 and 2018: Jim Mattis, Secretary of Defense; John Kelly as Director of Homeland Security and later Chief of Staff; H.R. McMaster National Security Advisor all dutifully served Donald Trump. All projected their stature and structure onto 45. Of the three, it is McMaster who is of most interest here because McMaster presented himself as an independent thinker, an intellectual with high standards for truth-telling. An educator and ethicist, his writing and speeches advocate for a loyalty to the military as devotion to the country. Although the US military historically functioned as the world's "police" and engaged in interventionist wars for corporate capital, McMaster refers to the "warrior ethos" as an ideal that civil society should embrace in order to support "our troops." Trusting Generals requires blind support rather than learning how to control the deployment of violence and ensure accountabilities for civil and human rights violations.

If the call to do battle for justice makes us noble, progressives need pedagogical tools to identify where perpetual warfare is not transformation but replication of prevailing norms. This issue is related to but transcends the distinctions between pacifist and nonpacifist wars for justice. In his November 18, 2014, keynote address at Georgetown University's Veterans Day ceremony, McMaster argued for perpetual war :

Our military is a living historical community and those of us serving today are determined to preserve the legacy of courageous, selfless service that we have inherited from the veterans who have gone before us. One of the patterns of American military history is to be unprepared for war either because of wishful thinking or a failure to consider continuities in the nature of war—especially war's political and human dimensions ... war is only possible through sacrifice.¹⁷

McMaster liberally quotes then sitting president Barack Obama: "As President Obama observed 'a non violent movement could not have stopped Hitler's armies.'"¹⁸ McMaster builds upon the former president's acceptance speech for his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize in which Obama asserts: "To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."¹⁹ He references western thought's foundational philosopher:

Aristotle first said that it is only worth discussing what is in our power. So we might discuss how to prevent particular conflicts rather than eliminate all conflict, and when conflict is necessary, how to win. And in the pursuit of victory, how to preserve our values and make war less inhumane.²⁰

McMaster instructs without self-consciousness of his own limitations and those of his "warriors." Again, quoting the former POTUS, although he would later serve

for a man who spent decades spewing racist “birtherism” to delegitimize 44: “As President Obama observed ‘a nonviolent movement could not have stopped Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms.’”²¹ Noting no flaws among US military (imperial might, racism, sexism and sexual violence), McMaster heralded the “warrior ethos.” Before he was unceremoniously fired by 45, McMaster campaigned for civil society to respect and support the professionalism of the military through emotional and psychological homage stripped from necessary analyses of US foreign policies and transnational corporations.

His military ethics fails to be grounded in ethics. It is grounded in victory and conquest to protect a nation that engages in interventions in search of markets and acquisitions. The pedagogy of ethical practice would have to relinquish the masters’ tools of warfare while attempting to confront when it cannot persuade the warrior ethos. There is insufficient theorizing on the nature of organized violence in democracy in order to expand its international reach and contain its internal rebels seeking greater democratic rights.

Conclusion

There are countless lessons for instruction in pedagogy for the oppressed. Currently as democracies falter across the globe, it is not only the poor and disenfranchised who suffer with anxiety about their future and their rights. The middle class, the affluent, those who believed in democratic ideals and the stability of democratic norms in civility and citizenship are dismayed by the present crisis. There are a thousand ways in which we could instruct ourselves, our communities, our classrooms on how to go forward. How best to delineate the brave from the foolish and then to shamefacedly admit that the brave often do what appears to be foolish: challenge authority; assert principles of fairness; believe in humanity; and fight for human rights.

Pedagogical lessons are needed that comprehend democracy’s origins, its repressive and progressive features, and its imperial military that ensnares and protects the nation. How we teach ourselves and allow others to teach us will prove pivotal in progress or retrenchment. That we attempt to do meaningful pedagogies, ethically grounded actions, to impede or reverse authoritarianism demonstrates that the future still belongs to those who seek sustainable, dignified life for all.

Notes

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- 2 Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1988), pp. 67–79.

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- 4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury, 1971; Martin Luther King, Jr, *Where Do We Go from Here, Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
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- 6 Roger Parloff, "Why U.S. Law Makes It Easy for Donald Trump to Stiff Contractors," *Fortune*, September 30, 2016.
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- 15 Gopnik, "The Persistence of Trump Derangement Syndrome."
- 16 Gopnik, "The Persistence of Trump Derangement Syndrome."
- 17 H.R. McMaster, "The Warrior Ethos at Risk," <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/The-Warrior-Ethos-at-Risk--H-R--McMaster-s-Remarkable-Veterans-Day-Speech--at-Georgetown-.html?soid=1114009586911&aid=0QipLubcAjw>
- 18 Ramandeep Girn, "Obama's Cynical View of Human Nature," *The Undercurrent*, Winter 2009–2010, December 20, 2009. Girn provides an alternative to McMaster's philosophy.
- 19 McMaster, "The Warrior Ethos at Risk."
- 20 McMaster "The Warrior Ethos at Risk."
- 21 McMaster "The Warrior Ethos at Risk."