

# **“I Will. Protect this House:” Under Armour, Corporate Nationalism and Post-9/11 Cultural Politics**

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This article explores the construction of U.S. nationalism through the branding strategies of Under Armour, a sportswear company which has achieved prominence in the U.S. marketplace and has a growing international profile. By examining their organizational synergies with the NFL, Zephyr technology, and the Wounded Warrior Project, and through a critical reading of the militaristic, philanthropic, nationalistic and masculine dimensions of their Freedom initiative, I illustrate how Under Armour has strategically sought to appeal to the heightened nationalistic tendencies of the post-9/11 United States. A central contention throughout the paper is that Under Armour’s brand development techniques, as mobilized predominantly through their website, offer important theoretical and empirical insights regarding the production, circulation, performance, and embodiment of post-9/11 cultural politics.

Cet article explore la construction du nationalisme étatsunien via des stratégies de développement de la marque propre à la compagnie « Under Armour », une société de vêtements de sport avec une part importante du marché étatsunien et un profil international grandissant. En examinant ses synergies organisationnelles avec la Ligue Nationale de Football, la technologie « Zephyr » et le « Wounded Warrior Project », ainsi que par le biais d’une lecture critique des dimensions militaristes, philanthropiques, nationalistes et masculines de son initiative « Freedom », j’illustre comment Under Armour a stratégiquement tenté de faire appel aux tendances nationalistes des États-Unis de l’ère post-11 septembre. Ici, une thèse centrale est que les techniques de développement de la marque Under Armour (telles qu’utilisées surtout sur le web) offrent d’importantes perspectives concernant la production, la circulation, la performance et la réalisation des politiques culturelles post-11 septembre.

This article explores the construction of U.S. nationalism through the branding strategies of Under Armour, a sportswear company which has achieved prominence in the U.S. marketplace and has a growing international profile. Since its founding in 1996, the company has specialized in “performance apparel” that is responsive

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to changes in body temperature and perspiration as an alternative to cotton-based products. Building on a first year turnover of US\$17,000, in 2010 apparel sales represented over 80% of the company's US\$1.064 billion net revenue (Under Armour Annual Report, 2010). This commercial success story is often narrated alongside founder and CEO Kevin Plank's prowess as a university of Maryland football player, his entrepreneurial character traits, and, less frequently, his training at the Fork Union Military Academy (e.g., Kraft & Lee, 2009). The company's "protect this house" slogan, used across their marketing campaigns, can be seen as capturing these features of Plank's biography by signifying the defense of athletic, corporate, and military spheres. Plank's personal experiences thus appear both reflective and constitutive of Under Armour's brand identity. Yet, as I will illustrate, the company has also prospered through a historical moment, and within a domestic marketplace, shaped by the events of September 11, 2001.

More specifically, this article traces how Under Armour has strategically sought to render its brand synonymous with the heightened nationalistic tendencies of the post-9/11 United States. Much of my analysis centers on the Under Armour Freedom initiative, launched in 2010 to affirm the company's support for the U.S. armed forces and public safety sector. Following an outline of my methodology, I begin by discussing the rhetorical use of the signifier "freedom" in the twenty first century U.S. Second, I illustrate how Under Armour has sought to foster its nationalistic brand identity through strategic partnerships with organizations such as the NFL and Zephyr technology. In the third and fourth sections I examine militarized, philanthropic, nationalistic, and masculine dimensions of the Under Armour Freedom initiative, before offering some reflections on the problems and possibilities facing those looking to challenge and reimagine post-9/11 cultural politics.

## Methodology

A central contention throughout this paper is that Under Armour's brand development techniques offer important theoretical and empirical insights regarding the production, circulation, performance, and embodiment of post-9/11 cultural politics. To develop this argument, I draw on videos, press releases, annual reports, interviews, and other promotional materials mostly accessed between April and October 2011 through the Under Armour website, which I view here as a virtual space where the company's brand articulates with preexisting, overtly militarized, and nationalistic discourses in the U.S. This articulation between text and context can be understood with recourse to the circuit of culture (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). The circuit of culture refers to a dynamic, interconnected framework comprising five phases or points through which cultural artifacts circulate: production, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation. Although I refer to this framework as an analytic guide rather than as a model to be applied, it is useful to consider Under Armour's website as a space where these overlapping phases articulate. For instance, the stories of wounded soldiers featured and solicited in Under Armour's Freedom initiative speak to the company's desired representation of their brand, the identities of particular consumer groups, and Under Armour's regulation of their virtual space, none of which can be considered as being produced independently of the circuit of culture. Therefore, by focusing

on the mobilization of the Freedom initiative through the Under Armour website, I intend to contribute to the “embryonic” understanding of “the types of [sporting] corporate websites and cybernetic sporting spectacles that are being produced” (Scherer and Jackson, 2008, p. 188) by (sporting) corporations.

This approach to the analysis of cultural texts follows the tenets of “radical contextualism” (Grossberg, 1997): it acknowledges that determinant links between Under Armour’s branding strategies and their wider configuration can only be partially represented and are never guaranteed. A critical reading of Under Armour’s website cannot provide an holistic appraisal of the wider consumption of its products, for instance, and the insights it does offer regarding the construction of U.S. nationalism are not uniformly received by consumers. Nevertheless, it is analytically productive to “reconstruct or fabricate the network of social, political, economic, and cultural articulations, or linkages, that produce any particular cultural phenomenon and trace, in turn, how the phenomenon (re)shapes the formation of which it is a part” (King, 2005, p. 27). My first task, then, is to illustrate how Under Armour’s use of the signifier “freedom” at this historical moment imbues its brand with particular nationalistic and militaristic meanings.

### **Freedom as Neoliberal, Militarized, and Promotional Rhetoric**

In the decade following September 11, 2001, the constellation of corporate capitalism, neoliberal globalization, global communication networks, and the unilateralism of the U.S. government and its military has been subject to great scrutiny (e.g., Dean, 2009; Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Kellner, 2007; Klein, 2007; Pieterse, 2007). Much of this commentary has critiqued the confluence of militarization and neoliberalism, each of which appropriate the notion of freedom to engender support for particular political, economic, and military objectives. Although many analysts (Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007) cite the late 1970s as the germination of neoliberalism, it has roots in the early twentieth century (Peck, 2010). Neoliberalism is often associated with economist Milton Friedman and his cohort at the University of Chicago, who opposed Keynesian social welfare policies in favor of the deregulation of markets, the liberalization of capital, and the privatization of national resources and industries (Harvey, 2003). Advocates of neoliberalism bring individual and institutional exchanges into the domain of market logic, including those of the state, whose responsibility in this framework is to create, sustain, and protect markets (Harvey, 2005). In such instances freedom is employed to render the economic liberation of markets, trade, and consumer choice analogous to egalitarian, social freedoms such as the right to free speech. One result of this position, Wendy Brown (2006) argued, is that freedom contributes to “the hollowing out of a democratic political culture and the production of the undemocratic citizen” (p. 692). She described the undemocratic citizen in this manner:

This is the citizen who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even of a liberal sort; the citizen who expects neither truth nor accountability in governance and state actions; the citizen who is not distressed by exorbitant

concentrations of political and economic power, routine abrogations of the rule of law, or distinctly undemocratic formulations of national purpose at home and abroad. (p. 692)

Neoliberalism, thus, becomes more than an economic framework or market fundamentalist doctrine when its principles are internalized by individuals and institutions. Freedom, in such instances, becomes defined as a freedom to prioritize and follow individual and economic interests instead of wider social or political concerns, and a freedom from others who might threaten the conditions in which these interests can be pursued.

Questions of freedom in the U.S. are of course not new to the present neoliberal formation: freedom as a personal, economic, and political value has deep and complex roots in U.S. history. In their sociological exploration into the challenges and contradictions of American values, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985) reflected on the complexity of “freedom:”

The ideal of freedom has historically given Americans a respect for individuals; it has, no doubt, stimulated their initiative and creativity; it has sometimes even made them tolerant of differences in a diverse society and resistant to overt forms of political oppression. But it is an ideal of freedom that leaves Americans with a stubborn fear of acknowledging structures of power and interdependence in a technologically complex society dominated by giant corporations and an increasingly powerful state. (p. 25)

While the position of the U.S. (or any other nation-state) within these structures of power and interdependence has been widely contested (Fukayama, 1989; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2003), those supporting and challenging such structures continue to mobilize the notion of freedom to advance their political objectives. As a germane example, the War on Terror<sup>1</sup> was framed by the Bush administration as a necessary means to defend the freedom of the U.S. and its “way of life” from those perceived, or portrayed to threaten democracy, free enterprise, and capitalism. Barack Obama (2012) recently echoed the rhetoric of the Bush administration when he reassured the American public that despite the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, “the United States of America will remain the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known.” Obama’s administration has persisted with its predecessors’ proactive approach to fighting “war in countries we are not at war with” (Quadrennial Defense Review Report, 2006, p. vi) as the continued deployment of drones in Pakistan and Somalia demonstrates. These preemptive actions have heightened the fears of many that the War on Terror is becoming, or has become, an endless war (Keen, 2006), or an everywhere war (Gregory, 2011), in which the world is imagined as a global battle space requiring the perpetual surveillance and domination of perceived threats to U.S. imperialism.

The domestic implications of U.S. imperialism have been putatively termed the “militarization of everyday life,” in which the global and national configurations of military operations abroad permeate the quotidian experiences of the U.S. populace. While the prevalence of military values and beliefs in the U.S. is not a new phenomenon, Giroux (2008) has argued that:

What is new about militarization in a post-9/11 world is that it has become naturalized, serving as a powerful pedagogical force that shapes our lives,

memories and daily experiences, while erasing everything critical and emancipatory about history, justice, solidarity and the meaning of democracy. (p. 60)

For example, the privileging of military values and research interests in U.S. higher education (Giroux, 2008), the galvanizing of Christian nationalist movements characterized by the ideals of Republican politics (Goldberg, 2006; Miller, 2007; Weinstein & Seay, 2006), and the resurgence of White cultural nationalism and heroic masculinity in sporting events such as NASCAR nation (Kusz, 2007; Newman & Giardina, 2010), have each been linked to the September 11 attacks and the ideological underpinnings of the War on Terror. In these instances, the freedom to express and assert religious, gendered, nationalistic, or other forms of subjectivity in the twenty first century U.S. has been shown to paradoxically perpetuate a culture of fear and social control among citizens (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Giroux, 2004).

In this context, Under Armour's Freedom initiative can be seen as trading in a language that has been normalized within, and aids in reproducing, the militarization of the U.S. in an era of perpetual warfare. Although the aims of the Freedom initiative are essentially promotional rather than geopolitical, these lines are blurred as Under Armour's corporate interests become increasingly difficult to disentangle from those of the U.S. government, its military, and the various organizations affiliated to and supportive of the War on Terror. Given that Under Armour has sought to develop its nationalistic brand identity for commercial purposes, it is useful to consider the interplay between corporate and state representations of nationalism.

Silk, Andrews, and Cole (2005, p. 7) advanced the notion of corporate nationalisms to describe how state influence in the construction of national cultures "is being eroded by external, commercially driven, forces" through which "the locus of control in influencing the manner in which the nation and national identity are represented becomes exteriorized through, and internalized within, the promotional strategies of transnational corporations." While acknowledging the transformative power of corporate capitalism in this context, Aronczyk (2008) has highlighted how governments have sought to (re)capture the ability to communicate desirable portrayals of their respective countries through nation branding<sup>2</sup>, a phenomenon which is patently evident in the marketing of global mega events such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup. These developments suggest that the state remains active in contouring cultural representations of the nation. However, these representations tend to require "engaging the profit-based marketing techniques of private enterprise to create and communicate a particular version of national identity" (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 42), thereby emphasizing the prevailing logics of corporate capitalism in the late-modern era.

The branding of nationalism, and indeed branding as a technique of capital accumulation, is worth exploring further here. The concept of nation branding illustrates how individuals harness various forms of capital available through nationalistic discourses to construct particular forms of personal and collective identification. Like branding more generally, then, nation branding is "less about the consumption of a product than about the social relations, experiences, and lifestyles such consumption enables" (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 7). For marketers:

The very purpose of nation branding...is to inspire a sense of collective belonging to the nation-state. As such the brand identity must not only be representative of particular ways of being but actually *lived*-embraced and embodied-by

the country's citizens if it is to be effective as a modern version of nationality. (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 10; italics in original)

Embracing and embodying nationalism is, of course, a highly visible feature of many sporting spectacles, and the role of the military in these events can heighten this sense of nationalistic fervor and serve to amplify the emotional involvement of audiences. American football, for instance, has long been a fertile site for fostering U.S. nationalism, notably during wartime when, as has often been illustrated in other national and historical contexts, sport is (re)constructed as a physical pedagogy for military purposes. In the past decade, various sporting events have been framed by the U.S. government and its armed forces as militarized spectacles to harness their cultural resonance and engender support for the War on Terror. These events become nationalistic displays of state security and moral supremacy, designed to showcase U.S. military strength, defiance, and intent (Atkinson & Young, 2007; Butterworth, 2010; McDonald, 2005; Silk & Falcous, 2005). The following discussion highlights the significance of American football, and particularly the NFL, in relation to Under Armour's genesis, brand development, and construction of corporate nationalism.

## **A Product of Its Time: Nation Branding Through Under Armour Apparel**

Although Under Armour has now fostered close and varied links with the NFL, the initial relationship between the corporation and American football was conceived through founder Kevin Plank's experience as a University of Maryland walk-on fullback. During the nascent development of the company, Plank's contacts within the sport served as a marketing opportunity when former teammates agreed to wear his moisture-wicking shirts instead of cotton-based alternatives produced by competitors (Kraft & Lee, 2009). Under Armour's formal alignment with American football began in 1998 when the company became official suppliers to NFL Europe, before generating significant brand exposure through their product placement in the 1999 American football movie *Any Given Sunday* (the first of several television and cinematic productions in which Under Armour feature). Following numerous outfitting, sponsorship, and related endorsements with high school, college, and professional football (and other athletic) teams in the U.S., the company became an official supplier of footwear to the NFL in 2006, a step taken "to complete the circle of authenticity from the Friday night lights of high school to Saturday afternoon college game day to the marquee Sunday match-ups of the NFL" (Under Armour Annual Report, 2010, p. 3). This strategy to secure their "authenticity" through alignment with American football's collegiate and high school leagues, as well as the NFL, has enabled Under Armour to weave its brand identity into the nation's cultural landscape. Exemplifying its success in this, the audio theme for its "protect this house" slogan can frequently be heard in NFL and collegiate stadiums, featuring the lyrics "I will, I will, protect this house" to the backdrop of a military-style drumbeat.

Under Armour's commercial relationship with American football developed concomitantly to the forming of closer organizational synergies between the NFL and the U.S. government. According to King (2008, p. 528), these synergies are

indicative of “the militarization of everyday life, and, simultaneously, of the ‘sportification’ of political life.” She elaborated that:

Although, historically, the NFL has positioned itself as the most militarily-identified of all the major leagues in the United States, until recently its role was confined to providing occasional ideological support in the form of athlete visitations with troops about to ship out to Vietnam or Air Force flyovers during the Super Bowl. In its new capacity as something akin to a for-profit marketing arm of the government, immersed in ongoing relationships with a variety of departments and offices, we might think of the NFL as a Department of Propaganda, neoliberal style. (p. 537)

Such developments underline the enduring influence of the state, or the U.S. government at least, in producing militarily-charged forms of nationalism through sporting spectacles. They also evidence the interplay between corporate organizations, such as the NFL, and the state in pursuit of mutual interests. In this context, Under Armour has strategically embedded its brand within the overtly nationalistic and militarized climate of the post-9/11 U.S. Recent technological innovations, partnerships, and marketing initiatives unveiled at the NFL Scouting Combine illustrate the extent to which these synergies have become central to Under Armour’s brand identity.

The NFL Scouting Combine is a week-long event in which collegiate athletes undertake a series of physical and psychological tests in advance of the NFL draft. The event provides on-looking managers, coaches, and scouts with standardized, comparable data on prospective players. In 2011, Under Armour was the official supplier of footwear and apparel for the NFL Scouting Combine and used the event to premier their “e39 biometric compression” apparel, which incorporates a “bug” into the sternum of the shirt. The bug comprises a computer hard drive and processor through which biometric data, such as heart rate, breathing rate, accelerometry, skin surface temperature, g-force, and horsepower can be recorded and processed wirelessly during physical activity. Significantly, Under Armour partnered with Zephyr Technology, a global leader in real-time physiological and biomechanical monitoring who also collaborate with U.S. fire departments, NASA, National Civil Guard Support Teams and the U.S. Special Forces, to design, produce, and market the e39 shirt. The rationale for this partnership is offered by Kevin Haley (2011), Under Armour’s Senior Vice President for Innovation, who spoke in anticipation of the launch of the e39 apparel for public consumption in 2012:

We partnered with Zephyr technology because they make this for the US Special Forces and people whose lives depend on the data they’re pulling out. So whether it’s US Special Forces in the field, or the Chilean Miners training to be extracted from the mine, if people’s lives depend on it it’s gotta be accurate, it’s gotta be precise data, and so we’re thrilled to have that level of precision in a product that now people can train with and understand exactly what’s going on with their body when they’re training.

Intriguingly, just as Under Armour highlighted the use of Zephyr’s Physical Status Monitoring technology (used in the e39 shirt) by U.S. Special Forces in their marketing, Zephyr’s CEO Brian Russell (2011) spoke of Under Armour in similar terms, within the shared context of the NFL Scouting Combine:

The NFL Scouting Combine is the perfect environment to demonstrate how Zephyr remotely measures physiology for fitness assessments, training and athletic performance before, during and after an event. Zephyr proved the technology with the U.S. Special Forces and partnered with Under Armour to open broader marketing opportunities.

Zephyr's proclaimed intention to use the NFL Scouting Combine to "open broader marketing opportunities" is a strategy on which Jansen and Sabo (1994) cast some light. They described how sport-war metaphors have long provided "government, the military, the sport industry, and mass media with an easily mobilized and highly articulated semiotic system and set of cultural values to advance and justify their respective plans, actions, and interests" (p. 1). The coalescence of Under Armour and Zephyr Technology around the NFL Scouting Combine moves beyond metaphors and further blurs distinctions between the violence of war and the spectacle of sport through technologies and sportswear products imbued with the physical, technological, and symbolic currency of the U.S. armed forces. These corporate partnerships, and the expression of patriotism through the Under Armour brand, are starkly manifest in the Freedom initiative.

## **Patriotic and Philanthropic Consumption Through Under Armour Freedom**

My house is freedom, is country, my brothers, my family, my being in my country. I protect it, I swore to protect it and even though I can't wear a uniform anymore I'll continue to protect it 'til the day I die. My house is our freedom. I have a responsibility to live a life in honor of the sacrifices that our men and women gladly give on a daily basis. Protect this house. I will.<sup>3</sup>

Unveiled in 2010, the Freedom initiative is the most candid example in Under Armour's fifteen-year history of its strategic alignment, or "natural partnership," with the U.S. armed forces and public safety sector. In the above passage, taken from a video featured on their website, six Americans involved in the Freedom initiative repeat the words "my house," before alternating their respective contributions to the vignette. Under Armour describe the ethos of the initiative as follows:

For more than a decade, we've provided the tactical end-user with gear engineered to perform in the most demanding situations. And now, with UA Freedom, we proudly announce our commitment to the military and public safety officials who risk their lives protecting our house.

The "protect this house" slogan has been used across Under Armour's marketing campaigns, usually as a metaphor for intensely competitive approaches to sport and exercise. However, in the Freedom initiative "protecting our house" becomes an overtly militarized analogy, symbolizing the defense and domination of sporting and geopolitical territories.

Upon entering CentCom, the division of Under Armour's website which houses the Freedom initiative, images of the American flag, military personnel on duty, individuals performing patriotic gestures, and various depictions of the Under Armour



logo, greet the visitor. CentCom is an abbreviation of Central Command, the term used by the U.S. military to geopolitically map the strategic “central” area of the globe, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and specifically denotes the headquarters which they have stationed in this region since 1983 following the Iran hostage crisis in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Just as the appeal to “freedom” in the title of the initiative carries semantic and symbolic significance, the reference to CentCom would resonate with visitors to the site who have knowledge of or experience with the U.S. armed forces.

The Freedom initiative is partnered with the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), a charity founded in 2003 to “honor and empower wounded warriors who incur service-connected wounds, injuries and illnesses (physiological and psychological) on or after September 11, 2001” (Wounded Warrior Project, 2011). Visitors to CentCom are able to purchase WWP apparel manufactured and branded by Under Armour, volunteer for events such as the Warrior Tour which provides “motivational entertainment” to U.S. armed forces members based overseas, and purchase gifts for injured public service men and women.

As part of the Freedom initiative, and in collaboration with the WWP, Under Armour has provided custom football uniforms and cleats to the Universities of Maryland and Texas Tech. To make explicit the connections between Under Armour, college football, and the U.S. armed forces, the uniforms and cleats are designed in a digi-camouflage style and bear the Under Armour logo. When worn in collegiate matches, players’ uniforms feature “a core value embellishment - Duty, Honor, Courage, Commitment, Integrity, Country, or Service” instead of their last names (Plank, 2010). For Plank, Under Armour’s founder and CEO:

The custom uniforms and gear provide us with an opportunity to engage college football fans and athletes, while uniting together to support the overall mission of the Wounded Warrior Project. We are committed to honoring our nation’s troops who risk their lives protecting our house and we are proud to support them through these games and beyond.

Plank’s words suggest that the Freedom initiative is as much a commercial venture designed to “engage” consumers as an act of patriotically-inspired philanthropy in honor of U.S. service members. Moreover, they exhibit how individuals are able to harness and (vicariously) embody the common sociopolitical values of the U.S. armed forces, the WWP, and Under Armour themselves, through these events, products, and services.

In addition to the WWP, the range of organizations to which Under Armour provides some form of support further underscores their desire to affiliate their brand with the U.S. armed forces and public safety sector. These include: Concerns of Police Survivors, Special Operations Warrior Foundation, Naval Special Warfare Foundation, Navy SEAL Warrior Fund, The Best Ranger Competition, Birdies for the Brave, Lone Survivor Foundation and the Pat Tillman Foundation<sup>4</sup>. While the formal and informal alliances between these organizations, and the frequent appropriation of sport in their practices and marketing, merit a separate analysis, it is salient to highlight here the growing number of nonprofit organizations devoted to supporting service members involved or injured in the War on Terror, and Under Armour’s avidity to create and publicize partnerships with a number of these. In addition to the mutually beneficial effect this has for both Under Armour and the

aforementioned organizations in terms of their marketing, these partnerships also serve to encourage “patriotic” citizens to either donate monies or buy products which affirm their national allegiances and provide the added satisfaction that their consumption is an act of post-9/11 philanthropy.

The “WWP/UA gift pack” scheme is emblematic of this fusing of consumption, philanthropy and patriotism into a model of neoliberal citizenship. A feature of the CentCom site is that visitors can purchase a WWP backpack, comprising assorted Under Armour sportswear, which is then presented to U.S. service men and women recovering from injuries and illnesses sustained during warfare. These backpacks are shipped directly to military hospitals, and citizen-consumers are sent engraved Under Armour military-style dog tags to “commemorate” their purchases. In a video available on CentCom, Dan Nevin, a retired army staff Sergeant and Director of Major Gifts for the WWP, recalled when he received the backpack:

I got a knock on the door and my wife was scheduled to come that night and it was a guy named John Melia [founder of the WWP], and he had a backpack. And the backpack had a logo on it of one warrior carrying another off the battlefield and I could relate to that. And he gave me this backpack and I kind of held it for a minute and I opened it up and in there was shorts and a t-shirt and all these things that after you’ve been in a hospital gown for a week I can tell you there’s probably no more significant gift that you could ever receive as that guy in that hospital bed and I can tell you I probably won’t receive a gift more significant than that for the rest of my life.

Nevin’s words are impassioned, and his sentiments echoed by two retired U.S. army Captains who reiterate the familiarity of the Under Armour logo on these products as offering some existential relief from their injuries. The representation of these and similar stories of war-induced trauma is a strategy which Under Armour employs to powerful effect elsewhere on CentCom.

## **Trading War Stories: Promoting Wounded (Sporting) Bodies Through Under Armour Freedom**

A further feature of the CentCom site allows for visitors to read, share, and comment on “Hero Stories.” The invitation reads:

Meet UA Freedom’s Heroes. If you’re an active service member or a veteran of the Armed Forces or public safety sector (Police Officer, Fire Fighter, or EMT), we want to hear your story of triumph and bravery. Tell us how you Protect this House.

This interactive facility is available in other facets of the Under Armour website, yet these particular stories invoke germane themes of tragedy, suffering, patriotism, masculinity, and defiance by articulating personal struggles to political values. Chad Fleming, retired U.S. army Captain, makes the following entry in writing, accompanied by a video interview with Under Armour:

First and foremost I'm a Patriot! I made a decision long ago to defend the greatest nation on earth knowing that it could cost me my life. This is something that I don't take lightly, that's why I chose to return back to the same unstable area in Iraq two times after sustaining very serious injuries during a deployment. These injuries cost me my left leg, but they did not take my will to fight nor my will to live everyday to its fullest. After becoming an amputee the doctors had a grim outlook for my ability to lead an active life. This only lit that burning desire to drive on and complete any mission they presented. That I did, I have ridden a bicycle from San Francisco to Los Angeles (460 miles) and from San Antonio to Dallas (360 miles). I have competed in Triathlons and even ran the New York City Marathon with my dear friend and fellow amputee last year. Failure is not an option, and we are only limited by our minds. I will never fail my wounded warrior brothers and I will never forget those who made the ultimate sacrifice so that we may live free in this great country. My house is perseverance. I will never quit until the mission is complete despite obstacles, discouragement, or difficulties! PROTECT THIS HOUSE. I WILL.

Drawing on Elaine Scarry's (1985) work on the body in pain, McDonald (2005) described how the wounded body serves to reify and "thus seemingly materialize otherwise abstract ideals including those of patriotism and nation" (p. 129). In his story, Chad Fleming's use of military language, imagery, and masculine reactions to adversity are crystallized in his wounded body, particularly when describing his "burning desire to drive on and complete any mission they [his doctors] presented" and to "never fail [and] never quit until the mission is complete despite obstacles, discouragement, or difficulties."

Traditional depictions of hegemonic masculinity in Western cultures, which portray men as tough, physical, athletic, fearless, powerful, and competitive, are palpable in Fleming's story (Robinson, 1995). His military background also structures his narrative through his use of the "mission" as a metaphor to make sense of and chronicle his recovery from injuries, and his portrayal as a hero is justified through his physical sacrifices and military decorations. Kleiber and Hutchinson (1999, p. 136) have warned, nevertheless, that the "hero metaphor", which can offer a man "an alternative image of being-when he is no longer able to walk," lionizes a subject position which may be problematic for those who cannot draw on the physical and psychological resources and experiences resulting from a career in the armed forces or as an athlete. Moreover, the warrior label can also be seen as idealizing a masculinized, elite athleticism in soldiers who have suffered physical trauma at war (Batts & Andrews, 2011; Woodward, 2006). This is not to deny the inspirational qualities of Fleming's story, but rather to highlight that the role of hero has enabling and constraining features. For example, Arthur Frank (1995) has described how individuals who experience physical trauma can adopt what he calls restitution narratives, through which the quest to return to a former state of corporeality becomes the defining feature of one's life story and understanding of self. Given that his story is a special feature on CentCom, and acknowledging his role in the WWP, Chad Fleming appears as a model neoliberal citizen, cast in the nationalistic, masculine, and philanthropic image and spirit of the Freedom initiative. For others who do not or cannot "recover" from war-induced trauma, who

perhaps question the promise of intense athleticism as a means for recovery or the politics and legitimacy of the War on Terror, the celebration of this subject position threatens to marginalize them in the shadows of the warrior hero.

Furthermore, in his invocation of the “protect this house” discourse, Fleming expresses his irrepressible commitment to defending the state, but emphasizes that his individual strengths and private endeavors were enough to overcome his personal experiences of adversity. The advancement of U.S. imperialism has often been attributed to the confluence of neoliberalism and militarization (Klein, 2007; Pieterse, 2007), yet the neoliberal forces which arguably inform Fleming’s assumption of personal responsibility for recovery from his injuries also promulgate the dismantling of state support for many citizens, including veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Consequently, the responsibilities relinquished by the state under neoliberalism, even in matters of national security which were routinely outsourced to a burgeoning security industry under the Bush administration (Klein, 2007), are increasingly replaced by individual and corporate forms of philanthropy and by a growing number of nonprofit organizations, such as the WWP, dedicated to the physical, psychological, and social fallout of post-9/11 warfare.

The 17 hero stories (including Fleming’s story) posted at the time of writing frequently describe bodies injured in warfare and recount journeys of recovery. Mattis, from Baltimore, reflects on his experience of injury during combat having seen a friend sacrifice his life to preserve others:

A room full of doctors telling me what I could and could not do was unacceptable. I had a new mission—one that will last a lifetime. One where failure is not an option. It is for the people of this great country that I stood up to PROTECT THIS HOUSE and it is in honor of my 1/76FA brothers that I ALWAYS WILL.

Alongside the recurring theme of perseverance in the name of patriotism following physical trauma, sport is often used to demarcate the extent of one’s recovery in these stories. Just as Chad Fleming spoke of his participation in triathlons, cycling events, and marathons following the amputation of his leg, Dan Nevin, the retired U.S. armed forces Sergeant quoted earlier, narrates the success of his recovery from the loss of a leg in relation to his golfing prowess. Others, such as Melissa Stockwell from Oak Park, Illinois who is a veteran of the Iraq war and Purple Heart recipient, voiced their experiences of Paralympic sport following war-induced injuries. Stockwell reflected on her successes as a swimmer in the 2008 Beijing Paralympics and world champion paratriathlete in the context of her life-long patriotism and, like Dan Nevin, is also on the board of directors for the WWP.

These stories often speak to the role sport can play in the (re)construction of body-self relationships for people who experience physical traumas. They also illuminate the biographical significance of service in the armed forces to these experiences. But perhaps most significantly in the present context, these stories help render the sociopolitical values underpinning the Freedom initiative properties of the Under Armour brand. These become interchangeable, blurring boundaries between individual tragedies, heroic recoveries, national pride, and corporate allegiance. Significantly, a number of the hero stories are told by individuals involved in the WWP who, therefore, hold a vested interest in the Freedom initiative. Their “official” narratives arguably act as templates for visitors to CentCom and serve to define acceptable and desirable forms of interaction and identification on the

site. This allows Under Armour to shape the development of their brand “through their ability to organize, and even program, the types of social communication that unfold in [their] electronic environments” (Lury & Moor, 2010, p. 41). Under Armour’s marketers, thus, use CentCom and the hero stories not only to “strengthen the relationships” between their brand and consumers but also to “determine the range of ‘acceptable’ (because productive of further brand capital) social positions and patterns” available to visitors to the site (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 7). It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of participants in CentCom clearly state that they do not regret their injuries. The accounts offered are of exemplary neoliberal citizens, who appear to accept their scars and sacrifices without posing difficult questions about the politics or legitimacy of the wars in which they have served.

Given Under Armour’s capacity to contour and regulate the content of the CentCom site, and the relative infancy of the Freedom initiative, it is difficult to discern popular reactions to the campaign. The stories on CentCom doubtless do not represent the views of the entire U.S. populace regarding the meanings of citizenship and the moral and political foundations of the War on Terror. But these online spaces are not sites for the democratic contestation of cultural politics. Their aim, in essence, is to associate Under Armour and their various partners with these heroic stories of recovery from injuries sustained at war. A visitor named reaperDelta captures these and other themes raised in this discussion in an entry to CentCom (transcribed verbatim):

Like many of my bothers in arms i joined shortly after 9–11 2001. Me and my brother both decided to turn down college football to do so. My brother was right out of high school with few offers from schools. I was already on a team and the university of Cincinnati. we decided that we could offer more to the world and nation with our physical gifted bodies and abilities. I have since been on 2 deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. my brother to Iraq. we are happy with our choices and thank the us army for everything it helped us with as we try to play it back with our time and service. i plan to try and get back on my college team but if my nation calls then I’ll be ready regardless.

## **Reflections on Post-9/11 Cultural Politics and the International Currency of Warfare**

What Under Armour has arguably constructed in the virtual space of CentCom is a site for the advocacy and affirmation of a particular form of citizenship, marked by neoliberal, masculine and militarized traits, and exemplified by wounded soldiers. The embodiment of and recovery from injuries sustained during warfare are captured as reflective of the Under Armour brand and apparel, or “the brand’s immaterial qualities—the emotions and ideas that are fastened to a product that have little to do with its physical properties—are materialized, or fleshed out, through the consumer” (Ebeling, 2010, p. 243). The use of online platforms such as CentCom to elicit, collate, and promote the stories of soldiers following their return from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is not a technique which simply manipulates U.S. citizens, although it does invite and permit only certain types of narrative. Rather, these techniques are designed to represent and identify with consumers already

caught up in the wider cultural politics of the War on Terror, who are in turn able to affirm their patriotism through spaces within and beyond CentCom.

The representation of post-9/11 war stories in virtual environments is not unique to Under Armour. In 2005, the U.S. army launched "Operation Tribute to Freedom" online as a means to broadcast the stories of returning service men and women to the public. The Wounded Warrior Project also offers the opportunity for visitors to "Meet a Warrior" on their website, a facility which is strikingly similar to the hero stories feature on Under Armour's CentCom site. This analysis of Under Armour's strategic partnerships with various public, private, and nonprofit organizations suggests that corporate nationalisms are not mobilized by any one entity, such as the state or individual corporations, but are constructed synergistically between organizations and individuals around shared sociopolitical values, and underpinned by the capitalist logics of branding (Aronczyk, 2008). How are we to challenge discourses such as those emitted through the Freedom initiative, and the wider formation in which the initiative is situated, given that its nationalistic and militaristic rhetoric is exercised through such prominent sources of authority and circulates so pervasively through popular cultural realms?

As I have argued, one of the most powerful techniques employed by those positioned to benefit from the perpetuation of the War on Terror lies in the representation of personal, tragic stories of war. The heroic, wounded soldier, whose traumas are framed through these stories as a collective sacrifice for our freedom, occupies a powerful rhetorical position which renders opposition to these discourses not just unpatriotic, but inhumane. These individual tragedies are clearly potent, passionate, and persuasive means for generating empathetic responses. Denzin and Giardina (2007) have argued that to counter such narratives we need to source and disseminate stories of equally emotive content:

We need stories about what it is like to hate and feel despair, anger, and alienation in a world bursting at the seams as it struggles to reinvent its dominant mythology. We need pedagogical discourses that make these feelings visible, palpable—stories and performances that connect these emotions to wild utopian dreams of freedom and peace. (p. 8–9)

The challenge for those who undertake this project is not just to seek out and disseminate these stories, but to create competing spaces in which they can reach and impact the everyday lives of citizens. This is obviously a daunting task given the power and scope of support for the War on Terror, and one which my analysis does not address directly. Speaking to this challenge, Metz (2011) has offered auto-ethnographic musings to confront how we are each positioned within versions of geopolitical truth which emit racialized and gendered portrayals of soldiers and athletes. Auto-ethnographic techniques for enacting cultural politics from below help us to "speak from the shadows of war" (Metz, 2011, p. 8) in pursuit of ethical, pedagogic, and even cathartic forms of knowledge (co)production. Moreover, these techniques promise to reveal and challenge not only how forms of nationalism are produced, but how they are lived, embraced, embodied, and resisted by individuals in contextually specific ways (Aronczyk, 2008).

Cyberspace appears to offer a site for the global dissemination of stories as lucid and impassioned as those communicated through CentCom. Yet the emergence of communications technologies since the telegraph at least has always preceded

suggestions that such technologies might alleviate or mitigate against the problems of the times. Moreover, as Dean (2009) asserted in her critique of the failure of the political left in the U.S., simply entering oppositional discourse into the vast circulation of online content far from guarantees that messages have any material effect in political, economic, or sociocultural spheres. Searching in hope for strategies which might circumvent such overwhelming restraints, I would advocate for interventionist projects which use the sheer speed and reach of cyberspace to support, dialogue with, and disseminate critical pedagogic and activist practices, many of which are already underway (e.g., Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Knight, 2010). Such projects would seek to privilege the experiences of war recounted by those who are marginalized by U.S. imperialism, such as citizens of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia, veterans, and conscientious objectors to the War on Terror. They would bring into popular focus, collaboratively, the humanity of the Other (Said, 1978), and the horror of warfare. If Under Armour is able to circulate its promotional agenda through the techniques of branding among various organizations and individuals affiliated to, and supportive of, the War on Terror, then such techniques might help to amplify oppositional agendas which aim to reimagine notions of freedom, nation, and citizenship.

The importance of developing analytical tools for this purpose brings us back to the future of Under Armour, a company which has achieved great commercial success domestically but has yet to establish its brand beyond North America (Under Armour annual report, 2010). It will be intriguing to see whether Under Armour opts to retain the militaristic elements of its U.S. marketing when it enters new territories, or whether *Protecting this House* will be imbued with alternative meanings to penetrate other national locales. Although we might presume warfare to be a less commercially viable marketing tool outside of the U.S., Falcous and Silk (2006) and Scherer and Koch (2010) have demonstrated how the War on Terror has been legitimated and defended in sporting contexts in Australia and Canada respectively. If the harnessing of U.S. nationalism at this historical juncture has given Under Armour some competitive advantage, then this underscores the importance of investigating the sociopolitical influence of branding alongside claims to the militarization of everyday life in and beyond the U.S. The success of Under Armour's international endeavors will be contingent on the versatility of their brand identity, the future trajectories of the War on Terror, and the articulation of their branding strategies into the emergent geopolitical and sociocultural landscapes.

## Notes

1. The Obama administration favors the term Overseas Contingency Operations instead of War on Terror. I retain the latter here in reference to the continuing violence in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Yemen, and the repression and violence its ideological connotations have served to perpetuate and legitimate in Chechnya, Palestine, the Philippines and Sri Lanka (Gregory, 2004, 2011; Ryan, 2011). This abbreviated list suggests that U.S. military operations are far from contingent, and that the War on Terror is far from over.
2. Simon Anholt (2005) claimed to have coined the term "nation branding". Whereas he advances it in arguing that the development of countries outside of the core capitalist economy would benefit from the logics of branding, Aronczyk (2008; and Powers, 2010) advanced the more critical perspective on the pervasiveness of branding logics and techniques drawn on here.

3. This quotation, and others taken from Under Armour's website, were retrieved from <http://www.underarmour.com/shop/us/en/freedom>.

4. Pat Tillman was a NFL player and servant in the U.S. armed forces. For discussions of the controversy surrounding his death by friendly fire while serving in Afghanistan in 2004, see King (2008), Krakauer (2009), Kusz (2007), and Metz (2011).

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