# *The Militarization of Toys*

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### *Takeaways*

- War toys such as G.I. Joe, little green toy soldiers, and "Military Barbie" shape the mindsets of children and adults alike, promoting ideals such as violent masculinity and military hierarchy.
- Toy companies sell billions of dollars' worth of war toys, militarized action figures, and toy guns annually across the globe.[2] These toys are cultural forces that carry implicit messages about identity, values, and acceptable behavior.
- War toys shape and constrain ideas about gender, gender roles, masculinity, and femininity.
- As kids "play war," these toys can have life and death significance: war toys can encourage children to aspire to join the military, to fight, to kill, and potentially to die.

After September 11, 2001, toys associated with the so-called "Global War on Terror" surged in popularity and profitability in the United States. Amid a wave of patriotism, the iconic military toy G.I. Joe and its accessories generated roughly $80 million in sales in 2001, doubling the prior year's figures.[3] The production of highly detailed action figures modeled after U.S. Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, and other counterterrorism units by companies such as BBI Elite Force and True Heroes mimicked real-life military counterterrorism operations, with soldiers in desert camouflage, replicas of advanced weaponry, and playsets featuring military vehicles and combat zones. These toys were part of a broader cultural shift that increased the normalization and celebration of the military in everyday life and perpetuated stereotypes about declared "enemies" in the post-9/11

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[2] See eg, Grand View Research. (2033). Action Figures Market (2023 – 2030). https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/action-figures-market-report#:~:text=How%20big%20is%20the%20action,Spin%20Master%2C%20and%20McFarlane%20Toys

[3] Pereira, J. (2001, November 7). Sales of G.I. Joe and Military Toys Are Buoyed by Nation's Patriotism. *Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1005090549134493200

world.[4] In the case of G.I. Joe, Hasbro began depicting "Cobra," his long-time enemy, as an "anti-American" terrorist group.[5]

War toys are more than just playthings—they shape perceptions and reinforce ideas in both children and the adults who tend to buy them. These toys promote ideals such as violent masculinity, rigid hierarchy, and the notion of the soldier as a "super citizen" deserving of special privileges. The connections between play, patriotism, and militarism run deep. For instance, five years into the U.S. war in Iraq, an online search for "G.I. Joe" produced at least 35 obituaries for military personnel that mentioned the toy, with family members recalling how G.I. Joe fueled childhood dreams of military service as a heroic and aspirational path.[6] The association between childhood play and adult military identity underscores how toys like G.I. Joe serve as tools of socialization that romanticize military labor and war.

### *A Brief History of War Toys*

For around 250 years, mass-produced toys have spread war-related worldviews. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the Hilpert brothers produced flat tin soldiers in Germany, and Lucotte created three-dimensional lead soldiers in France, selling millions across Europe and its colonies. In the late nineteenth century, William Britain & Sons revolutionized this industry by introducing the hollow-cast method, using less material, and making toy soldiers lighter and more affordable. Their detailed, hand-painted figures became iconic, influencing the global market for toy soldiers and solidifying Britain's role in the industry. Notably, companies produced toy soldiers representing imperial troops in elaborate national uniforms. These figures embraced nationalist and colonial discourses, portraying their empires as powerful and disciplined forces. Toy soldiers were exported globally, serving as cultural tools that celebrated the empire's reach and normalized the dominance of war in children's (mostly boys') play.[7]

By the early twentieth century, U.S. toy companies began producing toy guns. Similar to the colonial focus of European toys, these guns were initially tied to the mythology of "Cowboys and Indians" and the adventurous narratives of crime and mystery fiction, embedding notions of rugged individualism and heroism into children's play.

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[4] D' Innocenzio, A. (2003, April 5). Military Toys Big Sellers This Year. *GoUpstate.* https://www.goupstate.com/story/news/2003/04/06/military-toys-big-sellers-this-year/29665688007/

[5] Schwartz. R. (2024, February 23). Opinion: The Big Question as G.I. Joe Turns 60. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/23/opinions/gi-joe-toy-60-anniversary-kids-schwartz/index.html#:~:text=The%20fantasy%20at%20the%20core,only%20his%20old%20unfailing%20optimism.

[6] Boog, J. (2008, October 1). The Military Toy Industrial Complex. *The Believer.* https://www.thebeliever.net/the-military-toy-industrial-complex/

[7] Machin, D & Leeuwen, T. V. (2009). Toys as Discourse: Children's War Toys and the War on Terror," *Critical Discourse Studies* 6(1): 51–63.

The production of toy guns has undergone significant changes, with today's markets offering hyper-realistic replicas. The use of these toys has sometimes had deadly consequences, disproportionately affecting children of color, who have been misidentified as threats in encounters with law enforcement.[8]

Today, the range of toy guns offered to kids is broad: NERF guns, water guns, cap guns, laser tag guns, airsoft guns, gel blasters, and pop guns. These toys generate significant profits. In 2023, the global water gun market was valued at $304.9 million.[9] Toy guns are not merely objects of entertainment; they are cultural forces that carry implicit messages about identity, values, and acceptable behavior.

War toys likewise influence ideas about gender and gender relations. For example, Hasbro created G.I. Joe in 1964 as a direct response to Barbie, offering boys an "acceptable" way to play with dolls by dressing and undressing what Hasbro called for the first time an "action figure."[10] This term and Hasbro's framing of G.I. Joe in the distinctly "masculine" context of war avoided the perceived negative associations with traditional "girly" play, often associated with nurturing roles.[11] By the turn of the century, G.I. Joe had sold more than 375 million action figures.[12]

Mattel created its "Military Barbie" by partnering with the Pentagon in 1989. Over the next decade, Barbie expanded her role within the armed forces, joining the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps in various capacities and ranks. According to an Army public affairs officer, the doll was intended to inspire girls to become soldiers. From 1989 to 1991, over 60,000 military Barbie dolls were sold on U.S. military bases around the world.[13] This collaboration was a strategic response to two issues: first, Mattel's declining sales amid critiques of Barbie for reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes, and, second, the U.S. military's concern that public perceptions of female soldiers as "lacking femininity"

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[8] Sullivan, J., Jenkins, J., Tate, J., Courtney, S., & Houston, J. (2016, December 18). In Two Years, Police Killed 86 People Brandishing Guns That Look Real—but Aren't. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/in-two-years-police-killed-86-people-brandishing-guns-that-look-real--but-arent/2016/12/18/ec005c3a-b025-11e6-be1c-8cec35b1ad25_story.html

[9] See: MarketResearch. *Water Guns Market by Type*. https://marketresearch.biz/report/water-guns-market/

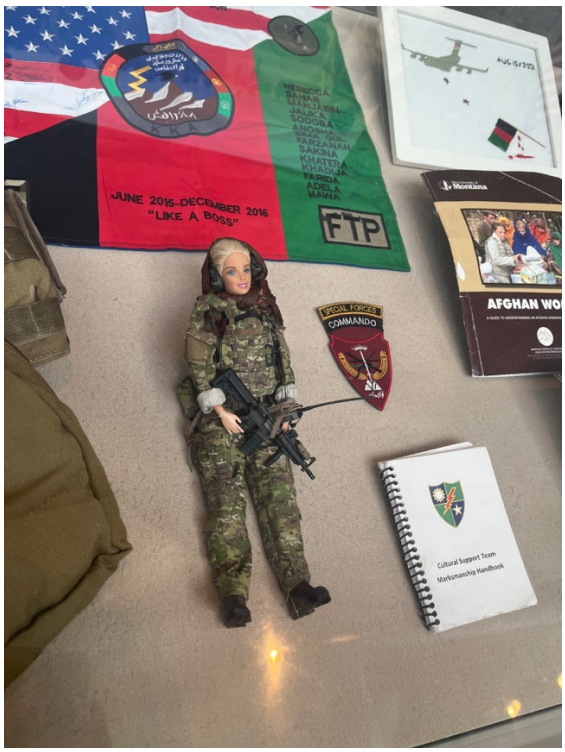
[10] The term "action figure" was coined by Hasbro in the 1960s to distinguish G.I. Joe from traditional dolls like Barbie. Today, action figures remain a highly popular toy category, appealing to both children and adult collectors. These toys feature a wide range of characters, from superheroes like Marvel and DC figures to figures from franchises such as Star Wars and Call of Duty. According to the U.S. Toy Association, action figures and accessories generated approximately $2 billion in U.S. sales in 2023. See: The Toy Association. (2024). *U.S. Sales Data*. https://www.toyassociation.org/ta/toys/research-and-data/data/us-sales-data.aspx?hkey=acea06b5-22e0-4bcc-a3bc-03532459e00d

[11] Godwin, V. (2015). GI Joe vs. Barbie: Anti-fandom, Fashion, Dolls, and One-Sixth Scale Action Figures. *Journal of Fandom Studies* 3(2): 119-133.

[12] *The Attleboro Sculptor Behind G.I. Joe: Philip Kraczkowski & Hasbro's First Action Figure*. Attleboro Area Industrial Museum. https://industrialmuseum.com/learn/famous-sculptor-behind-gi-joe/#

[13] Committee Opposed to Militarism and the Draft. (July-August 1991). Yo Barbie! *Draft Notices*. https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums1156-s01-i064/#page/1/mode/1up

would harm recruiting and the military's public image amid women's increasing involvement in combat roles.[14]




*Barbie doll exhibit at the Military Women's Memorial. Arlington, VA. Source: Photo by author (January 30, 2023).*

Although Mattel discontinued all "Military Barbie" dolls in 2001, during the war in Afghanistan, military women from the U.S. Cultural Support Team used a Barbie doll in camouflage and a hijab to engage in information operations with Afghan girls.[15]

War toys are vehicles for instilling ideas about gender, heroism, and power, often blurring the line between entertainment and ideological conditioning.[16] While it is challenging to establish a direct link between war toys and increased violent behavior,[17] their role in helping create what anthropologist Catherine Lutz terms the "military normal"

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[14] Rey Pinto, E. M. (@eva_rey_pinto). (2023, July 17). "Militarizing Barbie." *Twitter (X).* https://x.com/eva_rey_pinto/status/1680999171992502277

[15] This is according to a curator at the Military Women's Memorial in Arlington, VA. See information about the Cultural Support Team at: Tracy, Jared M. (2016). The U.S. Cultural Support Team Program: Historical Timeline. *Veritas* 12 (2). https://arsof-history.org/articles/v12n2_cst_timeline_page_1.html

[16] Kirby, P., Carter, S. & Woodyer, T. (2014, December). More than Child's Play? The Case for War Toys. *History Today* 64(12); Woodyer, T. (2016, June 2). Are toys becoming more violent … and should we be worried? *The Conversation*; Woodyer, T & Carter, S. (2020). "Toying with Militarization: Children and War on the Homefront," in *Discovering Childhood in International Relations,* edited by J. Marshall Beier, 155-178. Palgrave Macmillan.

[17] Zhecheva, E. & Matetovici, M. (2021, February 8). War Play and the Use of Toy Guns: Does It Influence Children's Behavior? Spiegeloog. https://www.spiegeloog.amsterdam/war-play-and-the-use-of-toy-guns-does-it-influence-childrens-behavior/

is clear. This concept highlights long-standing collaborations between the U.S. military and industries such as entertainment, fashion, and education, which not only generate substantial economic profits for private companies but also foster public acceptance of military values and war.[18]

### *Resistance*

Although war toys have long enjoyed popularity,[19] the industry has also encountered significant resistance from peace activists and concerned parents.[20] During the Vietnam War, sales of war toys, such as toy soldiers and action figures, began to decline, largely due to growing public opposition to the war. As protests against the war intensified in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a cultural shift took place in the U.S. toward questioning militarism and violence. Organizations such as the International War Toys Boycott[21] and the War Resisters League[22] launched campaigns against war toys, arguing that they glorified violence and promoted harmful militaristic values to children. Companies such as Sears Roebuck stopped selling war toys for almost fifteen years.[23]

This backlash led toy manufacturers such as Hasbro to reassess their products, and by the early 1970s, the focus on war toys shifted, with many companies opting to produce toys that emphasized peace and cooperation. G.I. Joe, for example, became a "land adventurer" who wore civilian clothing, a beard, and round dog tags that resembled peace signs.[24]

Like art and literature, toys are a product of their times, and the popularity of war and violence continues to be reflected in toys on the market. G.I. Joe saw a brief sales surge following the attacks of September 11, 2001,[25] and a subsequent decline after the start of the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003. Hasbro subsequently reinvented the brand through a

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[18] Lutz, C. (2019). "The Military Normal: Feeling at Home with Counterinsurgency in the United States," in *Militarization; A Reader*, edited by Roberto J. González, Hugh Gusterson, and David Price, 157-162. Duke University Press.

[19] TIME Magazine identified some of the military toys as the All-TIME 100 Greatest Toys. In the 1930s were the Army Men (little green toy soldiers) and in the 1960s was G.I. Joe. https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2049243,00.html

[20] Goldberg, R. (2023). *Radical Play : Revolutionizing Children's Toys in 1960s and 1970s America.* 1st ed. Duke University Press.

[21] Smith, E. (2016, November 1). War, Peace, And Action Figures. *Tedium*. https://tedium.co/2016/11/01/ban-war-toys-movement-history/#

[22] The Associated Press. (1985, December 4). GROUPS PROTEST TOYS WITH WAR THEME. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/04/garden/groups-protest-toys-with-war-theme.html

[23]Sears stopped selling war toys in its 1968 holiday catalog and reintroduced them in 1982 in response to increased demand around the start of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Poole, D. M. (1983, August 8). Concern Grows in US over Resurgence in Military Toys. *Christian Science Monitor.* https://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0808/080831.html

[24] National Museum of American History, "GI Joe Figure," catalog record ID nmah_313256, Smithsonian Institution, n.d., https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_313256.

[25] Pereira. J. (2001, November 7). Sales of G.I. Joe and Military Toys Are Buoyed by Nation's Patriotism. *The Wall Street Journal*.

successful movie and comic book franchise. The three G.I. Joe films (2009, 2013, 2021) have collectively grossed more than $800 million worldwide.[26] The comics became the biggest launch of 2024 for Image Comics with a pre-order of 225,000 copies.[27] In 2024, an active campaign started to advocate for the return of "Military Barbie," now as a Coast Guard member, pushed by a radio host in Michigan and spread by the media.[28]

By embedding military values into children's play, war toys blur the line between play and real-world militarism. The glorification and romanticization of war obscure its consequences – human, environmental, financial, and beyond. War toys influence public perceptions by promoting patriotism, nationalism, and support for military institutions. They often reinforce traditional gender roles, depicting men as warriors and women as supporters, which helps sustain patriarchal structures. Although "Military Barbie" appeared to challenge conventional gender roles by placing a woman in the context of war, the doll in fact reproduced familiar gender hierarchies, suggesting that women's participation in war was acceptable so long as it remained feminine, stylish, and non-threatening.

These toys also normalize associations between masculinity, violence, and militarization, meaning that these links become taken for granted. For some, childhood play with war toys like G.I. Joe translates into real-life military enlistment, illustrating how these toys not only reflect but actively shape desires and life choices with profound life-and-death consequences.

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[26] Box Office History for G.I. Joe Movies: https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/G-I-Joe#tab=summary

[27] Comichook. (2024, December 14). G.I. Joe Becomes Image's Biggest Launch of 2024. https://comicbook.com/comics/news/g-i-joe-image-comics-best-2024-title-sales/

[28] Havrilla, K. (2024, July 26). Where's Coast Guard Barbie? The push for a new career for the beloved doll. *Fox 17.* https://www.fox17online.com/news/morning-news/wheres-coast-guard-barbie-the-push-for-a-new-career-for-the-beloved-doll; see: WGHN in Grand Haven, MI
VOTE YES For Coast Guard Barbie. https://wghn.com/voteyes/.