It is a sunny fall morning in Southern California. US flags rustle from light posts and the streets of Eastmoore are lined with lawn chairs, rolling coolers, and people jostling for sidewalk space. It is the annual Veteran Day Parade in Eastmoore, and amid the local politicians, fireman, squad cars, and equestrian units are hundreds and hundreds of children. Some of these children form marching bands sputtering out slightly-out-of-tune patriotic songs such as “My Country ’tis of Thee” and cheer squads that encourage the crowd to yell in unison “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” but most of the children are clad in military uniforms and formed into neat lines marching together as human blocks through the city. Wave after wave of khaki and dark blue, line after line of marching youth: Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps units, California Cadet Corps brigades, private military academies, the color guard from the MEI, and even a vulnerable looking group of fourth and fifth graders holding hands shouting in singsong unison “Left! Left! Left, Right, Left!”

The United States is a warrior state. Not a state at war but a state of war. Since 1776, the United States has engaged in war or significant military action for 80 percent of its history and has not had one year since 1941 when the nation was not involved in some type of significant military engagement (Brandon 2003, 1820). The United States spent $682.5 billion dollars on military expenditures in 2012, an astounding 39 percent of total world military expenditure for that year. In 2012, the United States spent more than the next ten countries combined and a little more than four times that of China ($166.0 billion), the country with the second largest military expenditure (SIPRI 2013b). The total number of US military personnel in 2012 was over 3.6 million, making
the military the largest employer in the United States (Department of Defense (DoD) 2012b), and the military owns or leases 5,211 geographic sites domestically and globally (DoD 2012a). The United States was the largest arms exporter in all years from 1990 to 2012 (except for two years 2001–2002) (SIPRI 2013a) and controlled 30 percent or more of the market from 2003 to 2012 (Holton et al. 2013). The United States is undoubtedly a nation of war.

In a militarized nation such as the United States, the perpetual state of war and war readiness is normalized as military strength and violence are equated with diplomacy and national security. In the United States, military experience carves men out of boys, educates its citizens, and fuels the economy. The United States views the world through the crosshairs of a military sight and, as C. Wright Mills warned over 50 years ago, has “a military definition of reality” (1956, 191) in which the values of the military are understood as not only ordinary but also right and just.

Militarization, or the alignment of institutional, cultural, linguistic, governmental, and economic forms with militaristic values and beliefs, is the “step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas” (Enloe 2000, 3). However, the more the society is in sync with military values, the more accepted and ordinary militarization becomes. Thus, institutions, people, and cultural practices are legitimized through association with the military. For example, patriotism is defined as supporting the troops as opposed to critical dialogue or democracy. Bravery and strength are linked with martial violence instead of diplomacy. Military discipline is the solution for inner city violence, troubled youth, and failing schools, and war is a form of entertainment (Mann 1992) as video games, children’s toys, and films glorify military history, values, and practices. In such societies, as was described in the scene of the Eastmoore Veteran Day Parade, it is not unusual to see children playing at war dressed in the drag of military units marching through the streets of small towns.

Militarization is a raced, classed, and heterogendered project. For example, domestic militarization is found in the violence used on and against people of color (Gilmore 2000) and also “seen in the rise of the prison-industrial complex, the passing of retrograde legislation that targets immigrants, the appearance of gated communities, the widespread use of racial profiling by the police, and the ongoing attacks on the welfare state” (Giroux 2003, 39). The acceptance of militarization is also situational and bound by social context. The militarization of children and childhood is normalized within the United States (think children summer camps at military bases, Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps