Weaponization: Metaphorical Ubiquity and the Contemporary Rejection of Politics[1]

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Abstract:

This paper presents a discourse analysis of metaphor emergence from coinage to conventionality, responding to calls for metaphor analysis that take social context and chronology into account. It does this through a case study of the career of the metaphor of weaponization that became ubiquitous around the United States' 2016 presidential election. As a concept, the word originated in the Cold War defense industry as a literal description of the logistical deployment of weapons systems. As its use mutated into a metaphor between 1999-2003, it took on its contemporary moral meaning of over-politicizing things that had been, and should remain, neutral or peaceful. By 2017 "the weaponization of everything" implied that all aspects of social life were newly embroiled in illegitimate politics, making the metaphor a profound act of nostalgia that erased even recent conflicts. Weaponization demonstrates that a metaphor can retain its meaningfulness when it becomes ubiquitous by marshalling a temporal narrative tension against widely shared perceptions of recent social change. This is surprising because contemporary metaphor theory implies that ubiquitous metaphors become mere descriptions or

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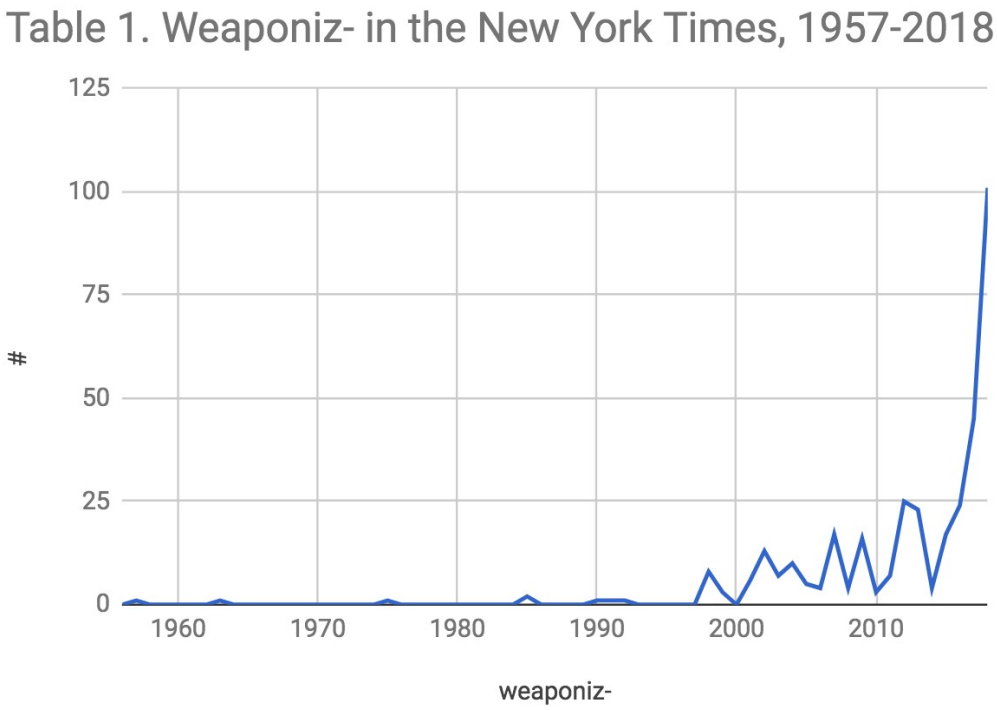
concepts if they are not used in different ways that are embedded in competing discursive communities. Because metaphors derive their meaningfulness through tension, *weaponiz-* shows how temporality, or social time, can be marshalled to attempt to create a shared public that understands itself as deeply divided. Weaponization is thus instructive as an act of folk sociology that exposes as social and conflicted, things that were previously natural or innocuous. Weaponization indicates a yearning for a shared polity in divided times, and shows that political metaphors can create broad publics that share the same meaning for all sides among competing political groups, even if that meaning is a naïve or utopian rejection of politics altogether.

1. Metaphor of the moment: *weaponiz-* exploded from 2016-2018

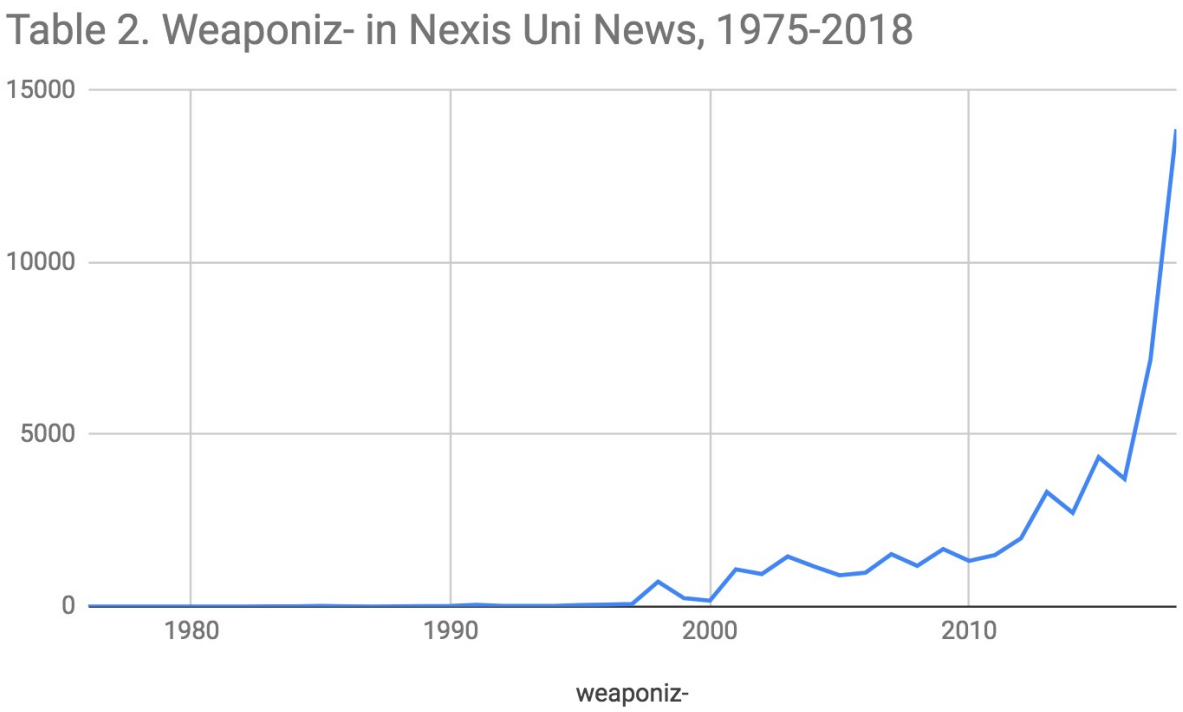
A question for cultural scholars is: what work does a metaphor perform if it can be applied to everything? Metaphors gain their "persuasive function" not only through the link they make between two conceptual domains, but also through the maintenance of ambiguity among these competing meanings that depend on social context (Glucksberg, 1986; Hamilton, 2005, p. 279, Author). The proliferation of a metaphor like "weaponization" thus raises the question: in our politically divided times, what possible shared social context makes weaponization meaningful in its ubiquity? The answer solves a puzzle in conceptual metaphor theory of how metaphors remain deliberatively meaningful in the face of widespread use, exposes the use of temporal narrative tension as one possible social context for metaphors, and provides a counterintuitive if faint indication of shared norms in politically divisive times.

In its 2017 annual review of words of the year, one New York Times reader grumbled, "weaponize. Never saw it before January 2017, now it's everywhere going in all directions" (Schuessler, 2017). This was an example of the "recency illusion" (Zwicky, 2005) because the word had, in fact, first appeared in the Times 60 years earlier to describe advances in nuclear weapons technology, and had been a staple of its pages since the late 1990s. The reader wasn't wrong, however, about its explosion in from 2017 through 2018 (see Table 1):



The incidence table counts all uses of weaponize, weaponized, and weaponization, glossed as *weaponiz-*, which had mushroomed in the pages of the Grey Lady in 2017 from 24 mentions in 2016 to 45 in 2017, and then on to 101 in 2018 (see also Table 4).

This wasn't just some verbal tic of one city's newspaper. The Nexis Uni News (formerly LexisNexis Academic) database of newspapers documented a similar trajectory for *weaponiz-* from 1975, the first year of data available, through the end of 2018:



In 2017, the database recorded 7182 uses of *weaponiz-*, almost double that of 2016's 3713 and approximately half of 2018's 13,878 (see also Table 4). Nor was weaponization a feature of one-sided politics.

Weaponiz- is notable because it is used by the political left and right in its post-2016-surge to describe similar objects, such as information and ideas. In 2017, for example, it was used in conservative-leaning media such as Fox News ("this weaponization of leaked information") and The National Review ("weaponize the redefinition of marriage"); more liberal outlets such as MSNBC ("information has been weaponized") and The Nation ("slander, sure to be weaponized"); and more centrist outlets such as CNN ("the weaponization of information") and The New Republic ("How Russia Weaponizes Fake News").[2] Differences among the outlets:

[2] Hemmer, Bill. 2017. "Steve Bannon Dismissal Discussed." *FOX News Sunday*, Aug. 20.
Anderson, Ryan T. 2017. "The Continuing Threat to Religious Liberty." *National Review* Vol. 69:15, pp. 32-35.
Glor, Jeff and Charlie Rose. 2017. "All Next Week, the PBS NewsHour Will Air a New Series Called Inside Putin's Russia…" *The Charlie Rose Show*. MSNBC, Jul. 07.

conservatives were more likely to describe government bureaucracies as being weaponized; liberals, the Constitution. But even as both sides disputed whether or which among a host of ideas, practices and institutions had been illegitimately politicized, they increasingly embraced the same metaphor to describe a wide array of things.

In 2017's New York Times alone, the year it surged dramatically, the term was used to describe the dizzying array on this abridged and alphabetized list:

anti-Hillary bots	applause
Big Data	Bill Cosby's catchphrases
conflicts of interest	critical theory
Ebola	ESP cats
government institutions	gender
ideas	irony
microbes	misinterpreted ideas
nuclear arms	NBA free agency
online harassment	Obamacare
religious convictions	rules of the Senate
paranoia	pictures on Facebook
stiletto heels	smiles
wit	Wonder Woman

These pairs illustrate the wild range of things at risk of weaponization, capturing both literal objects of the original concept (nuclear arms), extensions of that meaning to describe unlikely physical things that may be used as weapons (e.g. stiletto heels, cats), and hyperbolic extensions of the concept into metaphor (applause, wit) (see Table 5). As a March 14 essay in the New York Times Magazine pleaded, "If Everything Can Be 'Weaponized,' What Should We Fear?" (Hermman, 2017). As I show below, the use of the metaphor reflects a folk sociology to describe a shared cultural anxiety about illegitimate politicization, and a novel example of a social context

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Keeling, Brian. 2017. "How Far Would the Left Go?" *The Nation*,

Acosta, Jim. 2017. "Putin: 'Invulnerable' Nuclear Missile Ready to Deploy…" *Situation Room*. CNN, Dec. 27.

Reston, Laura. 2017. "How Russia Weaponizes Fake News." *The New Republic*, Vol 246:6, pp. 6-8.

in which temporal narrative tension maintains the metaphor's polysemy by contrasting, in context, a nasty now with an idealized, civil yesterday.

2. Metaphors and meaning

This essay traces the origin of the term *weaponiz-* and its transformation into a metaphor that became part of the broad "cultural repertoire" of 21st-century journalists and writers (Swidler, 1986). In so doing, I address one of the outstanding questions in metaphor study: "when, why, and how do people produce metaphorical language?" (Thibodeau *et al.* 2017).

We know that metaphors can create new meanings by juxtaposing a typically concrete "vehicle" or "source" (e.g. war) with an abstract "target" (e.g. hell). These cross-domain mappings can be unconscious and automatic ("a marriage gone off course") or deliberate and provocative ("art is the sex of the imagination"—see Okonski and Gibbs 2010). As Author summarizes, "cultural sociologists have long explored the implications of specific metaphors, not least because we define culture itself metaphorically—as switchmen, webs, structures, frames, narratives, signs, toolkits, and so on." Since the narrative turn, these studies of have shown "how social groups use the inherently productive ambiguity of metaphors to draw symbolic boundaries or construct meaningful stories." Weaponization raises the question of what meaning can animate such similar uses of a shared metaphor by opposing sides and to a dizzying array of targets.

To analyze this ubiquitous metaphor of contemporary political culture, I analyze the work *weaponiz-* does over time by attending to a) external events to which the term is applied and b) internal transformations of usage by c) coding each according to its target, source, and social context. Tracing the emergence of metaphors in real-life discourse makes it possible to see in

what contexts a novel metaphor appears, and to trace its passage into conventionality. This approach also responds to previous cultural sociological critiques of studies that do not account for both exogenous and endogenous factors (Lieberson, 2000; Ignatow, 2004; Kaufman, 2004) change over time (Griswold, 1987; Biernacki, 2000, p. 289; Lizardo, 2012, p. 391), and the "cultural turn" of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (e.g. Müller, 2008; Steen, 2008).

CMT describes the interdisciplinary research program that has extended Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) claims that metaphors are what "we live by," adding empirical neuroscientific findings about how metaphors are expressed in the two cognitive processes of categorization and comparison, the "thinking fast and slow" summarized famously by Daniel Kahnemann (2011, see also Thibodeau et. al. 2017). CMT may be summarized as demonstrating that "metaphors are the elementary particle of symbolic communication and a model for how we think," rendering irrelevant the distinctions between metaphors and other figurative language, such as metonymy, synecdoche, or tropes (e.g. Berntsen and Kennedy 1996, Polletta 2006, Townsley, 2006) or the modes in which they are mobilized, such as irony or sarcasm (Author).

In the career model of metaphor cognition (Bowdle and Gentner 2005), deliberative metaphors engage slow thinking, asking the reader to compare two seemingly unrelated cognitive domains ("scientific progress is a glacier"), while common metaphors fade to mere descriptions or clichés (also known as frozen or dead metaphors: "table leg," "time passed"); these are processed as categories (Steen 2014). As it passed from literal concept into metaphor, *weaponiz-* was thus an attempt to "slow" reader cognition, deploying a deliberative metaphor in lieu of other terms, such as *politiciz-* analyzed below, to evoke the affective and experiential connotations of a military metaphor (Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018). Bowdle and Gentner (2005) write that "novel metaphors involve base terms that refer to a domain-specific

concept but are not (yet) associated with a domain-general category." That *weaponiz-* can refer to a seemingly endless domain of targets implies that it is, at least in this particular historical movement, nearly endlessly novel, dragging inanimate objects and any erstwhile innocent gesture into the intractable struggles of social life.

CMT's cultural turn provides an opening for cultural sociologists and other scholars of discourse to specify the various contexts in which metaphors become apt or rise to conventionality. In the case of *weaponiz-*, I show that it uses a shared context of recently eroded norms of political civility to use temporality as the narrative tension from which it derives its meaning. This is different from existing discussions of metaphoric temporality, which focus on time as a resource ("have time"), time as a moving object ("time passed"), or the use of space to frame metaphors of time ("back to yesterday," "forward to tomorrow") (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Michon 1985, Radden 2003). Rather, the temporality implicit in *weaponiz-* is "social time" (Sorokin and Merton, 1937) framed not in universalistic terms but in a shared cultural context in which readers must already know certain "domains of experience" (Kovecses 2010), such as about eroded norms and a better yesterday.

At first glance, *weaponiz-* may seem to be a subtype of Lakoff and Johnson's famous conceptual base ARGUMENT IS WAR, derivatives of which are ubiquitous in everyday speech ("defend your position," "she attacked his proposal," "war on poverty"). ARGUMENT IS WAR, as the first conceptual metaphor examined in their 1980 volume, has attracted considerable attention in subsequent CMT scholarship (Ritchie 2003, Howe 2007, Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018). Implicit in ARGUMENT IS WAR, however, is an understanding that the target already has two or more "sides," an antagonist and a protagonist. *Weaponiz-* annexes targets that are not typically understood as having sides or antagonists ("smiles," "pantsuits,"

"critical theory"). This implies an underlying conceptual metaphor more akin to SOCIAL LIFE IS CONFLICT. Indeed, *weaponiz-* can easily apply to targets that might otherwise be seen as natural (the weaponization of fallen leaves by a neighbor, a plot to weaponize the weather against poor people). *Weaponiz-*, unlike its ARGUMENT IS WAR cousins, thus makes social things that might not otherwise have been seen as such, and implicates them in interpersonal conflict that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or unremarked. As an act of folk sociology, this may help explain the wide range of targets to which *weaponiz-* can be aptly applied, explaining its rise to metaphor and conventionality, a point to which I will return.

Existing approaches to metaphor cannot account for a ubiquitous metaphor because they explain the maintenance of a metaphor's ambiguity through different social-contextual usage embedded in competing social groups (see also Wuthnow 1989, Polletta 1998). As author states, "metaphors remain polysemous only when contrasting meanings are embedded in rival social group usage—otherwise they become technical jargon or fade to mere description or synonym" (p. 193) as with the terms "broadcast" (whose roots are in sowing seeds rather than radio waves) or "computer mouse." The ubiquity of weaponization and its use by competing groups to mean 'illegitimately politicized' thus poses a challenge: how can a metaphor retain its meaningfulness when it can be applied to such a wide range of targets, in the same way, by competing social groups?

In this paper, I show that metaphors can retain their meaningfulness by creating, not only differentiating, broad "discursive communities" (Wuthnow 1989). *Weaponiz-* does this by implicitly mobilizing a temporal tension between today's divisiveness and perceived shared norms of civility that, users imply, have recently eroded (whether or not such norms ever actually existed, as I discuss in the conclusion). Temporal tension is a new social context for

metaphor, maintaining deliberativeness not though polysemous semantic context, but through the cultural context of shared cultural anxieties. Temporality, or "social time," thus becomes another social context of metaphor that provides narrative tension beyond the text itself, and thus merits exploration by cultural scholars of metaphor.

This cultural anxiety about excessive polarization takes linguistic form in this deliberate use of something that is not "mere" politicization, a non-metaphorical term that arose in the divisive cultural politics of the late 1960s (see Table 3):

Table 3. weaponiz- and politiciz- in the New York Times

Concern over politicization in the *New York Times* has increased steadily since the term's debut in 1968, the end of a political period of remarkable political consensus (Author 2). Incidences peaked and then fell around contentious election years (1980, 2000, 2012, 2016). The 2016 peak is notable both for its steepness and the smallness of its decline in 2017, the period during which *weaponiz-* mushroomed. Journalists thus seem to not be completely swapping the anodyne

politiciz- for a more dramatic turn of phrase but to describe some new anxiety not fully captured by the previous term or its modifications (such as hyper- or *über-* politicized). That usage of *politiciz-* fell in 2018, however, may suggest that *weaponiz-* is becoming a conventional expression for a shared conceptual realm of social conflict.

Further evidence that *weaponiz-* is used to express some new meaning comes from the use of both terms in the same sentence, such as "the efforts of some to politicize and weaponize the issue [of human rights]" (Gutierrez 2018) or how the #MeToo movement "is, in some instances, getting politicized and weaponized" (Louwagie 2017). The comparison of the non-metaphor *politiciz-* suggests that the *weaponiz-* metaphor's use, at least up through 2018, is a deliberate political act with a semiotic purpose, and not an automatic or unconscious decision.

The *weaponiz-* metaphor is thus a notable example of rhetoric that assumes like-mindedness among readers who are framed as agreeing, if on nothing else, that things have recently gotten nasty. We know that people tend to talk about politics with perceived like-minded others (see review in Walsh 2004); *Weaponiz-* thus positions its readers as part of a shared concern that politics have recently become illegitimately disagreeable, and thus may be an attempt by authors to speak to like-minded others who can agree on little else.

This contradicts previous accounts that claim metaphors become meaningful by dividing groups against each other (Author). *Weaponiz-* suggests metaphors can have rhetorical power not only in (re)forming groups against enemies, but in framing readers of differing stripes against the erosion of idealized norms and values. Or to put it more simply, people may use metaphors to frame a public, even a fractured one.

Scholars should be interested in the explosion of weaponization for two other reasons. By describing "history," "ideas," and "smiles" as overtly political, this military metaphor makes

explicit the cultural politics that sociologists often describe as tacit or implicit (Luker 1984, Eliasoph, 1998; McAdam and Sewell 2001, Author). *Weaponiz-* may thus be understood as a kind of folk sociology, making explicit the tacit politics that theorists have previously described as a "socioanalysis" that is typically the province of trained social scientists (e.g. Bourdieu 1991). As sociologist of knowledge Lisa Stampnitzky noted, the idiom is strange because it "assumes that the normal state of affairs is peaceful and that war and/or use of force does not already pervade every realm" (Author 2). I document how the diffusion of *weaponiz-* operates at the cultural level by attempting to establish political norms around which specific practices are off limits, even as the metaphor's increasing conventionality also implies that conventional political norms are all but dead—murdered, even.

Secondly, the boom in weaponization also means that despite pervasive anxiety about America's fragmentation (Author 3), there is a broad discursive unanimity that all politics have been overly and illegitimately contentious. "Weaponization" is thus a metaphor that expresses a nostalgic amnesia, erasing contentious politics of the past to highlight a perception of shared, fading ideals (ones that may have been maintained in part by the absence of a metaphor to express the implicit politics lurking beneath them). The ubiquity of this metaphor suggests that America is actually united in a rejection of contentious politics, even as *any act, idea, or object* can now be seen as social and embroiled in conflict.

3. Methods

This essay documents the usage rules (see Gumpertz, 1982) of *weaponiz-* and its word forms, tracing its emergence first as concept, the endogenous mutations that pose it as an analogy, its conversion into metaphor, and its rise to conventionality. I use three corpora to trace

the metaphor's career. For broadest usage counts and trajectories, I used the Nexis Uni News database (N=52,459), formerly LexisNexis Academic. It has the advantage of breadth, cataloging major and minor "newspapers, newswires & press releases, [broadcast] news transcripts, magazines and journals, industry trade press, aggregate news sources, newsletters, web-based publications, scientific materials, and images." Nexis has the disadvantage of being extremely messy, including multiple versions of the same syndicated content, ignoring hits in which the search term was hyphenated, and attaching the search term from headlines to unrelated articles. Most problematically, there are more component sources in the database as time goes on, and the information about how many is proprietary. Nexis thus presents an exaggerated incidence rate, counting not only the uses in legacy newspapers over time, but also in upstart new media like blogs. A cleaner and less comprehensive corpus was necessary to code the context of each incidence to fully understand the career of its usage in context.

I use the corpus of the New York Times (N=706) to consider each source and target of the *weaponiz-* metaphor, including the context and excluding duplications, from the concept's debut in 1957 through the end of 2018. This has the advantage of allowing for comprehensive coding of all uses by target, source, and context. It has the disadvantage of parochialism—taking at face value one city's claim to be the national newspaper of record.

To supplement and provide a check on the generalizability of the New York Times corpus, I also compared it with that of the Google Books Ngram corpus. This database includes optical character recognition scans of approximately four percent of all books published in English up until 2008 (Michel et al, 2010). The dataset controls for the number of publications in a given year, revealing true usage rates. Because the dataset ends in 2008, it is not possible to examine the post-2009 proliferation of *weaponiz-* as a metaphor (in the Ngram corpus,

weaponiz- only ever is applied to weapons systems terms such as space, anthrax, or agents). It also differs from the rapidity of daily publications' use because of books' slower rate of publication. I found that any transformations of *weaponiz-* in the New York Times were reflected in at least one book scanned by the Ngram corpus within no more than three years, supporting the periodical's reliability as an indicator of the metaphor's career. Where sources from the Ngram corpus are more illustrative of the metaphor's rhetorical context, I provide them below.

As the counts show (see Table 4), *weaponiz-* was in limited use until 1997 (New York Times = 0, Nexis = 76) after which a constellation of exogenous events occurred, including nuclear tests in India and Pakistan, alarm about nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea, and concern over Iraq's biological and chemical weapons programs:

Table 4. Counts of *weaponiz-* in two corpora, 1995-2018

Year	New York Times	Nexis Uni News
1993	0	17
1994	0	19
1995	0	45
1996	0	58
1997	0	76
1998	8	726
1999	3	246
2000	0	174
2001	6	1084
2002	13	948
2003	7	1458
2004	10	1175
2005	5	913
2006	4	986
2007	17	1526
2008	4	1186
2009	16	1673
2010	3	1331
2011	7	1500
2012	25	1984
2013	23	3331
2014	4	2726

2015	17	4346
2016	24	3713
2017	45	7182
2018	101	13878

Weaponiz- in the New York Times experienced subsequent peaks in 2002 (N=13), 2007 (N=17), and 2012 (N=25). These are similar to the peaks in the Nexis database of 2003 (N=1458), 2007 (N=1526), and 2013 (N=3331). These incidences were dwarfed, however by those in 2017 (New York Times = 45; Nexus = 7182) and 2018 (New York Times = 101; Nexus = 13878). Given that usage has approximately doubled over each of these recent years, weaponization's meaningfulness has not yet been exhausted, and bears further consideration.

4. The Career of Weaponization

4.1 The Concept, from Space Race to Vietnam

Unsurprisingly, "weaponization" first appeared in defense and military contexts during the Cold War. It debuted in 1957 in the New York Times and Congressional Hearings via an interview with Werner von Braun, "Dr. Space", who described fears about the future of the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite program (Ward 2005). While the word appeared sporadically in Congressional hearings in that same year, only the periodical Aviation Week took the time to explicitly define it for readers who were not expected to be familiar with it:

> Weaponization is the latest of the coined words generated by missile scientists. It refers to the process by which a tested missile prototype is integrated into a complete weapon system with all its necessary handling, servicing, transporting and maintaining gear. Chronologically, weaponization occurs during the latter phases of the development test

> program, although planning and designing for weaponization begins—or should begin—almost at the start (1957, p. 57).

In its original coinage, then, the word describes the logistical process of deploying a new weapon throughout a complex organization, harkening to the Space Race rage for cybernetics and systems thinking (Edwards 1996, Kline 2006).

The New York Times (1963) defined the word for its readers upon its second use, supplying a glossary for a speech by Robert McNamara about the limited nuclear test ban signed that year between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev:

> Weaponization: taking the information gained in tests of pre-weapon devices and making a deliverable weapon from it. The first hydrogen explosion was a device the size of a small cottage, for example; it had to be made into a smaller package to be a bomb that could be dropped from an aircraft or a warhead that would fit into a missile nose cone.

Upon its first public definition, the meaning has not changed from its context of nuclear missile technology, and the paper continued to define it as "jargon" in 1977 and include it in scare quotes as late as 1983. The word was thus a concrete military systems concept in restricted code for much of its first 30 years (Bernstein 1971).

The Vietnam War brought an extension of its meaning for these same specialists. The Army Information Digest of 1965 defined "Aircraft Weaponization" as the adaptation for aerial deployment of existing artillery bombs, swapping out the fuses and explosive charges so they would not bury themselves without detonating in the soft soils of Vietnam. This preserved both the context and the meaning of the original concept: taking something physical that was always designed to be a weapon and making it effective, understood within and among a professional community of munitions experts, military officials, and government bureaucrats.

4.2 Transformation into Metaphor: Star Wars to Office Wars

It is perhaps fitting that the first application of weaponization to an abstract noun, and thus its career as a metaphor, came over fears that weapons would be placed in the abstraction of outer space. Even before the Soviet Union placed the first satellite into orbit, the post-WWII arms race generated fears that space would be weaponized. For example, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in 1946 published a statement against the practice, while a 1947 debate on the floor of the General Assembly of the United Nations stated that the "weaponization of space would lead to a dangerous rivalry in the field of space arms, which would have irreversible consequences for international peace and security." In this endogenous mutation of the original concept, it is not the transformation of the vacuum of space into a weapon that is described, but the placement of weapons into space.

These sparce early references ballooned after Ronald Reagan introduced his Strategic Defence Initiative, popularly known as Star Wars, in 1983, which explicitly argued for putting weapons in space. Discussion differentiated space's "weaponization" from the "militarization" that had already occurred (see Mowthorpe 2003), the longtime distinction between "passive" satellites guiding terrestrial weapons to "active" systems bearing weapons in space itself.

The weaponization of space thus marked a transformation of the concept away from the deployment of a weapon into military systems to the physical placement of a weapon, a mutation that becomes crucial for its later transformation into humorous hyperbole. Subsequent appearances of weaponization in the New York Times attend to Iraq's potential use of biological or chemical weapons in Scud missiles (1990-8), North Korea's nuclear program (1992), and the 1998 tests of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and India. For example, a 1998 editorial in the New

York Times described the steps to stopping the South Asian rivals from becoming full nuclear powers: “A number of actions need to be prevented, including unauthorized launch, accidental launch, weaponization of delivery vehicles, a nuclear arms race and, most important, a nuclear exchange” (Reiss, 1998).

Another such mutation, albeit a slight one, occurred in 1999 in the context of Chinese espionage in a U.S. weapons laboratory. “The weaponization of stolen nuclear secrets” applied the term to an abstract noun (“secrets”), although preserving the meaning of taking that information and turning it into a concrete weapon capable of being delivered (Broad, 1999). The concept thus retained its original meaning and contexts through 1999 despite slight endogenous mutations in which it was applied to abstractions such as information or used to mean “the placement of weapons in.”

The first incidence of the metaphor being used for hyperbolic effect appeared in the New York Times in 1999 (there are no such incidence in the Google Ngram Corpus, nor do I find any before 1999 in the Nexis Uni News corpus). In that year appeared a humorous piece entitled “ON THE JOB: Space Invaders, Just a Desk Away,” which described the annoying habits of coworkers. One interviewee described an administrative assistant who “weaponized her telephone for daily battle for much of the working day” (Van Gelder, 1999). The humor of this metaphor worked because the title evoked its original context of the space and arms races, relying on an analogy between the abstraction of outer space and the physical space of an adjacent desk. This metaphor also retained its original content as well: the article describes how the phone is part of an entire system of acts by which the secretary annoys her neighbors. It would be years before such humorous hyperbole would appear again in any of the corpora

studied here, suggesting that its passage into metaphor happened independently by different authors.

4.3 Gulf War to Total War

The surge in usage after 9/11 referred exclusively to the second Gulf War and domestic anthrax and ricin attacks, and was literal not metaphoric. Weaponize was on the list of the American Dialect Society's candidates for "word of the year" for 2001 (Scott, 2002), for example, and in his November 2001 syndicated "On Language" column, conservative columnist William Safire noted, "There should be no debate over the meaning of weaponized: a biological or chemical agent "put in a form that can be used effectively in a weapon."' This erased the extension of the concept to abstract nouns (space, secrets), asserting that the word was, in effect, not a metaphor. Rather, the post 9-11 spike in the incidence of *weaponiz-* describes the use of the Federal mails to deliver anthrax and ricin in domestic terror attacks.

The 9/11 attacks demonstrate how *weaponiz-* was still firmly embedded in actual military conflict in 2001. Surprisingly, *weaponiz-* was hardly ever used to refer to the passenger airlines used in the 9/11 attacks, although that use bore many of the hallmarks of the original concept: the systematic activation and deployment of something that could already be used in weapons systems to cause physical harm in political conflict. Such usage does not appear in either the New York Times or Ngram corpora for 2001, and only twice in Nexis Uni News.[3] This is strong evidence that despite its use as hyperbole two years earlier, the word in 2001 was still deeply

[3] Searches were conducted for "weaponization of *", "* was weaponized", " * were weaponized", "weaponize a *", "weaponize *" where * = *plane-*, aircraft, *jet-*, *air-*, commercial, passenger. It appeared twice in the Nexis Uni News corpus: in industry newsletter Air Safety Week's piece about anti-hijacking measures that would make aircraft "de-weaponized" (scare quotes in original), and an editorial by Marleen S. Barr about the development of missile shields "well before weaponized planes fell from the sky," which appeared in four regional newspapers in the San Francisco Bay Area (the Alameda Times-Star, the Tri-Valley Herald, the East Bay Times, and the San Jose Mercury News) and also in the Nassau and Suffolk Counties Edition of Newsday (e.g. Barr 2001).

embedded within the context of things manufactured to be weapons (nuclear arms, anthrax) and *not* the illicit use of things as weapons that were not intended to be. Such counterfactual context also raises the possibility that the 1999 humorous metaphor of the weaponized telephone implied that telephones were intended to be used as weapons—just not against coworkers.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan provided the exogenous context for two slight mutations of the concept and its increased use from 2001 to 2002 in both the New York Times (6 to 13) and Nexis Uni News (174 to 1084). One of these mutations extended its meaning, and other began its career into contemporary metaphor. The first was the mutation of the meaning to refer to the provision of weapons to somebody or something. For example, in 2002 a reporter embedded with U.S. troops described the U.S. strategy of providing guns to friendly warlords: "a day before his march on Kandahar began, Gul Agha assembled his newly weaponized fighters." This extension of the placement of weapons into space may be a layperson's naïve adaptation of military restricted code along the usage rules of suffix *-ized*, or it may be an apt application of the concept to describe the transformation of previously unarmed and untrained men into a deployable fighting force. This polysemous ambiguity provides a foundation for its later transformation into hyperbole.

It was this policy of embedding reporters within military units that provided the exogenous context through which the contemporary metaphor emerged for the second time after the "office wars" piece of 1999. A 2003 New York Times editorial titled "In This War, News is a Weapon" questioned the independence of the media:

> In Iraq, the Bush administration has beaten the press at its own game. It has turned the media into a weapon of war, using the information it provides to harass and intimidate the Iraqi military leadership… [but] at this point in the war, it is entirely unclear whether its

> strategy will achieve the results that were intended when the media was weaponized (Truscott, 2003).

This use bears all the hallmarks of the contemporary proliferation of the *weaponiz-* metaphor and its peak use in the Nexis database until the contentious 2008 elections (N=1458). It was consistent with previous mutations to refer to abstract nouns (secrets, media); it mobilized dual meanings through analogy (reporters are deployed into military systems and/or the media has been provided with weapons) and hyperbole (reporters have been made into weapons).

This metaphorical use marked a departure, however, from previous restricted code distinctions between militarization (the use of something that provides information for military purposes, whether satellites or reporters) and the active provision of weapons (such as to spacecraft or friendly Afghan forces). That the distinction between militarization and weaponization faded with this mutation is supported by usage in testy letter to the editor only three years later that chastised the paper for ignoring the distinction in its reporting (Cleland, 2006). *Weaponiz-* thus, by 2003, acquired its contemporary moral use to mean the recent and illegitimate transformation of something into a weapon that was never intended to be such—a temporal contrast that ignored the longstanding collaboration of the media in war, as I discuss in the conclusion.

This 2003 usage also marked the introduction of another hallmark of contemporary use: the mobilization of nostalgia and organized forgetting through temporal comparison. While the embeddedness of troops might have been new in Gulf War II compared to its predecessor, it was a practice that was common in earlier conflicts as recently as Vietnam (e.g. Paul and Kim 2004). "The weaponization of the media" thus highlights contemporary dangers in contrast with to a hypothetically (or hopefully) rosier past.

Older uses did not disappear but continued alongside the contemporary metaphor. These included a 2006 show of lingerie and uniforms at the Fashion Institute of Technology ("The Weaponized Woman"), concern that concrete planters struck by cars could injure passersby ("be weaponized"), a humorous piece about the number of celebrities flinging their cell phones at adversaries, incredulity about the TSA's confiscation of sporks as potential weapons, and multiple mentions of the quite literal description of Rose McGowan's character in the movie 2007 movie Grindhouse (see Figure 2). This last bears remark for its inversion of the typical metaphor juxtaposition of source and target, and its historical context.

Figure 2. Not a metaphor: Rose McGowan as Cherry Darling in 2007

The character is described as having a weaponized prosthetic leg in the New York Times movie listing of the Rodriguez and Tarantino double feature (Dimension Films). Image from The Telegraph (White 2018).

The New York Times movie listings in 2007 and 2008 repeatedly described the character as having a "weaponized prosthetic leg." This marks the maturity of *weaponiz-* as a metaphor because here "weapon" it is the vehicle of meaning, rather than the target: "prosthetic leg" is the concept whose ambiguous relationship to an assault rifle is being activated by the juxtaposition.

The film also unwittingly played a role in the mass proliferation of weaponization in 2017: it was during the making of this film that McGowan alleges she was raped by Harvey Weinstein. This accusation sparked the #MeToo movement which caused a sea change in public discussions of sexual assault (White 2018), a notable source of weaponization anxieties discussed further in the conclusion.

4.4 The weaponization of everything: 2009-

The contentious politics following Barack Obama's election put *weaponiz-* into regular, if measured use, by reporters and writers. 2009 marked an increase in the term's use over 2008 in both the New York Times (4 to 16) and Nexis Uni News (1186 to 1673). Mere days after his election, Charles Blow described how the Republican Party had "weaponized morality" after Ronald Reagan's reelection in a 2008 piece. Two weeks after the inauguration, another New York Times reporter wrote that "the very word, welfare, was weaponized last week" (DeParle 2009). Congressman Barney Frank coined a phrase that columnist and Nobel Prize laureate Paul Krugman subsequently adopted, "weaponized Keynsianism," which he defined as "the view that the government does not create jobs when it funds the building of bridges or important research or retrains workers, but when it builds airplanes that are never going to be used in combat, that is of course, economic salvation." This version of the metaphor works through the maintenance of ambiguity about the use of defense spending to create weapons, or the use of harmful rhetoric against non-military Keynesian spending.

Obama-era uses of *weaponiz-* did not all refer to the realm of institutional or governmental politics, but to the temporal contrast with new innovations. A 2009 Times report on a website that used algorithms to analyze movie studio email promotions described this as

"weaponized spam analytics." And the contemporary use of the metaphor received as close to a definition only in the arts pages, where the painter Richard Deon was described as creating new art that was easily "'weaponized,' meaning heavily politicized" (Lombardi, 2010). This definition captures some of the contemporary meaning, but not the humorous hyperbole that accompanied 2009 descriptions of the eponymous movie's "Sharktopus" or the "weaponized" drum and bass of that music genre's signature sound. Nor does mere politicization describe the "angular, quietly weaponized dialogue" that a critic detects in Lena Dunham's movie *Tiny Furniture*. Outside the Times, comedy items included a 2010 description of martial arts movie *Chocolate* as "weaponized autism," sparking a series of internet memes popular with the autistic community (Caldwell 2017). Thus contemporary weaponization is not merely politicized but aesthetic and/or affective as well; it can be restrained and tasteful (dialogue, paintings) or hyperbolically tacky (Sharktopus, spam email). All of these examples, however, involved a temporal rhetorical tension with the recent past of normal politics.

2009 also marked the first year in which all these contemporary uses appeared in the New York Times simultaneously with the original concept (see Table 5).

Table 5. Meanings of *weaponiz-* in the 2009 New York Times

Meaning	Context
Literal concept *(concrete weapons system)*	"North Korea Says It Has 'Weaponized' Plutonium" "Weaponization and nuclear technology are two separate issues" "the mailed anthrax had been 'weaponized' with … chemical additives"
Analogy *(used as weapon)*	"a snow globe-turned-crystal ball is weaponized in a search for snacks"
Mutation$_1$ *(to provide with actual weapons)*	Palestine as "a weaponized Arab country"
Mutation$_2$	"a shady plot to weaponize the weather"

(neutral noun never intended as weapon)	"ability to weaponize the [radio] spectrum to detonate [bombs]"
Hyperbole	child "weaponizes" a small American flag to pierce her sister's coat
(object not used	"weaponized spam analytics" to predict movie prizes
for actual harm)	a spicy po'boy sandwich is "stale bread weaponized"

These uses show *weaponiz-* was simultaneously used in literal ways conceptually true to its 1957 coinage alongside its subsequent uses as analogy, mutation to provide with weapons, and the 1999-2003 mutation into hyperbole that includes nostalgic amnesia. All four uses were again in use in 2017 to form the partial list with which this paper began in section 1.

5. Nostalgic amnesia by other means: metaphoric ubiquity

If politics is war by other means, then the contemporary proliferation of weaponization is another means of discursively organizing a nostalgic amnesia by framing a public that can agree, if on nothing else, that politics have recently become overly nasty. This thus adds to Author's argument that metaphors retain their meaningfulness only by being embedded in competing social groups, by demonstrating that metaphors may also be used to frame a fractured readership around shared values. With *weaponiz-*, the rhetorical tension is constructed temporally: we who can agree about nothing else are being urged to agree that some new practice is illegitimate compared to the legitimate politics of the recent past, a temporal narrative tension that uses social time for the juxtaposition by which metaphors work.

The *weaponiz-* form that becomes most common from 2016 onwards, eclipsing the concrete weaponization of nuclear arms or microbes, marshals an ahistorical nostalgia that implies politics only recently became unfair despite voluminous evidence to the contrary. The frequent discussions of the weaponization of fake news, for example, ignores the timeworn use

of propaganda, including by such organs as the Voice of America that its founders understood as such (Cull 2009), the systemic deployment of "psychological warfare" or "cultural infiltration" during the Cold War (Hixson 1998), or the longtime practice of "public diplomacy" using everything from the art of dance (Croft 2015) to modern art and literature (Barnhisel 2015). A review of such cultural diplomacy by one of its veteran practitioners described its post-1989 practice as that of "organized forgetting, as neither East nor West were interested in examining the prolonged acquiescence to absurdities" (Alting von Geusau 2009). It is these absurdities that are both celebrated by the weaponization of everything (prosthetic legs, smiles) and forgotten, through a naïve, utopian nostalgia.

Contemporary dismay over the contentiousness of contemporary politics similarly ignores the political struggles of the recent past. Claims that political institutions like the Supreme Court have recently been weaponized forget the Conservative outcry over "Bork-ing" in the 1980s when that nominee was rejected over his politics. Fears that politics were suddenly weaponized in 2017 forget the legacy of Black lynchings or the provision of weapons to fascist regimes in Latin America and elsewhere. Cultural anxiety that values have suddenly been weaponized erase all the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 90s, each of which had its own *nom de guerre*: "abortion wars," "sex wars," "P.C. wars.," "AIDS War," etc. (see e.g. Rubin 1984). The preferability to cultural conflicts, rather than physical altercations was made by Slate writer John Kelly in 2016, when he argued that "the spread of *weaponize* is a mass destruction of literal weaponization. When metaphors become more violent, as with *weaponize*, it may just mean our world is becoming less so." The weaponization of everything is certainly preferable to actual weapons everywhere but it acts as its own recency illusion, erasing all but the most recent examples of "mere" politicization.

The use of *weaponiz-* in relationship to the #MeToo movements call for the recognition of sexual assault is instructive. It is an example of the metaphor's application to the same object by both the political Right (e.g. "Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand 'Fully Weaponized #MeToo'" (Ingraham 2018)) and Left (e.g. "Feminism is now being weaponized for right-wing agendas" (Solnit 2017)), even before the Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearings during which #MeToo weaponization stories were rampant (e.g. Boothe 2018, Hardaway 2018, Sheffield 2018). The use of *weaponiz-* by political opponents in relationship to #MeToo suggests that all sides agree that sexual assault allegations must be taken seriously but not politicized, an impossible albeit shared idea. These usages allow those on the Right to honor claims of sexual assault in general even if specific instances must be set aside, while it allows those on the Left to object to these same dismissals. *Weaponiz-* as metaphor established shared, albeit razor-thin, ground that is preferable, we are implored to agree, to a time when sexual assault allegations were ignored.

Weaponiz- demonstrates how a metaphor might become ubiquitous among competitors and still retain its meaningfulness by creating a public from competing discursive communities organized around temporal narrative tension. It may have risen to conventionality as an act of folk sociology, mobilizing a conceptual metaphor SOCIAL LIFE IS CONFLICT that exposes previously tacit politics and reveals as "social" things that might otherwise be seen as innocuous ("catchphrases," "dialogue") or natural ("weather," "leaves").

Current descriptions of how metaphors work state that they become mere words or concepts when the ambiguity they marshal fades unless polysemous meanings are embedded in competing discursive communities. This paper shows that metaphors can create meaning by using temporal narrative tension against perceived eroded norms. It builds upon the careers approach as a way of assessing and documenting changes in metaphoric meaning, even as it

shows that metaphors can also create large publics rather than only subdividing competing ones. For John Herman, author of the 2017 essay about the weaponization of everything, the metaphor "places weapons in the hands of everyone around them, annexing their targets into a war zone where anything is permissible." This fear—that anything is permissible—is resisted, however by the use of that very metaphor, which attempts to organize its readers to resist these impermissible incursions. As this essay shows, especially since 2016, weaponization is used by journalists to frame readerships from left, right, and center as united, even if solely by the sense that politics have recently become overly contentious. Weaponization thus rejects a variety of politics as illegitimate, even as all politics may now be described as such.

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