In “Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power” by Rachel Maddow, Maddow presents a criticism of the American Military Industrial Complex that traces its evolution from World War II to the present day. Maddow is the Emmy Award-winning news anchor of the “Rachel Maddow Show” on MSNBC and has degrees in public policy and philosophy. Maddow was the first openly gay anchor of a major news program (MSNBC) in the United States and is known for her liberal political views and her witty, sarcastic personality.

Maddow argues in “Drift” that American military power and action has, over time, become invisible to the public, above political debate, too expensive to maintain, and constantly engaging in conflicts it shouldn’t be. Maddow examines how the military has “drifted” from its constitutional framework and from American public life by contrasting the martial culture of World War II (which was very much woven into everyday life) with martial culture under the command of the Cold War presidents and George W. Bush during the Global War on Terror. Her final diagnosis is that the military has been cut free of the constitutional and cultural ties that held it to the American public and its scrutiny. The consequences of this martial “drift” include a bloated defense budget, an isolation of career military personal from American public life, and a rampage of irresponsible and damaging actions abroad.
Maddow is not a total pessimist, however, despite her overwhelming sarcasm, and ends her book with concrete solutions to the problem she sees, urging that it is the responsibility of the American people to “revive the old idea of America as a deliberately peaceable nation” (252). To Maddow, the political structure of America is inherently anti-war and the normalization of war is a dangerous shift away from our constitutional inheritance and ideals.

Maddow’s book is a good read and “Drift” is accessible to audiences who do not have a foundation on American military and political history. Sometimes her sarcasm is overwhelming, trading style and bite for measured analysis, but overall “Drift” is written with a good balance between fact and flair. Maddow uses well-chosen vignettes and anecdotes to argue her thesis. A favorite of mine is her illustration of eight billion dollars’ worth of American nuclear weaponry growing fungus in the dusty, poorly managed hangars where they are stored, practically forgotten. Her sources are legitimate and diverse, combining her personal conversations and observations as a journalist with different types of written sources, including presidential primary sources, news articles, polls, and other books, fiction and nonfiction.

Her work is interdisciplinary in that she weaves together political sources such as polls and congressional hearings, historical evidence in so much as to lay out events and a sense of progression, and an economic argument about the cost of the military with an American Studies-styled approach to examining the effects of military drift on the American public, American culture, and American reputation in an increasingly globalized world. For example, Maddow uses the sales and production of G.I. Joe action figures to illustrate American martial culture. “Drift” would be more convincing if
Maddow presented more evidence arguing for such normalization in exchange for the overwhelming evidence she presents to show the actual “drift” of the military from legislative and judicial authority. Overall, however, Maddow is not simply presenting a military history, and uses different fields of academia to craft her book. “Drift’s” contribution to the field of American Studies is its concrete explanation of the political and martial culture of America during the Global War on Terror.

“Drift” is worthy of study in the capstone class for Connecticut College’s American Studies program, Globalization of American Culture, because it attempts to answer many questions asked by the class: how has globalization effected the American position in the world and the American culture and political atmosphere at home? How has American militarism affected the global economy and balance of power? How has American culture changed due to American interventions abroad? “Drift” would be a great addition to the course readings for globalization as well as other classes offered at the College, including Professor James Down’s class “Historicizing 9/11.”