

**ROUNDTABLE**

# CULTURES OF WAR

## Introduction

**Laura Hein, guest editor**

**ABSTRACT:** This roundtable discussion of John Dower's *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor / Hiroshima / 9-11 / Iraq* brings together the views of five scholars from a variety of academic disciplines: Sheila Miyoshi Jager (Oberlin), Monica Kim (Chicago), Ravi Arvind Palat (Binghamton), Emily Rosenberg (UC-Irvine), and Ussama Makdisi (Rice). In the December 2011 issue of *Critical Asian Studies* the participants will interact with one another in part 2 of the roundtable.

John Dower's *Cultures of War* is a smart, angry, and provocative book that challenges us to think more deeply and more carefully about modern warfare, the institutionalization of arrogance, and the double standards that states and societies routinely invoke when characterizing their own behavior versus that of others. Although deeply researched in American and Japanese sources, it is fundamentally a think piece about the ways in which Americans have imagined and conducted war and foreign occupation and how that compares and contrasts to the ways that Japanese thought about and conducted war in the 1940s and al-Qaeda does in the twenty-first century. Dower is uncommonly able to incorporate complex and contradictory evidence while still maintaining both evenhandedness and a bright through-line of argument. In addition, he tracks the ways in which the Asia-Pacific theater of World War II has been invoked since 1945 to understand later conflicts. Dower is deeply offended by people in and out of government who deliberately ransack the past ("cherry-pick history") to support desired actions in the present without honestly acknowledging the larger contexts of either era.

The book makes three large claims. First, starting “a war of choice” without realistic assessments or contingency plans is the result of multiple “strategic imbecilities” by people who may be very smart in other ways. Second, aerial bombardment of civilians and “shock and awe” terror tactics were normalized during World War II and have continued ever since. Finally, Dower turns his attention to the U.S. occupations of Japan and Iraq and finds that the pathologies of war carried on after the initial conquest in full force in Iraq but less so in Japan both because the occupations differed and because the occupied countries were not alike.

Dower builds his sweepingly comparative argument more from historical evidence than from social science theory. He writes with literary flair and moral engagement, describing, for example, the intoxication felt by the planners of massive air strikes in 1945 as reveling in “the serpent’s eye of unrestrained violence” (268). One of the book’s virtues is that it offers so many entry points for engagement, evident in this roundtable by five scholars with expertise in different areas. Their responses are also thought provoking—in the best sense, because even as they nail down some of Dower’s most important conclusions they broaden the discussion. The first three essays focus on the implications of wars between unequal parties, while the final two put greater emphasis on the international context of the post-9/11 war in Iraq.

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Sheila Miyoshi Jager approaches the book as an essay in military history. She focuses on the most egregious “failures of imagination” of the George W. Bush administration in Iraq and the governments of both the United States and Japan leading up to Pearl Harbor, none of which managed “to understand and appreciate ‘the cultural other.’” All three administrations disastrously misread their opponents and overvalued their own military strengths while systematically underestimating the likely consequences of their weaknesses. The Japanese under Tojo and the Americans under Bush in particular built their plans on wishful thinking, a refusal to consider defeat, and repression of internal dissent. All three were astonishingly contemptuous of their foes. While Jager agrees that such “strategic imbecilities” and “cultures of deception” often characterize America’s modern warfare, she is much more optimistic than is Dower that Americans can improve quickly. Jager notes that after Donald Rumsfeld’s forced resignation, the Department of Defense worked hard to develop better knowledge of Iraqi culture, and she is cautiously optimistic that Iraq will soon become more democratic. She is surely right that showing respect to local people is a minimal requirement for successful counterinsurgency. Yet it is easy to imagine other, less violent scenarios by which Saddam Hussein’s regime might have faltered—scenarios that would have involved far less suffering by the Iraqi people. Iraqi institutions and civil society appear radically weaker in 2011 than in 2001 and the sectarian violence that raged uncontrollably at the height of the U.S. occupation makes such institutions particularly difficult to rebuild. Four million Iraqis are now refugees, to give just one example of disarray.

Jager’s comments highlight another important issue: how hard it is to fix a bad war. Today Americans face only unlovely choices in Iraq: while it is callous



A woman views the bodies of school children killed in Braunschweig, Germany, after an Allied bombing raid, in 1944. In *Cultures of War* John Dower describes the intoxication felt by the planners of massive air strikes in 1945 as reveling in “the serpent’s eye of unrestrained violence.” (Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1979-025-19A / CC-BY-SA)

to ignore U.S. responsibility for the enormous damage caused by the war, it is hard to find any constructive actions that are likely to undo that damage. This dilemma is another durable result of overvaluing war, one that Dower does not explore.

Monica Kim is interested in the norms of international relations. She argues that Dower’s insights are best understood in the context of “the U.S. culture of perpetual war.” Kim sees the United States as the center of perpetual warfare because it is the most powerful nation-state of the day, rather than arising out of American culture in a more conventional sense. Her key point is that powerful nations use international law to define some forms of violence as war between legitimate parties, i.e., nation-states, and others as illegitimate insurrections against state authority, to be put down by “police action” and the like. As she explains, “the seeming ‘double standards’ are precisely the point.” Her analysis seems fruitful, even though in this case American government officials responded to al-Qaeda by explicitly declaring a “war on terror,” instead of treating 9/11 as a criminal act, even though many legal professionals feared that choice would legitimize Osama bin Laden’s organization through precisely the process that Kim indicates here. Because the United States neither denied Iraq’s legitimacy as a nation-state nor emphasized al-Qaeda’s non-state status, it seems to me that Kim’s real contribution is to remind her readers that nation-states are fictions. Her attention to the “intimate relationship between knowledge-making and war-making in the modern nation-state” reveals that both the Republic of Korea and Japan are client states of the United States and even today are dependent on American military protection. Their sovereignty masks the inequality between states. This structure probably is the model American officials hope for in Iraq, but this effort is likely to generate at least the same level of sullen compensatory nationalism as in East Asia, including fierce local conflicts, such as in Okinawa over American military bases today.

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Ravi Arvind Palat emphasizes the psychology of war-making, which he sees as most deeply entrenched in the United States because of its long history of attacking (but failing to vanquish) less powerful foes. While Jager emphasizes the difference between the worst American war-makers and the best, Palat argues that the commonalities of the two groups are more important than the differences. (Dower himself can be read either way, although I lean toward Palat's interpretation.) Palat usefully highlights Dower's attention to the moral and aesthetic dimensions of this psychology of war, stressing that they operate even when people respect their enemies and are well informed about their cultures. In both wars, all the combatants treated their own violence as justified and proportionate while excoriating their enemies' violence as irrational and vicious. In particular, the "new aesthetic of air war" appealed to Japanese in the 1940s but since then has most often been celebrated by Americans. Air war is typically experienced as both beautiful and terrible—that is, sublime—even by people on the ground.

As Dower shows, the explicit point of both conventional and atomic bombing since the 1940s has been to cause civilian suffering with minimal danger to attackers. Moreover, the naked ugliness of this goal—one that had as recently as 1937 been condemned as evidence of Axis barbarism—itself generated utopian dreams about "idealistic annihilation," similar to the rhetoric of "the war to end all wars" that accompanied the mechanized carnage of World War I. The smartest and most thoughtful developers of the atomic bomb, for example, told themselves that the shock and awe produced by using it on civilians would not only end their war but would make future war impossible (281). In *American Technological Sublime* (MIT Press, 1994), David E. Nye called the sense of individual sovereignty implied by control of a force as powerful as an atomic bomb the "technological sublime." This allows Americans to bask in the unsustainable notion that they, as sovereign individuals, are in control.

Palat is on to something important when he points out that the Iraqi insurgents were able to deploy their own shock and awe tactics with low-tech improvised explosive devices (IEDs). While he concludes that this development shows that such tactics rarely achieve complaisant "regime change," I think his underlying point may be that shock and awe does work—but only when a weak party attacks a strong one. After all, Iraqis did not have to adjust their basic assumptions about global power when they were defeated by the most powerful military in the world, unlike New Yorkers or workers at the Pentagon. Dower's evidence supports this conclusion: the Japanese attempt at shock and awe at Pearl Harbor was a tactical success but a strategic disaster, as was the 2003 American war on Iraq. The atomic bombings may have hastened surrender as intended, but the evidence that they did so is inconclusive and the costs were high. It seems likely that the war would have soon ended even without incinerating Hiroshima and almost certainly without bombing Nagasaki. And the cost to American prestige is still being felt today: Osama bin Laden himself cited the atomic bombs' use as one justification for his attacks on the United States (151–54). On the other hand, after 11 September 2001, the United States trans-

formed its institutions out of a sense of terror as the attackers had hoped and even began a war with bin Laden's strongest Arab enemy.

Economic and diplomatic historian Emily Rosenberg usefully pushes further than Dower, not only asking why the United States responded so much more disastrously to the events of 9/11 than to those of 12/7, but providing three answers: "oil (and raw materials generally), the influence of allies, and the inordinate power that can be exerted by a willful and dedicated group within a weak government." Vice President Dick Cheney looms large here as the architect of energy policy and conduit to firms such as Halliburton, which made billions off the war in Iraq. War has always provided opportunities for legal plunder and Rosenberg rightly points out that much that seems irrational in American policy makes perfect sense if the primary goal is to enhance such opportunities for a select few. The vast river of public funds channeled to private American contractors in the Iraq war reminds us that American as well as Iraqi lives may have been sacrificed for the benefit of a few. Like recognizing that air power deliberately targeted civilians, such lines of inquiry are deeply disturbing. Rosenberg reminds us that control of petroleum resources has long been a security issue as much as an economic one and that it has played an outsized role in modern warfare. Cheney's open contempt for energy conservation at home is yet another reminder that the cultures of war have stifled a great variety of opportunities to engage the world in a more peaceful manner.

Ussama Makdisi, a specialist in modern Arab history, develops Emily Rosenberg's second category, that American relations with Middle Eastern countries are profoundly affected by its support for Israel. He asks why American relations with Japan are so much better today than are American relations with the Arab world, given that the reverse was true in the 1940s. He then answers his own question: "American foreign policy...has...consistently defied the idea of Arab self-determination from 1947 to the present." Makdisi points out that American support for Israel has cost the United States essentially all its goodwill in the region. Americans who ignore that fact will never be able to understand their interactions with its inhabitants. Although Makdisi does not see "anything remotely analogous" in East Asia, in many ways Japan itself is the Israel of East Asia, showing that we must, as Makdisi insists, look at the integrated history of the region to understand the postwar history of U.S.–Japanese relations. After 1945 Japan's former empire was quickly partitioned along cold war lines. While resentment at American support for Japan certainly exists in Asia, this sentiment was either folded into the anti-Americanism of the Soviet bloc or was tamped down by client states too dependent on the United States to oppose Japan's revival. Since the end of the cold war, however, those old grievances have circulated more openly and more freely, particularly in China. In the end, *Cultures of War* may require a new chapter on the ways that the myths of American and Japanese warfare are affecting Chinese understandings of World War II and its own twenty-first century interests.

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## Sheila Miyoshi Jager

*Cultures of War* is a complex book.<sup>1</sup> Structurally, it can be read as three smaller books combined into a larger one. Several themes run throughout the entire work—the selective remembering and forgetting of the past and the uses and abuses of history—but each section contains its own internal logic and thematic focus and this structure makes a generalized summation of the entire book nearly impossible. For this reason, I have decided to organize my critique to mirror the book(s) as three separate reviews before offering a more general critique of Dower's use of comparative case studies to rethink the cultures of war.

### ***Part 1: Pearl Harbor as Code: Wars of Choice and Failures of Intelligence***

The chapters on “Pearl Harbor as Code” offer a comparative analysis of the surprise attacks and disastrous failures of intelligence on the U.S. side in 1941 and 2001. Dower ruminates on how the U.S. underestimation of the (Japanese and Islamic) enemy due to their alleged “civilizational differences” resulted in the tragedies of 7 December and 9/11. The Americans had not taken the threat from “little yellow men” in Asia seriously in 1941, and, likewise, they were unable to imagine that “a little terrorist in Afghanistan” could pull off a complex and imaginative act of aggression like 9/11. At the same time, however, Dower reminds us that this “failure of imagination” was not unique only to the United States. Japan too misread American psychology when it expressed hope that the surprise attack would strike a crippling blow against the enemy. In each case, the failure of imagination to understand and appreciate the “cultural other” had prevented the United States from preparing for the attacks of 7 December and 11 September just as it had led to a complete underestimation of the American enemy by Japan. This is one facet of what Dower identifies as the cultures of wars—not the stuff of culture per se, but the racial attitudes, arrogance, condescension, assumptions, and stupidities underlying policymaking and decisions about war that are best understood in cultural and not political terms.

In addition to the failure of imagination that Dower associates with the Pearl Harbor code, he identifies another similarity between 7 December and 9/11 that at first may appear outrageous, even traitorous: Japan's “tactical military success and strategic blunder” at Pearl Harbor with Bush's “war of choice” in 2003 that he launched in response to 9/11. While Dower is careful to show that such comparisons do not equal moral equivalences, the strategic failure of both wars of choice does invite interesting comparisons between Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the Iraq War. In both cases, there was a preoccupation with national security and the belief that the homeland was imperiled. There was also a certain “high tech” infatuation: Pearl Harbor amounted to a “demonstration and apparent vindication of the racial naval airpower concepts advocated by Admiral Yamamoto” while the Iraq operation was “promoted as a showcase for cutting edge ‘smart weapons’” (114). Both operations, while brilliantly con-

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1. Dower 2010.

ceived from a technical standpoint, were also initiated without meaningful planning for an end game. Up to the very moment of attack, “there were more than a few high navy and army officers who expressed reservations about Japan’s logistical capability to engage in protracted hostilities” (116). Similarly, in 2001, the Bush administration gave very little thought to what a post-Saddam Iraq might look like and how to plan for the implantation of an Iraqi democracy.

Both wars thus employed wishful thinking and outright delusion spurred on by groupthink and an unwillingness to question decisions made by leaders at the top. Like Emperor Hirohito’s loyal subjects, Americans also believed what their leaders told them and supported the invasion. This “culture of deception,” according to Dower, explains why so many were lulled into supporting this particular war of choice. Thus, added to the failure of imagination, wishful thinking, and an obedient herd mentality, was deception as another facet of the cultures of war that Dower identifies with the Pearl Harbor code.

A third and final rumination about the code is its association with infamy, vulnerability, rage, and revenge. For Roosevelt, 7 December 1941 was a political godsend for it finally allowed him to take the nation into war against the Axis powers. Similarly, September 11 proved a windfall for Bush whose presidency had begun to falter in its first year. The Pearl Harbor code became the narrative through which 9/11 was understood, unifying the American people around the Bush presidency and allowing the president to take the nation to war against Iraq. While “Pearl Harbor” worked in similar ways it led to different ends: whereas Roosevelt donned the mantle of a president at war and emerged from the war triumphant, 9/11 carried Bush to a second term but “the war in Iraq had, at least in the eyes of most of the world, become a disaster” (143).

Failure of imagination, wars of choice, and strategic imbecility arising from a culture of deception together with the use and abuse of the infamy narrative to rally the nation behind a faltering presidency were all part of the cultures of war that Dower identifies with 9/11 and America’s response to it. What is less clear, however, is whether these “cultures” reflect deeper psychological pathologies associated with all wars or are simply particular manifestations of America’s recent wars of choice. Certainly, many facets of these “cultures” were present in America’s war in Vietnam. Although President Johnson did not invoke the Pearl Harbor code, he justified the war in terms of a national security threat. There was also a spectacular failure of imagination, as Dower himself notes, as well as racial arrogance and cultural condescension that had led to a serious underestimation of the Vietnamese enemy. In addition, America’s response to the communist threat in Southeast Asia, like Islamic extremism in the Middle East, was hampered by lessons not learned: the French in Indochina and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Employing the wrong historical analogies was an integral part of the culture of deception and groupthink arising out of the failure of imagination to learn from the past.

The Korean War, too, followed some of the same patterns. For example, wishful thinking accounted for much of the failure to anticipate the North Korean invasion on 25 June 1950. Racial prejudice certainly played a role in America’s early response to the North Korean invasion when MacArthur sent the woefully

unprepared Task Force Smith into battle in early July. But it was MacArthur's conceit in his own powers of discerning the "oriental mind" that most clearly led to disaster when he grossly underestimated the Chinese. When 300,000 Chinese troops crossed the Yalu into North Korea in October 1950, that failure of imagination was put on full display before the world and almost led to World War III. Yet, despite these failures, it was Truman's stalwart resolve to resist MacArthur's calls for widening the war with China and to avoid nuclear holocaust that revealed that groupthink had been defeated and rationality had prevailed. Some of these lessons were later absorbed by President Johnson, who was constrained by fears of a Chinese intervention in Vietnam and ruled against a ground invasion of North Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> So it seems Americans had learned from history after all!

They also learned something during the war in Iraq. When it became clear that Iraq was turning into a brutal civil war and insurgency, American military commanders initiated a different approach to better understand the enemy. While racial attitudes and cultural arrogance persisted, new efforts to infuse cultural knowledge into U.S. military operations and training in Iraq coincided with a broader shift within the Department of Defense (DoD) to consider culture as an important operational factor. In July 2004, retired U.S. Army Major General Robert H. Scales Jr., a former commandant of the U.S. Army War College, wrote an article for the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings* magazine expressing his disagreement with the commonly held assumption prevalent within the Pentagon at the time that success in war is best achieved by overwhelming force. Instead, he argued that the type of conflict we are currently waging in Iraq required "an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivations."<sup>3</sup>

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2. President Lyndon Johnson later confided that his decision to gradually increase the levers of war was due to fear of China's reaction; calling up the reserves and publicly committing the United States to a full-scale war in Vietnam might have precipitated another Korea-like confrontation. It is also important to remember that a chorus of voices was already challenging the direction of U.S. policy on Vietnam on the important issue of escalate-or-withdrawal. Historians writing after the fact have generally given short shrift to this dissent, instead focusing on just a few lone voices in the administration like George Ball in the executive branch. However, as Fredrik Logevall and others have shown, there was in reality a "veritable chorus" of people in the State Department and National Security Council, as well as analysts in the CIA, who shared Ball's views. William Bundy and John McNaughton, two key players in the policy deliberations in late 1964 when Saigon was on the point of collapse, shared Ball's pessimism about the long-term prospects of the war and the likely consequences of U.S. defeat in South Vietnam. Influential Democratic senators Richard Russell and Wayne Morse also advocated a negotiated neutralization of South Vietnam and eventual American withdrawal. Moreover, elite opinion was also divided on what to do. Prominent commentators such as Walter Lippman, Drew Pearson, Arthur Krock, and Hans J. Morgenthau all opposed a major American escalation. Thus, while it may be tempting to ascribe the failure in Vietnam to the same "groupthink mentality" of a shared cold war consensus, the reality was that by the early 1960s that consensus had begun to fracture in large part because the cold war had begun to change. See Logevall 1999, 375–77. See also Morgenthau 1965.
  3. See Scales Jr. 2004 (Culture), 21. See also Scales Jr. 2004 (Transformation). A report in a special edition of *Military Review Counterinsurgency Reader* (October 2006) complements the *Army/Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24* on counterinsurgency operations.



Soon thereafter, the need for cultural knowledge in counterinsurgency was widely recognized and actively promoted by the Pentagon. General David H. Petraeus, then the military commander in Iraq, used his earlier experience in governing Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, to initiate a new counterinsurgency strategy. In sharp, stark contrast to Rumsfeld's heavy-handed approach, which emphasized aggressive military tactics, the post-Rumsfeld Pentagon began advocating a "gentler" approach, emphasizing cultural knowledge and ethnographic intelligence as major components of its counterinsurgency doctrine.<sup>4</sup> This "cultural turn" within Department of Defense (DoD) highlighted efforts to understand adversary societies and to recruit "practitioners" of culture, notably anthropologists, to help in the war effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> In Feb-

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4. General David Petraeus outlined his new approach to tactics in strategy in Iraq as early as 2006 when he wrote: "Knowledge of the cultural terrain can be as important as, and sometimes even more important than, the knowledge of the geographical terrain. This observation acknowledges that the people are, in many respects, the decisive terrain, and that we must study that terrain in the same way that we have always studied the geographical terrain." See Petraeus 2006, 51.
  5. An analysis and description of the "cultural turn" in U.S. military strategy can be found in my monograph, Jager 2007. Much of the material used was drawn from that study. The use of anthropologists and social scientists in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan is controversial. In particular, the Army's Human Terrain System (HTS) and its formation and deployment of Human Terrain Teams (HTT) have garnered considerable attention within the anthropological community as well as mainstream media. HTS/HTT is a DoD program conceived in 2005 and implemented in 2007. Manned by social scientists, the HTT operates by embedding itself with deployed units to provide commanders with an understanding of the "cultural terrain" to make informed decisions on developing relations, promoting community development and identifying threats. From the beginning the HTS/HTT came under intense criticism from academic anthropologists for betraying fundamental principles of anthropological ethics. Citing past misuse of social scientists in the counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam, some anthropologists have denounced the program as "mercenary anthropology." Roberto Gonzalez, a leading critical voice, is concerned by what he sees as a dangerous trend in the co-optation of cultural knowledge for military purposes, a view shared by other notable anthropologists, namely David Price and Hugh Gusterson. Their concern centers on what they see as politically motivated ethnographic work that can endanger informants and their families. But mostly, they wonder whether using cultural knowledge for military operations will threaten the disciplinary integrity of anthropology itself when cultural knowledge is used as a weapon. See Gonzales 2007; Gusterson 2003; Price 2002 (Interlopers); Price 2002 (Lessons); Price, 2006. In October 2007, the executive board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) released a statement on the HTS program as "an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise." It concluded that (a) "the HTS Program created conditions which are likely to place anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA Code of Ethics," and (b) "its use of anthropology poses a danger to both other anthropologists and persons other anthropologists study." The Executive Board did not, however, condemn the HTS because they believed anthropologists should not work for the government, but because the HTS was specifically designed to assist the military in the prosecution of war: "Anthropology can and in fact is obliged to help improve U.S. government policies through the widest possible circulation of anthropological understanding in the public sphere, so as to contribute to a transparent and informed development and implementation of U.S. policy by robustly democratic processes of fact-finding, debate, dialogue, and deliberation." The Executive Board affirmed that "anthropology can legitimately and effectively help guide U.S. policy to serve the humane causes of global peace and social justice." See American Anthropological Association Executive Board Statement on the Human Terrain System Project 2007. In a later 2009 report commissioned by the Executive Board of the AAA to study HTS in order to formulate an official position on members' participation in HTS activities, the commission concluded that "constructive engagement between anthropology and the military is possible" but that "AAA emphasize the incompatibility of the HTS with disciplinary ethics and practice for job seekers." See AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelli-

ruary 2006, Petraeus invited an array of academics, human rights lawyers, journalists, and practitioners of counterinsurgency to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to vet a draft for a new counterinsurgency manual, *Field Manual [FM] 3-24*, which was released on 15 December 2006. *FM 3-24* is the first U.S. Army manual dedicated exclusively to counterinsurgency in more than twenty years. Published by the University of Chicago press, it instantly became a bestseller. The 282-page document highlights cultural knowledge and human relationships as central aspects for waging a successful counterinsurgency:

Cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency. American ideas of what is “normal” and “rational” are not

universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have different notions of rationality, appropriate behavior, levels of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender. Thus, what might appear abnormal or strange to an external observer may appear as self-evidently normal to a group member. For this reason, counterinsurgents—especially commanders, planners, and small-unit leaders—should strive to avoid imposing their ideals of normalcy on a foreign cultural problem.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the cultures of war, while never entirely disappearing, can, in many cases, be overcome. Ultimately, Pearl Harbor as code was rejected in Iraq when it became clear that the “shock and awe” tactics on the ground were not working. The culture of deception and groupthink that had led to the initial disaster



General David H. Petraeus advocated a “gentler” approach, emphasizing cultural knowledge and ethnographic intelligence, in the U.S. military’s counterinsurgency warfare. (USAF/SSgt. Bradley Lail, July 2010)

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gence Communities (CEAUSSIC) 2009, 70–71. Other critics from within the government including DoD and policy experts have criticized the HTS program’s lack of accountability, poor leadership, mismanagement, and the recruitment of unqualified personnel. John Stanton, for example, has been a particularly harsh critic of HTS, stating that “program oversight, discipline and accountability have been virtually non-existent from the beginning.” See Stanton 2008, 2. In her investigative reporting in Afghanistan, journalist Ann Marlowe relayed similar complaints, adding that some of the HTTs even needed interpreters: “It is hard to see how they are getting closer to the people or learning more than a smart American officer who’s done more homework,” she concluded. See Marlowe 2007, 4. Yet, despite these and other problems, most critics of HTS/HTT still admit that the “cultural turn” in counterinsurgency made a dramatic difference in Iraq, whether HTS/HTT directly contributed to this outcome or not.

6. See “Counterinsurgency” in *FM 3-24*, at [www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf](http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf). The *FM* mentions “culture” eighty-eight times and “cultural” ninety times. The manual was published in 2007 by University of Chicago Press: *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*.

was also resisted when more instructive debates about culture and counterinsurgency led to the creation of a new military doctrine. Whether these constructive changes will guarantee that peace in Iraq will finally prevail or that future wars of choice will be avoided remains to be seen. But what these efforts do show is that far from repeating history, America's leaders can and do learn from past failures and military disasters, from Pearl Harbor to Iraq.

## ***Part 2: Ground Zero 1945 and Ground Zero 2001: Terror and Mass Destruction***

Like Pearl Harbor, "Hiroshima/Ground Zero" is a code for placing 9/11 in a historical perspective. Unlike the Pearl Harbor/"infamy" code, however, Hiroshima/Ground Zero is primarily concerned with strategies of forgetting, not remembering. That forgetting involves the indiscriminate practice of bombing urban areas, which became a standard procedure of British and U.S. air forces during World War II. Hiroshima and Nagasaki represented the natural culmination of this destruction while giving birth to the nuclear age. Ground Zero in Hiroshima refers to the hypocenter of the atomic bomb's explosion. In the wake of September 11, however, this earlier association with nuclear destruction was largely forgotten. Instead, the ruins of the World Trade Center was christened "Ground Zero" and became a code for America as a victim of evil forces of "alien people who unlike ourselves had no compunction about killing innocent men, women and children." Transformed into a symbol of Islamist extremism and barbarism, Ground Zero 2001 became "prima facie evidence of a clash of civilizations—the clearest imaginable illustration of a profound difference between Western and non-Western values" (161). Stripped of connection from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the "Ground Zero" rhetoric was detached from any acknowledgment or even recognition of where the term had come from.

These are uncomfortable observations. But Dower is careful to show that such comparisons between the bombing in World War II and the atrocities of 9/11 and present-day terrorism are not morally equivalent. Rather, his aim is simply to draw attention to the cultures of amnesia and the logic of mass destruction. Al-Qaeda's crime against humanity, which might have fostered some reflection about war and terror in general, instead gave rise to false dichotomies and divisions, in this case, those who recognize the sanctity of life and those who do not. When the Bush administration coined the term "war on terror" it deliberately sought to call attention to the differences between "us and our enemies" precisely on the issue of "respect for human life." September 11 and Ground Zero became emblematic of these distinctions. But by detailing the ardor with which the U.S. military pursued the incineration of enemy civilians in World War II, Dower demonstrates quite clearly that the alleged chasm separating the United States (and "Western civilizations") from the terrorists with regard to the issue of "the sanctity of life" was not so great after all. "Modern war breeds its own cultures and incinerating civilians is one of them" (156). Ground Zero in Hiroshima and Nagasaki serve as reminders of this sad fact.

Dower also describes in fascinating and dark detail the history of aerial bombing during World War II. This discussion is probably the fullest attempt in

the literature of World War II to place Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the larger context of the air war against Germany and Japan. Dower also revisits the controversies surrounding why the atomic bombs were used. Rather than singling out any one motive for their use, Dower is content to simply illuminate the milieu in which proposed alternatives to the bombs were not even considered. The reasons are well known: to end the war and save American lives, to intimidate the Russians, and to preempt partisan political criticism at home by showing that American taxpayers' money had been well spent. But there was also a fascination with what he calls "the aesthetics of mass destruction" and the peculiar way in which mass death from the air could "somehow make the dead old women invisible" by rendering it "not merely odious, but heroic and even civilized" (272). While aerial bombing made it easier to rationalize violence, such mass destruction also required greater moral justification. Since the deployment of such extreme force needed to be legitimized, wars could no longer be fought over mundane issues like national security. Instead, they had to be framed in terms of monumental moral struggles between good and evil, freedom and slavery. Hence another feature of the cultures of wars is the seductive mantra that the use of extreme violence was a necessary evil to combat a greater evil, "a war to end all wars" (284). Such rationalizations ignore proportionality, which in the traditional *jus in bello* sense implies that just wars are conducted in a fair, acceptable, or "proportionate" manner. Instead, *jus in bello* "was lifted from the war at hand to imagine conflagrations that might eventually destroy the United States and the Western world itself; and from this perspective, the sacrifice of unnumbered Japanese men, women and children was a small price to pay" (285).

But what happens when there are no longer truly monumental struggles to justify such mass violence? The answer was to magnify the mental image of the enemy and to exaggerate the true scope of the conflict. This too was a failure of imagination. The moral crusade against evil, the pathologies of division and the fascination with the aesthetics of destruction continued to be invoked in the "war on terror" just as it had been during World War II and the cold war. But these struggles were in no way comparable. Although the destruction of 9/11 was shocking, the threat al-Qaeda posed to the United States could hardly be compared to Germany, Japan, or the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this new enemy was equated with old enemies and the war on terror itself was perceived as a renewed struggle between good and evil. Moral distinctions between us and them—a major centerpiece of the "Bush Doctrine"—were immediately drawn.<sup>7</sup> This Manichean mindset also allowed for little in the way of complexity or nu-

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7. The Bush Doctrine, which was developed in response to circumstances confronting the United States and its allies in the wake of 9/11, provided a use-of-force policy that addresses the requirement for offensive action to prevent threats from materializing on American shores. Lieber and Lieber (2007) have identified four key themes of the Bush Doctrine that have generated controversy. First, it calls for preemptive military action against hostile states and terrorist groups seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Second, it advocates that the United States will not allow its global military strength to be challenged by any foreign power. Third, it expresses a commitment to multilateral international cooperation, but makes clear

ance or even “curiosity about the enemy” (293). Dower identifies this mindset with a “faith-based” outlook that “blocked seeing Islamic terrorism in ways that clarified its differences from early state enemies” (293). The results, he says, were catastrophic:

Turf wars, indiscipline, and nontransparency were greater than ever when U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority skulked out of Baghdad in mid-2004, after a year of floundering occupation. *Hard Lessons* [a report from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (ODNI) published in 2008] amounted to an indictment of managerial and organizational pathologies that characterized the full course of the Bush presidency—even after insurgency threatened to tear Iraq apart in 2005 and 2006, and even after the military “surge” and buying off of Islamic (and largely Sunni) dissidents that began in 2007 lowered the level of violence. (445)

The main problem with this account, as with the section on Pearl Harbor, is that Dower ends his discussion in 2007, when, in fact, the failures of Bush’s “faith-based” outlook were already widely recognized as early as 2006, when changes in military strategy and operations began to be implemented to help address them. Along with the release and implementation of *FM 3-24* in the field came new approaches to strategy and policy in general. The new approach that emphasized culture and history was reflected, for example, in the revised curriculum at the U.S. Army War College (USAWC). As part of the “cultural turn” within DoD, new lessons on culture as a fundamental of strategic thinking and new courses on regional studies that emphasized understanding regional history and culture were introduced into the curriculum in 2006. The aim of these courses was to teach senior military officers (many of whom would later be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan) the importance of cultural awareness and understanding of “how other regions, nations, and societies view themselves and others” and the effect of this awareness on policy and strategy formulations and outcome. This was a significant shift away from the traditional focus only on American interests. Led in large part by Colonel Jiyul Kim, then director of Asian Studies at the USAWC, the *Analytical Cultural Framework for Strategy and Policy*, which is the framework for the cultural approach, identifies three key dimensions for considering the impact of culture in the formulation of strategy and policy: Identity, Political Culture, and Resilience. History is a critical common theme that infuses the dimensions:

History makes man and his society, and its principal contemporary expression is culture. Without history, there is no culture. But history is an interpretive field, more subjective than objective. Thus, each dimension of the framework must be appreciated as the product of both the accumulation of actual historical experience as well as the revisionism brought by memory and interpretation of that history. In doing so, one must also con-

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that the United States “will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary” to defend national interests and security. Fourth, it proclaims the goal of spreading democracy and human rights around the globe, especially in the Muslim world.

sider that memory and interpretation of history are often incomplete, selective, or distorted. History, therefore, serves two important functions: as agent and process that determines specific tangible and intangible cultural forms; and as an instrument of culture, usually purposefully distorted or adapted for contemporary and, most often, political purposes.<sup>8</sup>

These new curricular initiatives were significant in their attempt to link the understanding of foreign cultures at its most abstract level (national identity, political culture, strategic culture, etc.) with American strategy and policy: “We live in a world without the comfortable and simple dichotomy of the cold war,” reads the National Cultures lesson.

Greater cultural proficiency at the strategic level is imperative in working with the rising powers such as China and India, dealing with new partners and allies as well as new challenges with old allies and partners, responding to extremism in its many forms, learning to wage an effective counter-insurgency campaign, coping with increasing anti-Americanism, handling transnational threats and issues, and building coalitions across the regions and the world.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, these and other initiatives amounted to exactly the *opposite* of the faith-based policy advocated by the Bush administration during the build-up to the Iraq War and the subsequent occupation of Iraq.<sup>10</sup> And I would argue that far more than the military “surge,” the ameliorating conditions and the lessening of violence in Iraq beginning in 2007 can be attributed to the “cultural turn” in DoD strategic thinking that went hand in hand with the implementation of *FM 3-24* in the field. In fact, the situation in Iraq, although still tenuous, has improved so much in recent years that the once stalwart anti-war candidate proudly announced as president in May 2011 that in Iraq “we see the promise of a multiethnic, multisectarian democracy” that is “poised to play a key role in the region.”<sup>11</sup> As Peter Wehner, a regular contributor to the conservative *Commentary* magazine gleefully remarked about the president’s speech, “In just a few years, Iraq has, for Barack Obama, gone from strategic disaster to something of a model for the region.”<sup>12</sup> While such optimism may be warranted for now, it does not mean that Iraq will one day become the beacon of democracy in the Middle East. What these efforts do show, however, is that cultures of war are *not* static or unchanging and American policy-makers and military leaders can and do adapt to new situations.

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8. Kim 2009, 14.

9. Kim 2007, 1.

10. Among the other innovations in strategy and policy was the reconceptualization of the “war on terror” not as one war but as many different wars. This meant fighting terrorist groups and networks, even transnational ones like al-Qaeda, as separate but related conflicts, and this meant in turn introducing flexibility and adapting military operations and tactics to meet the distinct challenges of the enemy. Another related aspect of this strategy was to focus less on the moral distinctions between “us” and “them”—a major centerpiece of the Bush Doctrine—and more on the differences between “them.”

11. Wehner 2011, 2.

12. *Ibid.*

### *Part 3: Wars and Occupations: Willing the Peace, Losing the Peace*

While the main themes of the first two sections deal with a stunning failure of imagination to either understand the enemy (Pearl Harbor as code) or to empathize and even acknowledge the enemy (Hiroshima/Ground Zero), the third section is devoted to the theme of conversion of the enemy. The Bush administration invoked the Occupied/Occupied Japan code to argue that undemocratic Iraq could be transformed into a democratic one through a violent regime change. At the heart of this conversion narrative is the neoconservative philosophy that democracy and democratic ideals could take root in Iraq if provided the right opportunity. For such thinkers democracy was not welded to Western values but is the universal aspiration of the human spirit. Thus, criticism of the invasion was dismissed as “being guilty of old-fashioned racism and ethnocentrism” since everyone aspired to be free (408). After the nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, which had been the major public rationale for the war, were not found, democratic conversion became the new goal for Bush’s war of choice in Iraq.

The politics of conversion for Iraq, however, required an historical precedent and Occupied Japan was chosen as the logical model. Dower, whose own book on the occupation, *Embracing Defeat*,<sup>13</sup> ironically served as a kind of bible, lays out in absorbing detail the most striking parts of convergence in the conduct of both occupations, but he also shows how these points were simultaneously the most telling points of divergence. For example, whereas both occupations witnessed the political purge and the dismantling of the military, “de-Baathication” in Iraq led to instability and eventual chaos whereas the Japanese purge of military leaders after the war was not socially disruptive. This was due in large part to the fact that the Americans had early on resolved to exonerate the emperor. Keeping the emperor while purging his loyal supporters allowed the Americans to manipulate a potent symbol of unity, continuity, and stability that MacArthur used to implement drastic changes. Dissolution of the Iraqi military, on the other hand, “which essentially capped the disestablishment of the Sunnis, who also dominated the officer corps, made the prospect of Sunni–Sh’ia conflict all the more inevitable” (402–3). The result was chaos and violence on a grand scale.

The other main point of convergence and divergence was the sweeping economic reforms imposed on the occupied countries. In Japan, a plan-oriented market economy became the centerpiece in the new agenda of “guiding the private sector toward export-oriented production.” This initiative enlisted the expertise of professionals “who usually supported interventionist policies of the sort associated with Keynesian theories and the New Deal” (427). By contrast, U.S. occupation authorities in Iraq encouraged a “capitalist dream” of free and unfettered foreign access that encouraged “privatization, cronyism, ideological litmus tests, failures of oversight and auditing, unfilled promises and

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13. Dower 2000.

outright corruption” (426). The results in Iraq were the very opposite of what had transpired in Japan. In Iraq reconstruction and recovery were “entrusted to profit seekers rather than to the Iraqi’s themselves” (435). Despite these chasms in occupation policy, civilian and military bureaucracies in Iraq continued to use Occupied Japan as a model.

This was another instance of deliberate forgetfulness and cherry picking of history to suit one’s needs. It was also indicative of the cultures of war where the failure of imagination and wishful thinking prevented the implementation of sound policy. The results were predictable: corruption and cronyism on a grand scale. Still, it will be the military situation on the ground that will determine the success or failure of America’s efforts in Iraq. And the jury is still out on how history will judge these efforts.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to write a history of contemporary events as Dower has set out to do, and more so during a period of radical change in the Middle East. What if it turns out, as Bush’s strongest defenders now claim, that he was right all along and that the violent regime change Bush sought to implement is now having a rippling or domino effect throughout the Middle East? Even those who do not ascribe to the notion that the U.S. invasion of Iraq had anything to do with the “Arab Spring” (and who knows how this will turn out in the end?), one cannot deny that the Iraq War has dramatically turned around. That President Barack Obama appears to have embraced democracy promotion as an objective in Iraq is already being cited as evidence for the Bush–Obama foreign policy convergence. As Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* reported about Obama’s 19 May 2011 speech: “In its broad strokes, yesterday’s address was a speech that George W. Bush could have given, from its summary of neoconservative cases against stability in its defense of military interventionism against dictators to its assertion henceforth, the promotion of democracy would lie at the center of American foreign policy in the Muslim World.”<sup>14</sup> Conservative commentators like Wehner have also been quick to point out that this turn of events actually represents a vindication of the Bush Doctrine:

The fact that Barack Obama is now (belatedly) embracing the views of his predecessor is something to be grateful for. . . . If Obama had been heeded after the war began, the surge would have been stopped and Iraq would now be convulsed by civil war, Americans would have left in defeat and disgrace, and al-Qaeda—in the form of al-Qaeda in Iraq—would have attained its greatest victory ever. Obama will never in a thousand years be able to bring himself to credit George W. Bush for deposing Saddam Hussein, for challenging the pathologies within the Arab world, and for putting in place a new military strategy that led to a dramatic turn in the fortunes of war. No matter; history has a way of taking care of such things.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Douthat 2011.

15. Wehner 2011, 2–3.



Or will it? Although I am more convinced than Dower that the institutional pathologies associated with the cultures of war can be overcome, the real danger in prematurely celebrating Iraq's "success" is that the larger lessons of the war will now be forgotten. The irony—and tragedy—of all this is that, like the terror bombings in World War II, the fiasco surrounding Bush's war of choice and the subsequent occupation will also be erased from public memory. *Cultures of War* is a strident reminder of why this must not happen.

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## Monica Kim

In the face of war, the historian wrestles with a two-headed dilemma: *What has “war” become? And what has become of history?* In John Dower’s latest book, war itself has become a culture, a way of being and knowing—and history has become an oddly fangled object in the hands of those who make war. Dower himself recounts the moment of eerie dissonance and shock on the morning of 12 September 2001, when he awoke to newspapers blaring headlines such as, “Infamy! Day of infamy! New day of infamy. A date which will live in infamy.” Pearl Harbor had become 9/11, and 9/11 had become Pearl Harbor, reflecting each other imperfectly in what Dower calls the “cracked mirror” of “misused history.” “Pearl Harbor, the Axis, even the Holocaust, such plundering from the last ‘good war’ was natural, irresistible, almost addictive, and took on a certain momentum all its own,” Dower writes.<sup>1</sup> World War II not only was reaffirmed as the paradigmatic experience of American war in the twentieth century, but it also was divested of material history to become a universal, timeless experience of “American war.”

The invocation of World War II by the Bush administration to frame the “war on terror” effectively deferred the public’s concrete understanding of the current realities of U.S. warfare in the twenty-first century. Using sustained comparative historical analysis, Dower tackles the challenge of gleaning these current realities of U.S.–led wars by dismantling the analogies made by the administration between Pearl Harbor and 9/11, Hiroshima and “Ground Zero,” and the occupations of Japan and Iraq. This approach is effective in demonstrating the logical fallacies in decision making over war among the U.S. power elites, where 9/11 was more the outcome of a “failure of imagination” than a “failure of intelligence.” *Cultures of War* is particularly compelling in that Dower meticulously traces and reveals the self-sustaining, insular logic of power undergirding the U.S. culture of perpetual war in modern history. In front of intelligence reports, military technology and weaponry, international law and legal precedence, U.S. state and military officials fashion wars that are more a reflection of an American will to power than a realistic assessment of activities and possibilities on the ground. What emerges from the pages of this book is a portrait of the U.S. military-state Leviathan, where the tenets under which the United States goes to war—liberal individualism, democratic governance, adherence to normative legal structures—are nowhere to be found at the top ranks of the U.S. state power elite. Instead, we find the ideology of the free market, the seduction of modern technology, and blind faith in the transformative power of U.S. military intervention. “The security state,” declares Dower, “with its holy writ and labyrinthine complexity, amounted to a profane theocracy” (440).

The book is a tale of indictment on two levels. First, Dower assigns historical culpability to those in the U.S. state and military elite for having conceived and conducted a war that is an abysmal failure even on their own terms. Dower re-

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1. Dower 2010, 11. Page numbers for Dower 2010 citations below will be given in parentheses.

constructs a key facet of modern war as being an epistemological project, one that requires knowledge of the enemy, of technology, and of the craft of state building. However, all of the military intelligence, technology, and legal precedence in the world could not save the Bush administration and military from failing the most fundamental test of knowledge: *know thyself (thy history)*. The sheer hubris of the Bush administration pushes Dower to his second level of indictment. As he moves between different locales and points in time to conduct comparative studies between disparate “cultures of war,” Dower hinges his analysis—and his ultimate indictment—on the common denominator of the human capacity for war. Dower begins from the premise that no one culture, society, or state has the monopoly on good or evil, on rational or irrational thinking, on civilized or barbaric behavior. War is conceived, legitimated, and mobilized by only a few, although it results in the deaths of many. “Modern war itself is a culture—just as bureaucratic behavior is, or corporate behavior, or the ‘herd instinct,’” asserts Dower (437). The move to bracket “war” as a “culture,” however, essentially renders war as a universalized event of mass violence and horror and stops Dower from pursuing further what I consider to be the most compelling line of argument in his book—the intimate relationship between knowledge-making and war-making in the modern nation-state.

The twentieth century witnessed not only the mass destruction of modern warfare, but also a pivotal shift in the global geopolitical order, where, I would suggest, nation-states no longer made war, but rather war made nation-states. After 1945, what did it mean to engage in “war,” when so many conflicts began to bear the U.S.-mobilized monikers of “police action,” “intervention,” “occupation,” and now a “war on terror”? What is missing from Dower’s critique of the modern-day American culture of war is a historicization of the concept of “war” itself, which would help better answer the specific question of how the American few have been able to determine the terms of warfare that results in the deaths of many.

The paradox in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century is this: in spite of all of the professions of horror at the senseless violence enacted by war, we are in a tighter embrace with war than ever before. Although Dower focused on the specific Greek tragedy of the Bush administration in their formulations, fumbblings, and foibles in war-making, I would extend Dower’s analytical focus on the “language and rhetoric” of war to the “cultures of war” that the United States has also sanctioned, created, and maintained through the form of the nation-state throughout the globe.<sup>2</sup> As we attempt to imagine what “cultures of peace” might look like, it is important to recognize that the United States has claimed its global power through its role of arbiter over two key trends in increasing institutionalization during the twentieth century—the nation-state system and warfare. The “culture of war” of the U.S. military and state creates an investment in perpetual war on an increasingly

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2. “Language and rhetoric themselves become a prison, and the machinery of destruction has its own momentum.” (Dower 2010, 101.)

global scale, but, aside from the two World Wars, never formally wages war in its name. Instead, “insurgency,” “rebellion,” “police action,” and “intervention” have been the terms with which the United States has legitimated its warfare. Although this linguistic footwork may at first appear to be yet another example of what Dower has called the “double standards” of the United States, where one disguises “war” behind a more palatable phrase, I suggest that it is also an example of how the United States grapples with the impossible resolution of a basic contradiction in its “culture of war.”<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of “war” itself is precisely fragmented, splintered, and multiple at this historical moment in time. I contend that over the course of the twentieth century alongside the move towards the criminalization and regulation of warfare (trends evidenced by the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928 or the periodic revisions of the Geneva Conventions), Western states attempted to preserve “war” as a privileged right that only legitimate states could claim. When confronted with the claims to self-determination and sovereignty being made in the colonies and territories, Western powers jealously guarded and circumscribed their language of “war.” The most fundamental challenge to the notion of “war” during the twentieth century came, not in the form of horror over mass violence, but rather in the form of anticolonial movements and formal decolonization. The “great powers” faced an unanticipated quandary: to wage “war” with another entity implied a political recognition of its legitimacy, an act that the “great powers” wanted to defer as long as possible in front of their colonies and territories. A historical convergence between the pressures of dealing with formal decolonization and the criminalization of “aggressive” war resulted in a peculiar lexical landscape for state-sanctioned mass violence in the latter half of the twentieth century. War could no longer be conducted sheerly and solely out of a state’s interest. Now, war would have to be conducted in the name of “humanity”—war itself had to be on the plane of the universal. War could now only be conducted as a disavowal of war itself.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, the sanctity of war as a state practice informs the proliferation of names under which modern U.S. wars are conducted. For example, the United States did not wage official “war” with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 1950 because it would have rendered Koreans as equal sovereigns on the world stage. Such a split, even schizophrenic, notion of “war” was in evidence

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3. In his introduction, Dower points out that “[d]ouble standards and hypocrisy became another recurrent theme” in the narrative of *Cultures of War* (xxx). In his extensive footnotes, Dower comes back to the question of “double standards” and explicitly links it to the issue of legality and warfare: “The double standards reflected here go beyond the discrepancy between rhetoric and practice, and were in fact canonized in the ‘rules of war’ the great powers ostensibly endorsed at the time, for it was understood that these rules applied only to warfare between ‘civilized’ nations and ‘similar’ enemies.” (490)

4. The most oft-referenced scholar on the relationship between states of war and legality is perhaps German jurist Carl Schmitt. See Schmitt 2003. For a discussion on international humanitarian law that situates Schmitt’s theories within a longer genealogy, see Koskenniemi 2002. The work of Nathaniel Berman also critically assesses the historical claims to universalism in international humanitarian law; see Berman 2004. On the changing nature of war as a legal institution, see Kennedy 2006.

on 11 June 2006, when Rear Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., the camp commander of Guantánamo Bay, called the suicides of three detainees “an act of asymmetrical warfare.” The commander’s statement implied that there is a normative sense of warfare, a “symmetrical warfare” that is essentially civilized and rational. The anachronistic idea that “war” operates akin to a Clausewitz-framed gentlemen’s duel has not been eviscerated through the horror over twentieth century warfare. Indeed, to borrow Dower’s own methodological terminology, “war” could also be “code” for “civilized,” even “enlightened,” state behavior. The camp commander’s depiction of the detainees’ suicides as aggressive acts of “asymmetrical warfare” placed the three detainees and the other “enemy combatants” beyond the pale of comprehending normative, civilized war—and thus presented the detainees as outside of humanity and outside of civilization. According to the logic of Rear Admiral Harris, war itself was not the problem—the issue was the detainees’ inability or refusal to conduct proper, or “symmetrical,” warfare.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, the seeming double standards are precisely the point. The fractured discourse of war belongs to a longer history of U.S. power and politics. A differentiated semiotics of violence used to disenfranchise or elide the political, historical claims of specific groups has been central to the historical development of liberal American governance, as the definitions of freedom or democracy have so often been articulated on the backs of those enslaved, oppressed, or marginalized. Thus, when Dower depicts the insular, myopic, and self-contained nature of the U.S. “imperial presidency,” and his analysis leads him to the book’s ultimate indictment of the U.S. state and military elites of “groupthink,” the final depiction comes across with devastating resonance. However, I also immediately began thinking about how we might be able to broaden the circle of accountability that Dower has traced for us, to focus our outrage beyond American elites’ co-option of democratic means of governance. What I find specifically alarming about the lexicon that the United States has mobilized around war as a state practice during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is how it has facilitated the installation of nation-states that are in and of themselves invested in a state of what I would call “perpetual war.” To illustrate this situation, I would like to turn to a part of the world that experienced a U.S. “occupation of liberation” that developed into a U.S. “war of intervention” during the immediate aftermath of World War II in a location immediately next to the islands of Japan—the Korean peninsula. While Dower has presented Japan as the “only place in Asia where the guns were really stilled and peace prevailed” (albeit, as he points out, a place surrounded by multiple hot wars of

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5. This quote comes from the statement made by Rear Admiral Harris during a phone conference call with the press when the news of the suicides of three detainees at Guantánamo broke on 11 June 2006. Although the camp commander did not divulge the names of the three detainees—two of whom were from Saudi Arabia, one from Yemen—the Saudi Arabian government identified the two Saudis as Mani bin Shaman bin Turki al Habrabi and Yasser Talal Abdullah Yahya al Zahrani. The story became international news. (For further details, see Risen and Golden 2006; Rosenberg and Clark 2006; and Selsky and Loven 2006.)

the cold war), I would like to present Korea as the place of “perpetual war”—a site for a war that officially began in 1950, but has not yet officially ended.

In the days following 25 June 1950, President Harry Truman had to present to the American public a war that was not a war when he explained his decision to send U.S. military troops to Korea. The core dilemma underlying the fraught lexicon of warfare was on full display in Truman’s contortionist application of the “language and rhetoric” of war to the situation on the Korean peninsula. To declare a war would not only require waiting for approval from Congress and possibly elicit disapproval from a public already war-weary from World War II, but it would also confer a certain political legitimacy to the northern Democratic Republic of Korea. Drawing upon the historical trend in the criminalization of “aggressive” war, Truman depicted North Korea as a criminal, rather than a legitimate nation-state, that had violated the norms of international law, and, by implication, had no regard for the value of law. Referring to the northern Korean People’s Army’s crossing southwards over the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, Truman stated, “Those responsible for this act of aggression must realize how seriously the Government of the United States views such threats to the peace of the world.”<sup>6</sup> The United States, on the other hand, putatively had no specific state interests in the conflict on the Korean peninsula—it would send troops to Korea to curb the excesses of the North Korean Army on behalf of reestablishing the “peace of the world.” So when asked by the press whether or not the United States was at war, Truman replied succinctly, “We are not at war.” He agreed with a later characterization of the military mobilization offered by a member of the press: a “police action under the United Nations.”<sup>7</sup>

Truman’s declaration of a non-war was based on a false analogy. He invoked a surprisingly traditional trope of warfare—the transgression of a sacred sovereign border as an “aggressive” act of war—in order to elicit outrage over the Korean People’s Army’s actions. However, on 25 June 1950, the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel was far from being a traditional, normalized border demarcating sovereignty. Created by U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., in anticipation of the Japanese surrender in August 1945 as a projected temporary border between Soviet and U.S. occupations in the Japanese colony, the arbitrary and abstract 38<sup>th</sup> parallel had no legitimacy on the ground as a line of division. In 1950, although two newly formed states lay on either side of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, both were competing for legitimacy on the world stage—for example, the United Nations only recognized the southern Republic of Korea as a sovereign state on the peninsula. It was a line of ambivalence—a structural legacy of the bumbled project of U.S.-mandated decolonization. Truman had attempted to make the stakes of the war visible to the American public by focusing on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, but contradicted his earlier characterization of the border when he authorized the

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6. “Statement by the President on the Violation of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel,” dated 26 June 1950. Part of the *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1945–1953* of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. See [www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers); accessed 21 May 2011.

7. “The President’s News Conference,” dated 29 June 1950. Part of the *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1945–1953* of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. See [www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers); accessed 21 May 2011.

U.S.-led United Nations Command forces to cross northwards. With the signing of the ceasefire in July 1953, the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel soon came to represent for the American public a front line in the cold war, and the fundamental questions of deferred decolonization embodied by the line were subsumed under this new narrative. The Demilitarized Zone with its hyper-militarization now operates as a marker of “perpetual war,” where the “language and rhetoric” of war is constantly configured around the hypothetical present and the threatening future, and past history has no place.

In his book, Dower describes the “dreamlike quality” of the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq, when “no one at top levels” questioned the assurances given by Iraqi exiles to President Bush “that the invading forces would be greeted with sweets and flowers.” The state of perpetual war in Korea, I would suggest, helps to sustain this peculiar dream life of the American global Leviathan, where the U.S. military presence is not only rendered indispensable, but multiple nation-states, including the Republic of Korea and Japan, also ask the U.S. military to continue its role as arbiter on the global stage. If, as Dower writes, “[s]weets also became a kind of synecdoche for occupied Iraq,” then the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel on the Korean peninsula has become a kind of synecdoche for perpetual war (339). An understanding of perpetual war extends Dower’s portrait of the delusional Leviathan—one that imagines consent, even gratitude, for its insistence on a constant state of war to justify its power, whose own analogies refracted by a “cracked mirror” of “misused history” substitute for knowledge.

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## Ravi Arvind Palat

“Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” In John Dower’s telling, Robert Oppenheimer’s invocation of these words from the *Bhagavad Gita* at the first successful test of an atomic bomb in the New Mexico desert deftly encapsulates a “psychology of war making” shared by policy-makers, military officers, and scientists creating ever more lethal weapons. It is this “culture of war” that he seeks to outline in his monumental book through an examination of Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9/11, and George Bush *filis*’s war on Iraq. Through a detailed analysis of these events, he shows that leaderships on both sides were subject to “failures of imagination”—despite mounting evidence, politicians in Washington, blinkered by their racist arrogance, could not imagine that “yellow Japs” or “peoples with towels on their heads” could dare attack the United States; that guaranteeing to preserve the emperor system, as President Harry Truman eventually did instead of insisting as he did initially on “unconditional surrender,” may have obviated the need for dropping nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He argues that policy-makers, mesmerized by an aesthetic of war, shrouded their essays in mass destruction “with garments of euphemism and cocoons of comforting denial.”<sup>1</sup> Such legitimations include the rhetoric of good and evil and the positing of an irrational “other”—indeed, he lucidly demonstrates that the herdlike irrationality and “groupthink” that Westerners attribute to non-Westerners were equally widespread among the Franklin D. Roosevelt and George W. Bush administrations—and across the United States. Indeed, in today’s political climate, the failure to profess a belief in American exceptionalism is tantamount to being “un-American.” Can there be a more egregious instance of herdlike irrationality?

Motives, scale, and context varied considerably, of course, and Dower is careful to distinguish between them: against the magnitude of death caused by Hiroshima, the events of 9/11 pale into insignificance and yet both acts of terror stemmed from moral certainty, first of a U.S. administration and second of Osama bin Laden. Comparing the clinically perfect execution of Pearl Harbor and the 2003 invasion of Iraq with little thought given by the leaders of Imperial Japan or the neoconservatives of the American “imperial presidency” to the consequences of their actions, Dower portrays both as instances of “tactical brilliance and strategic imbecility.”<sup>2</sup> He is careful to insist that these events—Hiroshima and 9/11, Pearl Harbor and the invasion of Iraq—are not equivalent instances: only that there are enough convergences to suggest a “culture of war.” Strategic imbecility, of course, is widespread—how else can one explain India’s nuclear detonations in 1998 that wiped out in one fell stroke New Delhi’s overwhelming superiority over Islamabad in conventional weaponry? In this use of “culture,” so refreshingly contrary to deployment of the concept in

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1. Dower 2010, 208; subsequent references to pages in this work will be in parenthesis in the text.
  2. Significantly, though, the attack on Pearl Harbor was an extraordinarily successful “surgical strike”: only forty-nine civilians were killed, and the majority of those by “friendly fire.” See Cumings 2009, 307.



reigning conceptions of Asian Studies that reify the cultures of areas of study, he does not posit an invariant “culture of war” across countries or even within a single country. Rather than meticulously preparing for occupation, as the U.S. government did in the case of Japan in the 1940s, Dower shows in rich, arresting detail that the imperial presidency of the early twenty-first century was criminally negligent in its plans to invade and occupy Iraq, blithely believing exiles’ claims that the “liberating forces” would be welcomed with “sweets and flowers” (133, 339). Despite invoking the reconstruction of postwar Japan, the American occupation of Iraq paid no heed to the sectarian and ethnic fractures of the country and hence, while not a single Allied soldier was killed in occupied Japan or Germany, the occupation of Iraq has led to more than four thousand U.S. and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilian fatalities (xxviii, 339). As Dower puts it elsewhere, “History misused is a cracked mirror” (14).

Dower is not the first to raise several of these issues: Rohini Hensman had underlined the parallels between the moral certitude of George W. Bush and that of Osama bin Laden less than two months after 9/11<sup>3</sup> and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had pointed out the alarming similarity between the “anticipatory self-defense” policy adopted by Bush and that employed by Imperial Japan at Pearl Harbor (16–17). What Dower does that is compelling is to bring his vast erudition to bear as he documents parallel instance after parallel instance and weaves them together to portray the psychology of war making as perhaps has never been done before. Each of the book’s three sections—surprise attacks and the failure of imagination, terror bombings by state and non-state actors, occupation of Japan after World War II and of Iraq since 2003—could be a book in its own right.

Welding all of these themes together into a single volume makes for an unwieldy tome. Moreover, Dower doesn’t locate these parallels within the evolving geopolitical architecture of the world. While his deep humanitarian instincts rise brilliantly to the fore as he presents the gruesome harvests of war, not only in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also in the Italian bombing of Ethiopia and the Allied brutalities in Dresden, in the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, there is no thread that connects them except the psychology of war making. How are the cultures of war generated across time and space? What prisms refract its modalities in different times and places? How is the culture of war differently nuanced between state and non-state actors? These are the questions Dower’s book raises with uncommon urgency though I have neither the space nor the competence presently to address them. Instead, I merely raise here some of the characteristics of the U.S. culture of war that may have been lost in the sheer density of the book *Cultures of War*.

While the irrationality of a racialized “other” may have been an enduring characteristic, the possibilities afforded to the U.S. military—its army ranked sixteenth in the world when hostilities began in Europe<sup>4</sup>—in World War II and by the turn of the twentieth-first century, when its military budget was one-third

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3. Hensman 2001, 4184.

4. Cumings 2009, 304.

of the world total,<sup>5</sup> were vastly different, especially given the quantum improvements in weapons and delivery systems. The United States emerged from World War II as the strongest power but it confronted another state—the Soviet Union—that set limits on Washington’s global reach. By the 1990s, the USSR had been erased from the world political map, but by then—as shown by Vietnam, and later by the Iraqi and Afghan resistances—the peoples of the Global South had become adept at waging asymmetrical warfare against technologically superior militaries of the North. How does this change in the relative positioning of the United States and the peoples of the Global South impact on the cultures of war?

Locating the U.S. culture of war within a longer historical frame of reference, we see that Washington, which has “never fought an adversary of its own size,”<sup>6</sup> has either provoked or waited for an incident which could be used to incite popular support for war—from President James Polk’s “War of American Intervention” against Mexico in 1845 to Pearl Harbor and the Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964—and including Lincoln tricking the “South into bombarding Fort Sumter” and the sinking of the *Maine* and the *Lusitania*, which mobilized popular support for the Spanish–American War and the U.S. entry into World War I respectively.<sup>7</sup> If this does not strictly apply to the Iraq War of 2003 when the doctrine of “anticipatory self-defense” was trotted out, it certainly did to the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. There is considerable evidence that Saddam Hussein signaled his intention to invade Kuwait to the United States—and U.S. ambassador April Glaspie said that she “understood” Iraqi concerns.<sup>8</sup>

Washington always presents attacks as unprovoked acts of aggression and abstracts them from their historical and geopolitical contexts. Just as the Japanese complained bitterly about “economic strangulation” when the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands (the three hegemonic states in the history of the capitalist world economy) cut off Tokyo’s access to strategic raw materials and minerals in order to pressure the Japanese Imperial Army to withdraw from China and set the stage for Pearl Harbor, al-Qaeda had bitterly complained about large bases of infidel U.S. soldiers in the Islamic holy land, the brutal killings of Iraqis, and U.S. support for the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestine. Indeed, if we are to take bin Laden and al-Qaeda at their word, as Hensman suggests, then all the people killed in the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the four airplanes were “collateral damage”—the real target being U.S. policies against the Palestinians and the Arabs.<sup>9</sup> If this sounds outrageous, as Hensman fully intended it to, it is only as outrageous as U.S. claims that the Afghans and Iraqis killed are “collateral damage”! What such an attitude suggests is the dehumanizing of the “other.” And this occurs not only in the context of actual wars but even in trade disputes (“trade wars”): in the early

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5. Achcar 2002, 74–75.

6. Todd 2003, 80.

7. Cumings 2009, 64–68, 132–33, 307.

8. Ali 2003, 133–34.

9. Hensman 2001, 4185.

1990s, when the Japanese economy was still viewed with apprehension by U.S. policy-makers, Senator Ernest Hollings suggested that a picture of a mushroom cloud be sent to Japan “with the inscription, ‘Made in the U.S.A, tested in Japan.’”<sup>10</sup>

The first Persian Gulf War underlined another characteristic of the American culture of war: the use of overwhelming force when “the enemy of choice was economically weak and militarily inferior.”<sup>11</sup> This was the case in Polk’s war against Mexico and in the Spanish–American War, as well as in U.S. military interventions in the Americas from the Dominican Republic to Granada and Panama.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese naval strategist Yamamoto Isoroku, who devised the Pearl Harbor strikes also thought in terms of shock and awe: the “Americans must be so overawed from the start as to cause them to shrink from continuing the war.”<sup>13</sup> In the first Gulf War, General Colin Powell elevated this concept to a principle after the demise of the Soviet Union and consequent elimination of any possible military rival to the United States: to deploy overwhelming force at the initial stages of combat in order to minimize U.S. military casualties and hence not be subject to incremental increases as had happened in Vietnam. By the first Gulf War—the first U.S. attack against a major third world state since its defeat in Vietnam—the deployment of overwhelming force was so effective that the invading U.S. forces suffered only seventy-nine fatalities.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the attacks on the Iraqis were called “turkey shoots” and the road to Baghdad the “highway of death.” “Modern war,” notes Dower, “breeds its own cultures, and incinerating civilians is one of them” (156).

This was the “shock and awe” of war—transmitted to television screens across the world, both conveying the awesome lethality of American power and the new aesthetic of war—of killing people from far away with predator drones, or from high in the air, with brilliant flashes lighting up the night sky with the “brightness of a thousand suns,” of “smart bombs” killing “dumb people.” In Kosovo, U.S. fatalities were lighter still and

[t]he blitz on Afghanistan, deploying a full panoply of satellites, smart missiles, drones, stealth bombers and special forces, showed just how wide the technological gap between the U.S. armoury and that of all other states had become, and how low the human cost—to the U.S.—of further military interventions round the world might be. The global imbalance in the means of violence once the USSR had vanished has, in effect, since been redoubled, tilting the underlying constituents of hegemony yet more sharply towards the pole of force. For the effect of the RMA [revolution in military affairs] is to create a low-risk power vacuum around American planning, in which the ordinary calculus of the risks or gains of war is diluted or suspended.<sup>15</sup>

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10. Quoted in Dirlik 1994, 1.

11. Cumings 2009, 64.

12. *Ibid.*, 141.

13. McComas 1991, 107, quoted in Cumings 2009, 308.

14. Hersh 2000, 49.

15. Anderson 2002, 13.

Iraq in 2003, of course, was even weaker than it had been in 1991, not only because the destructive capacity and the precision of the U.S. weapons of war and related command and control technologies had grown in geometric progression over the intervening twelve years, but also because between the end of the first Gulf War and 2001, the bombardment of Iraq by American and British planes had lasted longer than the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. In fact even during the Kosovo war, the United States and the UK launched more air strikes and missiles against Iraq than against the former Yugoslavia!<sup>16</sup> The attacks of 9/11 also showed that shock and awe can be administered by people with simple technologies, as with the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in occupied Iraq, and that shock and awe tactics can seldom shock people “into complaisant ‘regime change’” (300).

The omnipotence conferred by the technological marvels of death—the ability to deliver destruction without exposing the aggressors to their victims—also fed into experiences of sophisticated computer games. With the Bush administration refusing to allow televised reports of body bags coming back to the United States—and the U.S. occupation forces not maintaining records of Iraqi fatalities, or the journalists “embedded” within U.S. military units not transmitting gruesome images of death quite unlike their counterparts during the Vietnam War—the war on television resembled a computer game. This was the “aesthetics of mass destruction”—special to war from the air, which “possessed a beauty peculiarly its own, coupling as it did graceful flying machines, seas of flame and pillars of smoke, the nighttime crisscross of searchlights that made the planes glisten—an aura, almost, of touching heaven and hell simultaneously” (270). It was perhaps because the attacks of 9/11 showed how easily the nerve center of U.S. power—the Pentagon—could be breached by air power, that there was a media “muteness” about the attack on the Pentagon and attention was diverted instead to the collapse of the World Trade Center and thus away from a “stunning national embarrassment.”<sup>17</sup>

Much of the rhetoric of the “global war on terror”—of the civilizational differences between the West and “Islam,” of Saddam Hussein’s development and stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction—was played out on television, where a non-American view was rarely presented as a counter to the pronouncements emanating from U.S. politicians, journalists, and military officers, unless the non-American was a fellow traveler. This was a change that had been germinating in the 1990s, as even in the run-up to the first Gulf War, Iraqi officials like Tariq Aziz regularly appeared on news shows to present Iraq’s case directly to the TV audience, as did Soviet officials and journalists and Palestinian spokespersons. I was away from the United States for much of the 1990s and first became aware of the silencing of all but officially sanctioned views in early 2001, when a U.S. spy plane crashed on Hainan Island—in the 1980s, a similar incident would have seen debates between Chinese and U.S. journalists, policy

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16. Ali 2000, 6.

17. Smith 2002, 99.

18. Goodman 2004.

19. Wallerstein 2002, 67.

makers, and commanders, but in 2001 not a single person was invited on news shows to present the Chinese case.

The parade of retired senior military officers who appeared on television networks questioning embedded reporters during the Iraq war switched the customary practice of reporters interviewing generals, a point Amy Goodman underlined in her documentary “Independent media in a time of war.”<sup>18</sup> She reports that a survey of the evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS—in the week before Colin Powell went to the UN Security Council to make the case for an invasion of Iraq and in the week that followed—showed that only three of the 393 interviews aired at that time represented an antiwar position. Again, the television images of war were completely sanitized for American audiences, so sanitized that the use of torture is now an acceptable topic for debate in the United States! How did it come to this? What are the processes that legitimate the silencing of dissent, the deep cleansing of war, of torture itself?

Dower’s book, in short, charts the madness of war so thoroughly for the United States that we now need to inquire how much of this psychology of war was shared by other peoples. Surely, if its technological wizardry confers arrogant impunity to American forces that others cannot share, suicide bombers and IEDs have seriously undermined the American claim to invincibility. After all, in the three major wars it has fought since the end of World War II—in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan/Iraq—America has suffered one defeat and won no victories.<sup>19</sup> How do other cultures of war develop? How are we to map the cultures of war among non-state agencies, especially in a time when there are no states that can pose a plausible threat to Washington? What are the conditions that make audiences so receptive to the cultures of war? What enables politicians and generals to impose their failures of imagination on wider populations? What enables them to sell fear to their constituencies and then deliver the very fears they prophesy when their policies are accepted?

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## Emily S. Rosenberg

John Dower's *Cultures of War* grapples with the possibilities of comparative history and with the related issues of historical analogy and historical memory. It is a singular book, as it tacks back and forth between the Pacific War of the 1940s and the "war on terror" that President Bush claimed to wage after 11 September 2001. Framed not by chronology but by theme, the two wars serve to illuminate each other. Themes that could seem culturally or temporally discrete, when placed together, can bring to the surface comparisons and contrasts that cast both wars in new lights.

Early in the book Dower debunks the simple World War II analogies and comparisons that the Bush administration advanced to serve its own (mis) understanding of 9/11 and its justifications for "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Iraq. In refuting these craven and simplistic formulations of history, Dower finds himself drawn into comparisons. If the heroic narratives often popularly associated with World War II mislead as guides for policy, the more grounded and complex historical analyses that he offers can provide insight into "cultures of war" in a more general sense. Analogy and comparison, he seems to argue, are dangerous as simplistic propaganda but useful in promoting the kind of perspective that textured history can offer. Dower, in short, both rejects and embraces a politics of comparison.

What are the themes that he finds worthy of comparing, and how might they help a reader to think more broadly about "cultures of war"?

In the first part of the book Dower argues against the original Pearl Harbor–9/11 analogy. The United States was hardly an innocent attacked by evil nor was it an inevitable liberator. If one were to look for analogies, in fact, Dower suggests that the United States in the early twenty-first century might find a closer counterpart not in the United States of 1941 but in imperial Japan. His extensive examination of the rash decision for war—made by Japanese leaders in 1941 and by the Bush administration in 2003—highlights how a culture bending toward war can drum out dissent and, in its own hothouse, create decisions that, viewed from a distance, seem completely irrational, indeed "imbecilic."

The second section then deals with how the labeling of the Twin Towers wreckage as "Ground Zero" fosters historical amnesia toward America's 1945 use of atomic bombs. In a strong, detailed account that deserves widespread reading among the public, Dower analyzes civilian bombing as an increasingly important tactic in World War II—especially directed against Japan. According to Dower, Anglo-American aerial bombing killed an estimated 800,000 *civilians*, in both Europe and Japan. He also explains how the self-deception that can creep into justifications for war also easily infuses war making itself. To the end, Truman tried to claim that the United States targeted only military installations, although both physical evidence and even military records and plans clearly show that terrorizing civilians and destroying civilian workforces were a normal part of war planning. "Mass destruction," Dower writes, "possesses an almost irresistible momentum" (252), and he follows with a moving analysis of U.S. firebombing and then with an intricate description of the decision to use the atomic bomb. Here he tracks the way in which technological and military

momentum, domestic politics, and the awareness of rising Soviet power combined to turn the U.S. president away from what now seem to be reasonable alternatives to the massive civilian death toll (staging a demonstration and amending unconditional surrender terms). The horror of the atomic Ground Zero of 1945, however, has receded into an obfuscated public memory, now further eclipsed by the new Ground Zero of 2001—a designation that became weighted with symbolism about America's vulnerability even to possible atomic attack from the skies. The huge psychological impact of 9/11 as a Ground Zero—an impact greater than al-Qaeda could ever have imagined achieving—manifested itself in veritable panic, while a rhetoric resembling holy war emerged on both sides.

The third part of the book examines two occupations—of Japan after 1945 and of Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Here, again, the historical comparisons move back and forth, not to prove either similarity or difference (there are some of both) but to enhance understanding of the dynamic forces involved in a postwar military occupation. Comparative history proves especially worthwhile, enabling sharper questions and deeper analysis. Japan was often advanced as a “model” for Iraq in optimistic propaganda but, in fact, the higher levels of government engaged in no planning at all for Iraq. The administration believed it was “liberating,” not “nation-building,” and “free market fundamentalism”—with its disastrous program of privatization—encouraged the pillage of the country by contractors. Japan's economy under SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers), by sharp contrast, was protectionist, state-directed, and shielded (by Americans) from the temptation to sell off assets cheaply to foreigners. Iraq's economy was designed to be exactly the opposite, although of course war-related civil disorder became so huge that all processes (even privatization) became ad hoc and ineffective.

Dower closes with the theme that ties together all the parts: the Bush administration policies and its selective invocation of “history” as superficial justifications turned away from rationality and expertise to embrace change that was mostly “faith-based.” Faith-based thinking, he concludes, brings foreign policy disasters. There are no specific “lessons” in war and peace, as every situation brings its unique mix of circumstances. Yet there are general attributes that people should expect their government to display: using historical comparisons to think through many sides of problems, striving to understand how things might look through the eyes of others, avoiding incompetence, corruption, and profiteering, and recognizing the need for a long-term and thoughtful planning process.

The shelf of books documenting President Bush's incompetence and folly, of course, grows longer by the day, rendering stillborn (at least for now) the Bush–Cheney legacy project. The special value of Dower's book, however, is not simply in further documenting the horrible policy failures: the lapses in intelligence, the folly of an ideologically driven “unitary executive” deaf to competing points of view, the miscalculation that air power breaks will rather than strengthens it, the thrill of planning military offensives, the folly of fundamentalisms of all kinds, especially when unquestioned faiths drown out

the call for careful planning, the cascading self-deceptions and manipulations that spilled over into all aspects of policy. Rather, Dower asks us to consider these not just as characteristics of an unfortunate moment in our national life but as part of a larger syndrome by which leaders convince themselves to spread, by waging war, what they presume to be a benevolent empire. His detailed exercise in comparative histories allows us to think about, to better understand, and to worry over the “cultures of war” that have been on display over the past century.

John Dower’s earlier *War without Mercy* showed how the descent into racialized hatreds and horrific human destruction was not an attribute of one particular culture—Japanese or American; Eastern or Western—but came from a culture of war shaped within commonalities, even if those commonalities often manifested themselves in somewhat distinct ways. In many ways, *Cultures of War* is a provocative follow-up, one in which Dower both broadens and deepens the theme. If Americans think they can move beyond the follies of Bush’s wars, once they simply understand its mistakes, they need to read Dower’s book for a more sobering view of how cultures that produce war operate, how they solidify themselves, and how they generate a march of folly.

Appreciating these solid contributions of this thoughtful book, however, leads to further questions. If reliance on assertions, propaganda, and fundamentalist-style “faiths” can take a nation careening toward disaster for itself and others, how might one avoid this turn of events? How do states generate “faith-based” leaders, who may consider short-term tactics but ignore assessing long-term strategic aims? How do states with highly educated citizens end up with governments that ignore expertise, take pride in cultural blinders, and suppress healthy consideration of differing perspectives? On these questions, Dower falls somewhat silent. Of course, there are no simple formulas that might construct this kind of backward linkage. But his comparative methodology might, on this issue, again prove enlightening.

Without elaborating a full argument, I would like to suggest three possible additions to Dower’s comparison between the actions of the United States in 2003 and Japan in 1941. These three comparative elements, which recast possible interpretations of the motivations of both states, include oil (and raw materials generally), the influence of allies, and the inordinate power that can be exerted by a willful and dedicated group within a weak government.

The role of oil is the most surprising omission in this book. It is, of course, mentioned here and there. The reader is told of Japan’s interest in securing supplies of raw material by expansion in Asia and of America’s relationship to Iraqi oil. But, generally, American audiences may be much more eager to understand Japan’s move for raw materials than to accept their own. More detail might have illuminated the oil embargo that had shut U.S. companies out of the lucrative Iraqi field since the end of the Gulf War, the role of Vice President Dick Cheney’s secretive energy task force that sought to boost U.S. access to oil globally, the claims about looming exhaustion of fossil fuel fields and the fears that new global competitors for resources, such as China, needed to be countered by a stronger U.S. military and economic presence in the Middle East. Commitments



to privatization in postwar Iraq certainly stood upon the notions of market fundamentalism that had brewed in U.S. conservative think tanks over the previous decade, but oil companies were ready funders of those ideas. Moreover, the self-styled “strategic thinkers” who crafted the plan for the New American Century saw oil companies as stalwart allies whose operations in Iraq could help pay for the new U.S. regional presence. Dower may describe the architects of the war in Iraq as faith-based, but they styled themselves as hardheaded, geopolitical realists who understood the interplay between economic and strategic power. Market fundamentalism in Iraq was perhaps less a folly of “faith” than a highly functional long-term plan for introducing U.S. and other Western oil-company producers, buyers, and suppliers back into the country. Oil and raw materials occupy a position somewhere near the heart of the story of both the Pacific and the Iraq Wars; there are comparisons and certainly contrasts. But with so many other comparisons and contrasts making a fairly detailed appearance in *Cultures of War*, this one is notable by its near omission.

The influence of allies is another lacuna. Both Japan in the 1930s and the United States in the early twenty-first century operated within a complicated web of international politics. Countries, even powerful ones such as the post-cold war United States, are never lone rangers. Many leaders in Japan, as in Germany, worried over the growth of Soviet power and saw the Soviet Union as both a geopolitical and an ideological threat. Although Japanese leaders hardly appropriated all the trappings of the Nazi state after 1933, the coincidence of interest between the two countries drew them closer together. The economies of both were savaged by the Great Depression and by the liberalized trading order that had been unable to arrest the downward spiral. Established elements in both countries feared that economic collapse might prove a fertile ground for the expansion of communist sympathies domestically. Both embraced freshly fashionable ideas about the need for a strong state and military to spread landed and trading empires. Japan, in short, had allies that bolstered the ambitions of expansionists.

Although in no way the same, the United States alliance with Israel in the Middle East has also conditioned the views of certain leaders, especially those who came to have substantial influence in the early Bush administration. Additional detail on the international politics of the American–Israeli alliance might have helped explain some of the “faith-based” leaps that Dower judges lacking in thought and competence. Many of the neoconservatives around President Bush, of course, imagined that Iraq would only be the start of a larger campaign that would move on to overturn governments in Syria and finally Iran. Confusion in postwar Iraq, from this perspective, really mattered little to the larger goal of toppling governments in the Middle East that were staunchly anti-U.S. and anti-Israel. Many policy-makers in both the United States and Israel had been chafing, certainly since 1979, to solve the problem of hostile regimes in the Middle East. “Faith-based” arguments may have been the gloss but not the substance of taking the first step toward this goal. Again, the broader realm of international pressures and alliances that encouraged the culture of war might be a rich area for comparative insights.

Finally, there is a close relationship between incompetence and the drive toward “imbecilic” wars, and Dower certainly explores this theme in some depth. But there is another sense in which the relationship between incompetence and war can be understood. A government that is relatively weak and incompetent, for whatever different reasons, can be more easily manipulated by a small, determined group. Dower discusses “groupthink” throughout his book, and he ties it partly to an “imperial presidency” that isolates itself from accountability. But both groupthink and an imperial style flourish under certain circumstances: that is, when one determined party simply mows down the opposition in a government that is too weak to keep disparate forces in balance. Those who wonder and debate consequences are drummed out, and those who are clearly dedicated to a course of action aggregate power beyond their numbers. The “culture of war” thus flourishes especially in weakened states, as historians have often noted, and some greater insight into the circumstances of such weakening (and an assessment of the goals of the determined group) in these two comparative cases might have been illuminating. Certainly, before 9/11, the Bush administration, having come into office under the shadow of the 2000 election capers, was wobbly in its command and in its public support. Its uncertain prospects and mostly weak cabinet appointments made it far easier for the Cheney–Rumsfeld policy vision to ruthlessly enforce its groupthink.

The idea that binds these three suggested comparisons together is this: what Dower denounces as faith-based (non)reasoning approaches may have been thoroughly functional for certain goals that Dower has not weighed. Incompetence in the SEC’s regulation of the financial industry may suggest that “market fundamentalism” reigned supreme (as he suggests in his last chapter), or it may suggest that an incompetent and grossly understaffed SEC was highly functional for profit making by the powerful. British Petroleum’s assurance that deep water drilling had a solid record of success may have been “faith-based” optimism rather than science, but this assertion also surely arose from a carefully calculated, long-term corporate planning process. In narrating the story of 9/11, the war on terror, and the War in Iraq, historians might wish to avoid constructing today’s version of the “quagmire” thesis so commonly invoked to explain the Vietnam War. Yes, accidents, misjudgments, ideological blindness, and even stupidity often grease the skids toward war and other calamities, but Exxon and Halliburton just signed big contracts in Iraq; Iraq is predicted to greatly enlarge the world’s oil supply as it may eventually become perhaps the second largest producer in the world; and American taxpayers are debating whether to cut Medicare to help pay the bill. If this outcome has derived mainly from faith-based reasoning, it is no wonder so many elites are in church.

Nothing in this critique diminishes Dower’s insightful comparisons and conclusions, but looking beyond (or behind) the overt frame of the book does help raise additional important questions: For whom do “cultures of war” present very rational opportunities, and how might comparative histories help us think out this troubling question?

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## Ussama Makdisi

One of the most challenging and frustrating aspects of being a historian and teacher of modern Arab history in the United States is to be confronted by the persistent orientalism of mainstream American discourse about the Arab world. American assumptions about U.S. national righteousness and altruism and about Arab and Muslim “depravity” are widespread. Such assumptions persist despite a historical record that reveals a very different reality. If Latin America and the Philippines constituted the proving grounds of an ascendant U.S. imperialism more than a century ago, so now the heart of a less confident American empire beats in the Middle East.

Many astute scholars, journalists, activists, and otherwise informed citizens are deeply critical of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. This is not my point. Rather, despite such critics, the Iraqi and Afghani occupations have been typically described in the media (when Iraq was in the news, that is) in an invariably ahistorical, indeed antihistorical, manner. The starting point for almost any contemporary debate about the Middle East is the so-called war on terror after 9/11 and the rise of al-Qaeda, as if these phenomena were not themselves manifestations of longer historical genealogies involving the United States and Western powers. Although the viability and costs to Americans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are often passionately debated in the United States, these debates are invariably conducted without Arab or Afghani perspectives. Crucially, they are conducted in denial of how damaging the role of the United States has been in shaping the contemporary Middle East. As the historian Rashid Khalidi observes, the intrusion of the United States into this oil-rich region has uncannily followed in the footsteps of the British empire. Like the British, American officials have consistently subverted secular democratic aspirations among Arabs and Iranians. Like the British, they have promoted and supported autocratic regimes that have subordinated themselves to Western hegemony. Americans may think of themselves and their country as innocent. History, however, paints an altogether more damning picture.

This is why I was fascinated by John Dower’s *Cultures of War*. It offers an uncompromising and unsentimental understanding of American history. He reflects on how the United States reacted to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and to the al-Qaeda attacks of 9/11 (in both cases with a combination of righteousness, racism, vengeance, and, above all, awesome power). In chilling detail, Dower lays bare how American politicians, scientists, military personnel, and the public accepted, and in many instances called for, the deliberate targeting of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians. He thus dismisses the myth that Islam is more prone to terrorism than other religions and the belief that what some terrorists have perpetrated in the name of Islam is beyond description and comparison. Not so, says Dower. He thus puts al-Qaeda’s targeting of thousands of civilians into stark perspective. The effect (for me at least) is not to diminish the criminality of al-Qaeda as much as to put one murderous episode into a comparative historical context that scholars who focus only on Middle Eastern or Japanese history would probably never have been able to do. Dower

turns the ubiquitous evocation of 9/11 as a “second” Pearl Harbor on its head. Rather than affirming a chauvinistic American account of national innocence, he provides a serious historical meditation on how modern war-makers have repeatedly advocated, rationalized, planned, and perpetrated mass murder—and made massive strategic mistakes—in the name of nation, civilization, or religion.

Methodologically, Dower also provides an excellent example of how a reading of one set of historical experiences, centered on the American conflict with Japan during World War II, can illuminate a different set of experiences concerning contemporary U.S. involvement in the Middle East. What I most appreciated was his *juxtaposition* of these experiences, beginning with the simple, yet stunning, observation regarding the seamless appropriation of the term Ground Zero. The term initially indicated the site of the terrible nuclear attacks on Japan. Today, in America at least, the term refers exclusively to the site of the terrorist attacks on lower Manhattan of 9/11. This appropriation functions on several levels. It highlights one mass murder of civilians at the same time as it obscures other, far greater ones, including the incendiary bombings of Tokyo and other Japanese cities during World War II, in addition, of course, to the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dower writes that American planners selected these cities for obliteration precisely because they were nonmilitary targets and their destruction would demonstrate the full impact on a civilian population of a nuclear bombing. The recent appropriation of the term Ground Zero also reinforces a narrative of American innocence, demonizing Muslims as prone to a uniquely medieval fanaticism. “Islam,” as Bernard Lewis has never tired of telling us, has not had a secular Enlightenment like the “West” and hence supposedly resents this phantasmic West. Outrage at the attacks of 9/11 set in motion a series of retributive actions—including bombing campaigns, invasions of foreign countries, assassinations, and torture—all of which are routinely justified as an American “response” to a sudden, allegedly inexplicable, provocation.

In such a nationalist reading of the world, the story of terror begins only when the American homeland is treacherously attacked. America, therefore, necessarily acts in self-defense. Whatever civilians it does kill are either “collateral damage” or fatalities in the course of a justifiable retaliation in the name of vengeance or righteous wrath (or both). What America may have done prior to an attack is made irrelevant and invisible. Dower explains that the representation of the Japanese surprise attack on a U.S. naval base as heinous and barbaric became the prism through which an extraordinary but deliberate and methodical terror campaign to subdue Japan was viewed. Throughout the book, Dower exhorts repeatedly against “cherry-picking” historical experiences. He thus deconstructs the American response to 9/11 as a combination of genuine fear and anxiety and yet also of intense hypocrisy and historical amnesia.

Although I appreciated this juxtaposition of the American attitudes and conduct toward Japan and Iraq respectively, mediated by the response to the attacks of Pearl Harbor and 9/11, there is a striking imbalance in the book. This is, I am sure, in large part because I know the history of the modern Middle East far more than I know the history of Japan. Dower, of course, is an expert on Ja-

pan and has written extensively on the American–Japanese conflict during and after World War II. Inevitably, his knowledge of the Middle East is less nuanced. Whereas one comes across Japanese novelists, politicians, civilians, and military personnel in his account, most Arabs in this book appear to be al-Qaeda operatives or Islamists. Because Dower is completely familiar with Japanese sources and perspectives, he is able to construct a well-rounded history of Japan before, during, and after World War II. At the same time, although he is careful not to represent “the Arabs” or “the Muslims” or “Islam” in monolithic terms, he does not have the equivalent access to Arabic perspectives and sources. This raises a methodological point that I think merits some consideration, namely, what kind of expertise or collaboration is required to take Dower’s juxtaposition (or any such juxtaposition) to its full potential? Does one have to be fluent in several languages or be familiar with several archival sources?

I was also struck by Dower’s several allusions in the book to the negative impact and legacies of Western and American intrusion into the Middle East across the twentieth century without his specifying what this impact has been. Outlining these intrusions, however, might help explain the most important question the book raised for me, which is not related to an American “cherry-picking” of history. The question, rather, is why did Japan “embrace” its defeat (*Embracing Defeat* was the title of one of Dower’s earlier books) and move on to become what it is today, a vital member of the advanced, industrial world, an ally of the United States, while the Arab world, which had no grievances against the United States during World War II, has witnessed so many tragedies involving the United States? Why was there not, as Dower points out, a single killing of any Allied military personnel in the American occupations of Germany and Japan, yet the United States is routinely engaged in, and confronted by, violence in the Middle East? I realize that answering these questions is not Dower’s purpose, but they struck me as vital questions that needed to be addressed given the juxtaposition between the U.S. approaches to Pearl Harbor and 9/11 and to Japan and Iraq that Dower pursues in *Cultures of War*.

Viewed from the vantage point of America, as Dower does, Japan and Iraq can be compared as two foreign lands occupied by the United States. But the Japanese relationship to the United States at the moment of Pearl Harbor, with which Dower opens his book, was fundamentally different from the modern Arab relationship to the United States. Japan envisioned itself as a rival empire to the United States and the European colonial powers; the Arab nations did (and do) not. Why then the pronounced Arab antipathy to American foreign policy, especially given that up until the mid twentieth century Arabs had a largely favorable view of the United States? Indeed, why, even before the attacks of 9/11, had Arabs and Muslims become the chief bogeymen of American imagination, whereas it was the Japanese, as Dower illustrates so powerfully, who were once represented as the threat to an American way of life?

Dower recognizes that the Middle East has been subject to systematic Western imperialism for well over a century. In the nineteenth century, France colonized Algeria, and Britain occupied Egypt. At the end of World War I, the British and the French governments systematically undermined the principle of

self-determination in the Middle East. During the war, they had secretly partitioned what were then the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire. In 1920, they hid behind the façade of so-called mandates to justify their colonial partition. They used violence, including airpower (I am reminded of Sven Lindqvist's book *A History of Bombing*), to ensure that the governments established in the post-Ottoman Middle East were either directly subservient to them, or, at the very least, tacitly compliant with the demands of British or French empire. They brutally suppressed rebellions in Egypt (1919), Iraq (1920), Syria (1925), and Palestine (1936). The strategic location of the Middle East, its considerable petroleum resources, and the need to preserve colonial prestige were major considerations for British and French empire builders. The British and French imperialists who carved up the Arab world were also imbued with a sense of civilizational and religious superiority over what they regarded as fundamentally inferior peoples. In this they were not very different from American colonial rulers in the Philippines.

Nevertheless, the impact of these partitions was enormous. It created the post-Ottoman Arab world that we know today. It fueled major anticolonial nationalist movements. Most fatefully, beginning with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British also authorized and supported European Zionist colonization of Palestine in defiance of the indigenous Arab Palestinian population. Eventually, in 1948, the native Arab majority was ethnically cleansed. Needless to say, this historically late Zionist settler colonialism intersected with—and became the zeitgeist of—modern Arab national identity.

It is well known, of course, that the United States voted in favor of partitioning Palestine at the UN in 1947. Less well known is that Arabs considered this U.S. vote a flagrant violation of the ideals of democracy and self-determination that had been, in Arab eyes, closely associated with America. This vote precipitated a profound Arab disenchantment with American foreign policy in the Middle East, the legacy of which we can readily observe today. The U.S. acted against the Arabs on the pivotal question of Palestine, however, not as a conscious part of an imperial strategy to dominate the oil resources of the Middle East. Rather, all evidence points to other considerations: an active Zionist lobbying effort, Truman's need for Jewish votes, and the impact of the Holocaust and the question of displaced Jewish persons in Europe. What is most interesting is the degree to which American officials in 1947 and 1948 recognized that support for the creation of a Jewish state at the expense of the indigenous Arab majority contradicted America's need for a stable pro-Western Middle East. Yet Truman quickly recognized Israel and Congress overwhelmingly supported the idea of a Jewish state despite sustained Arab objections.

There was nothing, as far as I can tell, in American-Japanese relations that is remotely analogous to the role Israel plays in overtly shaping American-Arab relations. Rather than resolve (or at least ameliorate) its bias toward Israel, the United States has exacerbated it over the decades by becoming ever more partisan in favor of Israel. After the 1967 war, and yet another Israeli victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, the United States emerged as Israel's major political, economic, and military patron. Israel's occupation of Arab lands, of course, is

totally different from the American occupation of Japan. The logic of settler colonialism is not that of a military occupation of a foreign country. As Dower explains, Americans invested in postwar Japan and were interested in rehabilitating a shattered society and transforming it into an anticommunist ally during the cold war. Israel is not concerned with Palestinians except to reduce their presence within Israel and within the lands it occupies and colonizes. Israel's wager has been that its "iron wall" regarding the Arabs will ultimately pay off and that the militarily inferior Arabs as a whole will be forced to sue for peace on Israeli terms, accepting an expanded Israel as a Jewish state with pockets of autonomy for Palestinians in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. As Israel's major patron, the United States has become massively implicated in Israel's ongoing colonialism. At the same time, American officials have hoped and assumed that the Arabs would eventually reconcile themselves to their collective historic defeat in 1948.

But Arab resistance to the idea of a Jewish state forcibly implanted in their midst remains powerful. Arabs may have accepted the *fait accompli* of Israel's creation, but they repeatedly gravitate to resistance movements that appear to be successful in challenging Israel or U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, whether this was the PLO in the 1970s or Hizbullah in our own time. The underground terrorist organization al-Qaeda, by contrast, has had no such popular support, though, as Dower acknowledges, al-Qaeda continuously refers to the "Zionist crusader" imperialism to bolster its self-image as the vanguard of pious resistance to atheists and infidels. Hizbullah's victories in 2000 (when it forced Israel to withdraw from Lebanon, the first time that Israel retreated unconditionally from occupied Arab lands) and 2006 (when it survived Israel's devastating assault on Lebanon for far longer than conventional Arab armies were able to withstand Israel in 1967) reinforced this Arab refusal to accept the finality of their collective defeat in 1948. Significantly, immediately after the failed Israeli attempt to destroy Hizbullah in Lebanon in 2006, Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, famously insisted that "the era of [Arab] defeats is over."

Once again, the parallels with the American military authorities in postwar Japan are instructive. Israel is not nearly as powerful in the Arab world as the United States was in Japan. For all its military superiority over the Palestinians and conventional Arab armies, Israel cannot impose itself ideologically on Arab societies in the way that the United States imposed itself on Japan. A devastated Japan was able, or rather made by American occupation authorities, to draw a line between the suffering of its population and its own militarism during World War II, on the one hand, and, on the other, the period of reconstruction that followed (however contradictory this break may have been). For most Arabs, however, there has been no closure to the open wound of 1948.

Dower makes the important point that the United States had a "virtually uncontested moral *legitimacy*" in pursuing its occupation of Japan. The obvious question, then, is why has the United States endured and *perpetuated* a crisis of legitimacy in the Middle East that began long before the specific moments of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that Dower focuses on? Here is where I



U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur reviews U.S. Occupation troops in Tokyo on 4 July 1949. In his book, John Dower “makes the important point that the United States had a ‘virtually uncontested moral legitimacy’ in pursuing its occupation of Japan.” (AP Photo/Charles P. Gorry)

think Dower might have been more explicit in thinking through the limits of his juxtaposition of Japan and Iraq. It would have been helpful to consider how and why over the past century the American relationship to Japan has evolved productively while its relationship with the Arab world has devolved steadily since 1948. The cold war and the U.S. desire for quiescent rulers in an oil-rich region were certainly crucial factors in this devolution. Almost certainly, American and Arab relations would have become more fraught in an age of decolonization and nationalism irrespective of the U.S.–backed creation of Israel. But America's unique relationship to Israel has distorted U.S.–Arab relations and embittered Arabs more dramatically than any other single factor. Somewhere and somehow Dower ought to have engaged more explicitly with this breakdown. Without this downward spiral in American–Arab relations over the course of the twentieth century, there would have been, in all probability, no attacks on 9/11 and no American invasion and occupation of Iraq.

My point, ultimately, is not simply that America's public identification with Israel has profoundly affected how Arabs view American intentions and actions in places such as Iraq both before and after the U.S. occupation of the country in 2003. It has also shaped how many Americans view the Arab world (especially with the rise of a vehemently anti-Arab orientalism in the 1970s). As a result it is virtually impossible to analyze how the United States approaches the Middle East (whether we are talking about the occupation of Iraq, the so-called peace process, the response to 9/11 or to Islamist terrorism, enforcement of United Nations resolutions, or anxieties about nuclear proliferation in Iran) without the question of Israel entering into the analysis. This does not mean that Israel is responsible for American actions; neither does this mean that one cannot ana-



lyze American interests in petroleum independently of Israel nor acknowledge the clear similarities between American backing for repressive regimes in the Middle East with American backing for repressive regimes in Southeast Asia and Latin America during and after the cold war. But whereas U.S. support for Israel was *once* something that American officials had to soft-pedal before Arab audiences, today Israel is at the center of an American vision of a new Middle East. This transformation has been fueled by the dogmas of the powerful pro-Israel lobby, which Stephen Walt and John Mersheimer have analyzed, and by the military weakness of autocratic Arab regimes. Whereas Dwight Eisenhower compelled Israel to give up its conquest of the Sinai in 1956 to prove that there was a fundamental difference between the interests of the United States and those of Israel, Barack Obama in 2009 bluntly told the Arab (and Muslim) world *in Cairo* that the American bond to Israel was “unbreakable.” It remains a virtual taboo among American politicians to criticize Israel publicly, no matter how openly Israel defies, for example, formal U.S. policy on the illegality of settlement construction in the West Bank or East Jerusalem.

To be sure, I agree with Dower’s point that the administration of George W. Bush was hubristic and misguided in its invasion of Iraq. In particular, I agree with his emphasis on the way Americans managed their postwar occupation of Japan in order to underscore the shocking failures of the Bush administration in Iraq. But I also think it is far too convenient to locate the stunning arrogance and ignorance of Bush as the failure of a single administration. The problem of American power in the Middle East, in a word, runs far deeper than the snapshot that Dower provides of the Bush administration’s reaction to 9/11 can possibly suggest. The truth is that for decades, whether during the Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, Bush, or Obama administrations, U.S. Middle East policy has been stuck in a pro-Israel paradigm that cannot possibly lead to, let alone manage, a post-conflict Middle East. Not surprisingly, many of the neoconservatives who advocated the invasion of Iraq in 2003 conflated American and Israeli interests. Dower acknowledges the role the “bellicose supporters of Israel” played in the lead-up to the invasion. He is correct to point out that they were not the only constituents who pushed for war. Liberals, Iraqi expatriate figures, and Tony Blair also pushed for war. But he misses how these pro-Israel partisans, and many of the unnamed “Middle East experts” (presumably led by Fouad Ajami and Bernard Lewis), who also pushed for war, have consistently denied or minimized the ongoing impact of Western and Israeli colonialism on U.S.–Arab relations. Their insistence, after all, that an American occupation of Baghdad would lead to stability and the spread of “democracy” through invasion, just as the Americans had supposedly achieved in Japan and Germany, was premised on the key assumption that the road to peace in the Middle East could bypass an equitable solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Dower makes clear that they got their history of America’s occupations of Japan and Germany wrong. Far more tragically and perniciously, they also got their reading of modern Iraq and the Arab world profoundly wrong.

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**ROUNDTABLE**

## CULTURES OF WAR

Laura Hein, guest editor

**ABSTRACT:** In this second round of essays on John Dower's *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor / Hiroshima / 9-11 / Iraq* (Norton, 2010) participants expand upon and/or clarify the articles they contributed in the first round, published in *Critical Asian Studies* 43:2 (2011), and address themselves to points raised by the other participants. Participants include Sheila Miyoshi Jager (Oberlin), Monica Kim (Chicago), Ravi Arvind Palat (Binghamton), Emily S. Rosenberg (UC-Irvine), and Ussama Makdisi (Rice). A copy of this Roundtable (parts 1 and 2) is downloadable (gratis) from the *Critical Asian Studies* website: [www.criticalasianstudies.org](http://www.criticalasianstudies.org).

### *Sheila Miyoshi Jager*

One of the most interesting insights about John Dower's *Cultures of War* is his attempt to identify war as a cultural system and not the specific outcome of particular national policy. His main point is that modern warfare is not tied to any one national culture per se but is the product of shared assumptions, attitudes, and faith-based thinking. *Cultures of War* is thus a provocative follow-up to his earlier *War without Mercy*. In that work, too, Dower shows how the descent into racial hatred and wartime destruction were not the particular attributes of Japanese or American "way of war," but came from the same cultures of war that share similar commonalities.

In her synopsis of my response to Dower's book, Laura Hein claims that I am optimistic about prospects in Iraq. I am actually not very optimistic at all. My main point in bringing up the "cultural turn" in U.S. Department of Defense strategy was not to express my hope that "Iraq will soon become more democratic," but simply to show how cultures of war can change, even in the midst of an ongoing war. If the failure of imagination, wars of choice, and strategic imbecility arising from a culture of deception were all part of the cultures of war that Dower has identified with the actions of the United States in 2003 (and with Ja-

pan in 1941) what are we to make of the abrupt change of military strategy beginning in 2007? When it became clear that Iraq was turning into a brutal civil war, U.S. military commanders initiated a completely different approach to the war. In this case, the failure of imagination was (partially) recognized. The culture of deception was (partially) exposed. Thus the cultures of war, while never entirely disappearing, can, in many cases, be mitigated if not overcome. Whether these changes will guarantee that peace in Iraq will prevail or that future wars of choice can be avoided remains to be seen. But what these efforts do show is that far from repeating history, wartime leaders sometimes can and do learn from past failures and military disasters. So where does this leave the “cultures of war” that reinforces groupthink and a culture of deception?

Emily Rosenberg’s thoughtful review raises the same question in a different way. She asks how states generate faith-based leaders in the first place and why highly educated citizens end up with a government that ignores expertise, “take[s] pride in cultural blinders,” and “suppress[es] healthy consideration of differing perspectives.” The answer to these questions may not lie simply in the cultures of war per se, but in very pragmatic geopolitical considerations. For example, while faith-based policies and groupthink might have led to Japan’s and America’s decisions to go to war, their preoccupation with securing oil and raw materials also lies at the heart of the story of the Pacific and Iraq Wars. Could it be, she asks, that the faith-based thinking that led to both wars may have been an entirely pragmatic decision for certain goals? Similarly, when faced with a disastrous defeat in Iraq, the Bush administration abandoned wishful thinking and groupthink in favor of promoting a new military doctrine. In this case, very practical considerations challenged faith-based “culture.” War may be an outcome of groupthink, deception, and faith-based policies, but it is also the product of rational and pragmatic forces.

While the war in Iraq will be rightly judged on the false assertions, propaganda, and faith-based thinking that led to the invasion, it will also be judged for the strategic and policy goals of the United States the war was supposed to achieve. That our once antiwar president Barack Obama appears to have embraced democracy promotion as an objective in Iraq is evidence that such judgments are already being made.

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### **Monica Kim**

The cultures of war that John Dower presents to us are insular and self-sustaining in their closed logics, exemplary demonstrations of what Dower calls “groupthink.” Dower untangles the threads of logic spun through the psychology of the Bush administration, and implicates politicians, military officials, and scientists in a drama of warfare based more on pathology and tragedy than on transparency and debate. But in the face of pathology and tragedy, on what terms should we hold those in power accountable for war? Or perhaps a better question is: on what terms have the American and global publics been holding those in power accountable for war, and how must those terms change?

To be clear, I do not mean to imply that *Cultures of War* should have been a

prescriptive history for our current state of war; rather, I take my cue from how Dower moves his readers toward these very questions about accountability. A number of the roundtable comments pushed further on Dower's characterization of the Bush administration's "culture of war" as insular by placing the U.S. culture of war more squarely within what Ravi Palat calls the "evolving geopolitical architecture of the world." In their essays, Palat, Emily Rosenberg, and Ussama Makdisi pointed to structural situations that have enabled the insularity of U.S. elite power, whether through media and censorship, oil and elite capitalist interests, or the continuing U.S. denials of self-determination and humanity to the peoples of the Middle East. My own comment dovetailed with their concerns through the arena of law and decolonization in an attempt to historicize the debate over war itself, a point I would like to clarify here to bring the question of accountability to the fore.

An external force that could have potentially applied pressure upon the insular workings of the Bush administration enters Dower's story in the form of international law. But is it enough to demand that the United States adhere to the laws of war? Law must give shape to war in order to regulate it, and I argued for a need to historicize the event of "war" because the laws that supposedly give it legibility are themselves highly constructed and contested. To take as one example, the Geneva Conventions. During the Korean War, all parties involved in the armistice talks struggled over whose interpretation of the 1949 Conventions would hold sway on the topic of POW repatriation, although the United States, China, and North Korea were not signatories at that time. In the so-called war on terror, the Bush administration infamously dismissed the Geneva Conventions as "quaint." I'd like to suggest that despite the U.S. government's seeming turnabout on the legitimacy of international humanitarian law, there is a common set of stakes between the two historical stances: the United States' self-assigned role as the moral arbiter of legitimate nation-statehood. The convoluted questions of sovereignty in a "war of terror" involving the Guantánamo prison, extraordinary rendition, Iraq and Afghanistan, and private contractors have surprising resonance with the fraught nature of sovereignty at the heart of the POW controversy in the "police action" of the Korean War.

Drawing further from Makdisi's piece, I'd like to raise a question: would a confrontation by the United States with its own history regarding Palestine and Israel, or the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and the two Koreas, be more effective than any adherence to the laws of war would be in the push for a fundamental reckoning with and restructuring of U.S. "cultures of war"? Palat and Makdisi have also touched upon how the nation-state system—and the question of who abides, who is excluded, and who is a criminal—has become a larger affective landscape for

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\* Reference to memo sent by White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales to President Bush on 25 January 2002, in which Gonzales writes that the "new paradigm" of the war on terrorism "renders obsolete Geneva's strict provisions on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions." Internal memo obtained by *Newsweek* and reported in John Barry, Michael Hirsh, and Michael Isikoff, "The roots of torture—The road to Abu Ghraib began after 9/11, when Washington wrote new rules to fight a new kind of war." *Newsweek*, 23 May 2004.

political legitimacy, one that I believe encompasses Dower's psychology of war. My point is not simply that nation-states are fictions; indeed, the question at stake is not whether or not nation-states are real, but rather what kind of work such fictions enable for the implementation and maintenance of a state of war and possibly also the intervention in cultures of war. Such actions would not bring us suddenly closer to that "distant shore" of "cultures of peace" Dower mentions in his book's Preface, but the demand to break the insularity of power is a most urgent one for us today.

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### *Emily S. Rosenberg*

In my initial contribution to the Cultures of War roundtable, I raised a question about how to analyze what John Dower sees as irrational faith-based thinking ("imbecility"). If a "culture of war" involves irrationality, as Dower proposes, then it seems relevant to ask how that trait is cultivated and who benefits from its cultivation? Let's revisit that question.

Monica Kim's roundtable essay proposes one way to approach the question: American policy-makers have behaved much as they have throughout the "perpetual war" of the post-World War II era: imagining both their power and their presumed benevolence to be unbounded and pursuing almost continuous war under an ever-broadening lexicon of other names such as "police action," "liberation," "intervention," "anti-terrorism," and "peace." In this view, the Iraq War is not an irrational moment in policy-making but is consistent with broader patterns of what has come to seem normal. Ravi Arvind Palat makes a related point: has not a long history of warfare in the United States fed a psychology that promoted violence always in the name of defense? In cultures of war, especially in the age of air power and corporate media, can there be a bright line around what is deemed irrational? Ussama Makdisi sees U.S. policies in the Arab world as primarily a function of the Israeli alliance—a factor that Dower hardly examines.

My comment took the question in a different direction, which I will here make more explicit. The question of solutions grounded in empirical analysis rather than enabled by faith-based thinking seems particularly urgent because over the past decade the United States has experienced a vigorous promotion of the latter mode of thought—not just in a rush to war in 2003 but in a broad range of other matters as well. Indeed, Dower's final chapter provocatively links the Iraq War and the financial crisis of 2008 as both being products of faith-based thinking rather than of empirical assessments. The links do not stop here, however. A broad-based attack on scientific thinking has promoted challenges to evolutionary biology, climate science, basic economic principles (see Paul Krugman's blog about "arguments from personal incredulity"<sup>†</sup>), and the kind of quality higher education that instructs students in disciplinary methodologies. Who is promoting nonempirical modes of thought and faith-based

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<sup>†</sup> Available online at [krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/24/arguments-from-personal-incredulity/](http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/24/arguments-from-personal-incredulity/) (accessed 24 August 29, 2011).

policy arguments, and is not the process of this promotion often carefully researched and reasoned?

We know, of course, that what used to be called “the arts of persuasion” have become more and more sophisticated both in the realm of commerce (product advertising) and of politics (packaging and branding of candidates and slogans). These arts rest on the cultivation of emotional triggers. They are arts that can be very powerful, and they are for hire. The bigger the checkbook, the larger the megaphone. Branding and re-branding are all about generating an emotional response, one that cannot easily be addressed or changed within the realm of empirical argumentation. The 9/11 event was Pearl Harbor; Saddam was Hitler; Iraq was Japan post-1945; the “inheritance tax” is a “death tax”; torture is “enhanced interrogation”; and so on. The practice of “branding” events and policies, based on carefully pre-tested language clusters and emotional triggers, is a very rationally constructed process even as it enlarges the arena of largely predictable emotional responses. Palat’s comment elaborates on this line of thought as well.

People need to chart the logics of politics, as Dower has done, but they also should ask who actually benefits from the country’s stupification. Who gains from particular wars, particular kinds of economic bubbles, particular policies of deregulation, particular views of science, particular re-writings of history, particular analogies, and resonant words? In addition to Dower’s fine cultural analysis, we might remember the famous line from the Watergate scandals: follow the money. Like other recent faith-based moves (the debt-ceiling “crisis,” the plan for a balanced budget amendment, the proposal to rid the country of the scientists in the EPA) wars can prove highly rewarding to some even if they prove irrational for the well-being of many.

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### ***Ravi Arvind Palat***

Ussama Makdisi’s intervention poses a very interesting question: U.S. occupation and the remaking of Japan (and the Allied occupation of Germany) are probably the only two instances where a democratic order was successfully imposed by occupation forces. It is unlikely that a stable democratic order will emerge in Iraq—as Sheila Jager’s first-round essay appears to claim—or indeed in Afghanistan or in the latest victim of NATO imperialism, Libya. Rather than the “surge” in 2007 representing a change in military strategy in Iraq, it is more likely that by 2007 ethnic cleansing had led to population transfers on such a scale that different ethnicities were concentrated in separate ghettos; a multi-ethnic society had been transformed into a mosaic of armed ethnicities with the Kurds in the north being virtually an autonomous state. But this is not to say that cultures of war cannot change—John Dower’s intent was to lay out the *cultures* of war; it is for others to show how war changes and indeed how it is generated across time and space, as I raised in my first intervention.

In the successful nurturing of democracy in Japan and Germany, I think the context of the cold war was crucial since the United States was attempting to remake the world order under its aegis: seeking to build strong regional bulwarks

in the east and west against Soviet “expansionism,” and hence they were both recipients of massive amounts of aid (Japan initially through U.S. military procurements during the Korean War). U.S. interventions elsewhere—in Iraq and other places in the Middle East—have been more in the nature of colonial exercises: to impose Israel on Palestine and to safeguard oil supplies, to prop up complaint monarchies and autocracies in the region for these purposes. Indeed, even today, there is nary a word on the Saudi Arabian suppression of the “Arab Spring” in Bahrain or the claim by senior Saudi clerics that protest is “un-Islamic.”<sup>†</sup> Hence, while the United States and its allies could manipulate the Egyptian military to pension off—and perhaps eventually imprison—Mubarak and bombard Libya, they do not restrain their other allies.

There may be another way to address an issue that Emily Rosenberg raises: the role of allies, though it may not be the “lacuna” that she thinks it is. Since 1967, the importance of Israel to U.S. policy-makers has increased enormously for some of the reasons Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have discussed.<sup>§</sup> While the United States easily dismisses the concerns of other allies— even if British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously admonished George H.W. Bush when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait that “This was no time to go wobbly”<sup>‡</sup>—Israel has virtual immunity from official criticism and even the Republican Tea Party–driven spending cuts. Indeed, the United States seems unable to do anything to restrain Israel from flouting international law even when it threatens U.S. security. Yet another instance of strategic imbecility!

The United States may be unrivalled in its military power, but in other ways its power is very diminished. In contrast, at the end of World War II, the United States towered above all other states: it had 48 percent of the world’s industrial capacity and 70 percent of gold reserves.<sup>\*</sup> It could remake the economies of its strongest allies and could compel Britain and France to withdraw their invasion forces from the Suez in 1956. It is because the United States was explicitly constructing a new world order that it accepted the 1949 Geneva Conventions in POW repatriation in the Korean War despite the belligerent parties not being signatories to the convention, as Monika Kim shows. Today, it is the largest debtor in history; its cultural influence as measured by TV shows and movies has waned; it ignores international treaties that are inconvenient; and its political drift to the far right—with leading politicians expressing reservations about the reality of climate change and the theory of evolution—evokes contemptuous mirth everywhere.

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† Saudi Arabia prints 1.5m copies of religious edict banning protests. *Guardian*, 29 March 2011.

§ Walt and Mearsheimer 2006.

‡ Available at [www.margarethatcher.org/document/110711](http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/110711); accessed 28 August 2011.

\* Palat 2004, 7–8.

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A U.S. attack helicopter hovers over the smoke from a burning military vehicle in Sadr City in Baghdad, Iraq, 5 May 2007. “American military casualties may be down, [Ussama Makdisi writes] but Iraqis are still haunted by routine bombings in a ravaged, devastated country. Tens of thousands of private contractors and U.S. soldiers remain in the country. In addition, U.S. military polices in Iraq remain part of a much deeper American architecture of domination in the region.” (Credit: AP Photo/Ali al-Khazali)

### *Ussama Makdisi*

All the initial responses in the “Cultures of War” roundtable call for John Dower to elaborate on contemporary U.S. politics and to explore more precisely the various interests that have sustained a specific American culture of war—both within and beyond the United States. Sheila Jager points out how the U.S. military has evolved its tactics during the course of the occupation of Iraq. Emily Rosenberg quite rightly draws attention to what she refers to as the interest of “geo-political realists” in petroleum and military contracts. Both Rosenberg and I emphasize the nature of the U.S. relationship with Israel. Monica Kim alludes to how Japan and the Republic of Korea have sustained what she refers to as the “delusional Leviathan.” Ravi Palat wonders why and how the U.S. has been able to sanitize its use of torture and to gain the acquiescence of the American public, if not its overt approval, for the perpetuation of violence abroad?

I don’t agree with Jager’s contention that the publication of a field manual dedicated to counterinsurgency overcomes a myopic culture of war. What is meant by the military when it describes the supposedly different rationality that makes up the “foreign cultural problem” in Iraq? Coercion and violence remain at the heart of this particular counterinsurgency doctrine. American military casualties may be down, but Iraqis are still haunted by routine bombings in a ravaged, devastated country. Tens of thousands of private contractors and U.S.



soldiers remain in the country. In addition, U.S. military polices in Iraq remain part of a much deeper American architecture of domination in the region.

To be sure, Jager discusses the degree to which American anthropologists and the American Anthropological Association have criticized the military's deployment of anthropologists to further the war effort. I doubt, in any case, that the so-called cultural turn has made as much of a difference in Iraq as has the sectarian bloodletting during the U.S. military occupation. Journalist Nir Rosen has explored how the dynamics of sectarian violence since 2003 have fundamentally rearranged the political and confessional landscape of Iraq. That Barak Obama has adopted the rhetoric and even the basic approach (in Afghanistan in particular) of George W. Bush is less a vindication of Bush than an indication of the pathology of American imperial power.

The question, therefore, that we need to explore further is not so much why this power has chosen the ruinous route of brute domination to pursue its putative interests in the region. Rather, the question is why the U.S. chose this route despite the fact that it had arguably, at one point in time, the opportunity to pursue both its interests and the possibility of helping to build a more vibrant and friendly postcolonial Middle East.

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