An unsettling view of 'war on terror'

Cultures of War
Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9-11/Iraq
By John W. Dower

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Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

In March 2003, after the United States launched "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the eminent historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. declared that President George W. Bush had adopted a policy of "anticipatory self-defense" that was "alarmingly similar" to the policy that imperial Japan employed on Dec. 7, 1941.

Franklin D. Roosevelt had been right to declare war on the evil of the Axis, Schlesinger continued, but warned that "today it is we Americans who live in infamy."

Analogies between World War II and "the war on terror" are jarring. They can also be illuminating, as John W. Dower demonstrates in Cultures of War.

Dower, professor emeritus of history at MIT and Pulitzer-Prize winning author of Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II, examines the "groupthink" that characterized "wars of choice," as decision-makers substituted "half-truth history, scapegoating history," myths about the motives of aggrieved groups and nationalities, and "an adroit camouflage of failure," for objective analysis and self-criticism.

Supplemented with visual images that are texts in themselves, Dower's book is a passionate and provocative excursion into the comparative dynamics and pathologies of modern war.

Cultures of War subjects George W. Bush's foreign policy to saturation bombing. By responding to 9/11 with a "war on terror" and military force (and not as a "criminal problem)," Dower argues, the president and his circle started a chain reaction that led to the Guantanamo "gulag"
and the disastrous occupation of Iraq.

Bush's absolutist moral righteousness, which Dower points out was disquietingly similar to Osama bin Laden's, led Americans to "feast on fear for year after excruciating year."

More interesting - and more surprising - are Dower's comparisons of Hiroshima, the destruction of the World Trade Center, and the bombing of Baghdad. Bin Laden insisted that Bush used a double standard when he condemned the murder of "innocent civilians." The 2001 use of the term *ground zero* as a shorthand for America as a victim for evil forces, Dower adds, is especially (and depressingly) ironic, given its origins as a description of the two cities in Japan devastated by U.S. atomic bombs.

Although "shock and awe" against Iraq also drew much of its inspiration from American air power during World War II, Dower suggests that the doctrine works as well "as a practical weapon of the weak." It motivated the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, with the Japanese convincing themselves that they could demoralize Americans and keep them from entering World War II. And it was "stunningly successful" on Sept. 11 in demonstrating - or appearing to demonstrate - that a seemingly puny adversary could shake the economic and political pillars of the United States.

Dower's comparison of postwar Japan with postwar Iraq is equally stimulating. Because the situations - and the policies - differed so dramatically, he argues, using a positive picture of the former to anticipate a happy outcome in the latter "was perverse." Japan, after all, was an isolated archipelago, lacking in natural resources, with a relatively homogeneous population, and no adversaries perched on its borders. Nor did American officials treat Japan (as they did Iraq) as an unregulated marketplace, turning over "basic reconstruction tasks to foreign, profit-driven private interests."

"One-size-fits-all theories and metrics flush history, culture, psychology, and common sense down the drain," Dower writes. They invite us, during crises, to use the past like a supermarket, picking and choosing "facts" that conform to decisions already made and placing beyond the pale anyone who raises a red flag. And to turn necessary campaigns, including a struggle against Islamic terrorists, into "fools' errands."

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