MICHIGAN WAR STUDIES REVIEW

John W. Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor / Hiroshima, 9-11 / Iraq*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. Pp. xxxviii, 596. ISBN 978–0–393–06150–5.

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In his latest work, accomplished historian John Dower (MIT) undertakes a comparative study of the processes of planning and conducting war. Specifically, he analyzes parallel decisions made by the George W. Bush White House and the Imperial Japanese government before and during, respectively, the Iraq war and World War II. More generally, he returns "to old texts and arguments about Japan's war with China and the Western powers—and to all the clichés about the uniqueness of Japanese culture and the peculiarities of its mid-century militarism and aggression—and asking new questions not merely about Japan and the United States and other Allied powers all those decades ago, but also about war as a culture in and of itself, and why it is always with us" (xx). Dower also examines wartime myths about self and others, race and warfare, and postwar occupation through case studies from World War II and the post 9/11 era.

Dower's previous works have cemented his reputation as one of the West's leading historians of twentieth-century Japan and US-Japanese relations during and after the Second World War.[1] His awards include a Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and Bancroft Prize, among many others.

Cultures of War centers on four signal events: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9/11, and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. It blends masterful forays into Japanese decision-making and American policy in the Pacific War with thought-provoking, if less compelling, analyses of twenty-first-century US military policy.

Dower is most persuasive in discussing parallels between contemporary and Second World War political rhetoric, the consequences of underestimating adversaries, and the failure of both the Japanese government and the Bush administration to plan viable exit strategies. He also shows how racism and other cultural biases caused Japanese and American leaders to underestimate their enemies in both the Pacific War and the global "War on Terror." He observes that failed diplomatic efforts led the United States to war in 2003 as it had Japan in 1941. He argues that both administrations acted unreasonably, with no attention to long-term planning.

The book closely examines the language governments exploit to justify their use of military force. Terms like "Ground Zero" or language suggesting a similarity between the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 surprise attacks, were, Dower shows, effective but disingenuous. He notably argues that American commentators and politicians presented a simplistic, inaccurate version of World War II in framing an equally simplistic version of military actions taken in the wake of 9/11. Precisely this misrepresentation of history prompted the writing of *Cultures of War.*

Dower contends that in both 1941 Japan and post-9/11 America, "Ideology, emotion, and wishful thinking overrode rationality at the highest level, and criticism was tarred with an onus of defeatism, moral weakness, even intimations of treason once the machinery of war was actually set in motion" (98). Reductive, moralizing rhetoric refashioned complex events into a bogus *casus belli* and incomplete, ill-conceived policies vitiated deliberations in 1941 Japan and the Bush White House, as leaders fell prey to groupthink and "strategic imbecility" (115). "Lack of imagination"—the inability to understand the enemy's nature and motives—led to the failure of US officials to prevent 9/11 and of the Japanese high command to anticipate the overwhelming bellicose American response to Pearl Harbor.

Convenient semantic shifts were again in play as governments redefined the status of prisoners of war after both World War II and 9/11. Allied officials reclassified Japanese POWs in order to redeploy them against the Viet Minh in Indochina. So too, the Bush administration's legal team redefined terrorist sus-

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1. See *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (NY: Pantheon, 1986), *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (NY: Norton, 1999), and *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World* (NY: New Press, 2012).

pects as "enemy combatants" in order to detain them indefinitely. Elastic western notions of law and morality in times of war facilitated such reclassification of prisoners to serve perceived needs of immediate security.

Deploying an imposing array of primary and secondary sources, Dower gives a trenchant and masterful account of the evolution of US opinion of the bombing civilians between Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima. Before the war, President Roosevelt declared that attacks on civilians "sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity..." (220). But, by August 1945, US leaders saw it as a political and military necessity to use state of the art (including nuclear) weapons to annihilate Japanese cities.

A nation must know and understand its enemies and their motivations before going to war: "Launching a 'war on evil' as the Bush administration did—with contempt for the grievances or opinions of others, ignorance of the nature and capabilities of the enemy, and how and why that enemy attracted recruits, and only a cherry-picker's regard for history—carried tragic consequences. This made it impossible to comprehend why non-Western peoples may simultaneously embrace and repudiate Western contacts and influences, and why rallying cries about humanitarian intervention and the like may be dismissed as the latest refrain of an old imperialist song" (83).

While Dower's work on the World War II era rests on an impressive mastery of primary sources from US and Japanese archives, his account of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars reflects a less complete synthesis of secondary works, contemporary journalism, and some primary materials. On strategic issues, he fails to cite the substantial literature that has improved our understanding of the origins and conduct of contemporary warfare.

The events of 9/11 and the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have inspired emotional and politically rigid analyses by both prominent war critics and Bush Administration officials. Yet, "commentators including historians acquire perspective as time passes—regard the past with greater detachment, knowledge of long-term legacies, and the fuller understanding that derives from accounts by participants and access to private papers and hitherto secret documents" (221). This discrepancy of tone between immediate reactions to events and the later, more considered work of historians may account for a certain imbalance in *Cultures of War*. Or perhaps it has to do with the difficulty of comparing events whose outcome remains uncertain with those of decades past.

The treatment here of the targeting of civilians and the use of terror bombing is intriguing but uneven. In particular, the author's narrow focus on the years 1941 and 2003 is problematic. Key events in the interval, such as the Vietnam War and the 1991 Gulf War appear only in passing. This is especially damaging to Dower's handling of terror bombing. We get no sense of evolving American views on bombing civilians, as evidenced in the significant protests against bombing in the Vietnam era and afterwards. The assertion that the World War II targeting of civilians with airpower "had been firmly established as strategically desirable and, certainly among the victorious Allied powers, morally acceptable" (161) cannot be applied to bombing campaigns in the intervening decades, when Americans increasingly decried their government's use of such force. Mass protests against the bombing of Hanoi marked a critical change of attitude, in part reflecting the reaction of later, non-participant generations to the severity of bombing campaigns during the Second World War. Forced comparisons of events separated by six decades ignores major changes in public opinion of bombing campaigns and civilian casualties and weakens the book's arguments about larger issues of war and society.

"The U.S. problem, in Afghanistan as well as Iraq, was that brute force, no matter how technologically sophisticated, was inappropriate and counterproductive when it came to fighting elusive enemies embedded in complex communities" (114). While true enough, this does not address all the relevant issues. The United States has not unlimbered its full arsenal in either war, instead favoring a wide range of non-kinetic operations, with varying success. Dower oversimplifies the complexities of these operations, especially in Afghanistan, where a reliable and effective local partner and international support are sorely lacking. The current US counterinsurgency operations are far removed from World War II-era conventional assaults and

exertion of massive air power; they are even further removed from Soviet-era tactics, seen here as precursors of current US-led actions in Afghanistan.

Dower agrees with former Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, that the United States is repeating all of the Soviet Union's mistakes (58). He condenses the source of American difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan down to excessive use of force as a cure-all. But this overlooks many and diverse US civil-military efforts in both countries. Moreover, the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—unlike the Soviets—does not rely on retributive killing or the depopulation of entire Afghan villages that support or host Mujahedeen fighters. ISAF operations account for only 20 percent of civilian casualties and must conform to restrictive rules of engagement under heavy political and media scrutiny.

In discussing Bush administration arguments for invading Iraq, Dower simply labels as "paranoia" any White House concerns about terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction, without explaining exactly why such fears may have been unfounded (61). He contends that an "imagined dichotomy between rational Westerners and irrational hordes of people of color that, for most Caucasians, never ceases to be gospel" persistently animates conflicts between Western nations and the East (391). Though such a claim has some basis in twentieth- and twenty-first-century history, it obscures recent, ongoing changes in racial and cultural perceptions in the West.

Likewise, the discussion of collapsing security in Iraq after the invasion is facile and unpersuasive. Insurgency exploded in Iraq for many reasons, including lack of effective governance in the early years of the war. It was not the inevitable result of Iraq's history and its badly drawn colonial-era borders. Poor planning and inadequate resources escalated Iraq's security problems to crisis levels. American forces were too small to maintain order and the Coalition Provisional Authority enacted unwise policies, such as disbanding the Iraqi army and removing many Ba'ath party members from the civil service. It is plainly wrong to hold that US views on terror bombing have not changed since World War II. Present-day American war leaders work in the shadow of both the earlier war's atomic legacy and the anti-war protests of the Vietnam era. Presidents and military officials must cope with a whole new level of scrutiny of their actions.

Dower does in fact succeed in identifying similarities between Japanese and US leaders who committed strategic errors, succumbing to groupthink and deceptive war rhetoric. But he provides no detailed explanations for these similarities. Although a preeminent historian of the War in the Pacific, he is much less effective in comparing that war to America's present-day conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In short, while it has its strengths, *Cultures of War* lacks both the narrative coherence and the cogent argumentation of his previous work.