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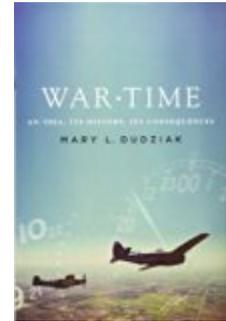
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary L. Dudziak. *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 232 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-977523-1.

Reviewed by Joseph Margulies (Northwestern University)

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The Myth of Wartime

After the attacks of September 11, it became popular to describe what was thought of as the typical American response to war: the nation is thrown off course at the onset of a military emergency but gradually steers back to a peacetime norm once the threat recedes.[1] It is the great myth of deviation and redemption. It imagines a sudden and violent storm, when the Ship of State is tempest-toss'd by buffeting gales of savage hatred, until such time as the seas finally calm and the country begins the long, difficult journey back to more familiar waters. Like any national myth, this one serves an important purpose in American life. It allows Americans to comfort themselves that whatever transgressions may occur during these periods are both aberrational and temporary. Wartime is a cosmic Get Out of Jail Free card, when all is forgiven because everything has changed, which comes in handy if you go to war a lot.

But like any myth, the myth of deviation and redemption suffers if we study it too closely. For one thing, it cannot account for continued forays into a repressive wilderness even after the threat has subsided. Yet what one scholar has called “the terrorism narrative” is at least as potent today as it was immediately after September 11, even though the consensus of the intelligence community is that the threat from transnational jihad in general and al Qaeda in particular, while always overblown, has now been substantially reduced.[2] Nor does the myth take into consideration the possibility that partisan pressures might nourish and sustain wartime impulses long past the point justified by any sober assessment of the

risk to national security. Yet we know the Cold War lasted far longer and cut far deeper into the fabric of American life precisely because of partisan pressure, and that the same thing is taking place during the war on terror.[3] In other words, the myth requires that we suspend what we know to be true in just about every other aspect of our lives—*viz.*, that our understanding of reality is largely constructed and that partisanship matters.

These illustrations help train our thinking on the myth's essential flaw. It imagines that wartime is a fixed and recognizable period, that it is a statement of fact rather than a state of mind. And this is indeed the widely held belief. To be sure, the courts have recognized for many years that the transition from war to peace is better imagined as a dimmer than a light switch. The issue arises now and again when someone complains that he should not be subject to this or that wartime rule because the shooting stopped a long time ago. Courts do not take kindly to these claims. The case law includes a lot of throat-clearing about “winding down,” along with the occasional observation that love and war apparently have at least this much in common: it's usually easier to know when things start than when they end. But apart from this, people seem to think they know when the country is “at war” and when it is not. Wartime is a condition that comes round now and again. We all know when it begins, when it ends, and where it happens, or so the story goes.

But for at least two generations in the United States, “wartime” has been nothing like what the myth imag-

ines it to be, and grows less so as the seasons pass and the wars accumulate. In *Wartime: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*, the legal historian Mary Dudziak has taken a closer look at the entire conceptual category. A slim and engaging volume, wonderfully written and carefully wrought, *Wartime* is a fascinating meditation on the perils of clinging to a myth of national identity that increasingly bears only a glancing resemblance to modern life. Particularly since the Cold War, “wartime” has been pretty near all the time. It is, as Dudziak writes, “not an exception to normal peacetime, but an enduring condition” (p. 4). And at least since President George W. Bush launched the “war on terror,” it’s also everywhere, unbounded not only in time (since no one knows what victory over an ideology looks like) but also in space (since ideologies have a way of taking root in the darnedest places).

Many writers have made a similar point and the concern that wartime initiatives will last beyond the emergency that summoned them forth is a familiar complaint. But Professor Dudziak, a professor of law, history, and political science at the University of Southern California, goes significantly beyond prior discussions by focusing our attention not on the risk of normalization, which is serious enough, but on the very idea that wartime remains an identifiable category, recognizably separate from whatever might be its opposite. The problem is not simply that we may come to accept roving wiretaps as part of the “normal” landscape of life (i.e., that we will tolerate them even when we are “at peace”), but that we will come to tolerate the idea that we are always “at war” and therefore eternally prepared to accept all manner of ostensibly exceptional measures because we cling to the myth that war is temporary and aberrational. The concern, in short, is that the myth to which we have grown so attached has outlasted its relevance to the American experience. It has decayed from myth (which has at least a passing resemblance to the truth), to fantasy (which is nothing more than truth as we would wish it). Though Professor Dudziak does not put things in precisely these terms, that is the implication of her account, and it is an exceptionally valuable insight.

For Professor Dudziak, all of this is made even more serious by the nature of modern warfare. As she points out, for the great majority of Americans, war has become remote. “Death and destruction [are] the province of soldiers and of peoples in faraway lands.... As war goes on, Americans have lapsed into a new kind of peacetime. It is not a time without war, but instead a time in which war does not bother everyday Americans” (p. 135). Professor

Dudziak views this as a threat to “democratic vigilance” (p. 136). It is indeed, but here I suspect she has trained her lens too narrowly. That the public does not sufficiently attend to matters of state is a truism of American life and has bedeviled civic leaders since the founding. As the political scientist Murray Edelman put it nearly fifty years ago, for most people most of the time, contentious national issues exist only as “a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines, and discussions.”[4] This is especially true in matters related to national security and foreign affairs, where the particulars of the debate are often deliberately shrouded in secrecy and thought to be beyond the ken of all but a tiny number of esoteric specialists.[5] It is not, in other words, a problem caused by the indeterminacy of modern warfare, but by the remoteness of modern life.

This suggests that the problem is more deeply entrenched than Professor Dudziak describes. Still, we ought not fault her for tackling only part of the problem lest the perfect become the enemy of the really quite good. The idea of being “at war” summons to the American mind a resolute purposefulness, a national determination to set aside childish things and marshal the vast resources of a powerful nation toward a single goal for the duration of the conflict. But when the conflict has no duration—when it is everywhere, all the time—and when only a tiny fraction of the population has to set aside anything, we are well advised to re-examine the legitimating national myth that allows this to continue. Professor Dudziak’s book is a splendid beginning.

I cannot close without one other quibble about Professor Dudziak’s account. She faults President Bush for launching the country onto a wartime footing immediately after the attacks of September 11 (pp. 100-101). This is a common complaint. In his otherwise careful account of the language of the post-September 11 era, for instance, the sociologist Richard Jackson blames the Bush administration for having quickly “remade” the attacks “from acts of terrorism ... to acts of war.”[6] And it is true the president used this language early and often to describe the violence of September 11. The first occasion was September 12. After meeting with his national security team, Bush told reporters the attacks “were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.”[7] The next day, after a morning call with New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Governor George Pataki, the president told reporters “that an act of war was declared on the United States of America.”[8] In the days that followed, his language grew increasingly ominous. On the 14th, in remarks to the nation from the National Cathedral in Wash-

ington, he said, “War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit.”[9] And the next day, after another meeting with his national security team, he said, “We’re at war. There has been an act of war declared upon America by terrorists, and we will respond accordingly.”[10]

But the suggestion that Bush led the charge to war is nonetheless unfair since it fails to appreciate the extent to which the president followed rather than led public sentiment, at least in this particular regard. Well before September 12, when President Bush first gave it a name, the conviction was commonplace that the attacks had been an act of war and almost no other view found a voice in the public square. “This is obviously an act of war that has been committed on the United States,” said Arizona Republican Senator John McCain on September 11. “Everybody said it all day,” Peter Jennings of ABC News correctly observed. It was “a declaration of war, an act of war against the United States. Any number of politicians and commentators, us included, who were reminded that the last time there was an attack like this on the United States was Pearl Harbor.”[11] On the day of the attacks, and just on the three major television networks alone, one careful study has found that “anchors, correspondents, and reporters ... mentioned the term ‘war’ 57 times; ‘Pearl Harbor’ 41 times, and ‘war zone’ 11 times. In addition, experts, public officials, historians, and other sources used the term ‘war’ a total of 29 times and ‘Pearl Harbor’ 17 times.”[12]

Conceivably, a concerted effort by the Bush administration might have tamped down the enthusiasm for war, and it is certainly true that the administration took no steps in that direction. Likewise, the mere fact that the attacks were spontaneously constructed as an act of war does not relieve the administration of responsibility for the shape the war on terror would take as a result of the policies it pursued. These, however, are separate matters. At least in the very first instance, it is unfair to suggest the administration dragged the country into a wartime footing. The country was already there. This is a matter of some significance to Professor Dudziak’s thesis, for it reminds us that the construction of “wartime” is a more complex cultural phenomenon than has sometimes been suggested by the “top-down” criticism of the Bush administration.

Quibbles aside, Professor Dudziak is to be congratulated for taking her scholarship in a new and important direction. Once we recognize that wartime is itself a myth, it frees us to reconceive a great deal about life in the United States. If she has begun that process, we are

much in her debt.

Notes

[1]. Geoffrey R. Stone, *In Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime from the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Norton, 2004); Joseph Margulies and Hope Metcalf, “Terrorizing Academia,” *Journal of Legal Education* 60 (2011): 433-471.

[2]. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

[3]. Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Julian E. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

[4]. Murray Edelman, *Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 5.

[5]. Stephen E. Bennett, “‘Know-Nothings’ Revisited: The Meaning of Political Ignorance Today,” *Social Science Quarterly* 69 (1988): 476-92; Stephen E. Bennett, “‘Know-Nothings’ Revisited Again,” *Political Behavior* 18 (1996): 219-31; Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, “Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11 (1947): 412-423.

[6]. Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-Terrorism* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 38.

[7]. George W. Bush, “Remarks Following a Meeting with the National Security Team,” September 12, 2001, at The American Presidency Project Web site by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?~pid=58058>.

[8]. George W. Bush, “Remarks in a Telephone Conversation with New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and New York Governor George E. Pataki and an Exchange with Reporters,” September 13, 2001, *ibid.*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?~pid=58062>.

[9]. George W. Bush, “Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service,” September 14, 2001, *ibid.*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?~pid=63645>.

[10]. George W. Bush, “Remarks in a Meeting with the National Security Team and an Exchange with Reporters at Camp David, Maryland,” September 15,

2001, *ibid.*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?~pid=63199>. *Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2-3.

[11]. Brigitte L. Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and* [12]. *Ibid.*, 3.

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