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Permanent Wartime

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Permanent Wartime

Harry van der Linden

Under Review:

Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 221pp. \$24.95, hardcover. ISBN 9780199775231.

The common understanding of war is that it has a clear beginning and endpoint so that wartime is a discrete and exceptional period of time that disrupts normal time as peacetime. Thus, when war ends, peacetime returns and peacetime predates wartime. In *War Time*, Mary L. Dudziak discusses how, with regard to the United States, this common understanding is inaccurate and distorts its historical social reality. In Dudziak's view, we are (and long have been) living in a time of continuous war, and in the conclusion of her short book she argues that the only way to begin the recovery of the political space lost by the typical liberty-restricting emergency politics of war is to see "war's presence as an ongoing feature of American democracy" (136). Or, as she puts it in her introduction, progressive politics requires that we recognize that "wartime is the only time we have" (8).

The Second World War may seem to illustrate the idea that wartime is a definite and exceptional period of time. The United States was attacked on December 7, 1941, and Japan signed surrender documents on September 2, 1945. But, Dudziak argues, to locate the war between these two dates would be an error because the Second World War already significantly determined American society several years before Pearl Harbor, notably in the form of increased exercise of presidential powers, expansion of the production and trade of weapons, wider federal surveillance, and increased prosecution of (with broadened understanding of what counts as) national security violations. Similarly, Dudziak writes with regard to the official end to hostilities on September 2, 1945: "But the power of war could not quite be extinguished with a signature. The United States began to demobilize, but the draft

would persist, and a legal state of war, enabling the use of government war powers, would endure for several years” (61).

According to Dudziak, then, wartime begins when anticipated hostilities impact law and politics, and it continues as long as the law and politics engendered by the actual hostilities prevail, even after the cessation of combat. So while the time of actual hostilities may have specific dates, wartime has no “tidy time boundaries” (36). Broadening Dudziak’s concept of wartime a bit, we can argue that war impacts not only law and politics, but also material production and culture, and, accordingly, that we are in wartime as long as war (anticipated, actual, or remembered) sets the direction and tone of all these social processes.

For Dudziak, the main problem with viewing wartime as a discrete period of actual hostilities is that it enables us to misconstrue much of American history and mistakenly anticipate our future as one of peacetime. She writes: “Built into the very essence of our idea of wartime is the assumption that war is temporary. The beginning of a war is the opening of an era that will, by definition, come to an end” (5). Looking at the past, we focus on the major wars and construe the other times as peacetime. Accordingly, “it is only through forgetting the small wars that so much of American history is remembered as peacetime” (31). Once we take an accurate look at American conflicts over the past century, however, it becomes clear that peacetime has been the exception. Dudziak visualizes this fact by mapping all the years that American soldiers could receive “campaign medals” during the twentieth century. Her map shows very few years when this opportunity was not available, and, typically, in any given year, several theatres of conflict would offer this opportunity, especially in the post-Second World War era (29). We should conclude, then, that for the United States, in the words of Dudziak, “war is not an exception to normal peacetime, but instead an enduring condition” (5).

Dudziak further supports this conclusion on basis of her analysis of the Cold War and the Global War on Terror. All in all, the Cold War era was a period of wartime, not only because actual hostilities were common during this period, often at the periphery of the zone of American influence. It was a period of wartime also because foreign policy became thoroughly militarized, the national security state was expanded, and the war economy became ingrained in society (90-94). Wartime continued with the Global War on Terror, but Dudziak shows that a trend that was already manifest during the Cold War has now become more striking: when wartime becomes permanent it is no longer distinguishable from peacetime, and what facilitates its continuation is that it is no longer fully experienced as wartime.

Initially, it seemed that 9/11 was the beginning of a particular wartime sharply distinct from peacetime, a “genuine” wartime that required the people to change their lives as Pearl

Harbor had done before. Presidential powers increased, war (indefinitely authorized by Congress) was waged against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, federal surveillance became even more extensive, indefinite detention emerged, and “normal” law was further suspended in the approval of extraordinary renditions and torture. But, unlike in 1941, most people were not asked to really change their lives. Here Dudziak cites President George W. Bush in a speech on homeland security (November 8, 2001) as praising the American people, faced with the threat of terrorism, for “going about their daily lives, working and shopping and playing, worshipping at churches and synagogues and mosques, going to the movies and to baseball games” (134). Dudziak neglects mentioning that Bush also applauded the rise in volunteering and service careers and that he promised that the government would create more opportunities for citizens to promote public safety and health. Still, these “new responsibilities” generated by 9/11 soon waned or never materialized, while working, shopping, playing, and praying continued as (in Bush’s words) the “ultimate repudiation of terrorism.” In a way, the Obama administration made matters even worse by making its wartime less controversial and contested. Dudziak writes: “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” (135). To put it otherwise, “alienated war”¹ enables a wartime that appears as a normal time and, so, as peacetime.

Going beyond the time frame of Dudziak’s book, it is evident that the current Obama administration is intent on masquerading wartime as peacetime. In his Second Inaugural Address, President Barack Obama said that “We, the people, still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war.” And the first thing that he noted in his State of the Union Address of 2013 was that “after a decade of grinding war, our brave men and women in uniform are coming home.” And later in the speech Obama maintained that the troops could stay home: “Today, the organization that attacked us on 9/11 is a shadow of its former self. It’s true, different al Qaeda affiliates and extremist groups have emerged -- from the Arabian Peninsula to Africa. The threat these groups pose is evolving. But to meet this threat, we don’t need to send tens of thousands of our sons and daughters abroad or occupy other nations.” Clearly, the misleading message here is that we are not at war when we use drone strikes to eliminate terrorists, including American citizens affiliated with groups declared to be “extremist,” and we are no longer living in war times when the troops come home from Afghanistan, even though the authorization to use military force granted by Congress

¹ Cheyney Ryan, *The Chickenhawk Syndrome* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 5-7.

immediately after 9/11 will remain in effect and a host of legal “emergency” measures remain effective. While it is true that some emergency measures adopted by the Bush administration, such as torture, have been rejected by the Obama administration, this rejection has not led to holding perpetrators accountable, making it easy for that history to repeat itself. And, of course, Obama conveniently forgot to mention in his speech that his time in office, described as a time of moving towards “peace,” has included NATO’s overthrow of Gadhafi, an increase of U.S. military activities in Africa, a continued military build-up of the Asia-Pacific region, and increased force projection towards Iran.

Dudziak describes the practical purpose of her study as follows: “The American people cannot wait for a new peacetime to end the detentions at Guantanamo or to rein in expanded presidential war power. Time itself will not wash them away. Wartime is the only time we have, and therefore is a time within which American politics must function.” (8; see also 136). Dudziak does not discuss whether it is feasible to reduce or even eliminate the legal exceptions and restrictions legitimized by the global war on terrorism during permanent wartime, but the example of the Cold War might be instructive here: in the 1970s significant restrictions were placed on domestic surveillance and CIA operations abroad, while presidential war powers were also curtailed, at least on paper. Conceivably, such measures could be taken today.²

Even if we grant this possibility, it leaves untouched the direct costs of American wars to people across the globe as well as the destructive cultural and economic consequences of living in wartime. Moreover, curtailment of the homeland security state could be swept away again once something occurs that makes the sound of war appealing, just as 9/11 swept away restraints placed in the 1970s on the legal abuses of the Cold War. To be sure, Dudziak warns against such an eventuality when she notes that the people are frequently misled by appeals to wartime emergency measures, and the historical record suggests that citizens (including many intellectuals) will continue to fall into this trap. Dudziak’s concern with safeguarding civil liberties and restricting presidential war powers thus raises the question of how to promote a radical questioning by Americans of their readiness to live in permanent wartime in the first place.

This is a difficult task. Recent challenges to wartime without shared sacrifice – for example, that depict supporters of war as chickenhawks or that condemn the casualty gap between rich and poor in recent conflicts – run into the problem that fighting wars is

² David K. Shipler raises the possibility in “Will Obama the Constitutional Lawyer Please Stand Up?,” *The Nation*, February 11, 2013, and he concludes that we are still far away from the conditions of relative safety, public outrage, and thorough and impartial investigation that enabled success at the time.

increasingly perceived as a job with the voluntary adoption of risk of harm.³ The ethics of the market now pushes aside the ethics of sacrifice and national solidarity. And appeals to self-interest in avoiding the economic burden of military hegemony, even the threat of national insolvency, as developed recently by Chalmers Johnson,⁴ run into the problem that the military budget, notwithstanding its huge opportunity costs, remains a relatively small part of the GDP. Still, the task must be pursued, especially for the sake of those for whom American wartime cannot appear as anything other than wartime.

³ See Ryan, *The Chickenhawk Syndrome* and Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ See, for example, Chalmers Johnson, *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).