

Cultures of War or Warmakers' Cultures?

In the past few years, U.S. historians who once expatriated their intellectual passions to analyze other nations' ills have returned to studying those of their own nation. They see American leadership as unhinged in the face of the decline of U.S. hegemony in its classic forms. Being practiced at dissecting the cataclysmic decisions that other great powers made as they went to seed, when they study America as a foreign land, they upend homegrown conventions about America's exceptional status in the world.

This is the case of John Dower, who tries to make sense of official America's reaction to 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. He was spurred to write the book by a particularly monstrous paradox, namely that George W. Bush, his cabinet and apologists -- in order to legitimate his administration's unprovoked aggression against Iraq in March 2002, and then to bolster its global war on Terrorism-- embarked on a six-year rhetorical spree in the course of which they dredged up practically every high-minded rationale for making war produced over the course of the twentieth century. Dower was provoked by two particularly iniquitous abuses of official speak. One was the act of calling the attack on the Twin Towers "an infamy," as in "day of infamy." Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously used that phrase to denounce the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, (adding it as a last minute correction to his speech) to exclude the perpetrators of the attack from all civilized notions of honorability in warfare and to assert thereby the need for the total "war without mercy" which was the subject of Dower's powerful book from 1993. Almost immediately after 9/11, George W. Bush latched on to the word, the effect of which was to turn the terrorist attack into a declaration of total war first against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and then to justify the United States's invasion of the sovereign state of Iraq.

The other abused figure of speech was "ground zero." That became official speak to sanctify the acres of rubble in downtown Manhattan piled up by the collapse of the Twin Towers, together with the upwards of 3000 Americans who died in the attack. The original "ground zero" was seen through the Enola Gay's bomb sights of the two medium-sized Japanese towns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, neither of which had particular strategic value, where the American nuclear strikes pulverized 200,000 people. That is an old story, of course. Dower's point is that in the face of America's hurt and the enormous capacity of the country to garner sympathy both at home and abroad, the significance of the original event was in effect expunged. Its horror, which had been perpetrated by the United States against tens of thousands of civilians, was appropriated by the perpetrators in order to perfect the deployment of shock and awe strategies. Aside from reaffirming the notion that we still never have to say we're sorry because the ends were well-served, this usage implied that in circumstances of total war, it was completely justifiable that civilians could be and were collateral damage in warfare, but the U.S. was demonstrating both its military prowess and humanitarianism by making more and more perfect the targeting of airborne weapons.

Denunciations of these Orwellian abuses of language are only the start here. If I read John Dower correctly, he is responding valiantly (and at many levels validly) to injunctions of cultural critics who, from the moment the U.S. declared war on Afghanistan, as they heard the racially coded language, dehumanizing cyber-lingo, and calculated deceptions of U.S. officialdom, conjured up Walter Benjamin to give us historians a hand. If we were to understand the fast-moving incoherent present, we would have to forsake the conventional narratives shaped by historical time to "seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," and "grasp the constellation that one's own era has formed with an earlier one."¹ Dower does just that here in his way, zigzagging across time and space to compare the deluded hopes of Bush and Hirohito for instant victories, the self-immolatory impulses that drove both Kamikaze pilots and Al Qaeda bombers on their suicidal missions, and the realpolitik considerations about civilian casualties that are so staggeringly awful in Donald Rumsfeld's infamously cavalier statement that "things happen," but also in Winston Churchill's directives on blitzing defenseless German citydwellers.

The upshot is a far-reaching diagnosis of what Dower characterizes as "pathologies of war culture." Their symptoms are "fools' errands," "evasions", "self-deception," "murderousness," and "failure of imagination."² Time and again he returns to the fundamental "strategic imbecility" that acts to compound all of the above vices in forms of magical thinking that induce in their speakers both paranoia about their own invulnerability and overestimations of the power of the enemy. Dower's point is not just that the U.S. acts like other war making countries in all of these respects, but that the United States acts out these behaviors more egregiously by virtue of its claim to be on a special historical mission. This rightness of the mission has been reconfirmed by its many wins in the name of democracy and freedom. This posture began with the fire bombings of Tokyo and the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and survives down to the present in the elaboration of shock and awe military doctrine and projects for global policing by means of drone surveillance systems.

Poking into the proliferation of historical analogies, magmatic self-justifications, and the sloppy vernacular of ghostwritten presidential addresses, this capacious book, illustrated with a copious visual archive, does some big work. The time spent coaxing American liberal arts and history students through it would thus be well spent, if only to initiate reflection on America as the biggest all-time bomber in the history of the world. For Dower is definitely not doing cultural studies, which is to say, he doesn't treat language as having coded significance that can only be read in terms of its codes. Far from him are structuralism or postmodernism; he wants readers to understand the original sense of the word as an anti-constructivist social historian would, namely by juxtaposing the discursive perversions against the rude realities on the ground. Thus Dower's way to disenchant the

¹ Cited in Rosalind C. Morris, "Theses on the Questions of War: History, Media, Terror," *Social Text*, 72 (Volume 20, Number 3), Fall 2002, p. 151

² Dower uses these terms throughout his study in the text and chapter headings. For example, see pp. xxxii, xxiv, 33, 115, 125, and 433.

terminological paradox involved in the abuse, say, of the phrase "ground zero" is to contrast the hackneyed image of the former President of the United States, a notorious draft dodger, who, outfitted in work shirt and hard hat, poses with a shovel at the rubble piles in the crater of the Twin Towers with that of the blitzed, irradiated ground, tens of square miles of it, and to the fallen as they really fell in Japanese cities by the hundreds of thousands "scorched and boiled and baked to death (182)," to recall General Curtis Lemay's dismayed words. For a people whose culture of war has been formed on massive doses of hyper-reality, drawing on Hollywood cinema, the Super Bowl, internet war games, and television violence, Dower's literalism can't but be salutary. His insistence on contrasting the imagic power of words with the real effects of bombs may be especially salutary for American students, who in my experience, say, from reading with them Paul Virilio on *War and Cinema*, subscribe to his notion that "war is cinema and cinema is war." Having only a highly mediated image-driven notion of war-making, not having experienced the trauma of real war inside the American homeland (though, arguably, the trauma of the Cold War is very real in the national historical memory), the motion picture camera producing mass images becomes as terrifying a prosthetic device as the machine gun spraying mass murder. There is no real, only the hyper-real and the code.

By contrast, Dower wants to drive home the contrast between words and actions, and especially that in twentieth century war-making (and the first decade of the twenty-first century as well), political and military leaders were deeply mindful of the need to legitimate the air bombing of civilians. In 1943, as the Allied Forces improved strategic bombing, nobody treated as misguided the test of the inflammability of incendiary bombs, the goal being to terrify civilians, provoke their resistance to their rulers, and cause them to put pressure on their leaders to surrender. A whole science was built up around maximizing the results, whether by studying cloud cover to get clear sightings of city targets, looking for especially dense population concentrations for the sake of efficient use of materiel, and testing model row houses for inflammability, which for the sake of accuracy had the Japanese sets being built in flimsy wood and the German sets in brick and mortar.

Dower subtly addresses the awful manipulation of the civilians obliterated by bombing, starting from callous sovereigns who, by their war mongering, first, abandoned their subjects by packing them into dense, miserable urban housing, and then abdicated the most elementary duties of sovereigns, namely to protect their subjects' lives, by leaving them unprotected by radar and anti-aircraft guns. That their people were then exterminated like bugs in their hovels was in turn used to demonstrate the enemy's bestiality. In turn, the enemy, in this case, the Anglo-American allies, showed no restraint, except when it was dictated by realist considerations. Winston Churchill provides Dower with his most telling example. Churchill famously cautioned against terror bombings. But the most important consideration was that was "mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive, (need to be) counterbalanced by the recognition that if the British take control of an utterly ruined land, they would not be able to get housing materials for their own needs." (p. 174)

Withal, to search for behaviors general to belligerents as ascribable more or less generally to "cultures of war," doesn't take us as far as we need to go to understand whether the United States should be treated as embodying its own historically peculiar form of "strategic imbecility." More than other policymakers, war policymakers have to legitimate the huge rupture to civilization that armed aggression provokes. No moment churns up the primordial past as much as the need to rationalize the psychic and political prohibitions against committing murder on a grand scale. Dower uses the odd word "cherry picking" the past to refer to the "evasions," "self-deceptions," etc,³ suggesting a kind of insouciant ferreting around for compromised terms when, if we consider Sigmund Freud's reflections on war, we might, starting at the outbreak of the Great War, rather regard all of this mental activism as obsessional replays of historical traumas that are far deeper and uncontainable. Dower is at his least convincing when he implies that acting out war cultures is basically a behavioral problem, as if a good dose of common sense could provide a cure, or that frightful deeds are the function of a particular culture of modern war, as on page p. 156, where he writes "modern warfare breeds its own cultures and incinerating civilians is one of them."

Ultimately, Dower may well believe that American war making has some particular characteristics, beyond the signally racist features that were embodied in the war against Japan, which was the subject of his first major work. If so, would he want here to spell these out? Is its present-day war culture the result of its particular relationship to air power, for example? Or, conversely, is its obsessive use of air power the result of a notion of sovereignty that arose out of lording over large spaces, relatively detached from invasive enemies, neither the Canadians nor the Mexicans being that, so danger came not from the frontiers but from the heavens? Is there something about America's use of air technology, as Michael Sherry's 1989 book emphasizes,⁴ that made air power --and its defeat-- so worrisome? Or was it the rational desire to save its manpower? Does the problem of language overkill perhaps lie in U.S. democracy, which calls for exceptionally communicative verbiage from its leaders who have to go the extra mile to gain public support to legitimate foreign wars? Does Dower see in American imperium a particular notion of sovereignty involving global air rights? Something along that line could be argued, not just from America's domination over big spaces by frontier war-making, but also the pressure to build continental-wide communication systems, and the rise of global marketing as early as the nineteenth century. Something could be said about the vision of sovereignty that comes out of World War II, spelled out in the Truman Doctrine, that American freedom meant the right to passage everywhere. Look at the imaginary lens through which Americans saw Sputnik or the threat of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba, or the attack on the Twin Towers. Consider these rights over space together with the right of finance capital to go everywhere, with American-led notions of global security attached to drone-based cyber surveillance, hyper accurate from its manned outposts in Kansas or

³ See pp. xxvii, 109, 125-126, 211, 238, 442, 452.

⁴ Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power; The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Arkansas, with only small complements deployed on the ground comprising soldiers, communications specialists, and social workers to apologize to the locals for human error, which is inevitable, and make amends for their losses with psychological counseling and compensation.

In sum, my thought is not that the historical problem before us is not a generic or essential "culture of war," common to modern peoples, but is rather to understand the war-making culture specific to the United States. That is a big agenda, but then John Dower is an extraordinary historian.