

When Is Postwar?

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***How We Forgot the Cold War: A Historical Journey across America.* By Jon Wiener. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 384 pages. \$34.95 (cloth). \$34.95 (eBook).**

***War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences.* By Mary L. Dudziak. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 221 pages. \$24.95 (cloth). \$18.99 (eBook).**

***Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government.* By James T. Sparrow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 344 pages. \$34.95 (cloth). \$21.95 (paper). \$19.99 (eBook).**

Speaking at the National Defense University on May 23, 2013, President Barack Obama announced his intention to scale back the war on terror that began more than a decade earlier in the weeks after September 11, 2001. He proposed to realign his administration's counterterrorism policy, restricting the use of drone strikes, redoubling efforts to close the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, and checking his own office's power to wage war. In this hour-long address, Obama emphasized the need for moderation in continuing to "fight terrorism without keeping America on a perpetual war footing." Not condemning the Bush administration directly, he referred to the war on terror as a war of "self-defense" and a "just war" that must nonetheless be brought to a close.¹ Casting a historical line from the Revolutionary War and Civil War to the Cold War and twenty-first-century counterterrorism, he admitted that warfare has changed. "But our commitment to constitutional principles has weathered every war, and every war has come to an end."² Although one cannot foretell the success of this policy shift, historians and cultural critics are challenging the idea that every war has, as Obama suggests, "come to an end." Three recent books in different ways speak to the meaning of warfare in the postwar period: Jon Wiener's *How We Forgot the Cold War: A Historical Journey across America* (2012), Mary Dudziak's *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (2012), and James Sparrow's *Warfare State: World War*

II Americans and the Age of Big Government (2011). Together they trace the origin of present-day American militarism and analyze the politics of the way we think about and remember war today.

In the United States, the term *postwar* is used to refer to the period after the surrender of Japan on September 2, 1945, the “official” end of World War II.³ But of course there has been no shortage of warfare since then. These “limited” wars are distinguished from the “total” wars that came before them and sometimes not called wars at all: they are “conflicts,” “hostilities,” “policy actions,” or “operations.” The idea of postwar therefore does not only mask decades of military campaigns; it is an argument that war always ends, that the ending is a defining feature of war. This thinking has met resistance, however. Giorgio Agamben, for one, has criticized the war on terror as epitomizing a “state of exception” in which the legal order is itself withheld. This state of exception is neither inside nor outside the legal order but rather designates a “zone of indistinction” through which state-sanctioned violence is carried out and concealed.⁴ Although Agamben emphasizes that this zone of indistinction is not a product of modernity (as Michel Foucault suggested) but the original relation of politics, he characterizes George W. Bush’s conduct after September 11, 2001, as the moment at which “the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war . . . becomes impossible.”⁵ Wiener, Dudziak, and Sparrow suggest otherwise, locating this moment far earlier in American history. The line distinguishing emergency from rule and peace from war became “impossible” long before Bush declared a war on terror.⁶

The historian Jon Wiener analyzes how the Cold War is being memorialized in the United States today. He toured dozens of historical sites and memorials—some existing only online or in stagnated legislation—to understand the cultural legacy of the nuclear arms race and proxy wars that underwrote the American global imaginary for half a century. Many of these sites originate in the same political agenda. When the USSR dissolved at the end of 1991, the American Right set about structuring the official memory of the Cold War. Mobilizing a “good war framework,” they maintained that Ronald Reagan had led an American victory over the Soviet Union and communism just as Franklin Delano Roosevelt had led one over Nazi Germany and fascism. They thereby recast the Cold War as a “traditional” war with clear winners and losers, a definite ending, and a moral cause: freedom for all. Yet, notwithstanding the ascendancy of neocons at the end of the century, Wiener concludes that this message has failed to gain cultural authority.

Americans are, he argues, forgetting the Cold War. They not only refuse the Right’s account of Cold War triumphalism; most are altogether uninterested

in the underlying politics of the era. Whereas historical sites commemorating World War II and the Civil War welcome millions of visitors every year, many Cold War museums and monuments are more or less neglected. (The Whittaker Chambers pumpkin patch located outside Westminster, Maryland, a National Historic Landmark, receives only two visitors per year.) If, as the memory studies scholar Andreas Huyssen suggests, we are suffering from a “hypertrophy of memory” in the twenty-first century,⁷ then the Cold War is an outlier, no more than a sidelight to the “memory boom” of the last thirty years. This has led many historical sites that began with a triumphalist message to shift their focus away from the Cold War. There are two recurring strategies, Wiener finds. Many sites are reorienting their content toward more marketable historical subjects: general military history, World War II, or depoliticized cultural history. Former nuclear sites, on the other hand, emphasize the safety and sustainability of these locations today, rather than the politics and wargaming that led to their construction at midcentury. *How We Forgot the Cold War* is Wiener’s collected analyses of these sites, some forgotten and others forgetting what they had once set out to remember.

The Churchill Museum in Fulton, Missouri, is characteristic of the shifting focus of many Cold War memory-sites. Westminster College in Fulton is the location from which Winston Churchill delivered his famous “Iron Curtain” speech in 1946, where he warned against the “expansive and proselytising tendencies” of Soviet communism.⁸ The college established the museum to commemorate this historical moment, and it became a site to which Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Tom DeLay, and others would come to reiterate this message in future decades. Yet, as Wiener notes, “the commemoration [in Fulton] now is centered on the blood, sweat, and tears of the struggle against Hitler. What began as a monument to the birth of the Cold War has become one more place to celebrate World War II’s Greatest Generation” (45). He finds that not only the Cold War but the famous speech itself has been de-emphasized; only six minutes of the original forty-four are available for viewing, and not many visitors are interested in seeing even this. The main attractions are instead the large World War II gallery and a reconstructed twelfth-century London church, which has nothing to do with Churchill or the Soviet Union. The Cold War, as Wiener discovers across the country, does not sell.

Some of the more striking sections of Wiener’s study recount his visits to former nuclear sites. In describing the Hanford B Reactor in Washington State, the Atomic Testing Museum outside Las Vegas, and Arizona’s Titan Missile Museum, Wiener concludes that these historical sites do little to further the Right’s “good war” story of the Cold War. They focus instead on measures

taken to ensure the safety of the local community and to remake these sites into recreational areas and reliable storage units for hazardous materials. In Weldon Spring, Missouri, for example, what was once a processing plant for uranium ore was transformed into a “disposal cell” for dangerous chemicals and then into the Weldon Spring Conservation Area and Interpretative Center. The highlight of the site is the view from atop a radioactive mound, offering “a panoramic view of St. Charles County,”⁹ and the emphasis is what the site is today, not *why* it is there in the first place. “Weldon Spring is not,” Wiener writes, “a memorial to those whose sacrifices here helped bring victory in the Cold War. Instead it’s a monument to the cleanup” (165). Even if the United States is not on a “perpetual war footing,” the legacy of warfare has nonetheless become a feature of daily life in many regions of the country.

Wiener’s *How We Forgot the Cold War* is a useful guide to the present-day cultural memory of the Cold War. He reminds us that memory-sites are just as much about forgetting as remembering, and what we choose to (or are made to) forget is telling. Wiener’s emphasis on “how” Americans came to forget the Cold War, however, leaves unanswered why exactly this is the case and what this forgetting enables. Why is World War II history so fascinating for Americans when the Cold War cannot find an audience? One answer emerges from Obama’s anxiety about the state’s “perpetual war footing.” When the “distinction between peace and war . . . becomes impossible,” warfare also becomes less easy to commemorate. This is the point from which the legal historian Mary Dudziak’s *War Time* departs. Rather than endorse ways to transition the country from an ongoing “wartime” to a future “peacetime,” she interrogates the logic on which these categories are based and thereby criticizes the politics they mobilize in the United States today.

Wartime for Dudziak must be understood as an idea rather than a natural feature of life. Understanding post-9/11 American warfare and counterterrorism policy as a “state of exception” has the dangerous side effect, she emphasizes, of assuming there is a normal time and normal legal order being deferred (4–5). Maybe wartime is our normal time and wartime legal order our normal legal order. When the state declares a war, time is thought to “proceed on a different plane,” necessitating “extraordinary measures” for a temporary stretch of time (22). The idea of wartime thus relies on a belief in a future beyond war. This future is the return of that guaranteed “regular life” being held in suspension during a military campaign. History then marches forward through alternating periods of wartime and peacetime, the former always maintained by the promise of the latter. Denaturalizing this understanding of time, Dudziak contends, is a starting point for forming a “politics of war” that “takes seriously war’s

presence as an ongoing feature of American democracy” rather than “viewing the nation’s history as divided into time zones” (136).

Dudziak is not of course the first to analyze the specter of permanent war in the United States. She builds on the work of many others, including the American foreign relations historian Marilyn Young. Young concluded her landmark history of the Vietnam War, writing as the USSR was being dissolved, by suggesting that the idea of “low-intensity conflict” and limited war “frankly embraces a policy of permanent war.”¹⁰ But Dudziak is the first to foreground the historical time registers that maintain the belief in war as periodized and thus bound to end. Historians tend to assume that American history is marked by a small number of large-scale wars with definite beginnings and conclusions. The remainder is peacetime. This story changes, however, once the so-called small wars are taken into account. Dudziak makes this case by considering American warfare not according to textbook periodization but through the eligibility criteria for veterans’ organizations and combat-service medals. “These criteria cause wartime to swallow much of American history” (28). When acknowledging that the military has awarded combat medals for campaigns in Cuba, Siberia, Nicaragua, Thailand, Grenada, Bosnia, and elsewhere, Obama’s “perpetual war footing” seems less the looming crisis he describes than an enduring fact in American history.

This returns us, then, to the meaning of postwar in an era that is anything but. One reason this usage has endured despite the many military campaigns since 1945 is that World War II has, in American culture, come to epitomize what warfare should be. It is the last war in which the United States signed a declaration of war and the last to conclude with an armistice. World War II, Dudziak writes, “reinforced the idea that real wars were large-scale conflicts with other powerful nations, punctuated by peacetimes” (62). To imagine a postwar period continuing from 1945 to today is to cast those “limited conflicts” in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East as not-exactly wars. The irony is not lost on Dudziak that her history of American warfare does not end but *begins* with World War II. Yet even this war’s timeline is not as straightforward as it might seem. Whereas Pearl Harbor is thought to mark the American entrance into World War II, Dudziak points out that Roosevelt had increased American arms production as early as March 1939 and, ducking Neutrality Acts, began sending weapons and ammunition to the British in 1940. Although the United States did not declare war until the end of 1941, it had begun a war effort years earlier. Even this mythologized wartime was, she underscores, “fuzzier around the edges than we usually imagine” (62).

The most compelling contribution of *War Time*, though, is Dudziak's analysis of the Cold War. Unlike World War II, the Cold War did not entail a large-scale military campaign waged directly against another powerful nation. It was instead a decades-long series of proxy wars, intelligence gathering, and tense stalemates waged against a sociopolitical idea, communism. This era challenged the notion that wartime and peacetime were contrasting time registers. Was the Cold War a wartime? Was it a peacetime? The difference no longer seemed clear. But historians today are inclined to consider the era according to "preexisting conceptual boxes" and thereby transform the Cold War into an "old-fashioned 'wartime'" (69). This is what the memorials of Wiener's study tend to do, a subtext that might begin to explain why their original message ("Cold War triumphalism") did not stick. The tendency to see the Cold War as an old-fashioned war also has a serious effect on the way we think about the "end" of the Cold War. If the fall of the Berlin Wall or the dissolution of the USSR is considered the end date of the war, it becomes hard to see its military-industrial legacy. The Cold War was, as Dudziak notes, "a period of state-building akin to the New Deal era. During both periods, the United States embraced a new logic of governance. New institutional structures and economic relationships flowed from these shifts in governance. Once in place, many had an interest in their continuance" (91). Although Dudziak overlooks other critical corollaries of the Cold War—Asian, African, and Latino American refugees; the effects of American transnational capital on the Third World; and the environmental aftermath of warfare—she nonetheless offers a needed correction for how we think about the era.¹¹ The Cold War is not confined to the past but rather embedded in twenty-first-century society. It thus becomes more difficult to assume that, as Obama maintains, "every war has come to an end."

The war on terror in many ways embraces the Cold War as a blueprint for waging war against an idea that works beyond borders and recognized state actors. In the days and weeks after September 11, 2001, Bush invoked the framework of wartime to enact an AUMF (Authorization for Use of Military Force) and pass the PATRIOT Act, authorizing the far-reaching surveillance of American citizens and others. These extraordinary measures were sanctioned at the time because the idea of wartime suggests that they are necessary and temporary, not overreaching and semipermanent, as they would later prove. The AUMF and PATRIOT Act also speak to the citizenry's relation to warmaking since the Cold War: war no longer demands sacrifices from the nation's citizens but instead discourages their engagement. The Bush administration asked that Americans serve their country by continuing to work, spend their

paychecks, and recreate as usual. “Rather than sacrifice for the war effort,” Dudziak writes, “we were to continue with daily life. This reinforced the sense that war was the government’s task, and was not something that citizens must take responsibility for” (134). If the military–industrial complex has institutionalized permanent war, a disengaged citizenry sustains it. And, as Wiener’s research suggests, the latter has been achieved. This is also evident in the post–World War II emphasis on warfare as defense. In 1947 the Department of War became the Department of Defense and the secretary of war the secretary of defense. The name changes signaled a shift in the way the United States would conduct war into the twenty-first century. American military campaigns would thereafter be characterized not as acts of aggression but as militarized mediations. War became necessary to secure and *defend* peace. This warmaking would, moreover, be carried out exclusively by the state so that citizens could enjoy the concurrent “peace.” Although we may cling to the idea of wartime as extraordinary and temporary, we must recognize that our time is what Dudziak calls “a newly configured, peace-less era, a new kind of normal” (127). Her crucial claim is that in this “new kind of normal” we must see wartime not as necessitating our withdrawal from public debate but as an “urgent occasion for politics” (136).

Whereas Wiener and Dudziak focus on how the reality of permanent war is masked through organized forgetting and disengagement, the political historian James Sparrow analyzes the cultural basis of this arrangement, locating it not in the Cold War but in the state growth that occurred during World War II. By the late 1930s the New Deal was under assault from both sides of the aisle, and the Roosevelt administration’s reforms had been brought to a near total halt. Southern Democrats and Republicans mobilized an American tradition of militating against statism, aiming to rein in the authority of Roosevelt’s office. Yet World War II ushered in an era of unmatched state-building. The war economy did not merely build on the New Deal; it altogether dwarfed and superseded these programs. This, Sparrow emphasizes, was “a critical turning point for the growth of the federal government within American society” (6). Focusing less on the policy work itself than on the political culture that legitimized this “federal leviathan,” he concludes that World War II Americans embraced the warfare state through a combination of Americanism and entitlement. Citizens would do their duty to the nation but only with the understanding that this sacrifice would not go unrewarded.

The challenge for the Roosevelt administration was fostering a war-minded citizenry even when most were not directly involved in the war effort. This was achieved through the figure of the combat soldier, who came to symbolize the

ultimate sacrifice and thereby relativize those of war industry workers, bond buyers, and taxpayers. One 1943 poster, for example, includes an image of a dead soldier's body and asks, "What did *you* do today . . . for freedom?" (73). In the early going of the war, Roosevelt leaned on the Library of Congress to legitimize the increased state authority that four years of warfare would necessitate. He made Archibald MacLeish his librarian of Congress, who in turn surrounded himself with Popular Front artists and musicians. But, as Sparrow underscores, the combat soldier and not "the people" became Americans' foremost wartime proxy: "As the purposes of government shifted from welfare to warfare, the foundations for its legitimacy shifted as well" (21). The people became "our boys," and this shift away from the New Deal was also reflected in how prowar Americanism was communicated. Though the Office of War Information labored to monitor and form citizens' attitudes toward the war, it left the bulk of war propaganda to "Hollywood studios, radio networks, and other privately owned media" (68). The "mixed economy" of the warfare state, that is, was not limited to manufacturing. This is no less true today, as the video game franchise *Call of Duty*, an unofficial recruiting tool for the US military, continues to set media sales records.

Warfare State is an insightful account of how welfare ideals were reorganized under the demands of war and thereby transformed the meaning of statecraft to American life. Sparrow analyzes this shift as it relates to industrial labor ("soldiers of production"), consumer culture, the machinery of surveillance, the entanglement of warfare and American foreign relations ("arsenal of democracy"), and the centrality of war to the nation's economy. This warfare state also, he finds, brought about the present-day idea of "fiscal citizenship" as the state transitioned from "class to mass taxation" throughout the early 1940s (122). Only 7 percent of the American labor force (or 3.9 million) paid income taxes in 1939. In 1945, in contrast, two-thirds of working Americans (42.7 million) paid taxes on the money they made (124). And these numbers would hold. In an argument that resonates with Lizabeth Cohen's theory of the midcentury "consumers' republic,"¹² Sparrow suggests that wartime taxation and bond ownership led Americans to feel they had a personal stake not only in the war but also in the government itself. This form of fiscal citizenship proved durable because it merged Americanism with entitlement. It was Americans' duty to the nation. But it would also become their claim *on the nation*, a demand for the "American way of life" they had heard so much about.

The returning GIs epitomized this wartime contract with the state, as they not only embraced the arrangement but also normalized and regulated it. "If habituation to the state was a hallmark of World War II America," Sparrow

writes, “then military service was the stamp that impressed it onto the social fabric” (208). World War II veterans, thanks to the GI Bill of Rights, dominated all realms of American life after 1945. And they brought with them a strong belief in state authority that was learned during their time in the Army or Navy. These men became some of the most trenchant anticommunists during the Cold War; they defined and enacted a normalized Americanism that remained bound to the militarized “emergency” of their early adulthood. If a state of permanent war demands a disengaged citizenry, as Dudziak claims, then one can see in Sparrow’s history where this disengagement originates. When consent to state authority is articulated as both a “greater good” and a source of rights, this authority becomes a thing to grant and defend, not to criticize. Yet, as Sparrow emphasizes, it is critical that we remember that the modern state’s legitimacy was achieved not through welfare but warfare. Although he does not continue his study beyond midcentury, one can see in Wiener’s and Dudziak’s books the legacy of Roosevelt’s “warfare state” today. The emergency is *still* the rule.

This prehistory of the war on terror went unmentioned in media analyses of Obama’s counterterrorism policy shift. His speech, moreover, came only a month after the cancellation of the contentious Distinguished Warfare Medal. If, as Dudziak suggests, combat-service medals are a telling way to assess American warfare, then this medal epitomizes the nation’s anxiety about warmaking in the twenty-first century. On February 13, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta introduced the Distinguished Warfare Medal to honor those working in remote computerized warfare, including directors of unmanned aerial vehicles or “drones.”¹³ It would rank higher than the Bronze Star, the Pentagon announced, but not as high as the Silver Star. The medal was met with immediate criticism from veterans’ organizations, which held that it should not rank higher than battlefield medals, and critics of the nation’s drone program. On April 15, Chuck Hagel, Panetta’s successor, canceled the medal.¹⁴ The Distinguished Warfare Medal had become a lightning rod for citizens concerned about the nation’s regular use of drone strikes in the Middle East. Awarding what critics called a “drone medal” seemed to confirm that the United States was in fact “on a perpetual war footing.” If the extraordinary measures of wartime are facilitated by the promise of a future beyond war, when is this postwar? Wiener, Dudziak, and Sparrow in different ways interrogate the logic of postwar in an era when war is never declared yet has no end. If we can understand postwar not as a fact but as an argument, we can begin to see the violence this argument authorizes and the politics necessary to counteract it.

Notes

1. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University," May 23, 2013, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university.
2. Ibid.
3. This is of course not the only way postwar is used. The historian Tony Judt, in his encyclopedic study of post-1945 Europe, employs the term to mean an "interim age" or "parenthesis"; World War II, he writes, "created the conditions for a new Europe" that would not be realized until the end of the century. Postwar for Judt thus comes to an end, but in a way that is not exactly about an end to warfare. See Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 2–10.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3, 23.
5. Ibid., 22.
6. This idea of the emergency-as-rule reorients the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's claim that "*war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means.*" Whereas for Clausewitz warfare is one way to conduct politics, Agamben suggests that it is this sovereign decision that determines the very threshold of the political realm. War is thus not a "means" of politics but, as a state of exception, the originary activity of politics. When the sovereign decision and the norm it suspends begin to coincide and blur together, the state of emergency becomes the rule and war an enduring feature of life. In the books being considered, this is not a matter of if but *when* (Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 7, 252).
7. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3.
8. Winston Churchill, "Iron Curtain Speech," March 5, 1946, Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/churchill-iron.asp.
9. "Weldon Spring Site," Office of Legacy Management, www.lm.doe.gov/Weldon/Interpretive_Center/Interpretive_Center_and_Educational_Opportunities.pdf (accessed July 1, 2013).
10. Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 316.
11. Leerom Medovoi, Christina Klein, Jodi Kim, and Steven Belletto argue in different ways that a dichotomous understanding of the Cold War—focusing on the US–Soviet rivalry and the "global imaginary of containment"—tends to obscure the economic stakes of the era: access to the labor-power and raw materials of the decolonizing Third World. The Cold War, Medovoi contends, "took the form of a triangulated rivalry over another universe that only now became known as the 'third world.' . . . By the mid-1950s, the 'three-worlds concept' had become the globe's dominant topological imaginary" (*Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005], 10–11). See also Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 24–28; Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 23; and Belletto, *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152–53.
12. Cohen argues that during and after World War II consumerism became one of the foremost ways in which Americans partook in civic life; "good consumer" became synonymous with "good citizen" (*A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* [New York: Random House, 2003], 119).
13. Thom Shanker, "A New Medal Honors Drone Pilots and Computer Experts," *New York Times*, February 13, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/us/new-medal-to-honor-drone-pilots-and-computer-experts.html?_r=0.
14. Ernesto Londoño, "Pentagon Cancels Divisive Distinguished Warfare Medal for Cyber Ops, Drone Strikes," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-04-15/world/38553247_1_distinguished-warfare-medal-new-medal-valor.