Book Review: The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror

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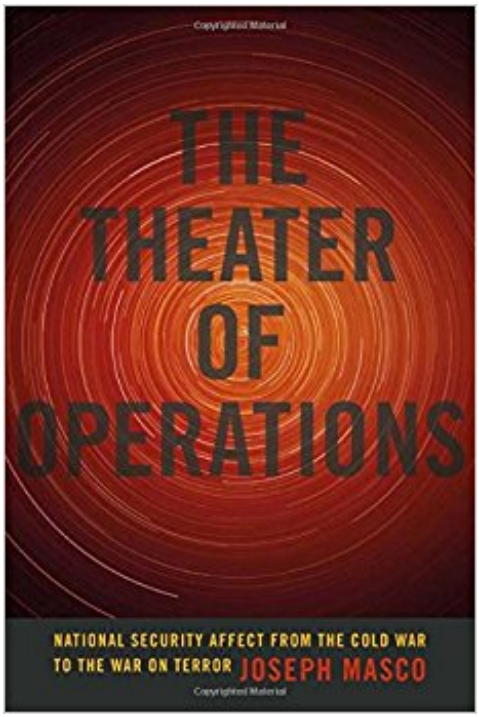
How did the most powerful nation on earth come to embrace terror as the organizing principle of its security policy? In The Theater of Operations, Joseph Masco locates the origins of the present-day U.S. counterterrorism apparatus in the Cold War's "balance of terror." Michail Zontos argues this is an important, well-argued book which comes as a welcome continuation of Joseph Masco's previous highly praised and awarded The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico.

The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror. Duke University Press. Joseph Masco. 2014.



In 2005, Katrina, one of the deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States, ravaged the country's Gulf Coast area. In the aftermath of the destruction, several high-level officials, such as President George W. Bush and Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, as well as many media commentators, suggested Americans think of the natural disaster as if it was a nuclear attack (p.107).

According to Joseph Masco, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago and expert in US national security culture, such an approach was not accidental. It reflects a unique American mentality which has been informed by the national security logic of the nuclear era, according to which the citizens of the most powerful and militarily advanced country in the world have learned to live constantly under the fear of existential threat.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Cold War dominated American life. Images of a possible future nuclear apocalypse, as presented in media, film and political rhetoric, combined with civil defense drills, taught Americans to be permanently vigilant. Also, the same feeling of constant existential threat led to the establishment of an unparalleled military-industrial-academic apparatus which focused not only in deterring the enemy but also in disciplining citizens in everyday life. The bomb reshaped pre-nuclear notions of security and the officials of the nuclear era declared that a return to the previous "normalcy" was impossible (p.8). The country had to learn how to defend itself or perish and, because of that, discourses of ruination played an important role in American nation building during the age of the atom (p. 45).

In the aftermath of 9/11, Masco argues, the terrorist violence was "quickly harnessed by U.S. officials to a conceptual project that mobilizes affects (fear, terror, anger) via imaginary processes (worry, precarity, threat) to constitute an unlimited space and time horizon for military state action." (p. 1). It was an easy endeavor as images of apocalyptic nuclear destruction had never completely left the American mind after the fall of the Soviet Union. As the author underlines, the images of the 9/11 attacks were both shocking and familiar to the American public. This paradox was based on the fact that "American society has been imaginatively rehearsing the destruction of these cities for more than three generations: in the civil defense campaigns of the early and late Cold War, as well as in the Hollywood blockbusters of the 1900s, which destroyed these cities each summer with increasing nuance and detail" (p. 73).

The familiarity of terror simplified the path from the nuclear state to the counter-terror state. During this period,

American security officials broadened their perceptions regarding what constitutes threat. During the Cold War, the menace came basically from nation states equipped with nuclear arsenal. After the 9/11, the “terrorist with a weapon of mass destruction” became the quintessential enemy. By combining “two poorly defined concepts into an image of total danger, Masco stresses, “the War on Terror is thus the ideological fulfillment of the Cold War state project, creating an institutional commitment to permanent militarisation though an ever-expanding universe of threat identification and response” (p.37).

U.S. Army Soldiers put their gas masks on for a simulated chemical attack during a training mission near Camp Ramadi, Iraq, Sept. 25, 2007 (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Andrew D. Pendracki): CC-BY.

One of the most interesting arguments in Masco’s book is exactly how futile this extremely broad definition of threat is. In the counter-terror era, simple items of everyday use, such as a forgotten bag at a train station and a bottle of shampoo in an airplane, can be considered dangerous. At the same time, the “terrorist with a WMD” can be found everywhere. In this respect, the theater of operations becomes planetary. By focusing on preemption rather than deterrence, the American security state has to stop attacks before even they take shape in the minds of their perpetrators. It is a battle that takes place at the level of imagination. As such, it nullifies security itself — the US wishes to create a world without events through the massive militarisation of security. There is an inherent contradiction in this approach, even if we accept that a world without events is a possible scenario — which is not.

This narrow-minded understanding of security has been detrimental to American values. Secrecy, extrajudicial assassinations (drone attacks), torture, surveillance, and indefinite detention, have been linked with the counter-terror state which has been proved to be relentlessly undemocratic. At the same time, issues such as climate change and poverty are neglected because they do not fit in the dominant definition of threat. We should consider, Masco warns the reader, that “the tools for fighting climate change are in fact diametrically opposed to those used in the War on Terror,” especially “a willingness to substitute global concerns for national interests” (p. 110). By neglecting serious global dangers and by focusing on a limited national notion of security, the United States may, in the end, undermine its own safety.

The Theater of Operations is an important, well-argued book which comes as a welcome continuation of Joseph Masco’s previous highly praised and awarded The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico (Princeton University Press, 2016). Perhaps some readers may find provocative the idea that, throughout the last seventy years, the American society has been constructed around the idea of nuclear detonation but Masco’s argument is well grounded and neatly presented. Perhaps the author could have moved further on to discuss whether this American perception of threat as planetary may lead to overextension of its power — the self-inflicted end of many imperial projects. But his discussion points to this direction.

Recently, new crises have arisen worldwide which directly affect the United States: the global financial crisis, climate

change, military confrontation between Ukraine and Russia, and the rise of Isis. The Theater of Operations comes at a time when it is highly relevant and needed. As real threats multiply and the idea of ultimate security becomes obsolete, the country may have to prioritise its goals so that its own values and world security will not be undermined. It may be hard for the United States to do so, but, at least, Masco's work reminds us how complex and multifaceted the relations between security, democracy and empire are.

Michail Zontos holds a BA in International and European Studies (University of Piraeus), an MA in International Relations and Strategic Studies (Panteion University) and an MA in American Studies (Utrecht University). He is currently a PhD candidate at Utrecht University. His dissertation focuses on perceptions of Europe in the work of American historians Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Austin Beard. He studied in the Netherlands as a scholar of the State Scholarships Foundation of Greece. Read more reviews by Michail.