

The Wonders of the American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's

Review of Tom Engelhardt's book

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If a person could approach you on the street, gently caress your cheek, and walk away leaving you with the feeling of having been violently slapped and doused with a bucket of ice water, they would approximate Tom Engelhardt's writing, including that in his newest book "The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's."

Let me stipulate from the start that at least three-quarters of the book has nothing to do with Obama, but deals purely with Bush's wars. However, those wars — which always were and still are our wars and our Congress's wars, and the wars of our grandchildren who will pay for them financially and probably in more serious ways — have not been fundamentally changed by applying the name of a different emperor to them. What Engelhardt has written over the past several years and collected here on the subject of war needed to be said and will continued to need to be said more loudly with each passing day.

By "wonders of war" I don't mean the latest technological feats, drone warrior desk jobs, or space weapons — all things Engelhardt does cover. I mean, rather, the quiet pausing to marvel in silence, or to ponder along with Engelhardt, the perverse and unnatural wonder that is our war-based society and our war-based economy, beginning perhaps with the wonder that we live in these things unknowingly.

Engelhardt's writing puts into historical context, and into the context of possible alternatives some of our more bizarre/mundane phenomena, including, among much else:

-The crimes of 9-11, how our culture was prepared for such a thing, how differently we might have taken it had the buildings not fallen, and how readily and outrageously we transformed a crime into a war. Engelhardt reminds us of a White House press conference at which a reporter asked President Bush whether he really was considering declaring war on an individual. (The concern for this reporter, of course, was not with presidents declaring wars, but with the nature of the proposed enemy.)

-The insanity of the response to 9-11 that has been building for almost nine years in what we never before would have tolerated anyone calling "the homeland."

-The empire of military bases the United States has spread around the globe, which occupy (pun intended) such a central position in the motivations of everything our government does and in the understanding that most of humanity has of us, but of which we are almost entirely unaware.

-The empire of 17 competing and catastrophically bad “intelligence” agencies in the U.S. government. If we can’t pause and wonder at this world of public but unaccountable crime, we are probably beyond the point of recovery.

-The nature of aerial bombing, the horrific murdering and torturing done by the bombs, and the sick spell that has convinced people that dropping bombs is moral and right, while retail scale killing and torturing is barbarous and evil.

-The exaggerated attention paid to certain dangers, like terrorism, as compared to much greater dangers, like illnesses and preventable accidents. If you wonder about this one too much you may begin to suspect that the libertarian denunciation of government may only ever be strong enough to defund workplace safety, environmental protection, and healthcare, whereas the funding of wars rises or falls based on acceptance or rejection of much more grandiose myths of good-and-evil created specifically to counter our usual distaste for unnecessary deaths.

Engelhardt draws out what is new, and what is identical to the claims and myths produced during previous wars and empires. And he goes after the degradation of our language. “Terrorism” has been reshaped to mean anti-U.S. activity. (Which explains why the media compares peace activists attacked by the Israeli military to al Qaeda.) Well known and openly discussed wars like our current war in Pakistan are consistently labeled “covert.” The explanation for this may be that presidents think the label “covert” makes their undeclared wars less unconstitutional. But why, exactly, should a secret war — if it really were secret — be less, rather than more, an abuse of power?

Tom Engelhardt occasionally publishes my articles on his website, TomDispatch, and less than a year into the reign of Obama, he was good enough to publish an article of mine with the headline “[Bush’s Third Term? You’re Living It.](#)” But, reading “The American Way of War: How Bush’s Wars Became Obama’s” leaves you perplexed, most of the way through, about the subtitle. Engelhardt writes as if something has fundamentally changed for the better, or may have, or might if we hope it:

“Whatever the Obama administration may want to do, or think should be done, if we don’t face the record we created, if we only look forward, if we only round up the usual suspects, if we try to turn that page in history and put a paperweight atop it, we will be haunted by the Bush years until hell freezes over.”

True enough, but at this point the Obama years are likely to do the most severe haunting if they do not produce hell right here on earth.

Chapter 6 of this seven-chapter book is called “Obama’s War” but still says very little about Obama, although including plenty of criticism for Bush, the media, the Pentagon, and others. Chapter 7, however, begins to fulfill the promise of the book’s subtitle. Here we read a truly brilliant speech that Engelhardt tells us Obama should give but never will. Although why an ideal speech would include this line is beyond me:

“As president, I retain the right to strike at Al-Qaeda or other terrorists who mean us imminent harm, no matter where they may be.”

No nation has that right. No world will long survive in which nations claim that right. And our republic will not long survive ascribing that right to presidents. These are all points that I

take Engelhardt to more or less agree with in other passages. He goes on, in the closing pages of the book, to accurately describe the criminal policies of the current White House. Our recovery from these policies will depend on writers like Engelhardt prodding us to pay attention through each coming step and stumble down the oil-slicked slide to fascism.

David Swanson is the author of the new book "Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union" by Seven Stories Press. You can order it and find out when tour will be in your town:<http://davidswanson.org/book>.

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