

Book Review: Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0822358060 (Paperback) 280 Pages. \$23.95.

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In *The Theater of Operations*, University of Chicago anthropologist Joseph Masco analyzes the political, cultural and historical transformations of US national security culture by tracing the relationship between the Cold War “nuclear terror” and post-9/11 “counterterror” state apparatuses. In his own words, the book “is an examination of the affective and imaginative logics of the national security state,” which “focuses particularly on how the institutions (cultural, material, expert) supporting the Cold War balance of terror were transformed after 2001 into a Global War on Terror” (Masco 2014: 26-27). Masco suggests that there is structural continuity between these two historically related state formations. Both depend on the emotional regulation and excitation of domestic populations. Both the counter-communist Cold War and post-9/11 counter-terror state enabled and justified military practices through the emotional recruitment of citizen-subjects into forms of fear and vulnerability.

The first major section explains the emotion-based cultural processes through which the Cold War state instilled anticipatory fear of nuclear weapons within the domestic population, generating an image of nuclear terror and personal vulnerability which characterized everyday life. This emotional project accompanied and enabled the postwar organization of a vast nuclear weapons infrastructure in the US. In specific response to the

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putative postwar threat of nuclear weapons, the US Cold War state deployed a “new kind of social engineering project, pursued with the help of social scientists and the advertising industry, to teach citizens a specific kind of nuclear fear while normalizing the nuclear crisis” (Masco 2014: 50). Some of these state projects enacted large-scale citizen mobilization. For instance, “civil defense” programs, the emergency national exercises of which simulated for the domestic populace imagined scenarios of nuclear obliteration from 1953 to 1961, was a key tool of the state (Masco 2014: 54). Other projects provoked the emotional reactions of citizens and tied them to the protection of state security through the public circulation of cultural representations of imagined threat. The Federal Civil Defense Administration, for example, generated, catalogued and publicized through the mass media system a detailed series of maps which represented Soviet nuclear targets, often large cities labeled either as “target area” or “critical target area” throughout the 1950s (Masco 2014: 53). A central goal of the state, then, was the regulation of the domestic community at the emotional level. Nuclear fear became the means through which citizen-subjects expressed national cohesion and collective (in)security.

The Cold War state’s emotional activation of fear and terror within populations — governed by the image of imminent nuclear destruction — over time became re-cast in the form of an emotional politics of “terrorism” and “counter-terrorism” after 9/11. Instead of being primed in terms nuclear obliteration, the domestic population after 9/11 became re-wired to attend to the perpetual threat of the figure of the “terrorist” equipped with “weapons of mass destruction.” This shift was encapsulated in 2002 during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, when then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld articulated the risk to the nation-state posed by “unknown unknowns.” Because these terrorist threats were purportedly impossible to render knowable by the security state, strategies of pre-emptive warfare were needed. Support for a pre-emptive US attack on Iraq was further intensified by the state’s attempt to link Saddam Hussein with biological and chemical “weapons of mass destruction,” an imagined connection which drew from but re-scripted the older Cold War-era nuclear threat.

A central innovation made by the US security state in the post-9/11 transition was the introduction of a specific *malleability* in the definitions of “terrorism” and “weapons of mass destruction.” These concepts — grounded in new discourses of counter-terrorism — are elastic enough to include varied sorts of threats to the state depending on its specific interests. Together, “they offer perhaps the purest form of threat projection

imaginable, one devoid of specific content (and thus able to be filled with nearly everything) but nonetheless capable of being felt as existentially consequential” (Masco 2014: 27). The post-9/11 security logic of pre-emption mentioned above, for example, enables the counterterror state to not only shape objects of threat, but prefigure and enact various policies of state security in response. Consider, for example, the deployment of the idea of pre-emptive defense against (non-existent) “weapons of mass destruction” to legitimize the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Under the counterterror state, the scope of possible objects of threat is effectively limitless — including everything from vials of anthrax to an isolated suitcase — and unconstrained by national territorial boundaries. The domain of threat is also future-oriented in that there is no end-point for projects of and possibilities for counterterror-oriented national security. For Masco, the “security apparatus... determines what counts as *terror* to enable its own field of action” (Masco 2014: 27). The counterterror security state thus endlessly makes new objects of threat, but often with an eye toward intensified security and militarization. For example, after the 2001 anthrax scare, socially oriented public health programs were de-prioritized in favor of programs of biosecurity largely directed through the Office of Health Affairs housed under the Department of Homeland Security.

The “goal of a national security system,” suggests Masco with reference to both state formations, “is to produce a citizen-subject who responds to officially designated signs of danger automatically, instinctively activating logics and actions learned over time through drills and media indoctrination” (Masco 2014: 18). Both state formations, and the cultural and institutional systems with which they are involved, deploy a militarized emotional politics in order to both produce and constrain imagined possibilities of danger. The difference between the Cold War “nuclear terror” and “counter-terror” state, however, is equally important for Masco. The latter is the solution to the problem of how to reproduce dominant modes of national security given the lack of an opposing superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union: “The War on Terror solves the structural problem of an unstable bipolarity (and specifically the potential loss of a stabilizing enemy other) by bypassing contemporary politics altogether... and claiming the future itself as the domain it needs to secure” (Masco 2014: 195). Masco goes on to explain that the counterterror state “draws its power from identifying a proliferating field of potential dangers on a planetary scale and then attempting to build a security state capable of responding to each contingency” (Masco 2014: 195).

Through highlighting just a few central nodes in Joseph Masco's *The Theater of Operations*, I hope to have demonstrated its importance for thinking about the contemporary moment and the future of discourses, practices and logics of national security in the US, especially given the current pressurized global and domestic atmosphere. It is especially helpful in carefully delineating the emotional and political fabric of the militarization of social life and expansion of the machinery of the military-industrial complex. While the book does not offer any substantive gestures toward possible solutions to the current configuration of the national security state in the US, it does juxtapose the proportion of the federal budget dedicated to military and security expenditures — over half of federal discretionary spending at \$598 billion in fiscal year 2015 — to that spent on domestic infrastructure critical for citizen safety and welfare. Such juxtapositional insights beckon further examination of the structural and political nature of the possible solutions to the problems so well illustrated by Joseph Masco in *The Theater of Operations*.