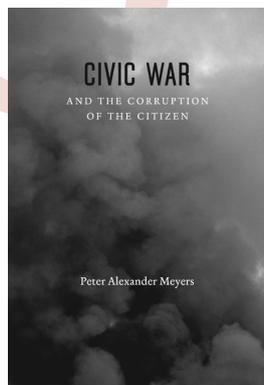# the war society

by andrew m. lindner
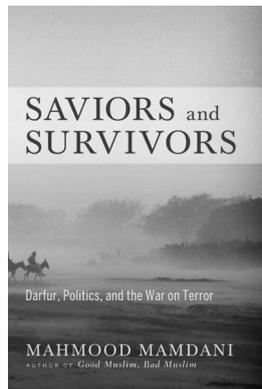
Civic War and the Corruption of the Citizen
By Peter Alexander Meyers
University of Chicago Press, 2008
376 pages

Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror
By Mahmood Mamdani
Pantheon Books, 2009
416 pages

In March 2009, comedians and political observers alike scoffed when the Obama administration announced it had swapped the grandiose, Bush-era phrase "Global War on Terror" for the more clunky (if less belligerent) term "Overseas Contingency Operations." While Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* was probably right that the new label would catch on "about as well as Crystal Pepsi," the change in official jargon may signal the waning of a political culture rooted in fear.

That political culture has had far-ranging consequences. Clutched by the seemingly ever-present threat of terrorist acts since 9/11, the American citizenry has allowed opportunists to strip them of civil rights and a political voice, according to Peter Alexander Meyers, author of *Civic War and the Corruption of the Citizen.*

Unfortunately, our fear is nothing new. Though conventional wisdom tells us that "everything changed on 9/11," Meyers claims the War on Terror is all too similar to the Cold War.

The Cold War certainly had deadly conflicts fought by proxy forces around the world, but the paramount battle was waged as a war of the imagination. For most Americans, the enemy Soviet communists were ill-understood and the constant threat of the atomic bomb was never used. And, yet, for those who scrambled under desks during air-raid drills and watched nightly news reports of ever-expanding nuclear escalation, the threat of the atomic bomb was vividly experienced in the imagination. In the presence of such abiding fear, citizens were willing to accept a massive expansion of military spending and bureaucracy, increased secrecy in the name of national security, and the consolidation of power by the Executive Branch.

Of course, this is also the story of America after 9/11. In the panic over airport safety, bioterrorism in the mail, and suitcase bombs at football games, Americans allowed the Bush administration to claim extraordinary emergency powers to wage the War on Terror. In the form of the National Security Administration's warrantless eavesdropping program, the indefinite detention of presumed enemy combatants, and the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques," the Bush administration violated numerous traditionally protected civil liberties in the name of national security. Through the repeated use of the state secrets privilege in court and presidential signing statements appended to legislation, the administration greatly strengthened the power of the Executive Branch. For Meyers, all these controversial actions are part of a greater trend toward an "antipolitical monocracy," in which more and more power is seized by elites in the name of wartime necessity.

Rather than seeing the War on Terror as a "new Cold War," Meyers encourages us to see it as a continuation of a Cold War that never ended. That is to say, the political culture of the Cold War—in which opportunist political elites perpetually exploit fear of a constant threat and use the rhetoric of war to gain public support for the further entrenchment of their power—has continued unabated. This condition, referred to as civic war, has continued through both Democratic and Republican administrations and was shocking during the Bush administration only because the trend toward monocracy accelerated so rapidly.

Even while political opportunists used the occasion of war to seize greater power, citizens, too, were complicit in the process, passively ceding to elites' demands. In fact, far more disturbing than the Bush administration's wanton violations of civil and human rights has been the willing surrender of political power by citizens. Though Meyers isn't terribly clear about what average citizens should do to resist monocracy, he seems to suggest that simply being aware of our own complicity and expressing outrage at our damaged democracy might be steps in the right direction. Perhaps, as sociologist Theodor Adorno once put it, "thinking is actually the force of resistance."

Civic War and the Corruption of the

Citizen, the first book in a forthcoming three-part series by Meyers entitled *Democracy in America After 9/11,* provides a satisfying explanation of how politics in America since 9/11 fit into the larger political culture of the past half century. Unfortunately, like too many works of social science, the book is steeped in its own idiosyncratic jargon and, consequently, often offers extended explanations of semantics where plain language would have sufficed. For readers who can overcome the jargon, Meyers' insights offer a helpful guide to our democratic challenges as we attempt to move beyond the fear-inducing rhetoric and policies of the War on Terror.

If Meyers sees the War on Terror as a continuation of the Cold War, Mahmood Mamdani, author of the fascinating and highly readable *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror,* regards it as a fundamentally different logic of foreign engagement and the Save Darfur movement as an important expression of it. During the Cold War, the United States, often acting through covert CIA operatives or proxy forces, sought to oust political and military regimes with links to the Soviet Union and to install pro-American leadership in the name of defending the sovereignty of foreign nations. By contrast, the War on Terror has used the language of protecting human rights to engage in unilateral, direct military interventions without sufficient understanding of local political, historical, and social context.

In the case of the Darfur region of Sudan, much of the current political dynamics were created by the United States' Cold War strategy in the region. In the early 1980s, the United States financed and directed military armaments to President of Chad Hissen Habré (later dubbed "Africa's Pinochet" by Human Rights Watch) ostensibly to protect the sovereignty of Chad from incursions by Libyan Muammar al-Qaddafi. Unfortunately, by acting through proxy forces, the United States ended up militarizing the entire region, flooding Chad and Sudan with Kalashnikov assault rifles.

The logic of the War on Terror is different. Rather than emphasizing sovereignty and arming proxy forces, American political leaders have framed this battle in the language of *individual* rights and act as "saviors," using U.S. forces to intervene directly. In Afghanistan, we learned about the oppression of Afghani women. In Iraq, it was the gassing of the Kurds and Saddam's torture dungeons. Even if the underlying motives may have been vengeance or the hunt for cheap oil, the political rhetoric surrounding the invasions emphasized how the United States had a moral obligation to clear the path for human and civil rights. As Mr. Bush said at a 2002 Veterans' Day event, "[the United States has] no territorial ambitions. We don't seek an empire. Our nation is committed to freedom for ourselves and for others."

While proposed intervention in Darfur is often seen as quite a different type of conflict than either Afghanistan or Iraq, Mamdani argues that it follows the same War on Terror logic. Even though the motives behind the movement to intervene in Darfur were principally humanitarian in nature, the dominance of the War on Terror mode of global engagement led the members of the Save Darfur Coalition to campaign for military action and retribution for the alleged perpetrators of genocide rather than call for diplomacy or peaceful reconciliation.

Like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Mamdani argues, the proponents of action in Darfur seek a swift use of force without a clear understanding of the local context. In fact, a major reason for the widespread support for intervention in Darfur, particularly on college campuses, was precisely its depoliticized nature. Unlike the politically divisive Operation Iraqi Freedom, a lack of understanding of the political circumstances in Sudan made it possible for Americans of all political stripes to unite around the moral cause of ending a supposed genocide.

Better yet, saving Darfur could be a selfless and just humanitarian conflict, rather than one darkened by the cloud of self-interest (Iraq) or hotheaded revenge (Afghanistan). Our lack of knowledge of the political circumstances

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surrounding Darfur could even make it feel like the Good War in the War on Terror. The potential to be saviors and warriors against injustice on the world stage gained so much enthusiasm among college students it effectively neutralized campus-based resistance to the far more controversial war in Iraq.

The immense passion for Darfur felt by many Americans was instilled, like the other conflicts of the War on Terror, by a powerful political spin campaign. *Saviors and Survivors* outlines in detail the prominent role of the Committee on Conscience and American Jewish World Service (AJWS) in founding the Save Darfur Coalition and depicting the conflict in Sudan as a horrifically violent genocide between "Arabs" and Africans—a depiction that, Mamdani contends, greatly oversimplifies a complex civil war borne of drought.

While Mamdani sees the War on Terror as a new and disturbing paradigm of global engagement, Meyers regards it as continuing the fear-inducing domes-

tic political culture of the Cold War. Whether innovation or continuation, it seems clear that, both domestically and in foreign affairs, the Cold War continues to shape American politics.

That Mr. Obama, still in his 20s when the Berlin Wall fell, is a bit too young to be a Cold Warrior holds some potential for a "change" in the tone of our politics. Moreover, in the early going, his administration has shown a greater interest in developing partnerships for open and reconciliatory diplomacy than in "shock and awe" foreign policy. Even so, the public's failure to express outrage over the Obama administration's persistent use of opaque, Bush-era secrecy practices may be a sign that our society maintains an undemocratic Cold War culture.

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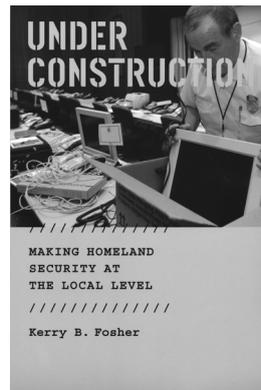# ending the war on the war on terror

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Thwarting Enemies at Home and Abroad: How to Be a Counterintelligence Officer
By William R. Johnson
Georgetown University Press, 2009 (1987)
236 pages

Under Construction: Making Homeland Security at the Local Level
By Kerry B. Fosher
University of Chicago Press, 2009
288 pages

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, brought about many changes in society, the launch of a War on Terror the most pronounced among them.

Perhaps as remarkable as the social processes related to the War on Terror—an increase in surveillance, the passing of unprecedented legislation, and engagement in two full-blown wars, to name a few—has been the relative reluctance of sociologists to take up these issues in their research. This is astonishing for the simple fact that these terrorism-related issues in the post-9/11 era have dramatically impacted society, not only in the United States, but in many parts of the world.

besides its own history, the discipline also fell victim to an active opposition among several of its practitioners to the study of terrorism and terrorism-related issues. The political nature of terrorism and the War on Terror can't justify this silence. Precisely as a politically constructed reality (primarily during the Bush administration, but with lasting impact for Barack Obama's presidency), the War on Terror presents a topic of research of which sociologists can unravel the mechanisms and conditions.

Fortunately, recent sociological work has begun to address a variety of socially relevant aspects of terrorism and counter-terrorism, but these studies don't yet add up to a veritable "sociology of terrorism." Sociologists therefore would do well to look to other disciplines. While neither *Thwarting Enemies at Home and Abroad* nor *Under Con-*

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Of course, sociologists weren't among the social scientists studying dimensions of terrorism in the decades before September 11—political scientists and legal scholars primarily conducted the relevant studies. However, *struction* are written by sociologists, they can be useful for the sociological study of (counter)terrorism. What both books reveal, in varying ways, are the important processes at work in some of the responses undertaken against terrorism.