

The Emergency State: America's Pursuit of Absolute Security at All Costs

David C. Unger (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 359 pp., bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Samuel Cooper-Wall

“Oceania was at war with Eastasia: Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia,” the government of Big Brother assured its subjects. In truth, its allies and enemies were in a constant state of flux, but the dazed, gullible, and insufficiently educated public was incapable of knowing the difference.^a

The United States government as described by *New York Times* editorialist David Unger doesn't compare to the regime in George Orwell's *1984*. Nevertheless, Unger does paint a rather disturbing picture in *The Emergency State*. He argues that for the past 70 years, the imperial presidency^b and the nation's security apparatus, anchored by the CIA, Defense Department, and National Security Council, have sustained the aura of a permanent state of emergency in America. These agencies have undertaken a “desperate search” for enemies in order to justify their large budgets while slighting constitutional protections. Enemies have changed; institutions and policies have not.

Even worse, each president, regardless of party affiliation, has wittingly sustained this culture, thanks in part to a public that has become so accustomed to this arrangement that few can imagine the US government not at war, not staring down an enemy. The irony, Unger postulates, is that the presidents and the nation's security organizations have simultaneously been ineffective in satisfying their mission to make the country more secure.

Unger's solutions revolve around a grassroots movement to instigate a fresh debate about America's place in the world for the 21st century. He projects that this debate will dismantle the emergency state,

empower Congress toward more effective oversight, compel the president to abide by constraints like the War Powers Act, limit the classification system only to select information including sources and methods, and establish national security policies that won't hinder the country's economic progress.

Some of Unger's recommendations are strong, others problematic yet interesting. In the aggregate they offer relevant arguments and food for thought, making this book a worthwhile read for those involved in intelligence and national security. The thrust of his arguments, however, are far more complex and require special scrutiny.

Unger's narrative walks readers through the slow but steady growth of the emergency state, president by president, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt “tap dancing around the neutrality acts” to provide support to Great Britain, enlisting J. Edgar Hoover for domestic surveillance, and authorizing the Japanese internment. Most importantly, Unger accuses Roosevelt of fueling what will become the military industrial complex by providing tax breaks to companies involved in war production.

Having been isolated from foreign policy decision making before succeeding Roosevelt, Harry Truman feared his Fair Deal domestic program would stall in an unresponsive Congress if he didn't show firm resolve in dealing with Joseph Stalin. Senator Joe McCarthy's “red scare” in the early 1950s only reinforced Truman's fears. Therefore, he backed away

^a George Orwell, *1984* (Fairfield, IA: 1st World Library Literary Society, 2004), 44, 228.

^b The term “the imperial presidency” is borrowed from historian Arthur Schlesinger. See his book, *The Imperial Presidency* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

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from collective security with the Soviets and instead bought into George Kennan's theory of containment.

What followed Truman was an array of successors whose unique approaches to the national security apparatus ultimately met the same end: sustaining or expanding the emergency state. Taken collectively, these presidents all laid the groundwork for George W. Bush, whose administration took executive power to a new level with two wars, the Patriot Act, and detainee controversies at Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Unger's book has excellent points and serious flaws, several of which deserve special attention, including his argument that the United States has struggled with identifying and managing global threats. He correctly reminds readers that dictators such as Saddam Hussein and Manuel Noriega did not pose as serious a threat to the United States as originally thought. Yet his analysis of the Cold War gives the Soviet Union too much credit. That Nikita Khrushchev's reforms, for example, signaled a Soviet interest in reducing Cold War tensions that the Eisenhower administration failed to exploit is half true. Yet it is unclear how Unger reconciles the Khrushchev seeking a *détente* with the Khrushchev who spat vitriol at the United States, crushed the 1956 revolt in Hungary, and issued the Berlin ultimatum just two years later.

Unger also repeatedly claims that the war on terrorism is being fought with an outdated mentality and is not strengthening the nation's security. However, while national security programs and policy can surely be reformed to improve effectiveness, Unger largely ignores the government's track record against al-Qa'ida and other entities since 9/11. In fact, the DNI's Threat Report to Congress earlier this year argues that al-Qa'ida, while still posing danger, has had its leadership decimated, its cohesiveness cracked, and its ability to coordinate with other movements in the global jihad severely curtailed.^a

In his haste to rein in the executive branch, Unger is willing to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In the depths of the Cold War, Allen Dulles wrote, "It is not our intelligence organization [and by extension, our national security apparatus] which threatens our liberties. The threat is rather that we will not be adequately informed of the perils which face us and that we will fail to act in time."^b The impact of the war on terrorism has demonstrated a redeeming value of the national security realm that Unger would rather neglect for the sake of his argument.

Also of concern is the role of the CIA in Unger's book. Despite calling the Agency out as a culprit of the emergency state, his emphasis lies far more with military spending and how the US maintains its controversial global interests. The OSS, Oleg Penkovsky, intelligence reports to Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War, and other highlights in intelligence history are neglected or barely mentioned. While Unger's favored subjects—the ramifications of covert action, the Bay of Pigs, MKULTRA, and Iran-Contra—are failures or grave errors that must be articulated, the bias with which he paints the Agency is obvious.

Unger's partiality can perhaps best be rebutted by the conclusion of another former DCI, Stansfield Turner: "Those who criticize our intelligence as a threat to our society's values and those who would condone any kind of intrusion into our personal privacy for the sake of the nation's security are both wrong."^c What Turner alludes to is a middle ground in national security, both in its contemporary policymaking and in its history. A fair treatment of this subject matter—the effectiveness, structure, and future of the CIA and national security collectively—might provoke exactly the kind of national discussion Unger would like to start. His book will not be the one to achieve this, however, as he too often dissolves into one-sided commentary that answers too few questions in an effort to win new converts.



^a James R. Clapper, "Unclassified Statement for the Record on Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," (presented in Washington, DC, 31 January 2012) available at <http://intelligence.senate.gov/120131/clapper.pdf>.

^b Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence* (New York: Signet Books, 1965), 245.

^c Stansfield Turner, *Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 1.