

**Stuart Croft.**

**Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror.**

Cambridge University Press, 2006, 301 pp.

\$US 29.99 paper (0521687330), \$US 75.00 hardcover (0521867991)

Depicting the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as the product of a crusade against U.S. values and democracy, President George W. Bush and his supporters implemented a major shift in U.S. foreign policy. Known as the “war on terror,” this shift is grounded in a powerful discourse that justified a series of controversial policies, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the enactment of the USA Patriot Act. In his book, British international relations professor Stuart Croft analyzes the development of the “war on terror” discourse in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. More specifically, the book focuses on how U.S. media and popular culture participated in the construction, diffusion, and sometimes, critique of this powerful discourse. Consequently, this book analyzes not only political speeches but also editorial cartoons, movies, novels, TV series, popular songs, religious writings, and even tattoos. For Croft, these different cultural forms feature key discursive processes at the foundation of the “war on terror.” Covering the 2001–2005 period, the analysis is able to study of how such discourse changed over time.

Theoretically, *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror* starts from the assumption that a security crisis is “constructed in and through social interaction. It is given meaning through social processes, through a decisive intervention which gives meaning to the situation and which also provides a route for future policy. That is, there are no objective ontological criteria that a crisis must fulfil to be a crisis: a crisis is one when it permeates discourse, and creates new understandings and, thereby, new policy programs” (p. 5). This constructivist approach focuses on cycles of political and discursive processes that constitute security crises. In order to analyze these crises, Croft draws extensively on the policy literature about the relationship between discourse and policy change, especially the work of Colin Hay and Vivien Schmidt. Yet, this book focuses less on “political discourse” in the narrow sense of the term than on how “popular culture (*co-*)produces discourse.” Hence, as Croft puts it, his book seeks out “the political in the cultural” (p. 9). From a disciplinary perspective, the author attempts to convince readers that the field of international relations would benefit from “engaging with cultural studies” (p. 10). This is exactly what this book does: it bridges cultural studies and international relations in order to explain how security crises unfold through discursive processes featured in both political speeches and distinct cultural products.

In his detailed analysis, Croft shows how a coherent meta-narrative rapidly emerged as the hegemonic “common sense” that would both guide and legitimize the policy program known as the “war on terror.” This meta-narrative comprised four key elements: 1) the construction of the enemy as a bunch of evil-doers who attacked innocent U.S. citizens because they hate freedom and democracy; 2) the idea that no one within the federal government should be blamed for what happened on September 11, 2001; 3) the claim that the United States has the sacred mission to fight for freedom and justice; 4) the belief this fight should take a global form, under the leadership of the United States but with strong international support. According to Croft, this meta-narrative rapidly dominated both political discourse and popular culture, which favoured the implementation of the Bush administration's policy program (e.g. the invasion of Afghanistan and the enactment the USA Patriot Act). During the build-up for the invasion of Iraq, however, a counter-discourse became prominent enough to challenge the dominant “war on terror” meta-narrative. As the book shows, the

so-called “no war for oil” discourse became influential in early 2003 but failed to displace the dominant meta-narrative, which “struck back” during the 2004 presidential campaign. Although the debate over Iraq created a new foreign policy crisis that temporarily undermined the “war on terror” discourse, this meta-narrative survived the crisis. This is true largely because most Democrats failed to challenge this discourse. Instead, they explicitly embraced it while criticizing the Bush administration on tactical issues (i.e. how to win the “war on terror” rather than how to create an alternative to it). Through *Culture, Crisis and America’s War on Terror*, Croft explains how cultural products ranging from movies to popular songs and evangelical websites co-produced and, more rarely, questioned the “war on terror” meta-narrative and the policy program it underlined.

This is an accessible and well-researched book that offers valuable insight about the U.S. debate over terrorism in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. More generally, it makes a strong case for the inclusion of popular culture in the study of international relations. The book could be used in graduate seminars and, because it is well written, in advanced undergraduate courses in international relations, political science, and political sociology. Although students of U.S. politics and society already know most of the story told here, *Culture, Crisis and America’s War on Terror* could help many readers better understand the so-called “war on terror” and the discourse surrounding it. From this angle, this is a most useful book.

However, the book is not without flaws. First, the chapters are not always well-organized, making the book less coherent than it could have been. For example, the discussion of the theoretical framework in the first few chapters could have been more systematic. Second, Croft does not offer an in-depth discussion of U.S. nationalism, which is perhaps the most crucial factor to understand the structure and content of the “war on terror” discourse. Many issues at the center of this discourse, such as the idea of freedom, are key components of U.S. nationalism, which is barely mentioned in the book (e.g. the Index does not even feature “nationalism” or “patriotism”). This is a significant flaw that makes the empirical analysis less compelling than it could have been. Finally, the discussion about evangelical Christians probably overemphasizes their role in U.S. society. Although evangelicals are influential politically, their views are shared by a only minority of the U.S. population.

Overall, *Culture, Crisis and America’s War on Terror* is an excellent book that political sociologists and students of security issues could read with profit. The so-called “war on terror” is one of the major political issues of our time and scholars interested in understanding its cultural underpinnings should engage with Croft’s timely monograph.

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September 2007

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