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Book Review by Zachary Shore of *The  
Emergency State America's Pursuit of  
Absolute Security at All Costs* by David C. Unger

Shore, Zachary

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## 'The Emergency State,' by David C. Unger: review

NONFICTION

Zachary Shore Published 4:00 am, Sunday, March 11, 2012

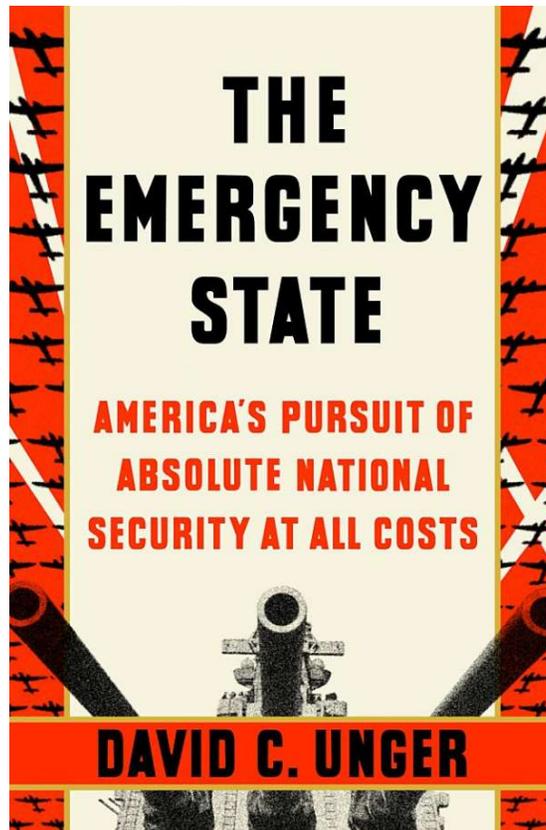


IMAGE 1 OF 3

"The Emergency State: America's Pursuit of Absolute Security at All Costs" By David C. Unger

### **The Emergency State America's Pursuit of Absolute Security at All Costs By David C. Unger (The Penguin Press; 359 pages; \$27.95)**

At long last, combat troops are out of Iraq. President **Obama** has begun drawing down troops in Afghanistan. And rather than leading a charge into Libya, the president gave U.S. forces the backseat to Britain and France. If you thought that this has signaled a kinder, gentler America, David Unger wants you to think again.

Unger, an editorial writer at the **New York Times**, argues that every American president since **Franklin Roosevelt** has left the nation in a permanent state of emergency. He never clarifies precisely what constitutes this emergency state, but it seems to include the reckless use of military force, wasteful defense spending, the curtailing of civil liberties through surveillance and the failure of congressional oversight. Tackling all of these concerns would be an ambitious undertaking for any author, and Unger should be commended for contributing to the debate.

In "The Emergency State," the author reviews seven decades of well-known history, drawing on 10 to 20 published sources per presidential administration. He depicts each president as either guilty of misusing emergency state powers or feckless at curbing them. But the book leads the reader to a state of confusion, as it is never quite clear what Unger thinks causes the problems to persist. Is it the presidents themselves, the institutions he critiques (the **Defense Department, CIA and National Security Council**), or an ill-defined public mind-set? The culprits shift throughout the book.

At times he lays the blame on individual leaders. **Dwight Eisenhower** allegedly viewed "America's global credibility as being everywhere on the line," and this made him unable to resist checking the spread of communism. But Unger neglects to mention that Ike refused to send troops to Vietnam, against the pleas of his entire Cabinet.

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Unger opines that without realizing it, the United States has "slipped into a permanent, self-renewing state of emergency." He then provides evidence of its impermanence. Under the emergency state, presidents supposedly abuse their authority without proper checks and balances. **Richard Nixon** was the prime abuser, yet when he tried to use national security as a defense against releasing those incriminating transcripts, Congress forced his hand. When Nixon tried to block publication of the Pentagon Papers, the **Supreme Court** overruled him. When he conducted a secret war in Cambodia and was discovered, the public outcry helped terminate his command.

The next two presidents, **Gerald Ford** and **Jimmy Carter**, then scaled back much of the Nixonian excesses, even disclosing CIA surveillance of Americans. Unger sees this whole period, from 1968 to 1980, as anomalous. Yet in the later 1980s, when **Ronald Reagan's** covert funding of the Contras was exposed, Congress pulled the plug on those White House machinations.

Unger occasionally makes a convincing case for things we never doubted. "The onset of the Cold War," he writes, "blighted Franklin Roosevelt's hopes for the postwar era," and "the Vietnam War incinerated the **Great Society**." It's true: Wars do cause guns to trump butter. But Unger's broader, potent point is that the United States has diverted needed funds from domestic spending and into wasteful defense.

And here he makes persuasive points. Though the U.S. defense budget looks modest as a part of gross domestic product (4.8 percent in 2011), Unger notes that it represents more than half of all discretionary federal spending - the one-third portion of the federal budget that Congress can adjust.

So is Unger right that we have weakened our society by spending on defense? It would be hard to argue otherwise, until one grapples with the nitty-gritty. Take the F-22 fighter

jet. The fleet's development over nearly 15 years cost a gasp-inducing \$62 billion. Is this wasteful, especially when so many Americans need jobs that could come from investing in public works? On the other hand, is it ethical to send young men and women on missions in an older plane that can more easily be shot down? The F-22 is designed to make its detection extremely unlikely. If a less-sophisticated plane is destroyed, we not only lose the crew and devastate their families, we also lose all the money we had invested in that less-costly but more-vulnerable aircraft.

So is it really wasteful to build the planes with the greatest chance of achieving their mission and returning home? Unger might say that we should not deploy them to begin with. But what if the mission is to stop a dictator from slaughtering his people, as in Libya? What if it's to take out a missile site in Iran aimed at Tel Aviv, or a nuclear weapons plant in Pyongyang, North Korea, whose products could be sold for use against the United States?

Unger's grandest claim is that the emergency state has made us "more vulnerable, more isolated, and less free." Are we more vulnerable? Actually, since Pearl Harbor, the United States has suffered only one major attack at home in 70 years, not a bad track record. Are we really more isolated? The United States is deeply embedded in multinational institutions from NATO to the **World Trade Organization**, and it conducts bilateral security arrangements with countries around the world.

As for being less free, there is a clear case to be made that state surveillance and control have dramatically increased. It's said that if we sacrifice our liberties, then the terrorists have won. But on the other hand, if they kill us, then they've also won. Put another way, I don't want Big Brother reading my e-mail, but I also don't want a car bomb in Times Square. There has to be a middle ground, and our country has yet to have a serious discussion of how far we want our government to pry in the effort to protect us.

These are all questions worth debating. And if "The Emergency State" helps stimulate a national discussion, it would serve the country well.

Zachary Shore is a fellow at **Stanford University's** Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and an associate professor of national security affairs at the **Naval Postgraduate School**. [books@sfchronicle.com](mailto:books@sfchronicle.com)