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Terrorism and a New American Agenda

In her latest book, *Just War against Terror*, Jean Bethke Elshtain argues for a new strategic paradigm in American foreign policy in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11. Published just prior to the launching of military operations in Iraq, the work shows signs of haste in its brevity and loose organization, but nevertheless makes a strong case for the use of military force in defense of American lives and values "in a violent world."

The historical context of Elshtain's argument is defined by the collapse of the Cold War superpower condominium under which the United States and the Soviet Union practiced a traditional international politics of balance of power, and American strategy deployed military forces to "contain and deter" Soviet threats to the stability of that balance. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, bipolar politics and the paradigm of mutual deterrence simply no longer apply and the United States finds itself in a more chaotic international situation in which American moral authority and superpower must confront the threat of asymmetrical (terroristic) warfare waged by Islamic fundamentalists and the rogue states that sponsor and harbor them.

The ethical context of her argument is the theory of justified war elaborated on the basis of Christian realism, specifically the Augustinian doctrine that statesmen have moral responsibilities both domestically, to establish and maintain a civil tranquility in which innocent citizens are protected from violence; and internationally, to cooperate in maintaining peace within a system of accountable national governments. To achieve these ends of peace and justice, the discriminant and proportionate use of force (just war) is morally licit, and in some circumstances, morally obligatory. Without much analysis, Elshtain applies the traditional just war categories (legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, last resort, and reasonable hope of success as well as discriminate and proportionate means) to the post-September 11 world, and thereon develops an argument that is at once censorious of those who eschew any moral judgment on terrorism, on the supposition of some "moral equivalence" between the victims...
and those who kill them; analytic of the historical contrasts between Christian polity and theocracy of Islamic fundamentalism; and constructive in positing a fundamental American agenda of defending and promoting human dignity and equality.

The events of September 11 and the lethal machinations of Islamist terrorism throughout the world provide an ideal occasion for Elshtain's criticism of the intellectual fashion that cloaks moral evil (the massacre of innocents) under the guise of a "moral equivalence" that seeks somehow to blame the victims (as Americans, or Christians, or Israelis) for the atrocity of the evil perpetrator. Here, Elshtain's logic is ostensive: to grasp the horror of September 11 is to draw the moral verdict. The contrast between the totalizing ends and terrorist tactics of Islamic fundamentalists (e.g. Osama bin Laden), and the measured and discriminate response of the United States is patently clear. In the eighteenth century, Emerich de Vattel made the same point. We must be on our guard to discount ideological rationalizations for violence and instead judge the end by the means: murderous means contradict the putative nobility of the professed ends. Yet instead of acknowledging America's moral responsibility to defend its liberal values from terrorism, the all-too-common reaction of many Western intellectuals, academicians, and clergy has been simply to posit "Western guilt" and to question American motives, while at the same time constructing various exculpatory rationales for terrorism that the Islamists themselves unequivocally disavow in their frankly theocratic manifestoes. The irony here is inescapable: those post-moderns who have made an axiom of moral relativism now spring to rationalize the violence of the most virulent and atavistic absolutists.

This is an interesting argumentative gambit in that it nicely obviates the need to rebut these critics of American foreign policy on their own terms by attempting to show how their criticisms are beside the point. As secular modernists they have accepted as axiomatic Max Weber's "secularization hypothesis," relegating religion to epiphenomenal status. The result is that they, and especially those imbued with Marxism, are blinded to the sort of threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism. Misdescribing the existential nature of the conflict and the religious motives of the terrorists leads to policies that are bound to miscarry. However difficult it may be for these secularists to appreciate, Islamic terrorists are not trying to engage in a political dialogue with the West; quite the contrary, they are embarked on a religious jihad against modernity in general and "the great Satan" (the United States) in particular. Unlike the more familiar Western terrorists who typically seek to coerce some particular political or economic resolution, al Qaeda et alia are engaged in what is professed to be essentially a "holy war" against the core values of Western liberalism; and in "holy war" one does not negotiate with "the Great Satan"—quite the contrary, one slays the dragon and drives a stake through its heart. In short, zealots make terrible interlocutors. Thus political excuses for their atrocities, no matter how facially plausible, simply miss the fundamental point.

To support her critique, Elshtain traces the differentiation of religious and civil authority in the Christian West from Jesus' admonition to "render unto Caesar," through Augustine's two "cities," up to the American constitutional doctrine of the "separation of church and state." While acknowledging that there have been serious historical tensions between these respective institutions, she argues that the tension has tended to foster the rights of individuals vis a vis both. At various times citizens have used political means to restrain clerical ambition on the one hand, and religious appeals to "God-given rights" to circumscribe the power of government on the other. As a result, secular liberalism has flourished in the Christian West on the basic religious principle of the moral equality of human individuals. In short,
the "separation of Church and State" has worked to strengthen the autonomy of both institutions within civil society.

As an integral feature of this concordat, Elshtain argues for the authenticity of a specifically Christian mission within secular political culture. Far from standing aloof, Christians must sometimes accept the melancholy responsibility of waging just war in defense of individuals’ rights and the institutions on which their civic life depends. It is a false doctrine that equates the just use of military force to defend the innocent with the violence that evil men use to assail them. Nor may the Christian disdain such force in the interest of “keeping his hands clean,” for the pragmatic reason that unless scrupulous people with grave reluctance are prepared to use force when it is necessary, other unscrupulous people with much less reluctance may resort to force when it is not necessary.

The contrast with fundamentalist Islam must not be underestimated. Given his historical circumstances, Muhammad was required to be a soldier and statesman as much as a prophet; in short, he was a self-conscious theocrat who divided the world into mutually antagonistic realms: dar al islam, the realm of peaceful harmony among faithful Muslims, and dar al harb, the hostile and chaotic world of the unbelievers, the “infidels,” who must be brought into submission to Allah by the fourfold jihad of heart, tongue, hand, and sword. As interpreted by its fundamentalists, e.g. Wahabism, Islam is thus historically a militant faith that sees itself perennially besieged by the hostile political, economic, and cultural aggression of infidels from both East and West.

The political and cultural implications of this religious outlook are evident in the salient fact that few Islamic nations have developed viable secular institutions to check and balance their frequently fractious religious authorities. The concepts of “civil society,” political equality, republican self-government, and the rule of law distinct from sectarian religion have not taken root in the Islamic Middle East. Citing a report by columnist Thomas Friedman, Elshtain lists the consequent “freedom deficit undermining human development” within Arab societies: “the shortage of freedom to speak, innovate and affect political life, a shortage of women’s rights, and a shortage of quality education” (p. 143). Inevitably, such political deficits account in large measure for the economic poverty that fuels the hostility and resentment toward the liberalism and modernity of the West.

Another pertinent contrast between Islam and the West concerns the ethical strictures on the use of military force. In the Christian tradition, the just war theory posits a strong moral resistance to war that demands sufficient ethical and political justification for the use of force. Specific criteria governing both the resort to war and the conduct of warfare have been embodied in the customary and positive law of nations. By contrast, Islamic fundamentalists teach jihad against unbelievers to be a requirement of faith; the very existence of the unbelievers provides sufficient justification for jihadists to coerce submission. The infidel must choose Islam or death.

Elshtain goes on to argue that the absence of a distinction in Islamic culture between religion and politics, mosque and state, also explains--albeit ironically--the fractious nature of Islamic religious authority, and the consequent lack of moral condemnation for the perpetrators of Islamic terror. Who speaks for an authentic Islam and against the fanatics who murder in its name? Where are the fatwas against Osama Bin Laden? The moral challenge of September 11 confronts Muslims more critically than Christians and Jews; yet without an institution strengthened throughout a history of struggles with the state, Islamic theocrats lack the intellectual cohesion, authority, or moral courage to condemn, much less rein in, their own fanatic fringe.
Confronting the challenges of such religiously inspired terrorism and the failure of so many Arab and Islamic governments to arrest it on their own soil, Elshtain argues that the United States has the moral responsibility to wage just war against terrorists. This is not simply a function of the inherent right of national self-defense; it is expressive of a much grander vision of our moral duty to articulate and uphold the core value of human dignity and to foster the political infrastructures that are its necessary conditions. It is at this point that Elshtain begins to sound Wolfowitzian in her worldview, espousing the new strategic paradigm of "interdiction" and intervention in "failed states" that harbor and foment terrorism.

Her argument is that by virtue of our constitutional commitment to moral dignity and political equality (embodied in our founding documents, and implemented in our jurisprudence and political institutions), and because we find ourselves to be the world’s only superpower, only the United States and its like-minded allies are in the position effectively to "interdict" terrorists, and to intervene to create and foster the civic stability within "failed states" that, with our political and economic assistance, will undergird the rise of accountable national governments: the metaphor of "rising dominoes."

However appealing, this argument is predicated on several debatable presumptions about America’s values, history, and role in the world that Elshtain tends to regard as givens. In the first place, she is making an explicitly moral argument appealing to the value of human dignity, conceived in terms of the sort of civil equality among individuals that Western liberalism takes to be axiomatic. Granted, dignity and equality are unquestionably core values, and certainly worth defending. But the immediate practical issue is as much cultural as political: how to articulate these secular values in the unfamiliar vernacular of faraway places with strange-sounding names. By comparison, Jefferson and Madison had it easy; they drew their ideas of law and polity from the long tradition of constitutional government and republicanism stretching back to Greece and Rome. Yet for the very reasons Elshtain so persuasively details, the Islamic Middle East is a harsh environment for nascent polities, particularly those imposed by even a benevolent (non-colonial) interventionist.

Secondly, while the history of America’s engagement in the world is not so bad as it might have been, neither is it so pure as to allay all suspicions of our geopolitical motives and intentions. It is irrelevant how we may think about ourselves and our moral imperatives. The point is that we are very likely to provoke deep resistance among those we would make our clients as well as among the other nations of the world who fear any hegemony, especially one so powerful and self-righteous. Prudentially, the dangers of imperial over-reach need to be balanced against the moral imperatives of "interdiction" and "nation building." It is important to recall that one of the necessary conditions for resorting to just war in the first place is "the reasonable possibility of success," i.e. of actually achieving the just and lasting peace at which just war (of interdiction and/or intervention) aims. Far from establishing viable civil societies on the principles of republican democracy, we may only be "sowing the dragon’s teeth" in soil fertilized with our own blood and treasure. To be candid, we must acknowledge that in Afghanistan (and more lately in Iraq), the political and hence moral benefits of our interventions are radically uncertain.

Nor does Elshtain consider the historical tendency among sovereign nations to redress disturbances in the international balance of power. The very concept of a "sole" superpower strikes many as aberrational, a temporary anomaly in the international system that will inevitably elicit countervailing coalitions and alliances to thwart even our best intentions by diplomatic if not military resistance. It is already apparent that despite the com-
mon threat posed by international terrorism our erstwhile friends, France and Germany, are determined to check and balance American initiatives that fail to include them as proper partners.

In the last analysis, does the United States have any effective alternatives to the new paradigm of “interdiction and intervention”? Can we secure our lives and institutions in ways other than those Elshtain advocates? The post-Cold War history of the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations is not encouraging. The effectiveness of the UN and NGOs in peacekeeping and nurturing political infrastructures, much less interdicting global terrorism, has been largely dependent on the financial, military, and logistical support of the United States. The fundamental political reality of our time is that the price of being “the world’s only superpower” is that we so often feel morally constrained to spend that power in dubious battles.

Elshtain presents a blunt argument that the “war against terror” poses a crucial test of American power, authority, will, and wisdom that we cannot afford to fail.

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