
Michael Walzer: *A Foreign Policy for the Left*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. Pp. viii, 198.)

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Schadenfreude—a delight in the misfortunes of others, particularly in those of your adversaries—is a ubiquitous, if not commendable, emotion. Readers on the opposite side of the political barricades from Michael Walzer’s new manifesto outlining a foreign policy agenda will find much satisfaction in both Walzer’s catalog of the current debilities of the Left’s foreign policy and the defects of his own effort to craft a progressive global agenda. Not only would delight in the Left’s distress be unseemly, but it would also blind those of us on the other side to the reality that a weak Left, especially in the foreign policy realm, is bad for the country, and indeed for conservatives themselves.

Walzer is among America’s most thoughtful and influential left-wing public intellectuals. Long associated with *Dissent*, a highbrow and nondoctrinaire progressive monthly in New York, Walzer can be counted on to apply an erudite and scholarly approach (not surprising given that he was also a faculty member at both Princeton and Harvard) to some of the most pressing public issues of the day such as just war theory, equality, toleration, and international relations.

In this slender volume, Walzer launches a polemic at his fellow progressives, arguing that the Left today lacks a foreign policy. The problem, in Walzer’s estimation, derives from the fact that it is mostly concerned with domestic politics (1). Looking at the rest of the world through a domestic lens leads to a variety of pathologies: the assumptions that oppressed peoples and movements are always the good guys (and gals); that America and its allies, especially Israel, are always the bad guys; and that a progressive agenda should always align itself with all self-identified Leftist governments and movements around the world (31–32).

To the extent that the Left engages with the rest of the world, in Walzer’s view, it tends to be supine: “Leftist conceptions of foreign policy, insofar as we think about foreign policy, lean toward the avoidance of forceful action” (2). This leads to what Walzer dismisses as the “politics of pretending,” the belief that the only legitimate use of force has to take place under the auspices of the United Nations, which he sees as a recipe for never using it (130). Walzer also takes his comrades to task for three other blind spots: the failure to recognize the enduring role of religion in political life (137), ignoring the “crucial” role of the state in world politics, especially in advancing progressive causes (109), and minimizing the continuing legitimacy of nationalism in world politics. On this last, Walzer asserts that “it is not unjust, as some leftists believe, to feel especially obligated to neighbors and kinfolk” (104).

Not surprisingly, Walzer’s new foreign policy agenda for the Left is the opposite of most of this. His is an activist approach to the world, committed

to rebuilding states not only as a means to deal with contemporary problems—especially human rights—but also as the basis for an eventual overcoming of the state system in favor of an eventual global “governing arrangement” that would advance the progressive cause (116–17, 135). In Walzer’s assessment, “good leftists can’t avoid internationalism” (33). Walzer is circumspect, but within narrow bounds not averse to the use of military force to fight “good wars” such as World War II and Kosovo (25). Finally, Walzer laments his comrades’ growing rejection of Jewish nationalism and waxes nostalgic for a time when Zionism was embraced by much of the global Left (118).

Walzer is a moderate leftist. His idols are the French Girondins and Russian Mensheviks (162). His alternative foreign policy for the Left today is offered in their spirit of recapturing a more moderate and pragmatic revolutionary agenda. The problem for Walzer’s quest is obvious: both movements ultimately failed! While it is hard to fault Walzer’s indictment of the Left’s current simulacra of a foreign policy, it is not clear that his actual one is really better.

Consider his more muscular willingness to use military force. For many on the left, the Vietnam War discredited wars for democracy. But the legacy of the Holocaust and moral duty to aid victims of human rights abuse continued to legitimize the use of military force to protect human rights in places like the Balkans in the 1990s (29 and 39). This position puts Walzer in a bind: he has to deny, despite ample rhetorical evidence to the contrary, that the United States’ intervention in Iraq was in any way motivated by humanitarian concerns (54).

A more balanced assessment of recent humanitarian interventions in Iraq, Libya, and even Syria would have to concede that the road to hell (or at least unintended consequences) is often paved with good intentions. Walzer is confident that such interventions can be limited to stopping the killing and then getting out, but then gives away the game by admitting that weak and deeply ethnically divided states may require prolonged occupation (68). Indeed, he sees such interventions as obligatory, “more than a right and more than an imperfect duty” (62).

Walzer also wades into the intellectual fray over contemporary America’s role in the world. He denies America is an “empire” on the grounds that the American public would never support such a posture and that our democratic political system is incompatible with it (78, 82–84). This confidence, however, is belied both by the historical instances of liberal imperialism and by the fact that the American public has upon occasion overwhelmingly endorsed quasi-imperial undertakings such as the “liberation” of Iraq. Walzer concedes the existence of American “hegemony” (85). But this strikes me as a distinction without much of a difference. Sure, jodhpurs and pith helmets are out of fashion and lip service to juridical sovereignty is *de rigueur*. But the difference between empire and hegemony on the ground seems pretty fine.

Even if we concede Walzer’s distinction, American hegemony has hardly been benign. Bill Clinton’s secretary of state Madeleine Albright famously

characterized the United States as the “indispensable nation” in Europe during the 1990s. Not only did we have to take the lead in the humanitarian interventions in the civil wars resulting from the breakup of Yugoslavia, but we also drove the train in terms of consolidating democracy in the wreckage of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union by expanding NATO. We did so despite our verbal assurances that we would not do so to Soviet reformer Mikhail Gorbachev and in the face of warnings from Russian democrats that it would inflame anti-Western nationalism in Russia. Unaware of the significance of these earlier events, most Americans think that the new Cold War with Vladimir Putin’s Russia began with the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014. Walzer undoubtedly knows better, but still waffles on NATO expansion, acknowledging its downside, but he still cannot resist the pleading of Eastern European progressives such as Vaclav Havel to bring former Warsaw Pact states into the Atlantic alliance (46).

Though he is no fan of the neoconservatives’ domestic agenda, Walzer is candid in conceding that these former Trotskyites’ foreign policy approach is in some ways not dissimilar to that of progressives. One important example is their belief that democracy will not be “safe” until it spreads (14). Many leftists thought that the same was true of socialism. While Walzer claims to see the broader resurgence of religion as a worrisome phenomenon, he, like neoconservative thinkers such as his late Princeton colleague Bernard Lewis, seems most afraid of Islam (138). This leads him to pay more than a grudging respect to Muslim apostates like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, currently a fellow at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute (153). Finally, like the neoconservatives, Walzer declares war on terrorism (along with tyranny and human rights violators), or at least on the rest of the Left’s refusal to face the problem squarely (41). In the end, much of Walzer’s new Left foreign policy seems like old neoconservative wine in new progressive bottles.

So why shouldn’t those of us who do not share his progressive commitments revel in the Left’s foreign policy dithering and Walzer’s impractical alternative agenda? The most obvious answer is that the moderate Left may once again control the executive branch and the two possibilities of no foreign policy and a default back to the neoconservative posture that occupied the vital center of America’s approach to the world since the end of the Cold War, are not good options.

Moreover, a distinct and practical leftist foreign policy agenda is also essential for conservatives. Taking a page out of the late Louis Hartz’s famous argument that American liberalism was prone to illiberal fits because it faced no real nonliberal alternative, I would maintain that, at least in the realm of foreign policy, the establishment consensus has been captured by important elements of the neoconservative agenda. The results since 2003 have hardly been good. This is, in my view, a function of too little dissent from the view that the United States and its close allies face unrelenting assault from Islamofascism, that the appropriate response is more assertive American

leadership, and that such leadership can be made benign by connecting it with a crusade to protect human rights.

There is, of course, an alternative body of thought about America's role in the world, which advocates a different and more coherent approach. Realism, which Walzer dismisses as "right-wing," advocates a more restrained approach for the United States based upon the national interest and the limits of even America's great power (5). At times, the Left has shared this agenda. Walzer deplors that such a Left-Right coalition stood against one of the good wars in the 1930s and 1940s (25). While that united front may have been wrong before the Second World War, that does not mean that today Left and Right opponents of NATO expansion were similarly wrong-headed (46). It is too bad that the two did not find more common ground in opposing it (92).

Walzer is correct that the Left's general incoherence about foreign policy reduces its influence; but it is not clear that his alt-left foreign policy would be an improvement over what we have had for the past quarter of a century. This is not something that those of us on the other side of the barricades should cheer.

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Seth N. Jaffe: *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. ix, 236.)

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In his first book, S. N. Jaffe undertakes an ambitious and detailed study of book 1 of Thucydides's *War of the Athenians and the Peloponnesians*, focusing on the reasons for the outbreak of the conflict between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies. The author thus proposes a thorough analysis of what he calls the political psychologies of Athens and Sparta, reconstructing step by step the arguments, strategies, and discourses that the characters put forth in Thucydides's narrative.

Among the strongest points of the interpretation is the fact that the author reads Thucydides's *History* in its own light without any reference to sources not warranted by Thucydides himself. In a somewhat Straussian manner, he offers an internal reading of the text based on the premise that one should take Thucydides's intention seriously. This means accepting that his narrative is based on a conception of human nature, that the reconstitution