

Morality and Meaning in a Time of Terror

A REVIEW ESSAY BY SCOTT R. PAETH

Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World.
By Jean Bethke Elshtain. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning. By Chris Hedges. New York: Public Affairs, 2002.

On the first anniversary of the United States' invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush declared: "There is no neutral ground — no neutral ground — in the fight between civilization and terror, because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, and life and death. The war on terror is not a figure of speech. It is an inescapable calling of our generation" (Bush 2004). This statement illustrates two characteristics of the Bush administration that have been widely noted – its dualism (verging on Manicheism) and its political messianism. By painting the world in shades of black and white, and placing the mantel of righteousness squarely on our own shoulders, the Bush administration has framed the war on terror as divine mission to eradicate evil and inaugurate the eschatological era of democracy and freedom for the entire world.

The image that this calls to mind is of the Stalwart Sheriff – Gary Cooper, perhaps – forced by circumstances and his own sense of responsibility to strap on his holster and stand alone on a dusty main street, ready to face off against all the powers and principalities of corruption and iniquity. In the face of such righteousness, how *can* there be neutrality? We are either with the Sheriff, or we are with the terrorists. Two recent, and quite different, books offer challenging perspectives against which this image should be evaluated. In one case, the United States has clearly been cast in the role of Stalwart Sheriff; in the other, our situation is more complex, and demands of us a

more self-critical perspective from which to view the whole enterprise of war-making.

In *Just War Against Terror*, Jean Bethke Elshtain lays out a moral case in favor of the war on terror, arguing against “so many” who “tick off a list of American ‘failures’ or even insist that America brought the horrors of September 11, 2001, on herself” (Elshtain, 2). Central to her argument is the contention that the terrorists with whom we are at war are not susceptible to rational engagement, and thus only open warfare provides the means for dealing with them. She dismisses alternative strategies geared toward resolving the “root issues” of terrorism, such as poverty and anger over U.S. foreign policy, arguing that “no such change, either singly or together, will deter Osama bin Laden and those like him” (Elshtain, 3). Elshtain’s arguments are worthy of serious examination, for she makes a closely reasoned and potent argument in favor of an aggressive stance toward terrorism. Yet, her argument suffers from such a plethora of sweeping generalizations, straw man arguments, and gross caricatures that the force of her overall thesis is lost.

Elshtain begins by trying to clarify the language surrounding the events of September 11th, arguing that any attempts to describe the planners and perpetrators of the attacks as anything other than terrorists – such as “soldiers” or even “mass murderers” obscures both the intention of their actions — “to sow terror” (Elshtain, 18)—and the moral status of their acts — “nihilism” (Elshtain, 19). Additionally, she is at pains to distinguish justified from unjustified violence as well as the idea of “justice” from that of “revenge.”

Elshtain is very thorough at drawing such distinctions. She recognizes, as did her sources Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, the way in which sentimentality and false consciousness can contribute to bad faith in analyzing morally fraught situations. By masking the distinctions between the United States and al Qaeda, and between the just and unjust use of force, we risk a moral inertia born of, at best, fuzzy-headedness and, at worst, the kind of self-loathing that Nietzsche would have appreciated.

Elshtain is undoubtedly right that distinctions of these kinds must be made in order to arrive at a moral understanding of terrorism, and for discerning a proper response. Yet at the same time she avoids other distinctions that would complicate the moral clarity that she wants to establish. For example, she agrees with President Bush’s statements that “we are hated because of our freedoms and our rights” (24). But this is too simplistic, whether it comes from Elshtain or from Bush. Certainly liberal democratic forms of life are perceived as degenerate by Osama bin Laden and many Islamic radi-

cals, but any meaningful or constructive analysis of terrorism needs to go beyond this and consider the perception that endures linking Western Democracy with oppressive political legacies in the Middle East. What to us appears to be freedom may appear to many in the Muslim world to be license. More importantly, our foreign policy is perceived by many around the world to have less to do with the extension of liberty than with the establishment of hegemony. Historian Chalmers Johnson (2000) uses the term “blowback” to describe this phenomenon.

Elshtain critiques the concept of blowback, characterizing it as “a reaction we brought on ourselves by being engaged with the world” (82). Yet, tellingly, nowhere in her discussion does she cite Johnson, with whom the term took on popular cachet. Johnson is more circumspect, writing: “Even an empire cannot control the long-term effects of its policies. That is the essence of blowback” (Johnson 2000: 13).¹ The point, contrary to Elshtain’s argument, is not that we “deserved” the attacks of September 11th, or that we “brought them on ourselves,” as critics of U.S. foreign policy are often accused of saying. Rather, the point is that our actions have consequences that stretch far beyond our ability to calculate.

Elshtain endorses historian Louis Menand’s contention that the blowback argument leads to “only two alternatives: isolationism or conquest.” Elshtain contends that isolationism is not an option, and refuses to give credence to the possibility that we might in fact be engaged in a project of conquest, and therefore concludes that the blowback argument is invalid. Yet neither Menand nor Elshtain consider a third alternative: A just involvement in international affairs, rather than one that seeks to extend and preserve U.S. global power.²

The thrust of Elshtain’s argument is in the direction of a unilateralist exercise of U.S. power on behalf of the world. She is critical of multilateral

¹ That having been said, Johnson is highly critical of U.S. foreign policy, and particularly the Cold War activities of the CIA, arguing that these activities have created situations that will inevitably produce the blowback that he documents. Yet, although Johnson presents quite a stark picture of consequences of our involvement abroad, he does not provide much by way of a constructive proposal for how we can credibly remedy the situation.

² Although the extension and preservation of U.S. power has been on the agenda of every administration since the end of World War II, the Bush administration has been particularly brazen in its advocacy of a global situation in which there is no possible rival to U.S. power. This was the thesis of a report

efforts such as the International Criminal Court, asserting (though not really *arguing*) that “relying on international courts to make a just response to attacks like those of September 11 lets those who are responsible off the hook almost by definition” (Elshtain, 165). It is the province of U.S. power to protect the world, for this power entails a recognition of deep moral responsibility. Elshtain never gives adequate attention, however, to the dual questions that arise in the face of U.S. power, namely, do we use our power justly, and might the unjust use of power not subject us to the possibility of future terrorist attacks?

Elshtain’s silence on the historical unjust use of American power, by act or omission, coupled with her refusal to take seriously some of the terrorists’ claims, causes her to downplay possible alternative accounts of the current situation. Elshtain takes for granted that “war” is an adequate term to describe the action that must be taken against terrorism, without considering whether the mechanisms of international law enforcement might produce better results. It is true that we apply the term “war” to many endeavors that are not military in character (the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs), but the context (as well as the rhetoric of the current presidential campaign), makes clear that the “War on Terror” is meant to be understood literally as a *war* on terror, with all of the military accoutrements this implies, including the application of Just War theory.

Additionally, she takes for granted the idea that “terrorism” is something against which one can wage a “war.” This is problematic on two fronts. First, “terrorism” is an idea, a tactic, rather than an enemy. It is an evil and immoral idea, but an idea nonetheless, against which a war in the military sense is not really possible or even meaningful. To abolish any popular support for terrorism requires a war of *ideas*, in which we make a case for a binding principle of civilian immunity. Unless we alter the very basis of thinking about political violence, terror will always be a tactic of asymmetrical warfare.

Far more importantly, we must fight against al Qaeda, and more specifically we must bring to bear the instruments of international law enforcement and investigation to the hunt for the organization, its leaders, and its

published by the Project for a New American Century (2000), entitled *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century*. Among the participants in the project was current administration Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. One of the main authors of this report was Donald Kagan, whom Elshtain takes as a credible source in her discussion of the need to “take the terrorists at their word” (Elshtain, 85).

sources of funding. The rhetoric of war obscures this very central requirement while allowing us to clothe our actions in the robes of military necessity.

The second problem with her argument is her presumption that to be a terrorist is to be *per se* beyond the capacity for reason. By and large, terrorism is a tactic in situations where direct military engagement is impossible.³ It does not follow from this that terrorists are *per se* not susceptible to negotiation or compromise. The historical record has shown that the IRA, the Basque Separatists, and even Hamas show evidence of adjusting targets, tactics, and goals through good faith negotiations and changing political conditions. A blanket condemnation of terrorists as irrational or unjustified may be too hasty.

Elshtain argues, no doubt rightly, that in any case *Osama bin Laden* is irrational, and no attempts to negotiate, compromise, or change policy are likely to deter *him* from seeking further violence against the West. She asserts repeatedly that to attempt to satisfy bin Laden would imply a complete withdrawal from international affairs. But although bin Laden may be unreasonable, she never considers the possibility that a more just U.S. foreign policy would affect his ability to recruit associates and financial backers. Changes in U.S. policy that would create a more participatory international situation, in which we were perceived to be acting as a fair arbiter in situations of conflict, would probably not affect bin Laden or his more dedicated followers, but it would severely undermine the popularity of his cause in the Islamic world.

Elshtain's objective in *Just War Against Terror* is not simply to make the case *for* the war on terror, but to offer a trenchant criticism *of* many of the responses made to September 11th by, in particular, academic and theological commentators. She speaks in very broad terms of how "the Academy" responded to the terrorist attacks. In light of this, one might assume that Elshtain offers a broad survey of academic responses to the attacks. One

³ Michael Walzer points out that the word "terrorism" itself is in dispute. It is, he notes, "most often used to describe revolutionary violence" (Walzer 1977: 197). Yet prior to World War II, what we understand to be terrorism – large scale action against civilian populations, was relatively rare. What went by the name of "terrorism" would be more accurately described today as "political assassination" (198). Although Elshtain and other commentators on the issue do not say so, the implication of their arguments tends toward the principle that terrorism is what civilians do, but is not a category to describe military action by states, terrifying or not.

would be mistaken. Elshtain instead offers four concrete examples of “academia’s” response to terrorism. She refers to the reactions of Joan Baez and Gore Vidal, neither of whom could be classified as “academics” in any meaningful sense, and the writings of Noam Chomsky and Mark L. Taylor, both of whom are certainly academics, but neither of whom plausibly represent the breadth of academic reaction to the bombings.⁴ Elshtain has similarly harsh words for the reaction of pastors and church leaders to the attacks, invoking Niebuhr and Tillich as a contrast. Here she is much more convincing, pointing out that the failure of many Christian leaders to respond in a morally appropriate way is largely due to the theological vacuousness of much contemporary Protestant ecclesial leadership. She correctly holds up Pope John Paul II’s response to the attacks as a theologically nuanced and appropriate reaction.

What ties all of the strands of Elshtain’s argument together is a sense that, without the strong leadership of the United States in the world today, civilization is at grave risk. There is a chauvinism to this attitude that distorts the complexities of the use of U.S. policies and power in the world, the causes and cures of terrorism, and the nature of discourse in the academic community. In fairness to Elshtain, her book is intended to be a polemic. Yet, even when Elshtain’s points are well-made, her failure to consider their nuances leads one to suspect that winning the debate is more important to her than arriving at the truth. Elshtain’s argument is forceful, but lacks the requisite humility that moral reflection on war requires. She places too much faith in authority, grants too little charity to the positions of her adversaries (terrorist and academic alike), and is too quick to assert the certainty of her position. An Augustinian sense of human sin and error might also consider the limitations of those authorities: quick to rush to war, hasty to make generali-

⁴ A far more convincing survey of academic reaction to September 11th would have been to read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on September 28, 2001, which contained a large and diverse set of reactions to the attacks, the vast majority of which could not be accused “ignoring or distorting the facts” about the attacks, nor accusing the U.S. of a “mad rush to war,” nor arguing that “America created Osama bin Ladin.” Furthermore, these articles could not be accused of using “worn-out categories and false analogies” as Elshtain would have it. A web search of the word “terrorism” on the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s website would have discovered a remarkable diversity of reaction recorded throughout academia in the last 3 years. Furthermore, it would be instructive if Elshtain could explain just when Noam Chomsky became the spokesperson for “academia” in the first place.

zations, and speedy to impugn the rationality of terror while promoting a foreign policy guided not by reason, but by partisan interests.

Christopher Hedges' *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* is in its own way equally provocative. But whereas Elshtain's polemical argument for the War on Terror suffers from playing fast and loose with its arguments, Hedges offers a subtle account of both what makes war attractive to us as human beings and why it is so horrible.

Hedges is not a theologian (although he does possess a Master of Divinity degree). He is a war correspondent for the *New York Times*. His book is written as a meditation on the way in which war, as the title states, provides meaning in a threatening world. He writes: "The enduring attraction of war is this: Even without its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent" (Hedges, 3). Hedges brings a strong theological sense to his analysis, recognizing both the moral corruption that accompanies war, and yet not flinching in the face of war's often inescapable necessity:

Even as I detest the pestilence that is war and fear its deadly addiction, even as I see it lead states and groups towards self-immolation, even as I concede that it is war that has left millions of dead and maimed across the planet, I, like most reporters in Sarajevo and Kosovo, desperately hoped for armed intervention (Hedges, 16).

In recognizing the moral ambiguity of war, Hedges nevertheless wants to understand its spiritual destructiveness. To go to war, it is necessary, argues Hedges, to be convinced of the "myth of war."

By the "myth of war," Hedges means the psychological process by which we create a narrative of our own implacable righteousness, in contrast to the stark evil of our enemy. The corollary to this is that the evil we face must be utterly vanquished in order to secure a lasting, perhaps eternal, peace.⁵ As the President says, "There is no neutral ground ... in the fight against evil." Like Elshtain, Hedges is concerned with the corruption of language surrounding war, yet unlike Elshtain, he sees that perversion taking place among

⁵ And indeed, this pattern can be seen repeated yet again in the literature of the War on Terror. Witness, for example, the recent volume published by Richard Pearle, of the Defense Policy Institute (an organization that advises the Pentagon), and former White House speechwriter David Frum. Their book, *An End to Evil* (2004) presents exactly the kind of Manichean morality of which Hedges writes.

all participants. Jingoistic rhetoric is intertwined with dangerous nationalistic fervor that infects nations at war, including our own: “Overweening pride and a sense of national solidarity swept through the city like an electric current. It was as if I had woken up, like one of Kafka’s characters, and found myself transformed into a huge bug. I would come to feel this way in every nation at war, including the United States after the attacks of September 11th” (Hedges 44).

For those at war, the experience is like a drug: “Once we begin to take war’s heady narcotic, it creates an addiction that slowly lowers us to the moral depravity of all addicts” (Hedges 25). Just as a drug displaces that which is truly valuable in life, and dissolves the connections between the addict and the real world, so does war dissolve and destroy collective memory and cultural values. Everything that is good and true, according to Hedges, is subordinated in war to the support of “The Cause”:

War finds its meaning in death. The cause is built on the backs of victims, portrayed always as innocent. Indeed, most conflicts are ignited with martyrs, whether real or created. The death of an innocent, one who is perceived as emblematic of the nation or the group under attack, becomes the initial rallying point for war. These dead bodies become the standard-bearers of the cause and all causes feed off the steady supply of corpses (Hedges 144)

The addictive power of war – its narcotic attraction – is indicative of the basic struggle between a love of life and a love of death. The one addicted to war, whether in Kosovo or Kansas, is addicted to death, Thanatos. “Happiness is elusive and protean. And it is sterile when devoid of meaning. But meaning, when it is set in the vast arena of war with its high stakes, its adrenaline-driven rushes, its bold sweeps and drama, is heartless and self-destructive” (Hedges 159).

For all of this, however, Hedges recognizes the persistent reality, and perhaps even the moral necessity, of war, for “the poison that is war does not free us from the ethics of responsibility. There are times when we must take this poison ... There are times when the force wielded by one immoral faction must be countered by a faction that, while never moral, is perhaps less immoral” (Hedges 16).

All of this is true, and so we cannot make an end of war. Hedges is correct that war can provide meaning in a world of triviality. With few other strong forces to give our lives significance, Thanatos has an inexorable attraction.

The only force which has the potential to free us from the power of death is, in the end, love:

when Thanatos is ascendant, the instinct must be to reach out to those we love, to see in them all the divinity, pity and pathos of the human. And to recognize love in the lives of others – even those with whom we are in conflict – love that is like our own. It does not mean we will avoid war or death. It does not mean that we as distinct individuals will survive. But love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives meaning that endures. It alone allows us to embrace and cherish life. (Hedges 184-5).

It is difficult to assess this conclusion. Hedges recognizes war as a conflict among peoples, while love is a matter between individuals. His appeal to love is not a solution to the problems inherent in war, *per se*, except insofar as they may aid us to keep our sanity in the midst of an insane situation. But if war is a poison that we must occasionally ingest for the sake of preventing great evil, can even love rescue us from madness? Love cannot save civilizations, except insofar as it is transformed into justice. Clearly, power without love or justice becomes a demonic worship of death, but Hedges' appeal to love, without an analysis of its relationship to power or to justice risks becoming merely sentimental. As Elshtain would quickly remind us, Reinhold Niebuhr's legacy is one of moral responsibility in opposition to such sentimentality.

Thus we have two volumes, each of which is concerned with the ambiguous terrain of war, justice, and morality. Both authors are keenly aware of the moral compromises political responsibility demands in a dangerous world. Both authors are also aware of the distortions that ideology and egoism can create in our capacity for moral judgment and self-understanding. Both appeal, in different ways, to the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr. In Elshtain's case, she sees the war on terror as a clear case of the just use of military force in the name of a righteous cause, and she makes a compelling argument on that score. Hedges is interested in a different question, namely: what does war do to us? What kind of human beings does it create? While Elshtain's argument is designed to make a strong appeal in favor of strong action, Hedges asks us to pause and comprehend just what it is that we do.

In its broad details, much of what Elshtain says in favor of the War on Terror is compelling, and if the only alternative to such a war is resignation, then it is true that the terrorists have already won. But like Hedges, I cannot

bring myself to the kind of confidence in our collective righteousness that seems to motivate Elshtain's case. Our past – and our present – is much too ambiguous for that.

In the end I am drawn back to that image of the Sheriff standing on a dusty street. Yet it is not the iconic image of Gary Cooper that I see, but merely a fallible human being. It may indeed be just for him to make his stand, or it may be simply necessary in order to hold back the tide of chaos for one more day. In either case, he acts on my behalf, for I am of the town he protects. Therefore I am responsible for his actions, and cannot take comfort or solace in the myth of war.

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