

Old Rivals, New Allies?

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A Foreign Policy for the Left
By Michael Walzer
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The election of Donald Trump has opened up an unprecedented chance to rethink the pieties of American foreign policy since World War II. It raises in particular the question of whether the mainstream position of the foreign policy establishment since 1941—a globally oriented strategy of promoting markets and “peace” through diplomacy and force—is working optimally. Amid endless war and growing economic inequality, there is reason to sow doubts. Alliances between aspects of the anti-imperialist left and noninterventionist right that are willing to entertain such doubts beckon. In relation to this moment, Michael Walzer is not a helpful guide.

Walzer is a storied intellectual on the American left. A professor at Harvard and Princeton before accepting a position at the Institute for Advanced Study, from which he is now retired, Walzer is renowned for his revival of just war theory after Vietnam. Later he developed a left-wing version of “communitarianism” in political theory. A gifted essayist, Walzer also coedited the progressive magazine *Dissent* for decades and stood up for a democratic vision of socialism in relation to Cold War apologetics for totalitarian regimes as well as to mainstream American

liberalism. Walzer’s support for Zionism has made him controversial in recent decades, as his attempt to keep a democratic and socialist vision for Israel alive has fared poorly.

In *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, Walzer has updated some of the accessible and sprightly essays he published in *Dissent* and elsewhere since 2001 to explain how American progressives should think about their state’s global activities. His central argument is negative: the American left should not stick to what Walzer calls its “default” position of recommending standoffish withdrawal from world affairs.

Like an annoyed teacher who has seen generations of students repeat the same mistakes, Walzer lectures the left on the defects of the confection of anti-imperialism, isolationism, and pacifism he thinks it offers too reflexively. To the contrary, Walzer’s main point is that sometimes American hegemony, “internationalism,” and military force serve progressive ends.

I grant that it is sometimes genuinely worrisome when Americans, on both the left and the right, find excuses for disclaiming responsibility and doing nothing in response to international aggression or humanitarian abuses. But this fact hardly minimizes the

even greater risk that Walzer courts—that of prettifying interventionism—as if it were the sole alternative to withdrawal. If inaction and isolation are sometimes sins, it is also true that America’s left and right have erred even more grossly through staunch interventionism and showy moralism.

Like many who defined their leftism around the cause of humanitarian intervention after the Cold War, Walzer is fixated on the quandary of when American military power should be deployed to prevent or halt mass atrocity. The experiences of the 1990s, from failures in the face of slaughter in Bosnia and Rwanda to “success” in Kosovo, crystallized a sense of obligation and even optimism about the beneficence of American force, if properly applied.

Unfortunately, the history of the current century points the other way: from Iraq (where many progressive hawks supported a catastrophic neoconservative adventure) to Trump’s recent Syrian intervention, the litany of armed American incursions has ranged from the feckless to the ruinous. Liberal internationalist Anne-Marie Slaughter, who (unlike Walzer) supported the Iraq tragedy, explains on the back cover of this book that “it is a vitally important corrective to so many of his comrades who have lost their bearings in and on global politics.” But lecturing the left (and right) for a skittish attitude toward ruling the world is hardly the most important task. And those who are guilty of worse mistakes may want to avoid casting stones for a while longer.

Walzer’s attempt to snatch the promise of American intervention from the jaws of recent horrors shows the need to repeat the litany. The left has long since learned how difficult it is to respond to those who laughed when it tried to save the pure idea of communism from its totalitarian applications. Walzer applies the same strategy to humanitarian intervention, as if it might work better in this case.

Remarkably, Walzer does not even mention the Libyan intervention in 2011, which—like the Iraq War—has left hopes for militarized humanism in shambles. Ever since Democrats and their allies abroad acted to topple Muammar al-Qaddafi under the cover of humanitarian protection, the possibility of insulating the so-called “responsibility to protect” civilians abroad from great power designs and horrendous long-term outcomes has become incredible. Much like a stock newsletter touting a new strategy to beat the odds after a market crash, the promise of a better scheme for picking winners among prospective interventions has become unbelievable, at least for now. For Walzer, however, the priority is to chide fellow leftists for failing to defend the option of humanitarian intervention in theory, not to understand today why almost nobody thinks it improves the world in practice.

Worse than his championship of humanitarian intervention is the way Walzer elevates the narrow and rare problem of when to send the military to help strangers into the decisive one around which the future of American foreign policy revolves. Walzer’s single-minded obsession with this problem entirely skews the larger picture of world affairs. Topics like arms sales are scanted and many features of American policy, like military basing around the world and outsourcing fighting to mercenaries, are nowhere to be found in the book.

Likewise absent is America’s startling drift toward new forms of “humane” war that are apparently more compliant with law and less spectacularly grisly even when they go wrong. Walzer mentions drones just twice in passing and without judging their significance. He also says nothing about the deployment of special forces to a majority of the countries of the world (150 last year alone). He refers to “endless war” as a tiresome leftist talking point when it has become very much a reality. Walzer also finds no room to

mention Edward Snowden, a pivotal figure for anyone who would understand America's war posture since 9/11. Surely our new forms of surveillance and warfare are as important as humanitarian intervention in coming to terms with American foreign policy.

In another chapter of the book, Walzer offers a tutorial on why the United States has not adopted an explicitly imperial approach. Instead, he describes America's overwhelming influence as "hegemony." More forthrightly than some other defenders of American hegemony, such as his fellow Princetonian John Ikenberry, Walzer admits that hegemony sometimes takes unethical forms. But Walzer argues that the left's mission is to cure it of its maladies. He suggests, for example, that the use of force abroad and weapons sales ought to be more open to "democratic review." The idea is that, with more pressure from the left, America can exercise its power for the sake of better outcomes.

The question is whether, all things considered, American hegemony is worthy of redemption. Instead of exploring more comprehensive alternatives to the sordid realities of our foreign policy, Walzer prioritizes the worry that his allies on the left will revert to their default position of isolation, as if there were something dishonorable about indicting the immense costs of entrenching cultures of military procurement and privatized war, indefinite entanglements with unholy allies, and now hoary traditions of horrific backlash.

Not only does Walzer exaggerate the significance of humanitarian intervention as the decisive problem in American war, but he also exaggerates the significance of war in deliberating over the future of America's foreign policy. It is rapidly becoming clear that the left was—and is—onto something in placing economics at the heart of its criticism of America's foreign policy. Once again, Walzer is out of position. Strikingly, even after witnessing decades of promotion of economic freedom abroad and at home,

Walzer thinks global economic affairs are not the left's (or right's) problem to solve.

It is especially a startling and even shocking turn for a man with Walzer's credentials, who is able to recite so well the historic links between internationalism and leftism. Yet Walzer—a socialist for decades, when few dared to describe themselves that way—attacks the first openly socialist presidential candidate in living memory, Bernie Sanders, on the first page of this study. True, Walzer admits, people of good will can oppose what is now commonly dubbed "neoliberalism," the standard leftist insult today for using government power to open and protect markets around the world. Walzer sagely adds, however, that the obstacles before anyone who would replace it are too high to be worth trying. Critics of neoliberalism should pursue domestic justice, he insists. He does not explain how this deflationary argument fits with his overall criticism of leftists for focusing on domestic matters to the exclusion of foreign policy. It is Walzer, it turns out, who has no foreign policy in the face of an economic system that has caused galloping inequality in most nations even as it has promoted a reduction in extreme poverty.

It is a missed opportunity, therefore, when Walzer declares that the left has no global role other than pursuing humanitarian succor for disaster and penury. Walzer's hesitation with respect to a cosmopolitan program is, of course, wholly understandable. The truth is, nobody has yet put a plausible vision on the table. In this book, nonetheless, Walzer elevates this failure into a rationale for prioritizing local and national action, treating the task of outlining "a foreign policy for the left" to be about devising arguments for what *American* leftists should think about *American* foreign policy. For many who think there is no response to "neoliberalism" that is not itself global, this framing is a non sequitur. Neoliberals themselves have not scrupled to work at the global level.

If American hegemony is the problem rather than the solution, if war without end is a scar on the planet, and if market freedom becomes a kind of victorious cosmopolitanism, it is also worth asking whether those on the right who are correcting their own traditions could be critical allies in reversing these mistakes. Neoconservatism has shown it has (at least) nine lives, but others on the right are revisiting their war party's historic interventionism. Alongside a more skeptical attitude toward war, a foreign policy for a fair globe could open new lines of communication with the American right, which is reexamining its traditional devotion to "free markets" as a panacea for all ills. There are risks to exploring new partnerships, but they are nothing compared to the damage done so far by the alliance between neoconservative warmongers on the right and "liberal internationalism" on the left that has dominated the past few decades.

The title of Walzer's book promises a program for making the world a better place, but the text is primarily a series of complaints

against others who harbor more doubts than he does about the beneficence of the mainstream foreign policy establishment's "default position." It is unfortunate that this longtime guide and inspiration for young leftists has forsaken the opportunity to shift his positions at the very moment when a new generation is thinking beyond stale pieties of military intervention and free trade. The unintended lesson of *A Foreign Policy for the Left*, as a result, is that new starting points beckon for the left, including the prospect of new alliances with aspects of the right, that do not presuppose the Cold War and post-Cold War trajectory that has defined Walzer's thinking. Not the frightening specter of Stalinism and unaccountable failure to support humanitarian intervention but the left's long marginal critique of endless war and the toll of economic freedom deserve to be the touchstones of another foreign policy.

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