



why I'm not for  
**PEACE**  
by  
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**D**URING THE WAR IN BOSNIA, IN AN attempt to express my impatience—if that’s the word—with fellow leftists who opposed American intervention in the Balkans, I wisecracked, “Some people would oppose intervention if New York were invaded.” Little did I know: this is an age when *absurdum* outstrips all efforts at *reductio*. Yes, my title is a provocation. I’m not really against peace; what I’m against is Peace as a mantra—Anti-Imperialism being another—that wards off thought. What I’m against is the illusion that by opposing military action anywhere at any time Americans can somehow avoid the moral ambiguities inherent in being citizens of the most powerful nation-state in a world largely shaped by the reality or threat of force.

Those ambiguities weighed heavily from the first moment of impact on September 11. The shock of the attack itself was compounded by the aftershock of realization that all the decisions about how to respond to it would be made by the most reactionary presidential administration in my lifetime, with any



fallout from the stolen 2000 election now to be swept away by the deference and goodwill commonly accorded a wartime commander in chief. The immediate worry, given Bush's cowboy rhetoric and the sentiments of Defense Department hawks (along with their cheering section in the press), was that we would reflexively launch an indiscriminate bombing campaign in Afghanistan, make preemptive war on Iraq, or declare most of the Middle East our enemy. I

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believed the situation called for military force. Not to retaliate for a massacre of Americans, clearly aimed at the United States as such, would be to abdicate our government's most basic function, providing for the com-

mon defense. But a measured, carefully targeted retaliation was one thing; the larger "war on terrorism" was a far more complex problem, not conducive to solution through sheer firepower.

So I was relieved when Bush stopped hyperventilating and settled, for the moment at least, on a limited war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The administration said the right things about minimizing civilian casualties, distinguishing between the Afghan people and their oppressive regime, and preventing mass starvation (granted that our token airlift of food was hardly a serious response to that threat). It even appeared to backtrack on its aversion to "nation-building," suggesting that it had learned from past mistakes and would devote money and energy to reconstructing a post-Taliban Afghanistan.

I supported, and still support, the basic outlines of this policy: as the saying goes, even a blind hen sometimes finds a pea. It's impossible not to be happy that a regime of totalitarian lunatics is gone; not to

be moved by the photographs of women showing their faces on the Kabul streets—or, for that matter, not to get ironic satisfaction from our president's belated conversion on women's liberation. Cynical, to be sure: but that certain words are pronounced on the international stage is more important, in the long run, than the motives of the speaker.

The objections I have had from the beginning—and still have—are not to the fact of our war in Afghanistan but to the way we've conducted it. I object in general to our modus operandi of avoiding American casualties by depending on air power and using local troops as our proxies. If we have a legitimate stake in a war we should take responsibility for it by putting our own troops on the ground. Bombs, however "smart," inevitably hit civilians and should be kept to the absolute minimum necessary to destroy an opponent's military capacity—yet even after the Taliban's collapse, and under conditions of maximum confusion between soldiers and civilians, we kept on bombing. As for the decision to let the Northern Alliance fight our war, the predictable result is that the warlords are back in control, the provisional government has no means of enforcing its authority, and rampant banditry is once again the rule. In interview after interview with ordinary Afghans, they plead for an international presence to establish law and order. Yet for all its lip service to reconstruction, the United States refuses to send troops or allow other countries to send them in anything like the numbers needed.

My frustration, in other words, is not that we took action in Afghanistan but that we have not done *enough*. We should have fought the ground war and occupied Kabul; organized an international force to disarm the warlords, protect ordinary citizens, and oversee the distribution of aid; demanded that secularists be included in the negotiations for a new government and that basic women's rights be built into a new structure of law. If this is "imperial-



ism”—in the promiscuous contemporary usage of that term—I am for it: I believe it is the prerequisite of a stable peace.

All this is by way of illustrating the chasm the size of Ground Zero that stretches between me and the antiwar movement that sprang up post-9/11. What caught my attention first was crowds of young people looking and sounding like preserved specimens of the sixties antiwar counterculture, with the same songs and peace-and-love slogans. Everything about this bothered me: that 20-year-olds were using their elders' language and style instead of inventing their own; that those blinky-eyed, reductive slogans had induced me and many other card-carrying members of the antiwar counterculture to roll our eyes even in 1967; and worst, that the demonstrators were invoking the moral authority of the Vietnam protests in an obscenely inapposite way.

The other main antiwar contingent came from my own generation of leftists and erstwhile Vietnam protesters, heavily concentrated in academia. Most were not pacifists, but rather took it as axiomatic that no assertion of military power by the United States could possibly be justified or have a good result. A war undertaken by the U.S. was by definition imperialist aggression; self-defense and the barbarism of the Taliban were merely excuses. After all, hadn't we engineered the fundamentalists' rise to power in the first place? Who were we, anyway, to be self-righteous about terrorism after the terrible things we had done or condoned in Iraq/Chile/East Timor/fill in the blank? Many in this camp were convinced beyond a doubt that we would carpet-bomb the civilian population, leveling what was left of Afghanistan; that in fact we refrained from doing this did little to stem the flow of impassioned rhetoric about mass violence and atrocity.

Watching these developments I flashed back to the Gulf War, a far more dubious proposition that nonetheless had me feeling a similar alienation from

the peace movement. Then, too, the moral and conceptual assumptions of the Vietnam opposition were dusted off as if international relations had frozen in 1975. Demonstrations were notable for the simpleminded slogan “No blood for oil,” as well as for a strain of vulgar pacifism amounting to little more than the conviction that war is a yucky nasty thing we shouldn't have to deal with. (I was particularly chilled by a news photograph of some young protesters holding up a sign that read “Nothing is worth dying for.” What would Gandhi have thought?) That Saddam Hussein was a megalomaniac tyrant; that he clearly meant to establish himself as a regional superpower, with highly dangerous consequences; that his move on Kuwait was, among other things, a test to see if anyone cared to stop him—none of this was deemed relevant to the debate. Nor, a year later, did Slobodan Milosevic's “ethnic cleansing” campaign in Bosnia prompt any serious soul-searching on the antiwar left about whether intervention to prevent genocide might be warranted. Nor did its reprise in Kosovo. Whatever the circumstance, the dogma remained constant: violence is bad; any military action by the United States is imperialist.

And so the arguments went after 9/11. Making war on the Taliban was revenge, not justice, and would only perpetuate the “cycle of violence.” We could not win, because the Afghan people did not want foreign intruders and would reject us as they had the Soviet Union. Our cause would be seen by millions of Middle Easterners and South Asians as a war of the West against Islam and would incite a massive backlash in support of Osama bin Laden's *jihad*. It would destabilize the fragile government of Pakistan, with its nuclear weapons. Instead, we should address the root causes of anti-American terrorism, which lie in our misguided foreign policy. Meanwhile we should regard the attack not as war but as a crime, and seek to try the criminals before an international court.



These arguments raise political, moral, and practical questions that deserve to be addressed. Yet in the end it seems to me that they are debating points marshaled to support an a priori conviction, that to the extent they can be refuted—or have been refuted by events (the Taliban fell, to no apparent regret on the part of the Afghans; no massive Islamic backlash has occurred)—other points will hastily fill the gap. For at the heart of the matter is an unspoken meta-argument: that America is a sinful country, and must achieve redemption through nonviolence. Violence committed against us is the wages of sin. To strike back in kind is to continue to collect the geopolitical equivalent of bad karma, inevitably provoking more “blowback.” Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind.

The crudest expression of this attitude—the claim that terrorism is retaliation for specific U.S. policies—does not pass cursory inspection. It trivializes the Islamic fundamentalist movement, which

has quite bluntly declared its dedication to destroying unbelievers and their morally corrupt societies, to imagine it would be mollified by the withdrawal of Ameri-

can troops from the Persian Gulf or the lifting of sanctions against Iraq. Even sillier is the idea that our route to safety is getting tough and imposing an Israeli-Palestinian settlement (the one cause in which throwing our weight around is okay, it seems). While such a settlement is devoutly to be wished, far from deterring fundamentalist terrorism it would probably cause a Palestinian civil war. The radical Islamists do not want a settlement; they want Israel to go away.

Yet the broader claim that we are responsible for our vulnerability has resonance because it’s at least partly true. After all, it’s incontestable that America’s tunnel-vision cold war policy of building up radical Islamists to fight the Soviet Union has blown back on us. Overall, our government’s commitment to the notion that the business of America is global business, its championing of neoliberal policies that exacerbate economic inequality, its alliances with “stable” autocratic regimes and allergy to any democratizing movement with a leftist tinge have done their part to foment the economic and political resentments that fundamentalist demagogues exploit.

Suppose, then, that this were the whole story: America’s malfesancies unleashed a monster. Why would it follow that we should not fight back? On the contrary, wouldn’t we have even more responsibility to confront the golem we created? In the years before World War II the Western powers were clearly complicitous in Hitler’s rise; they hoped he would attack the Soviet Union and solve their Communism problem. Furthermore, the Nazis exploited the economic misery and political humiliation of the German people, which stemmed from the crisis of capitalism and its most horrendous symptom, World War I: in these developments Britain, France, and the U.S. were thoroughly implicated. Hitler, in short, was blowback too. And at the time, many on the left insisted—especially before Hitler attacked Russia—that this was just another war among rival imperialists. Were they right?

Of course, it’s simplistic to see Nazism as purely a product of capitalism and imperialism, and equally so to see Osama bin Laden as a product of the World Bank. Nazism was a revolt against modernity (notwithstanding its use of modern technology and media as mainstays of its power) and specifically against the liberal values of the Enlightenment. As a mass movement, it was an outbreak of collective irra-

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tionalism, impelled by the anxieties of a people caught up in the clash between the rigid patriarchalism of traditional German culture and the competing forces of globalization, liberalism, and democracy. It was in the context of such liberalizing forces that a populist movement like fascism could emerge. It was in the context of deeply rooted patriarchalism that the people's rebelliousness failed to take the form of a democratic movement aimed at improving their economic and political situation, but instead expressed itself in submission to an absolute authority that provided an outlet for their rage: the capitalist/ communist/rootless cosmopolitan Jew.

Much the same can be said of the religious totalitarianism Al Qaeda represents. It is the latest flashpoint in the ongoing, worldwide culture war that began in the eighteenth century: intertwined with the spread of capitalism, though by no means synonymous with it, the ideas of freedom, equality, separation of church and state—and their more recent application to our sexual and domestic lives—have penetrated everywhere, eroding traditional patriarchal institutions and rigid social controls. And in the Islamic world as in Weimar Germany this erosion has had a paradoxical result, at once inciting a fundamentalist backlash and creating the conditions for mobilizing its supporters. There could hardly be a more vivid metaphor for this paradox than the success of the Al Qaeda hijackers in blending into American society and using our airplanes against us.

The United States is the world's most powerful exporter of liberal and secular values, just as it is the preeminent tribune of corporate globalization; yet neither global class conflict nor the culture war can be reduced to a question of American national power. The division between transnational corporations and their increasingly immiserated victims exists within America itself, as does the clash between

secular modernity and patriarchal fundamentalism. Transnational capital may use the United States as its headquarters and dictate its economic policies, but it has no loyalty to any nation or national interest. Nor is the democratic secular impulse the property of America, or of the West. These global forces are fundamentally beyond American control.

Indeed, I would argue that the U.S. government has contributed to its present predicament not only by exercising but also by abdicating its power. Our bracketing of theocratic despotism and the persecution of women as non-issues in our international relations—a cultural-political blind spot as well as a matter of corporate realpolitik—has substantially strengthened the hand of radical fundamentalists no longer willing to confine their atrocities to their own population. (Consider our complaisance toward Saudi Arabia, or our tepid response to the death sentence pronounced on Salman Rushdie.) Which is to say that the old imperialism model does not hold, either economically or culturally—and that the left badly needs a new and more nuanced analysis of the role of the nation-state in world affairs.

But this assumes a left that's genuinely interested in politics—that is, in how to influence national and international policy to promote more freedom, equality, and democracy in the world. In fact, the animating impulses of the left's peace wing have far less to do with politics in this sense than with a quasi-religious moralism that conceives of the United States as a soul that needs saving: it is power-hungry, violent, greedy; it's a sinkhole of lies and hypocrisy, professing democracy while supporting dictators and selectively condemning terrorism; and so on. I could argue that this indictment is one-sided, that if you're appraising America's soul you also have to consider its passion for freedom and irreverence toward authority, its ability to inspire great social movements, its inventiveness, its appetite for pleasure and fantasy. I could claim that if you stack up

our virtues and faults against those of other nations around the world, we actually come off relatively well. I could point out that on 9/11 it was our virtues more than our faults that were under attack.

But really, it's the underlying premise of the argument that's wrong. The implication is there's such a thing as a morally pure state: one that abjures power, wealth, and violence and is sincere, truthful, and consistent. In fact, a morally pure state is an oxymoron. The state, including its liberal democratic version, is an inherently problematic institution, whose basic reason for being is to exercise power and protect its sovereignty, its physical integrity, and its wealth, by force if necessary.

It's certainly the province of a democratic left to critique that institution, to try to force it to be more accountable to its citizens and to international bodies and agreements—or, for that matter, to envision other forms of social organization more in keeping with the needs of free and equal people. And given that we are, willy-nilly, members of a nation-state that constantly acts in the world in our name, we must of course try to influence what it does. But our focus should be assessing the impact of U.S. policy, not taking its spiritual temperature and parsing its inevitably tangled motives. Ask not that your country be sincere; ask that its actions further democracy and promote the welfare of the people they affect.

From this perspective, 9/11 should indeed impel leftists to take a hard look at all aspects of America's relationship to the world; but that means asking if there is anything new to learn, not simply assimilating the event to preexisting dogma. On the most elementary level, what's new is an experience no living American has had before: American cities were attacked by a foreign force; and not just any cities, but our seat of government and our economic and cultural capital. Several thousand civilians died. What is to be done in such a case? Do we have the

right to defend ourselves; or rather, does the impure American nation-state have the right and the responsibility to defend us?

Pressed on this question, war opponents have uncharacteristically tended to change the subject from rights and morality to practical consequences. Military action, they have argued, will not make us safe; on the contrary it will make matters worse, inviting further attacks, exacerbating anti-American hatred, provoking the Islamic "street," and playing into Osama bin Laden's desire for an apocalyptic East-West showdown. These worries are hardly baseless, even if at the moment their most lurid possibilities seem remote. War by definition is dangerous; neither safety nor victory is guaranteed. What this line of argument leaves out, though, is that there are also consequences for doing nothing in fear of inflaming one's enemies. There is ample historical evidence that appeasement never placates aggressors; quite the contrary. Bullies respect power and have contempt for weakness. The surest way to invite further attacks would have been to signal that they could be committed with impunity. Indeed, it could be argued that 9/11 might never have taken place were it not for our inaction in the face of a long line of provocations from the 1979 hostage-taking in Iran to bin Laden's embassy bombings in 1998.

What of the international tribunal option? As an argument for an alternative to violence, this proposal is frivolous, since a military campaign would be needed to capture the would-be defendants in the first place. The real point is to allow the peace movement to condemn the massacre as a crime against humanity while refusing to condemn it, or even recognize it, as an attack meant to damage and demoralize the American polity: that is, a political crime; an act of war. Of course, there is no chance whatsoever of convening an international court that would be able to try this case as a purely "human" matter, appealing to a transcendent conception of justice

untouched by the muck of international politics; but never mind. The peace left's ultimate answer to my question about self-defense is this: as abstract human beings we are entitled to seek theoretical justice; as (tainted) Americans we must turn the other cheek.

The politics of moralism and self-abnegation are an old story on the left. Among white middle-class radicals in the sixties there was always tension between those who believed that the purpose of a political movement was to transform society for everyone's benefit, including their own, and those who saw themselves as engaged in a moral mission on behalf of justice for the truly oppressed—poor people, black people, the Vietnamese, the Third World. The latter attitude eventually dominated the antiwar movement, and the results were not good. Denying the legitimacy of their own needs and de-

sires, movement moralists ended by estranging themselves from their own identities, seeing nothing in their Americanness but unearned, corrupt privilege, and so radically isolating themselves from Americans in general. Some, brandishing their isolation as proof of their superior virtue, went so far as to set off bombs; a far greater number, not given to violence, merely stewed in alienated, depressed confusion. Either way, the movement as a force for change was destroyed.

These are different times, but if anything 9/11 underscores the point: if we aspire to change our society, we must be for ourselves as well as others. That doesn't mean embracing a facile, uncritical patriotism. It does mean resisting the equally facile temptation to declare peace and go home. ■

## Notes for Contributors

Passionate, critical, and unorthodox, **Radical Society** is a journal that challenges the notion of what it means to be on the left and helps define an alternative vision.

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