

# *R*EVIEW:

*COMPARING TERROR AND LIBERALISM TO  
FAITH AND REASON  
BY PAUL BERMAN &  
GEORGE WEIGEL*

PATRICK FROST

“We are the anti-nihilists – we had better be, anyway. In the anti-nihilist system, freedom for others means safety for ourselves. Let us be for the freedom of others.”

Paul Berman,

Terror and Liberalism

The terrorist threat to the United States, which became all too visible on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the Bush administration’s policies to combat it have brought about an important debate concerning our nation’s foreign policy. This debate has largely centered on whether the US should have a foreign policy that actively and candidly advocates liberal democracy or one that is more realistic and seeks to protect just our immediate vital interests. How the US views the nature and motivations of itself and of its present enemy will play a vital role in deciding which of these two sides should prevail in our nation’s future foreign policy discussions.

Paul Berman and George Weigel have both written important pieces regarding the current state of the US and Western civilization and its newfound position relative to what the author calls Islamic fascism.<sup>1</sup> In their books, Weigel’s Faith, Reason, and the

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<sup>1</sup> This term has been criticized by some scholars, but these discussions are outside the scope of the current review.

War Against Jihadism and Berman’s Terror and Liberalism, they emphasize the existential threat brought to the world by secular fascists, such as Saddam Hussein, and Islamic totalitarians, such as al-Qaeda and other radical groups, who dream of the collapse of Western civilization’s liberal and secular order followed by the creation of a world ruled by the one true faith, Islam. These authors believe that religion and ideology are incredibly strong factors in our world and play a commanding role in US relations with other states and peoples.

Berman and Weigel share this view of the nature of our enemy and adamantly support the West’s liberal system, but they come to these conclusions from very different angles. George Weigel is a Catholic social and political commentator, who has written much about American Christianity and how it should affect our outlook of the world. In Faith, he urges that in order for us to successfully fight this present enemy, who he argues sees ‘no innocents’ in our Western world, we must see history and the present situation not just through economic or political lenses, but must emphasize culture, morality, and ideology. Weigel asserts that we Americans must be aware of the dynamic religious forces in the world, our own and ‘theirs’, if we are to win this fight. He warns against the secular foreign policy establishment, which he argues has eroded our ability to fight the War on Terror. We must ‘deserve victory’ in his eyes by deeming ourselves and our culture worthy. To Weigel, the biblical tradition has led the US down a prosperous and secure path and we would be foolish not to utilize such a vital asset in this fight.

Weigel is a supporter of President Bush’s foreign policy in the War on Terror and its actions in the Middle East. He argues for the ‘rethinking of realism’ and warns that

unless drastic, aggressive measures are taken, it will lead to the mistakes of pacifist Europe in the 1930s. He declares Bush's Afghanistan and Iraq policies as being very realistic, because the current corrupt and unstable system and governments of the Middle East were unacceptable. Weigel warns against mistaking 'brittleness for order' and missing the revolutionary nature of our enemies in the region.

Weigel's Faith offers a convincing, though compared to Berman, shallow analysis of the US/West's ideological enemies and a solid defense of the Bush Administration's policies in the Middle East, but he fails to acknowledge the complexities and fateful consequences of such a foreign policy. His rethought realism has caused great grief in the Arab world, strained US relations with its allies, caused a domestic divide inside the US, and led to great instability in a region that is obviously vital to the US's national interests. However, his attention to the power and influence of ideology and religion on both the US and its Islamic and fascist enemies is vital to our understanding of this present day conflict.

Paul Berman in Terror and Liberalism looks at the War on Terror, and what he calls 'Islamic fascism' from a different perspective, but comes to similar conclusions. A left wing journalist, Berman is a strong advocate of international liberalism, believing in the universal freedoms of speech, religion, and an open society. Although he is no fan of the Bush Administration, he is at times a supporter of using force to bring such ideals and governance to societies entrenched with leaders opposed to these values, and has supported recent U.S. military actions in both Taliban-governed Afghanistan and an Iraq led by Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party.

Berman's Terror and Liberalism takes a deeper look than Weigel's Faith into the

nature of modern Arab fascist dictators and the rise of Islamic totalitarian thought and followers. The book examines how they have grown to challenge the existence and dominance of Western liberal civilization. Berman traces the history of liberalism in Europe and how totalitarian movements, specifically the Nazis, Italian fascists, and Soviet Communists, rose up to challenge the liberal system of society and government. He argues that although these totalitarian movements may have been defeated, by force mind you and not by appeasers and apologists, liberalism is still being combated today by similar movements. Fascism is not dead and liberalism is not safe. Berman provocatively draws a line of connection between the fascists of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and the Soviet Empire to Saddam's Baath Party, Al Qaeda and other Islamist radicals. To him, they all share a utopian view of their own civilization, this time based on religion, not race or class, a hatred of liberal beliefs, the use of a police state to control the domestic population, organized hatred, apocalyptic fantasies, and conspiracy theories. All these elements are what Berman calls the 'culture of totalitarianism' and a 'culture of death.'

The most fascinating element of Terror and Liberalism is Berman's analysis of the writings and beliefs of Sayyid Qutb, an influential Egyptian writer who wrote about Islam and its relation with the secular, liberal West. According to Qutb the world is divided into a dichotomous system, pitting the secular West against the forces of Islam. Qutb's view of the world, expressed in his major writings Milestones and In the Shade of the Qu'ran, has had a dramatic impact on many Muslims, including the leaders of Al Qaeda.

Qutb argues for the totality of Islam and that God is Everything, but to his great despair, this *truth* has been openly challenged by a dominant Western society and system,

whose guiding philosophy was secular and liberal. The Islamic community was experiencing a horrifying 'schizophrenia'; it had the *truth* and the path to eternal salvation, but this was corrupted by an alien force that made the devastating mistake of separating God from political life. It was in this dramatic setting that Qutb advocated for a vanguard of true Muslims who would work to defeat this wrongheaded system and create a world true to Islam. To achieve this, the vanguard could utilize a Jihad that went beyond just a defense of Muslim lands; in fact, this Jihad would have 'no limits.' To die in this fight for Islamic truth would be the ultimate sacrifice and lead to eternal salvation. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's group Al Qaeda took on the role of Qutb's vanguard, combating the US and West in the name of their version of Islam.

To Berman, Qutb's Islamic movement and talk of death was nothing exotic or new. It was just a continuation of fascist retaliation against the modern liberal system, like that seen in Europe during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Berman argues that before September 11<sup>th</sup>, the West made the same mistake with Al-Qaeda, and other Islamic groups Berman would regard as fascist, as they did with Hitler in the 1930s, in assuming the enemy to be guided by rational thought as opposed to dogma. They assumed Hitler was rational, he had to be, right? Under this mistaken and ignorant philosophy, Islamists use of suicide bombing must be a rational retaliation to a specific insult; here that would be, 'they were brought to it by Israel.' Just like Britain and France underestimated the irrationality guiding Hitler's actions, so too did the US misinterpret the roots of Al Qaeda's earlier actions and statements. To Berman, this was a failure to accept that 'mass political movements do get drunk on the idea of slaughter.' The US held a firm belief that people will 'behave in more or less, reasonable

ways in pursuit of identifiable interests.' After all, Berman points out, 'the Pentagon had no plan to defend the Pentagon!' As religious scholar, Mark Lilla argues in his recent book The Stillborn God, the West's "intellectual complacency, nursed by implicit faith in the inevitability of secularization [and rationalism], has blinded us to the persistence of political theology and its manifest power to shape human life at any moment." In other words Qutb is right; God does matter.

Berman does not believe in a 'clash of civilizations,' but in a clash of ideology, liberalism versus phantasmagorical totalitarian movements that have risen against it. In a similar vein to Weigel's argument for the necessity of force when dealing with a fascist movement, Berman supported the US war in Afghanistan, and though less vehemently, the one in Iraq. Although he finds much to fault in George W. Bush's policies and execution, he believes that the man has rightly fought these wars for two main reasons; to defeat the totalitarian movements of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Ba'athist Party, and to promote a liberal, democratic order.

Berman laments Bush's failure to get this message more clearly out to the world and even to the US population, and feels that his talk of preemption and WMDs led away from these points. Nevertheless, he recognizes that Bush has done much more than cynical, realist conservatives or isolationist, pacifist liberals in supporting women's rights, human rights, and liberal ideals of freedom in a region which sorely lacked traces of them. Berman discusses pictures he saw during the early months of the Afghan campaign of Afghan women removing their 'oppressive' burqas and making their way to school, and pleads; "Let us not forget these scenes!"

Weigel, and especially Berman, make convincing and provocative arguments in favor of an active US/West democracy promotion

policy in world affairs, but the struggles of the US/West in Afghanistan and Iraq show the dangerous and low success rate of such liberal-minded endeavors. Just like there are great arguments in favor of spreading democracy and deposing dictators, there are equally convincing treatises advocating a more realistic policy, Walt and Mearsheimer's argument against the Iraq invasion in 'An Unnecessary War' comes to mind, that keeps the US out of harms way and other nations more stable and sovereign. After all, although Berman and Weigel mainly speak of fascists and radicals in the Islamic world, there are dictators in every region (of course none of them have aided or participated in any plots that attacked the US homeland) and the US cannot fight them all. It's also easy to say one supports democracy promotion and just argue that it was the Bush administration's incompetence and arrogance that led to the disastrous post-conflict situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but deposing a totalitarian government and replacing it with a liberal democracy in a country and region whose history is near vacant of such an enterprise is going to be a daunting task for any leadership.

Many times state and human actions and policies are completely rational, and thus it is important to view others in this way. However, Berman, Weigel, and Lilla do a great service by reminding us that religion and ideology also influence us and our governments. We must not be surprised when someone follows an ideology or religion to extreme levels, for humans have been acting in this manner throughout history. The attacks on the morning of 9/11/2001 surprised us, but they did not surprise the followers of Sayyid Qutb and other Islamic fascists, for death was already on their minds. The challenging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are reminders that spreading a liberal and democratic world order to a region that has neither is extremely

difficult, but as Berman illustrates, we must not forget those scenes of Afghan women and children heading to school for the first time. There are wrongs in this world, and there are definitely things worth fighting for.