

REVIEWS

Peter Beinhart, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*. HarperCollins, 2006. 304 pp. Hbk. \$25.95. ISBN 0-06084-161-3.

Peter Beinhart is editor at large of *The New Republic*, a contributor to *Time* magazine, and a regular commentator on television. This book is an ambitious effort to provide a sweeping summary of the inner dynamics of Liberal thought and politics from the mid-twentieth century to the present. In addition, it is a strongly argued case that only Liberalism (properly conceived) provides the intellectual tools necessary for the US to address its current challenges in the world.

The historical component of the book is a very helpful and relatively detailed account of the struggles internal to Liberalism in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The central question in dispute at the time was the proper attitude to take toward Communism. In the struggle of the time between Henry Wallace and an apparently politically weak Harry Truman, Beinhart chronicles Truman's embrace of the perspective of Americans for Democratic Action, which identified totalitarianism as the central foreign policy threat to the nation—and applied the label to the Soviet Union. This period resulted (after considerable internal struggle on the Left) in an emergent dominance of antitotalitarian Liberalism in American politics that lasted through the Cold War.

This was the ideology that made possible far-sighted internationalist programs such as the Marshall Plan and helped build a stable, democratic, and non-Communist West without insisting on absolute lock-step ideological purity defined in American terms. It required accepting a degree of moral ambiguity which was opposed by many on the Left whom Arthur Schlesinger called “dough-facism.” For example, in the decision to arm Greece and Turkey in the face of Soviet threat, many on the Left wished to insist on vetting the intervention through the United Nations—even though effective action would have been impossible if it had been attempted by that route. As Schlesinger wrote, describing the “doughface fantasy,” “one can denounce a decision without accepting the consequences of the alternative” (7).

When the dust settled, Truman enunciated a foreign policy that rested on three major planks: containment of the Soviet Union, reconstruction of war-torn nations, and the recognition of the interdependence of the international system and American restraint. For readers of *Political Theology*, it is significant to note that in many ways Beinhart's “hero” throughout is Reinhold Niebuhr, whom George Kennan called “the father of us all” (16). As Beinhart summarizes Niebuhr's

contribution to the new synthesis: “And the theologian’s overriding message was that for all of their accomplishments, Americans should not fall in love with their own virtue, and should not expect non-Americans to take that virtue on faith. The implication, which the [Truman] administration built into its policies, was that by limiting its power, the United States could make that power more accepted in the world” (16).

Beinhart then proceeds to document the many ways in which Liberalism “lost America” as it evolved through the 1960s and became associated with causes and stances more and more out of the mainstream of American thought. For example, “Civil rights, sold by Truman and Kennedy as a way to empower the country as a whole, became in the early 1970s merely a way to empower one group. That group, African Americans, voted for McGovern in 1972. But barely anyone else did” (55).

Beinhart develops the parallel stories of “Reagan’s children” (the Republican movement culminating in George W. Bush’s unilateralism in international affairs) and “Qutb’s children” (after Said Qutb, the Egyptian so scandalized by his visit to the United States that he began articulating the Salafist version of Islam that culminated in the September 11, 2001 attacks and the ongoing struggle with worldwide Islamic terrorism). It is in these parallel stories that Beinhart reaches the point he is most concerned to make: that Liberalism’s willingness to address economic as well as ideological causes of the conflict make them better prepared to address and deal with the root issues in this conflict. For conservatives today, he argues, to address economic root causes “is rationalizing. It shifts blame from the terrorists themselves, and thus threatens the quality conservatives cherish most: moral clarity” (121). Indeed, another theme Beinhart develops is the persistent fear from the conservative movement throughout the whole period he discusses that the US lacks the moral clarity and commitment of its adversary, and is therefore inadequate to the conflict. As he puts it, “Ultimately, debates about American foreign policy are debates about America. Conservatives understand that. While the right has gone through many phases over the last half-century, a core vision has endured. It starts with a fear that Americans don’t believe deeply enough in themselves... Against fanatically self-confident foes, this makes them potentially weak” (189).

But here, he argues, is liberalism’s distinctive contribution, since “this effort to preserve America’s moral clarity about the enemy prevents America from fully fighting that enemy. In truth, salafism’s political and economic root causes are intimately intertwined” (121).

If liberalism is to bring its perspective to bear on these questions, it must address a core failing to which it has succumbed in recent decades: “Liberals can churn out policy papers and nominate war heroes, but without their own narrative of American greatness, it will do them little good, either in gaining power or in wielding it” (189).

In the end, it is Niebuhrian restraint and self-criticism that lies at the core of Beinhart’s call. “Statesmen like George Kennan and George Marshall knew that if America restrained itself, weaker countries would welcome its preeminence, and that preeminence would endure. And intellectuals like Reinhold Niebuhr knew

that it was not just other countries that should fear the corruption of American power; we ourselves should fear it most of all” (190).

So what, in the end, is Beinhart’s recommendation? First, the “response to totalitarianism in a globalized world is freedom broadly defined—freedom as both greater liberty and greater opportunity” (193). Here, liberalism provides the resources to avoid conservative’s exclusive and ultimately naïve claims that political liberties or “democracy” alone will address the root problems of conflict.

But one area remains where liberalism will divide: the legitimacy of the use of military force. Beinhart writes, “the United States may need to enter stateless zones, capture or kill the jihadists taking refuge there, and stay long enough to begin rebuilding the state” (196). Here, the “doughfacism” of the liberal fights of the 1940s resurfaces in the tendency to fear or reject even necessary uses of military force in the quest for elusive (and, in the end, illusory) hopes of retaining moral purity. Beinhart writes, “The central question dividing liberals today is whether they believe liberal values are as imperiled by the new totalitarianism rising from the Islamic world as they are by the American right. If they are—if the war on terror is our fight too—then liberals must support military as well as economic and political efforts to fight it, even if those efforts are morally imperfect” (197).

Of course, to say that is hardly to agree with every decision to use military force. Liberals must be prepared to think clearly about how to “fight smart” rather than to “fight dumb” in the war on terror. To argue, for example, that the Iraq invasion was a blunder does not negate the reality that we would need to be using military force in the world (e.g., clearly in Afghanistan). But if liberals are not at least clear that it is a fight, and that morally ambiguous uses of military force are an essential component of that fight, liberalism will continue to sit on the sidelines of the real challenges facing the United States at this juncture.

Beinhart’s book is in the end a bracing challenge to liberalism to recover its roots from the beginning of the Cold War and to adapt them to the challenges of “the long war” against Islamic terrorism that clearly stretches before us. “Liberalism’s answer is the same one it gave at the Willard Hotel [where the Truman policy was worked out]: shared struggle bases upon shared power and shared risk” (207). After decades of “doughfacism” and confusion, he believes these roots and resources are there to be revived and used as a basis for a call to unity and moral purpose. It is, to paraphrase, “Saint Reinhold, pray for us now, and at the hour of our need.”

Is it a call that can be heeded? The reflexive anti-military stance of much of the Left hardly inspires confidence. Nevertheless, in this writer’s opinion, the urgency of the conflict, on the one hand, and the obvious failures of the conservative’s unilateralism and simplistic analysis of the conflict on the other, should cause us all to give serious consideration to the truth of the claim that liberalism, and only liberalism, can win the war on terror.

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