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[Book Review of] "Just War On Terror"

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No Abstract

This Is a Book Review from Kevin Schilbrack of *Just War on Terror* By Jean Bethke Elshtain.

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Just War on Terror. By Jean Bethke Elshtain

In this book, Jean Bethke Elshtain applies revised Augustinian criteria for just war to the US war on terror. This is therefore a book that pursues the difficult task of moving beyond the relatively clean world of theory to more complicated questions concerning decision making and consequences in the actual world. Elshtain's thesis is that the US war on terror, exemplified by the invasion of Afghanistan, is just. The 2004 edition adds an epilogue assessing the invasion of Iraq and argues that the Iraq invasion, like that of Afghanistan, meets the criteria for a just war.

The strongest part of the book is the idea that with power come ethical obligations. Elshtain is certainly right that the Taliban and Saddam Hussein governments were brutal, and critics of the war should recognize squarely that to defend the innocent from terrorism is a state's moral duty. Moreover, as Elshtain says, there is such a thing as a "false peace": a nation that is not at war may exist nevertheless in a situation of cruelty and injustice. There is thus an inevitable moral burden that follows from the fact that the United States is the world's only superpower.

The central weakness of the book, however, is that Elshtain portrays the only responses to 9/11 as (a) exactly what the Bush administration is doing and (b) a complete pacifism that denies that evil is real, permits genocide, and is racist in its implication that the Arab world does not deserve democracy. Not only does she argue that the war on terror is just, there are no *aspects* of the war on terror she criticizes, and she considers no alternatives. [For such alternatives, see Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).] Of course, Elshtain knows that there are critics of the war, like Noam Chomsky who argues that the war on terror does not meet the criteria of a just war and is, rather, a pretext for US imperialism; but Elshtain says, "I have not put Chomsky's outrageous and wholly irresponsible tirade in the body of this text because analyzing it is like shooting fish in a barrel—it just isn't very interesting" (226 n.17). Instead she chooses to shoot down unusual arguments such as the claim that Americans were bothered by the destruction of the twin towers because they were phallic symbols (153). Who made these arguments? Elshtain does not say, and she rarely gives them more than a sentence before she dismisses critics of the war on terror as purveying ridiculous nonsense. The book includes several such straw men. Similarly, throughout the book, conservative thinkers are introduced as "distinguished," thinkers on the left as "bizarre," "fact-shunning," and "partisan." Elshtain's is an unobvious polemic.

Elshtain describes herself as an Augustinian, and the heart of the book is her case that the war on terror meets the criteria of the Christian just war tradition. The five criteria of *jus ad bellum* are that a war is

justified when the cause is just, when one's intentions are right, when the war is authorized by the legitimate authority, when one has a reasonable chance of success, and when one turns to war only as the last resort. Was the cause of the war on terror just? The primary justification for the war in Iraq was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, but this turned out to be false. Another justification was that Saddam Hussein had ties to the 9/11 attacks or to Al Qaeda, but this also turned out to be false. One might fear that if the stated justifications for the war fail, then the justice of the war also collapses. But Elshtain points out that a war can be justified as defending a third party, namely the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. In both countries, repressive regimes were overthrown. Elshtain argues that in US-occupied Afghanistan, "girls are flocking back to school and women are openly teaching again," and hundreds of thousands of children have been vaccinated (42,60).

Some may judge that Elshtain's analysis of the justice of the war has slid into a utilitarian calculus (and a blinkered one in that she does not recognize any negative consequences of the war, not even the massive growth in terrorism it has generated). But to return to the criterion: if bringing vaccines and women's schools to Afghanistan was not actually the cause for which the war is fought, what does this say of the justice of the cause? If this was not the intent of the administration, the soldiers, or the US public, how can the intent be right? This seems like a hunt for a *post facto* rationalization.

Elshtain's treatment of the criterion of last resort is even weaker. Clearly she wants to say that the United States met this criterion, but her language is extremely vague: "America waited and considered carefully what a measured response would be" (7; cf. 225 n.2). There was no "mad rush to war," she insists; America did not begin "on September 12 ... wildly... striking back" (78). Against those who say that America did rush to war, Elshtain responds in high pique:

[T]o make a false claim about what happened is not a legitimate point of departure for debate. The argument of those who do not get the basic time line right, or who cannot account for facts verifiable by widely available evidence, is going to collapse under the weight of its initial distortions (78).

What is the relevant time line? What diplomatic events need to be placed on it? Elshtain does not say.

Of course, the war in Afghanistan began less than one month after the 9/11 attacks. Many have complained that the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq (like the Patriot Act) were devised before 9/11 and had little to do with stopping terrorism. Again, Elshtain does not discuss this. The Taliban proposed to extradite Osama bin Laden to Pakistan to be tried. Whether that offer was sincere or not, she does not mention it. Were there means other than war that were explored by the United States, so that she can conclude that the war was not the last resort, but in fact the first and only alternative considered? She does not mention any. In fact, when one turns to what she actually says about the criterion of last resort, it turns out that she argues against its relevance. The criterion of last resort, she says, need not be met in the war on terror because Bin Laden and Al Qaeda "present no accountable organized entity to engage—no sovereign state" (61). Of course, Afghanistan and Iraq were sovereign states; could anything short of war have been used? Elshtain says that "[t]he criterion of last resort does *not* compel a government to try everything else in actual fact" (61). It is hard to see this as an honest application of the criterion to the circumstances. In fact, it is hard to imagine Elshtain arguing differently if she rejected this criterion of just war altogether.

How is this view an example of religious ethics? In an earlier essay, Elshtain had written that

The Christian saviour was a "prince of peace" and the New Testament Jesus deconstructs the powerful metaphor of the warrior central to Old Testament narrative. He enjoins Peter to sheath his sword; he devirilizes the image of manhood; he tells his followers to go as sheep among wolves and to offer their lives, if need be, but never to take the life of another in violence. From the beginning, Christian narrative presents a pacific ontology, finding in the "paths of peace" the most natural as well as the most desirable way of being ["Reflections on War and Political Discourse: Realism, Just War, and Feminism in a Nuclear Age," *Political Theory* 13:1 (February 1985), 39-57].

But now she says that pacifism falls outside of the Christian mainstream (51). Against those who argue that this war cannot be reconciled with the teachings of the prince of peace, Elshtain responds, "Most of us do not feel authorized to drag Jesus to our own side in a political dispute with such dogmatic certainty" (229 n.4). She nevertheless tries to use Jesus to support her position by referring to what she calls "the wrath of Jesus" (84; cf. 100), and she repeatedly quotes Jesus' statement that one should render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's (29, 30, 99, 159). For the most part, though, the Bible is absent.

Elshtain does quote theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr who defend the idea of a just war, but she does not wrestle with (or even mention) those places where they would qualify her view. Elshtain's use of Pope John Paul II is similarly tendentious. She frequently cites the Pope—"that true voice of moral protest ... an unarmed prophet and impassioned defender of human rights" (73)—as one with whom she is agreeing. But she never mentions that he repeatedly and clearly opposed the invasion of Iraq. Given that the Vatican specifically argued that the war in Iraq did not meet the criteria for a just war, Elshtain's references to the pope seem to be deliberately misleading.

Overall, there is very little religion in the book, and the little there is corresponds to what Jim Wallis calls "a theology of empire" (*God's Politics*, chap. 9). From this perspective, "we" are moral and concerned for the innocent; "they" are simply irrational and hateful. It is disappointing: Augustinians usually focus attention on the sinfulness and self-deception in all people, but Elshtain never identifies these aspects in the US policies. In fact, the greatest irony of the book is how it portrays itself as Augustinian while it struggles to identify the Christian path with the spread of an earthly city—as a form of good imperialism (166).

In the end, it is a sign of the one-sidedness of the book that Elshtain blasts her opponents as leftists blinded by ideology and does not admit (or see?) that her support for neoconservative policy puts her at odds with many on the right. Two brief examples: First, although no WMD were found in Iraq, Elshtain declares that those who say "that intelligence was hyped . . . just do not know what they are talking about" (187). But the complaints that the White House "cherry-picked" intelligence came first not from the leftists but from the intelligence offices themselves, including the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Department of Energy. Second, although she claims that we should take the terrorists at their word (chap. 6), she reverses this idea when terrorists claim that they are responding to the US policies. The US behavior should not be used "even to make sense of the terrorist attacks (194). "They loathe us" not because we have done anything but simply "because of who we are and what our society represents" (3). But it is not only the Left who sees US foreign policy as having enraged the Middle East; it is the National Security Council.

Although this book may be a reference point in the culture wars, it will not be of lasting value for those thinking about the idea of just war. Limited in its view of the options and disingenuous in its use of the facts, it will satisfy very few on the Left or the Right who want a balanced discussion of the religious or ethical issues involved.