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# Walzer's War

*Michael Walzer*  
**Arguing About War**  
*Yale, 2004, 208 pages.*

*Reviewed by Michael S. Kochin*

Michael Walzer, arguably the most influential living American political philosopher, studies our moral communities in order to understand how we reason in what we ourselves regard as our better moments. Walzer has spent his career trying to teach us what to worry about by pointing to what we already worry about. For Walzer, thinking about justice does not mean developing abstract theories, but rather refining those intuitions about right and wrong that come to us spontaneously in dealing with particular cases, and showing how those intuitions may come to bear on other cases we might not have seen as related. Walzer is a pluralist, committed to the preservation of cultural and religious difference (within decent limits), and thus

he emphasizes that we worry about justice and injustice differently in different spheres of life. Yet he is an egalitarian, social-democratic pluralist: He believes that the different ways of living across the spectrum of group affiliations must all somehow provide every individual with the same basic life opportunities, and that these are the life opportunities each individual ought to want.

Walzer is currently a professor at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, and has served as editor-in-chief of *Dissent*, America's leading progressive journal of politics, since 1976. Through his acclaimed books *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) and *Obligations* (1982), and his numerous articles in both academic and popular journals, Walzer has had a profound impact on American discourse on questions related to war. *Arguing About War* is a collection of previously published essays, but the book's six chapters on terrorism, Iraq, and humanitarian intervention give the book currency, while the five general

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essays Walzer has chosen give it intellectual depth.

Self-described “realists” argue that moral worries must give way to questions of military necessity and national security. But as Walzer contends, we cannot help but talk about justice and injustice, right and wrong, in relation to war. States are indeed responsive to moral concerns, even if they fail to live up to them: Should the United States deal with the threat of a nuclear Iran by forcibly preventing the mullahs from realizing their nuclear ambitions? Can captured Iraqi insurgents be tortured to reveal potentially life-saving information? The realist, Walzer shows, is engaged in moral arguments about war when he offers excuses for soldiers and politicians who are accused of violating our moral sense. Moreover, the realist is unrealistic about the military, diplomatic, or national-security price incurred by violations of the moral standards of armed conflict.

Walzer’s name for the work of worrying about morality in war is “just war theory,” a combined reflection on *jus ad bellum*, or when it is just to fight, and *jus in bello*, how it is just to fight. It is just to fight, we sense, if the goal is to resist and reverse aggression, whether it be in self-defense or in the aid of a community unjustly attacked. It is also just, we intuit, to fight to stop crimes committed by states against

their own populations, if those crimes are big enough and shocking enough. Thus it would be wrong, we feel, for a major power to permit a massacre of thousands of civilians in a city under the guns of its battleships.

The defense and subsequent liberation of Kuwait during the first Gulf War, for instance, is a near paradigmatic case of a just war waged against unjust aggression. Walzer’s famously forthright defense of America’s military action in that war, “Justice and Injustice in the Gulf War,” reprinted in *Arguing About War*, is so simple and irrefutable that one wonders if anything other than irrational hatred of the United States can explain why the war was as controversial as it was both in American and European intellectual circles as well as in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Just war theory is thus opposed to conventional realism, but it is equally opposed to pacifism. Unlike pacifism, Walzer explains in this book, just war theory is a doctrine of radical responsibility, which teaches that we are responsible for refraining from doing those things that are wrong to do even to an enemy. It also teaches that we are responsible for maintaining the moral world within which our and others’ ways of life have a place, and for passing that world on to our children as a decent place in which to live. It is only by maintaining the

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appropriate limits on war, Walzer argues, that we can hope to win “hearts and minds”—that is to say, to show that we are a decent people and that our purposes are decent.

Unlike many of his fellow progressives, then, Walzer brings 35 years of serious thinking about morality in war to bear on the questions that confront America after September 11. In his past writings on war, Walzer was not concerned with justifying his verdict on the case at hand so much as he was interested in convincing us that the things he worries about in relation to the case are in fact worth worrying about. His success since the early 1970s at getting Americans, and especially American military officers and service academy instructors, to sympathize with his worries explains the title of the book’s first essay, “The Triumph of Just War Theory.” It stands to reason that as a reprint of position pieces, *Arguing About War* ostensibly asks to be judged on the basis of the case Walzer makes for each position, and not merely for the help he provides in deciding what to worry about. If we were to judge *Arguing About War* as a book about war, then, we would have to consider whether Walzer’s judgments are well-grounded not only in moral theory, but also in political and

military fact. Yet *Arguing About War* is not so much a book about war as a war book—a polemical salvo in what Paul Berman calls the cultural war on terror.

A polemic, like any other war effort, should be assessed in military terms. As far as the *jus ad bellum* aspect of just war theory is concerned, Walzer is doubtless vindicated, since the two wars he is fighting in this collection are indeed just: The global war against Islamicist terror, and the Israeli war for the security of Israel (“within the pre-1967 borders,” Walzer hastens to add). The point of Walzer’s polemical spear is directed against the leftist European elite’s attitude toward these dual wars against terror. He urges that the excuses offered by European apologists for terrorist acts must be refuted because European support for these two wars on terror is crucial. Thus Walzer notes that the decisive battle against terror is in fact being waged not in Afghanistan or Iraq, but in the “Arab and Islamic diasporas”—principally, that is, in European countries—where terrorists are recruited, cells financed, and attacks planned. Moreover, when speaking of the terror war launched by the Palestinians after the failure of the Camp David talks in 2000, for example, Walzer maintains that such terrorism must

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“be defeated or definitely renounced,” and insists in the chapter “The Four Wars of Israel/Palestine” that “critics of Israel in Europe and at the United Nations have made a mistake, a moral as well as a political mistake, in failing to acknowledge the necessity of this defeat.”

Chapter 4 of *Arguing About War* is a reprint of a 1988 essay called “Terrorism: A Critique of Excuses,” attacking the sordid business of providing rationalizations for terrorism, in particular the deliberate killing of innocent people who are singled out on account of their ethnic or religious identity. Terrorism is a choice, Walzer reminds us, and those who choose it could have chosen differently. He concedes that terror may somehow be linked to oppression, but believes that it is not an effective means of alleviating it. As Walzer predicted well before the Palestinian suicide-bombing campaign against Oslo, the closer parties come to a “serious effort to deal with the oppression of the people [the terrorists] claim to defend... the more they [the terrorists] would escalate their terrorism.”

The primary purpose of *Arguing About War* is to compel Europe to share some of the “hard power” responsibility for maintaining a decent world. This likely accounts for his

inclusion of a 1999 essay on Kosovo, in which he writes that “people who believe in international pluralism and the balance of power can hope for the emergence of an independent European Union with an army it can put into action on its own.” What we have seen instead is a state of affairs in which the United States sends the troops, and the Europeans send the human rights activists and satellite news channel journalists who hasten to report—albeit not always inaccurately—every unjust wartime act the Americans commit. This situation is rendered all the more pathetic in Walzer’s account of the European attempt to intervene in Bosnia:

The Europeans in Bosnia, it has to be said, didn’t even wait to panic: They made it clear from the beginning that the soldiers they sent to open roads and transport supplies were not to be regarded as *soldiers* in any sense; these were grown up Boy Scouts, doing good deeds.

In “Five on Iraq,” Walzer’s discussion of the French reaction to the American effort to enforce UN Security Council resolutions by deposing Saddam Hussein for violating them, the European proclivity for shirking hard power responsibility assumes blackly comic proportions. Here Walzer reminds us of French President Jacques Chirac’s successful

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efforts to prevent the renewed enforcement of UN sanctions against Iraq in September 2002. "It is really the Europeans who are being tested at this moment," he writes. "So far, their conduct suggests they have lost all sense of themselves as independent and responsible actors in international society." On the eve of war, he continues, "What [the French] are saying is that if things get very bad, they will unleash the American army. And Saddam Hussein knows that the French will never admit that things have gotten that bad." The French, Walzer concludes, thus rejected every opportunity to provide an alternative to war.

Many of Walzer's more dubious criticisms of the Bush administration—such as his equating "Arafat's behavior at Camp David and after" with "Sharon's behavior since coming to power," both of which he condemns as obstacles to peace—can thus be interpreted as rhetorical sops to Walzer's European audience. While Walzer repeatedly argues that sanctions against Iraq could have been continued, nowhere does he answer the administration's claim that continuing sanctions would have required a military and naval presence in Iraq's neighboring countries that would likely have spurred further acts

of terror against American targets, and whose indefinite continuation was in any case simply beyond America's means. In the end, these sops prove all the more effective because Walzer himself doubtless believes them. In fact, his sincerity is sufficient proof that he is fighting within the limits that the *jus in bello* side of just war theory imposes on the conduct of war propagandists.

As a book *about* war, however, *Arguing About War* is less satisfactory. The American or Israeli reader will likely be left wanting for a serious explanation of the economic, political, cultural, and religious factors that have caused the Europeans to shirk responsibility for the fate of the world. After all, to accept responsibility for the fate of the world requires, among other things, adopting public policies that foster a sense of individual responsibility for one's own fate and that of one's family. Yet the welfare and unemployment provisions installed by Europe's social-democratic governments and maintained by its conservative governments have succeeded in undermining the individual's sense of obligation. Nor, for that matter, has the effect of public policy been balanced, as it is in the United States, by the power of private

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beliefs: As the French novelist Michel Houellebecq has argued, secularism has made European adults less willing to sacrifice their pleasures for the sake of their obligations. Europeans work less and have fewer children than their American counterparts, and, as their populations age, show less concern for the future of the moral world they inhabit than for the stability of their pensions and health plans.

European states have tried to remedy their demographic decline by importing labor, in large part from Arab and Muslim countries. But European states have short-sightedly refused to face the problem of teaching these immigrants to accept, or at least to abide by, European norms of pluralism and sexual egalitarianism. Instead, these states have, to varying degrees, sought to quiet local versions of the Arab

street with stridently anti-American and anti-Israeli foreign policies.

Why does Walzer not offer any such explanations of the European habit of shirking responsibility? Probably because in a polemic intended to call Europe to arms, it would be self-defeating for Walzer to explain why Europeans are not going to listen. Moreover, addressing such explanations would require Walzer to argue that a thoroughly secular welfare state can produce citizens who are willing to fight, kill, and die to maintain a decent world. Experienced polemicist that he is, Walzer no doubt knows better than to join that losing battle.

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