

Correspondence

Great Nations, Small Wars

TO THE EDITORS:

In “How Great Nations Can Win Small Wars” (*AZURE* 24, Spring 2006), Yagil Henkin is certainly right that “enfeebled decisionmaking on the part of... leaders” has played a key role in democratic defeats against insurgent enemies. But the examples he cited did little to inspire hope that victory against terror is any nearer. Unfortunately, his analysis of instances of democratic nations being defeated had a lot more cogency than those examples which he believes illustrated democratic victories.

Most problematic is the example of Northern Ireland. First, the Catholic population in British-ruled Ulster was a minority at the time of the country’s partition. That is still the case today. Had the provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) been working in the 1990s from a base that constituted 90 percent of the population, as was the case in Algeria during its war for independence (one of the examples he rightly cites as a failure of will by a democratic leader) they might well have won.

Henkin’s analysis of the IRA’s failure also has a glaring omission: The

government of Ireland flat-out opposed the IRA, rightly seeing the Marxist extremists of the “provos” as a threat to democracy in Ireland as much as they were to British rule in Ulster. And unlike the position of the current Iraqi government, which likewise opposes Islamic and Baathist insurgents, the legitimacy of the Irish Republic and the unpopularity of the IRA have been established for decades. Thus, there is no real analogy between Irish and Muslim terrorists in either Iraq or the Palestinian territories, who, unfortunately, enjoy a large measure of popular support.

Henkin’s example of Chechnya as a win for the democrats is also flawed. Calling Vladimir Putin’s Russia a democracy is more than a stretch: The willingness of the majority of Russians to lay waste to Chechnya and scatter its people says a lot about the legacy of czarist imperialism, the nastiness of Chechen terrorism, and perhaps even something about the clash of civilizations between Islam and non-Muslim governments. But it is not an example of a clash between a democratic nation and a popular revolt.

Henkin’s example of Israel’s post-Six Day War triumph over terror in Gaza is certainly germane to the

current conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, but it also took place at a time when Palestinian political nationalism had yet to firmly establish itself. More importantly, Israel's policies in Gaza did not reflect a desire on the part of Israelis to hold onto that territory forever. Rather, putting down terror was widely seen as a prerequisite to negotiations that would bring peace and withdrawal. So to extrapolate from that case the notion that Israel will prevail in a battle to hold onto all of Judea and Samaria is dubious. As we saw four years ago, it appears most Israelis have no problem with the Israel Defense Forces going into Palestinian cities to fight the terrorists. But the notion that most Israelis are willing to fight that battle and then to stay in the territories forever flies in the face of a political reality that better resembles his examples of democratic defeat than victory.

Those looking for hope for the American position in Iraq will also find cold comfort in Henkin's case studies. Even with the most resolute leadership, the absence of popular support for the war effort may doom America to defeat. Though such a defeat would be a disaster for the West, President Bush will need more than a steady hand to convince his successors that the cost of war is worth the

political hit they will take for continuing the fight.

Jonathan S. Tobin

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YAGIL HENKIN RESPONDS:

Jonathan Tobin, I fear, has misunderstood the purpose of my article, and understandably so, as the title on the cover was somewhat misleading. My goal was not to explain how America can win the war against Islamic terror, but rather whether the West is capable of withstanding its enemies' attempts to destroy it. Looked at this way—in the sense of the Western world being on the defensive—its task is not always to “win,” but rather *not* to lose. It is crucial for the West to realize that its defensive position does not necessarily spell defeat.

In the case of Ireland, Tobin's analysis of the situation is indeed convincing—so convincing, in fact, that it makes one wonder how this truth was lost on the IRA, the British government, and the majority of the British public. The answer is that good or bad starting points are no more than that: Starting points. It is possible to lose a war, even if one began with the greater advantage, just as it is possible to win a war even if

one began with a substantial handicap. Thus, if the IRA had managed to convince the majority of the British public that holding onto Northern Ireland was not worth the trouble, “winning” might have been possible, despite its inferior starting point. As it turned out, however, the IRA had the bad luck to come up against Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, and not Alec Douglas-Home.

As for Chechnya, it is certainly true that Russians are not especially sensitive to civilian losses in Chechnya (although the same could probably be said concerning American sensitivity toward civilian losses in Iraq), but the point is not whether Russia is a liberal democracy (it is not), but whether the significant rise in support for the war there since 2000, as opposed to the almost total absence of support for the government’s actions in the first war, can indeed influence the far-from-certain outcome.

Regarding Gaza, I have no idea how Tobin reached the conclusion that he did. It was in the period immediately following the Six Day War, in fact, that Moshe Dayan said, “Better Sharm-el-Sheikh without peace than peace without Sharm-el-Sheikh,” and Golda Meir declared that there was no such thing as a Palestinian people. In contrast to

Ireland, the PLO appeared to enjoy broad support in Gaza and its environs before Israel quelled the terror. It is impossible to have it both ways: You cannot on the one hand pin the failure of the Irish on a lack of public support, and on the other dismiss the importance of public support in Gaza to the Palestinian “victory” there.

Furthermore, only a short time before Sharon unveiled his disengagement plan, most Israelis were opposed to conducting negotiations under fire, sure that Israeli society had more staying power than did the Palestinians. Until the Israeli elite decided to unilaterally determine the country’s borders, the majority of the public chose not to apply any pressure on the government one way or another with regard to Gaza.

Finally, I agree with Tobin that if America is to win the war in Iraq, it cannot rely solely on its military efforts. It must also persuade its own citizens that the war is justified. History has shown that popular support is crucial for military victory. If the Bush administration has the courage to explain, compellingly, why American forces must remain in Iraq, it will not be the perceived lack of success that determines the public’s attitude toward the war, but rather the vital importance of the war’s ultimate objective.

Jews and Power

TO THE EDITORS:

Michael B. Oren's essay "Jews and the Challenge of Sovereignty" (AZURE 23, Winter 2006), introduces the Hebrew concept of *mamlachtiyut*, or "acting in a sovereign manner."

After his brilliant introduction, I expected that his conclusions would mirror my own thinking on the subject, demanding of both Israeli and Diaspora Jews that they cast off their mantle of victimhood and put an end to their rationalizations. I hoped Oren would encourage them to take a lesson from their own history, and assume the *mamlachtiyut* that he described so eloquently in the previous pages.

But instead, Oren demurred. He fell prey to the *tikun olam* "morality" that has plagued the Jewish mentality for centuries. He employed the usual Jewish cop-out when events scream out to the Jews to defend their own rights, concluding instead, "Let us remain cognizant not only of our [Israel's] great achievements... but also of the weighty responsibilities we bear... reconciling our heritage with our sovereignty, our strength with our compassion, and our will to survive with our desire to inspire others."

How very noble, how very Jewish, and how very similar to the failing that he assailed in everything that

came before. What happened to his own sense of *mamlachtiyut*?

Jerome S. Kaufman

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Isaiah Berlin

TO THE EDITORS:

In "The Spectacles of Isaiah Berlin" (AZURE 24, Spring 2006), Assaf Inbari misreads the Romantics and the Bible in the service of a misinformed attack on Isaiah Berlin. On his misreading of the Romantics, we need look no further than his claim that Romanticism "sanctified the night. That was its message." Inbari is surely familiar with the Romanticism which is not of the night, but is "harmony with the natural order... it is the familiar, the sense of one's unique tradition, joy in the smiling aspect of everyday nature, and the accustomed sights and sounds of contented simple, rural folk..." (*The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 17) After all, these varied descriptions of Romantic impulses appear embedded in the very same paragraph which Inbari cites from Berlin's passage capturing the other side of Romanticism, that of violence and the night. Why, then, leave these descriptions out, or even worse, cover them up with ellipses, as he does?

His misunderstanding of the Romantics assumes its more substantive form when he asserts that the primacy of the will over reason did not burst into the European consciousness with the advent of Romanticism, as Berlin has claimed. After all, says Inbari, the Jewish people of the Bible proclaimed, “We will do and obey,” thereby prioritizing will over reason thousands of years before the Romantics. But Berlin is clear as to just how the Romantics asserted the primacy of the will: “The answers to the great questions are not to be discovered so much as to be invented. They are not something found, they are something literally made... [the] new emphasis... on motives rather than consequences... on the quality of the vision, the state of mind or soul of the acting agent...” (*The Power of Ideas*, pp. 202-203). For Berlin, the Romantics unmoored the will from external reality: “Those are the fundamental bases of Romanticism: Will, the fact that there is no structure to things, that you can mold things as you will.” As a result of this primacy of the will, “what matters now is motive, integrity, sincerity...” (“The Romantic Revolution,” p. 185) For Inbari, “there is not a word here that is not compatible with... biblical ethos.” Quite the contrary: There is not a word here that *is* compatible with the biblical ethos. Berlin elaborates on just how radical this emphasis

on integrity and motive really is: “Self-immolation for a cause is the thing, not the validity of the cause itself...” (*Power of Ideas*, p. 204). This, then, is the doctrine of the primacy of the will over reason, according to Berlin, and it has nothing to do with the Bible.

Inbari claims that this invention of values by the will, this almost total focus on motives, is not Romanticism, but Sartrean existentialism. Yet even a cursory glance at the writings of dozens of Romantics will reveal the idolization of the will, whatever it may choose, as a prime motif.

Inbari’s initial thrusts serve merely as a warm-up to his main frontal assault: That Berlin was no pluralist. He was, rather, a dogmatic liberal masquerading as a pluralist. Genuine pluralism, Inbari maintains, means that competing systems of values must all be given their due, and Berlin, by claiming that negative liberty should trump positive liberty, shows his true dogmatic liberal colors. For Inbari, when discussing pluralism, “Berlin is not speaking about a clash of *systems* of values (or cultures), but about a clash of values *within* each system,” which is “an *eclectic* ethos, not a *pluralistic* ethos.” Inbari’s interpretation is contradicted by Berlin himself: “What is the ideal form of life? We cannot be both Greek and Phoenician and medieval, and Eastern and Western....

Since we cannot do that, the whole notion of the perfect life collapses...” (*Roots of Romanticism*, p. 65). What are these cultures if not competing systems of values? For Berlin, there may be many absolute values which clash, and the clashes within a person may take the shape of clashes within a system or among systems or among parts of systems.

Berlin’s pluralism is full of bite. In an article he co-authored with Bernard Williams, he writes that “It is true... that pluralists sometimes urge the particular importance... of some values such as variety or autonomy... there is no inconsistency between their doing this, and their accepting that this is one value among others. If they move to asserting the overriding importance of this value, as some liberals do, then they may begin to be in trouble with pluralism. But then pluralists will not be that kind of liberal...” (“Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply,” *Political Studies* 42, p. 308). And Berlin is not that kind of liberal. Contrary to Inbari’s assertion, as this quote demonstrates, Berlin is deeply committed to pluralism, because he does not believe that liberal values, such as autonomy and variety, must at all times possess overriding importance to the complete exclusion of other competing values.

So Berlin would maintain that autonomy and tolerance (not a tolerance

of anything goes, which is not tolerance, but suicide) are not optional, but rather that they are values which must be given their due, and are more justified by a recognition of pluralism than other competing values. But, at the same time, he was not so dogmatic as to know how central and “overriding” a role they must play in all regimes at all times. If this isn’t pluralism, what is?

There is, as Inbari rightly points out, a genuine tension between pluralism and liberalism. But if there is a danger in Berlin’s thought, it is the danger that his deep commitment to pluralism will undermine his liberalism, and not, as Inbari maintains, the opposite. There is much to be learned from Isaiah Berlin, and much to criticize. But before he can be criticized, he must be understood.

Alex Sztuden

New York

Paradise Now

TO THE EDITORS:

The central argument of Anselma Dell’Olio’s review, “Palestinian Apocalypse” (*AZURE* 23, Winter 2006), is that the film *Paradise Now* “works as a movie... while its philosophical

plea for non-violence is all the while communicated with subtlety, irony, humor, and depth of feeling.”

Indeed, *Paradise Now* has impressive cinematic qualities. Yet these qualities do not highlight moral purity or humanistic values—just the opposite. The history of film is full of such examples of “good-bad” movies—those which claim cinematic excellence, but fall flat when it comes to basic moral issues. German cinema in the time of the Third Reich, for example, produced highly accomplished films, but they also made it easier for German hearts and minds to embrace the Final Solution.

Some fans have argued that the cinematic achievement of *Paradise Now* is particularly impressive in light of the harsh reality faced by the Palestinians. Supposedly, this is the creation of people whose lives are defined by military confrontation—even the possibility of an evening out at the movies is hampered by the severity of their distress. Dell’Olio also relates to *Paradise Now* as if it were a locally produced film. But while the movie was filmed “in the region,” it is doubtful whether *Paradise Now* accurately reflects it. It was made by an Israeli Arab who was born in Nazareth but lives in Holland, and whose screenwriting partner is a Dutch Christian with professional film credentials. *Paradise Now*, therefore, is

more accurately an expression of the political worldview of an Arab intellectual at home in European culture. What it is *not* is an authentic representation of regional reality.

Moreover, it is the film’s narrative excellence, as well as its artistic allusions and moments of sophisticated irony, that inform Dell’Olio’s critique. But such a portrayal misses out on a decisive element of the cinematic experience: The intense viewer identification with the film’s central character, in this case that of Said. The film initially presents Said as sensitive and reflective, a hard worker, and a devoted son to a loving mother. He is a handsome young man courted by a pretty and privileged young woman. And yet, at the end of the film, he is about to blow people up on a city bus. His journey toward suicide martyrdom includes a relationship with a friend who is excited by the planned undertaking, as well as a meeting with a young woman who pleads passionately against terrorist attacks. We can conclude, then, that the words spoken by the female character do not reflect the film’s message, but are rather just one of many obstacles with which Said must deal on his way to a glorious death. The viewer identifies with Said, shares his anxiety lest he be caught by Israeli security forces or killed by Palestinians who doubt his loyalty to the cause, and, in

the end, understands his final choice, which leads to the film's climax.

And so, as a film that succeeds in eliciting "understanding" for the phenomenon of suicide bombing, what we are left with is not an "anti-violence" film, but rather a film whose sole critique of violence is directed against Israel. And this is precisely why *Paradise Now's* message is so dangerous.

Ilan Avissar

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ANSELMA DELL'OLIO RESPONDS:

Ilan Avissar's reflection on my review of *Paradise Now* went straight to my heart. I have no quibbles with anything he says; our main difference is whether we see the glass half empty, or half full.

I watched the film three times, and also participated in a television debate with the film's director. I believe the director, Hany Abu-Assad, is sincerely against violence, or at least fearful of it. I also believe that he is just as sincerely deaf and blind

to Israel's impossible quandary. I do not believe that the film encourages suicide bombings—quite the contrary—although it certainly feels for suicide bombers. What I thought I saw, however, was a glimmer of hope in what to me is the ocean of darkness and despair that is the Muslim mindset. This film marks the first time I have ever seen on screen anything by a Muslim that dared to be even slightly critical of a culture that promotes suicide bombings. I also felt that it was telling that the "hero" is a man whose father was murdered for collaborating with the Israelis, and whose future was, therefore, utterly compromised from the outset. Yet, as I was writing my hopeful conclusion, I was all too aware that I myself do not live "in the region," and could very well be grasping at straws.

Call me prejudiced, but if I have to choose, I'd much rather come down on the side of the endearing Professor Avissar than of any self-proclaimed, Holland-based pacifist, however talented.

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