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Review Essay

The White House's Burden:
Benjamin R. Barber, *Fear's Empire*

by
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Fear's Empire is one of several scholarly responses to the portentous historical moment of 9/11 and its political aftermath. In this insightful book the distinguished academic and political commentator Benjamin Barber presents an impassive analysis of the unapologetically truculent turn in American national security policy. Besides seeking to show why the current objectives of the current White House administration are ultimately unsustainable, Barber also outlines a long term strategy for the maintenance of global security and, by extension, American power and influence: In place of the current policy of "preventive war" (the prerogative of *Pax Americana*), Barber proffers "preventive democracy" (the imperative of *Lex Humana*).

Tariq Ali in his *Clash of Fundamentalisms* has recently observed the way that many liberal American commentators, caught up in the current maelstrom of superpatriotism, are anxious not to appear out of step with the prevailing mood for fear of not being heard. In these doleful days, the Chomskys, Sontags and Vidals are sadly few and far between. Benjamin Barber's *Fear's Empire* also bears the marks of having negotiated this self-imposed censorship. By stating that his express purpose is to show how America's national interest may be best served, and by not ruling out the use of preemptive strikes in the war against terrorism (but always as a last resort, and not against a sovereign state), Barber earns enough points to allow him to deliver a crushing ideological critique of the contemporary American right in what amounts to a defense of Enlightenment values against neoconservative romantic idealism.

Although his eye is firmly fixed on the lessons of recent international history, Barber's warning is distinctly Ciceronian. When the *Pax Romana* was established, political intrigue and sectional commercial interests displaced the political virtues that had sustained the Roman Republic. The political

corruption brought on by the Roman Empire is clearly a parallel for Barber's depiction of *Pax Americana*. The American Empire attempts to assert the sovereignty of the center by pursuing a policy of unilateral military action. The justification for this policy is not humanitarian, or defensive, but *preventive*. Preventive war is the essence of *Pax Americana*, an instinctive conservative response to the sense of vulnerability and debilitation in the face of stateless, non-governmental predators like Al Qaeda. Of course, Barber reminds us that the war in Iraq was not solely a reaction to the rapaciousness of the terrorist Other and his presumed state sponsors. The Iraq war has as much to do with long-term geopolitical strategies in the Middle East as well as with George W. Bush avenging his father. But it is noticeable that Barber does not use the argument that says the purpose of the war is to manage the international oil supply. Perhaps this is because economic arguments for war actually make sense in a nation fearful for the future of its material security. By focusing on the rhetorical and ideological arguments surrounding current foreign policy, Barber wants to argue his case on the ethico-political front.

Eagles and Owls

BARBER'S ATTACK ON THE RIGHT IS VISIBLE IN HIS ADROIT reinterpretation of the metaphorical language of contemporary politics. In distinguishing between the supporters of preventive war and those that advise caution, Barber replaces the customary terms "hawks" and "doves" with his own images—"eagles" and "owls." The symbolism is clear; the predatory nationalism of the Bush faction is contested by the watchful wisdom of, not only the political opposition, but insiders like Colin Powell and many of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who, at least before the recent wars, emphasized the maintenance of America's interests through *interdependency* with the international community. According to Barber, the owl (also a bird of prey) seeing through the darkness of fear understands the lesson that Edmund Burke drew from the French revolution that violence is not the right route to democracy. America is mistaken to unilaterally assert its sovereign *independence* through a global reign of terror.

The eagle and owl metaphor also carries the sense that the warriors in the White House, in spite of their muscular, no-nonsense rhetoric are in fact Romantic idealists, an idealism with intellectual and cultural roots in the myths surrounding American exceptionalism. The owls, in contrast, are

comprised of “aging old birds, strategic toughs and wary veterans,” (and quite unlike the naive doves of the peace movement). They are the pragmatic realists. Barber illustrates this point by referring to a comment made by Powell to the secretary of the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the war in Afghanistan was even planned. Upon hearing that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were already campaigning for an invasion of Iraq, Powell exclaimed, “What the hell, what are these guys thinking about? Can’t you get these guys back in the box?”

Throughout this book Barber’s particular critique of Bush’s foreign policy is delivered alongside a general argument against the very essence of the conservative *weltanschauung* “fear.” Fear as a political rhetoric, it can be said, derives from a sense of vulnerability and weakness in the face of the fecund opponents of American power. It derives from a general pessimism about humanity and its fundamentally evil urges, that says a world without power and order produces anarchy. And perhaps it derives from deep psychic rivulets of historical guilt. The messianic idealism of the current administration is a mesmerizing way to overcome this false sense of hopelessness. Barber’s political message, although couched in terms of pragmatism, is no less idealistic—or to be precise, optimistic. For Barber, America is the unassailable world power and terrorist attacks are “mere bee stings to a grizzly bear,” and its unquestionable strength should be directed toward a global network of *interdependence*. In other words, America will serve its interests best by creating a world order in accordance with its own liberal-democratic values, and will win the respect and admiration that it increasingly lacks in the world when it is clearly seen to uphold them.

A Nation of Virtue?

BARBER TRACES THE ROOTS OF THE “LEGITIMACY” OF PREVENTIVE war to a distorted version of American origins. When he states that “A Nation creates its past no less than its future,” Barber is acutely aware of the value of history in political thought. Not history as a collection of facts and fables, but history as communal self-knowledge and self-assertion. American self-identity, like that of many nation-states, resorts to a notion of exceptionalism. Exceptionalism is a powerful emotional resource that was exploited by the Puritan settlers and the fathers Madison and Jefferson, and was applauded by de Tocqueville. Exceptionalism remains the justification for America’s

freedom to strike pre-emptively at any potentially hostile state, a right denied to any other sovereign power.

According to Barber, the historical source of America as an exceptional nation, blessed with virtue, can be traced to its foundation myth. Paradisical America was seen to be “empty” and this apparent (and clearly erroneous) fact, as Tom Paine naïvely said, allowed its people to “start the world over again.” Barber describes young America’s naked candor “as if the hypothetical innocence of Rousseau’s state of nature had been written into America’s actual beginnings.” History now agrees that this was a regrettable and presumptuous conceit, however, the image of American exceptionalism continues to be projected outward to the wider world. It is a self-image of virtuous Americans, unbagged by the histories of the barbarian lands across the seas. Literature epitomizes this attitude with Henry James’s “innocents abroad” and in the unsophisticated sincerity of Graham Green’s *Quiet American*. It is therefore no surprise that the Monroe Doctrine of isolationism served the interests of national sovereignty in a world of fear and evil. What does sound surprising and paradoxical is Barber’s argument that out of isolationism grew domination. Isolationism was a product of a sense of national virtue, and similarly more recent American foreign policy has approached the outside world with this same sense of virtue intact: The Cold War was a battle against an “Evil Empire” just as present U.S. policy is directed against the “Axis of Evil,” and Bush reminds us that the most serious threat to the “civilized world” are the “evildoers,” those terrorist cells that lurk in the dark beyond the talons of “Fears Empire.” It is for this reason, Barber seems to suggest, that the hallowed Monroe Doctrine becomes profane Imperialism as fear drives the State Department from isolation to domination, carried by a misguided sense of virtue.

The advocates of “America the Good” are of course not so churlish to rely on its messianic sense of destiny alone. The clarion call of the *Project for a New American Century* was a “Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity.” This relates to another of Barber’s criticisms of American self-identity; the belief that its knowledge and invincible technology can protect and “cocoon” the homeland, like the laughable “Star Wars” defense system and its much mooted offspring. It will be interesting to see how much the cost to the federal budget of the “techno-blitzkrieg” in Iraq will be received by the U.S. electorate in 2004.

Barber's case is clear. These moralizing myths may persuade a perplexed electorate to embark upon a "righteous war against evil," but it does not sustain a serious political argument about long-term global prosperity and security. His alternative is to reject the moral fig leaf that unburdens both Isolationism and Imperialism from responsibility and also to reject the techno-military straightjacket that puts a strain on the national budget. Instead, America should forgo its futile quest for independence and institutionalize its interactions with the world community through cooperative organizations governed by international law. This implies giving up some degree of national sovereignty and in this Barber calls for a healthy dose of pragmatism. Perhaps to make his argument more amenable to the hardliners he should have drawn more attention to his footnote quoting Lord Acton who advised that "a nation has neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies, only permanent interests."

Exceptional Circumstances and Perilous Times

BARBER IS ADAMANT THAT EXCEPTIONALISM IS THE SOURCE of current U.S. foreign policy, the doctrine of preventive war. This doctrine, it is routinely argued by the hawks, is more suited to these perilous times post 9/11. However, Barber asks whether the events during the Cold War were any less perilous—during the Cuban missile crisis Kennedy was forced to consider a first strike against Cuba and in doing so risk a nuclear exchange. It seems then that the idea that preventive strikes on potential aggressors is more likely in an age where potential aggressors *cannot* strike back. And it seems more likely that the North Koreas of the world would want to obtain a nuclear capability if this is the lesson to be drawn. The enemies in these "more perilous" times are not nation states but networks of committed individuals that lie beyond the rule of law. The solution for Barber is cooperation between sovereign states, which subscribe to the rule of law.

The "National Security Strategy" of September 20, 2002, when Condoleezza Rice officially sanctioned the policy of preventive war, was a tactical victory for those in the administration who, in 2001, had advocated *active counterproliferation*. This, in practice, meant pulling the funds from programs like Nunn-Lugar which tried to buy up old Soviet nuclear weapons in the newly independent states. *Active counterproliferation* also meant an end to rigorously enforcing international agreements like the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. Instead,

active counterproliferation insisted on pre-emptive strikes against targets likely to be developing weapons of mass destruction—much like Clinton thought he was doing when he destroyed a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory in 1998. The logic of counterproliferation, of course, formed the justification for the war in Iraq. The logic of preventive strikes also contains within it a sense of an on-going mission—as Ariel Sharon said, “Imagine a brain surgeon penetrating the skull of a patient who has two malignant tumors and extracting only one of them”; the second tumor, of course is Iran. But why stop there? Why not Syria or North Korea and so on? It is conceivable that the American public would desire revenge for 9/11 but can any administration seriously sell a policy of ongoing active counterproliferation?

The policy of preventive war also has serious consequences for the international moral order. American exceptionalism allows the United States to conduct such a first strike, however this example will easily be emulated by other “exceptional” states. According to Barber, if the logic of preventive war becomes universalized in a Kantian way we may be faced with a world where, say, Pakistan could legitimately strike at India on the grounds that India may be about to attack Kashmir, or North Korea could attack South Korea for fear of an American invasion.

Power or Law?

IN BARBER’S VIEW, THE ADVOCATES OF PREVENTIVE war have made a tragic theoretical error. They have wrongly interpreted the nature and relationship between power and law. The right-wing critic Robert Kagan, for example, evokes Thomas Hobbes when he suggests that the remedy for an anxious world of anarchy and fear is *power*. The solution, according to Kagan, is for a powerful America to stamp order upon a world of chaos and conflict. In response, Barber argues that this is an incorrect reading of Hobbes’s intentions. He argues that Hobbes may be correct when he says that life in a world without political order is “nasty, brutish and short,” but the solution is not “power.” Power is what exists in the state of nature and is responsible for violence and vulnerability. The terrorists of 9/11 had learnt their lesson from Hobbes when they proved that even the weakest could use their power to harm the strongest in a world of fear.

Barber argues that Hobbes actually intended the solution to the “war of all against all” to be “law.” Hobbes’ social contract is not subjection to power

but a positive agreement to live under the rules of political society; although it has to be accepted that power is required to guarantee the rule of law. To reject the social contract (which for Barber is synonymous with “interdependence”) and pursue a unilateralist stance is to fight fear with fear and plunge the global community further into war. This is precisely what the terrorists intended and why they are successful. They have undone the social contract by provoking the most powerful guarantor of global order into a vague policy of systematic violence. This is true because it is being conducted without the will of the international community. The lessons of the League of Nations have yet to be learned. Again this strengthens Barber’s argument that America can best serve the interests of global security (and therefore its own interests) by opting into a system of international cooperation. Interdependence, with its roots in Enlightenment political ideology, is basic to Barber’s alternative to the doctrine of preventive war—preventive democracy.

Lex humana: Preventive Democracy

“PREVENTIVE DEMOCRACY,” AS A NATIONAL SECURITY strategy, “must overcome terror without paying a price in fear.” To achieve this it requires two components. First, sophisticated military and intelligence services that are engaged in “non-state-directed preventive war.” This refers to the targeting of terrorist cells, their networks and training and armament facilities. But the sovereign state where these targets reside are not violated and all action is taken with the cooperation of the national government in whose territory the terrorist targets reside (although he admits this is not always feasible). Because the targets are universally acknowledged as threats to international security the logic of these measures is defensive rather than preventive. Secondly, global organizations for developing democratic institutions within nations should be encouraged such as Barber’s own project “CivWorld.”

As an example of the first component Barber recalls the case of the Israeli bombing of the state-owned Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. The Israelis delivered a single strike to the Osirak plant because they feared it would be used to develop nuclear weapons. Yet it is questionable whether this example fits Barber’s criteria of “non-state-directed preventive war” when the sovereign territory of Iraq was clearly violated. Also the tenet that military action is a last resort was also broken in the Osirak incident as surely the UN

or some other body should have first been exhausted (in actual fact the UN and the U.S. had roundly condemned the attack, and before the bombing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had conducted inspections of the reactor bringing it under international surveillance). The level of detail with which Barber presents this example is such that a reader could infer that in the Osirak incident Israel was operating under the same sense of moral “exceptionalism” with which Barber criticizes current White House policy in Iraq.

A far better example is the Marshall Plan in post-war Europe and the system of International law (the UN) which together provided the political and economic environment for the re-development of civic institutions. Of course, critics would argue that these measures served as instruments for American domination in the post-war western world. The idea that America would reap political and economic gain through a system of active interdependency seems to linger over Barber’s argument, perhaps as a bid to sell his idea in a superpatriotic climate.

The first part of Barber’s alternative strategy stretches the definition of a “just war” in ways that would be difficult to apply in a real life situation, unless, of course, Barber commits to the idea that any pre-emptive strike should first receive the assent of the international community, on which point he is unclear. However, it is the second part of the strategy that reveals Barber to be more critically and theoretically coherent. A long-term scheme for perpetual peace requires a critical understanding of the process of globalization as well as a set of principles that underlay the construction of a civic republic. It is here that Barber outlines the *lex humana*.

It is a feature of contemporary political thought that commentators are unable to agree upon the exact character of late modernity. Some see the world becoming more homogeneous, like Fukuyama’s assurance that we have arrived at the “End of History” signaled by the ultimate domination of the capitalist mode of production and the triumph of liberal democracy. Others insist that the world is becoming more fragmented, regionalized or de-centered. Samuel Huntington’s thesis in his *The Clash of Civilisations* provides a classic example of the latter. Barber, however, tries to reconcile these two views. In his earlier work, *Jihad vs McWorld*, Barber describes the process of late (or post) modernity in dialectic terms: as global capitalism advances, regional nationalisms and fundamentalisms arise in response. In *Fear’s Empire* he develops this argument in the light of Bush’s foreign

adventures. Barber argues that American democracy, as a complete political package, cannot be exported and expected to flourish in a different political and cultural context. Moreover, he maintains, that merely exporting capitalism and generating global markets will not create democracy. His central point is that the social identities “Consumers” and “Citizens” are theoretically distinct categories.

This brings us to the philosophical heart of Barber’s politics of “Preventive Democracy”—the concept of *Citizenship* and the belief that the inhabitants of the world can be transformed into *Citizens* through a process of education. (Barber’s political principles are basically Rousseauian. This is made clear when he describes Rousseau as “Democracy’s greatest historical prophet.”) The creation of the *Citizen* as a particular kind of social personality within a strong civic society is the only long-term safe guard for global security. The modern individual is a “schizophrenic” creature possessing both private consumer logic and a public civic logic. This is illustrated by Barber in the way we distinguish between our personal desires and the requirements of the “common good,” or as Barber neatly describes it, the difference between “‘me’ thinking and ‘we’ thinking.” Education is required to develop the sense of public spirit to combat the power of corporate culture. The role of civic institutions is essential in Barber’s political theory because the public good is not, *pace* Adam Smith, the sum total of private desires. Strong public institutions are needed where citizens can actively assert their rights to govern themselves and resolve their differences. For this reason Barber insists that “Democracy is the mechanism by which private power and personal desires are accommodated to public goods and the common weal.”

For this kind of civil society—democracy—to flourish Barber argues that we have to accept strong *public* institutions (which implies rational state bureaucracies) which may pose obstacles for corporate investors. Barber acknowledges that this may sound unpopular because the idea of the “public” has been out of fashion for many years now. This, he says, is because totalitarian Communism had grossly perverted the notion of public goods and public institutions (hence the relative ease with which the ex-Soviet states descended into gangster capitalism in the post-Gorbechev era). Similarly, confidence in the public sector has waned because of the relative dominance of privatization ideology since the end of the Cold War. Privatization ideology taught people ways to view the interests of corporations, particularly the free flow of capital, as bound up with their own.

The success of privatization ideology has not only put the public sector ethos on the defensive, but has legitimized the removal of power from public institutions which are transparent and accountable and transferred it to private corporations where it becomes the invisible and unchallenged possession of Enron-like bureaucracies. The impact of economic privatization on politics is to degrade the public spiritedness (civic virtues) of government. Barber seems to echo Marx when he describes how “National government now becomes an instructed instrument of the private sector rather than the participatory assembly of the public sector”—seemingly a modern day committee of the bourgeoisie. Thus it is part of Barber’s strategy to radically unpick the concept of “market democracy” and to show that privatization and inward investment into states like Iraq do not amount to democratization. The neoliberal belief that consumption is the essence of social self-expression prompts Barber to warn, that “when the ethos of Disney becomes synonymous with the ethics of liberty and when consumers come to be seen as identical with citizens, genuine democratization is derailed.”

Cultures of Democracy

BARBER IS ALSO QUICK TO WARN THE WOULD-BE STATE makers that “democracy” has a protean quality and can take on different forms in different places. Western democracy is the product of a long history and contingent factors make for variations within the European and American traditions—English, French and Swiss “democracies” each display local distinctions. Indeed Barber’s view is distinctly Tocquevillian in that he agrees that the slow processes of “rational bureaucratization” were “prequels to real democratization.” With reference to plans for Iraq, it is plainly clear that democracy cannot be “imposed on a country at the point of a gun.” Rational public institutions need to be fully functioning before multi-party, and participatory or representational government can function securely.

On the specific subject of democratization in the Middle East, Barber takes exception to certain commentators like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington who see Islam as culturally adverse to democracy. Barber not only cites Amartya Sen who argues that Buddhist and Confucian traditions incorporate practices that would equate to western notions of freedom and toleration, but he reminds us that, historically speaking, the west only achieved “civil society” after overthrowing the domination of an authoritarian

religious civilization. His argument is that the kind of polity which could emerge in Iraq and elsewhere should benefit its local traditions and historical peculiarities, this means acknowledging the Islamic factor. For this reason there is no real reason why Frank Graham's Christian charity, with its express ideological program, should be given encouragement in post-war Iraq. However, Barber acknowledges that religious values can and do clash with secular democracy—as he reminds us “Protestant fundamentalists inside the United States are as anxiety ridden by the secular culture of consumption as some of their Muslim brothers in Tehran or Cairo.” Yet Barber probably shares the same sentiments with critics like Huntington that *American* democracy cannot exist in Islamic nations. The cultural question, as Barber sees it, is that “fundamentalism” is primarily a reaction within communities that equate Americanization with secularization (despite the fact that Bush's Manichean language of the “evil-doers” is no different in quality to the fundamentalists view of westerners as “infidels”). This view of American culture should come as no surprise when so much emphasis is placed on the promotion of American corporations and brands.

A serious attempt at democratization in Iraq would “factor in” the local cultural and religious dimensions. Of course, Barber concedes that the relationship between the sacred and the secular in civil societies is a complex negotiation (Latin America provides a contemporary example), but he believes that de-politicized religion can act as a social adhesive in a society undergoing transition. For this reason one cannot issue a “one size fits all” decree. Moreover, if western ideologues sincerely believe that diversity can exist *within* individual cultures then surely diversity can exist *among* different cultures. Here again, we see how Barber's model for civil society in the nation state can be applied at the international level.

Pragmatic Idealism

BY DERIVING THE ACTIONS OF THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION from the conservatives' sense of fear Barber is concurring with other popular critics of the right. Michael Moore's hugely popular (and therefore mainstream) *Bowling for Columbine* illustrates the vast gulf between the notion of liberty held by the “frontiersmen,” those militiamen of the mid-west, and that of the “civic republicans,” who are more at home in Manhattan. Each derives authority for their opinions from the sacred texts of American history—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the

Federalist Papers (although the latter may be perhaps regarded by some as apocryphal). The problem for people like Moore and Barber, who in very different ways court and command popular appeal, is to convince ordinary Americans that to trust in public institutions and embrace the civic ethos will provide advantage to all citizens, not just those whose personal power and prestige are directly connected to these organizations (namely academics and journalists). Opponents of the right are correct to want to present their arguments in plain, pragmatic language. (It seems that many on the American left now believe it will take a veteran general to do this.)

As Tocqueville observed, “Americaness” reveals a strong distaste for abstract theorizing and philosophical principles while displaying an instinctively practical attitude toward individual participation in the municipal spirit. This spirit of pragmatism is what Barber is hoping to utilize in the face of conservative romantic idealism. Barber agrees with Krugman’s contrast between America and Europe as not being a comparison between the political economies of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, but rather a choice between Immanuel Kant and William James. For Krugman, the Europeans categorically demand “a clear set of principles: rules that specify the nature of truth, the basis of morality, when shops will be open, and what a Deutsche mark is worth.” Americans, by contrast, are “philosophically and personally sloppy.” For “sloppy” read “pragmatic.” Conservatism has traditionally made sense to ordinary Americans because of its pragmatic, anti-ideology ideology. It is this pragmatic instinct that Barber seeks to exploit, but whether noble and worthy concepts like *interdependence*, “preventive democracy” and “CivWorld” can make any headway among voters remains to be seen.

Responsibility or Burden?

It is all too easy to criticize American foreign policy and its international political role. The sense of inequity and powerlessness around the developing world is clearly the source of this critique. Even in Britain where, despite a strong pro-American stance in national government, opposition to current American foreign policy is fairly prevalent. However, it is more difficult to present a serious and constructive critique of America’s unique international function. Benjamin Barber’s *Fear’s Empire* provides a useful starting point for this discussion. If Barber is saying that America must be *in* the world but America cannot *be* the world, he perhaps presents a practical long-term policy for strengthening global security. Stauncher critics of a greater America will

say that Barber has produced what the historian J. G. A. Pocock would call the ideology of “liberal empire”—the grafting of the values of civic republicanism on to a fundamentally imperialist order.

However, Barber’s mixture of pragmatism and optimism deserves to have a fair reading and his ideas should perhaps point the way for future national security policy once the “eagles” have flown. The owls, he says, understand that the rule of law frequently requires power to enforce it, but power as domination simply cannot work. Neither can isolationism. The vulnerabilities of the nation state in the open, globalized economy show that American foreign policy would reap better rewards for its citizens, their culture and their investments, if it saw its own interests as synonymous with the security and prosperity of the entire world’s citizens. For the realist and pragmatic owls, Barber maintains, “Interdependency” is not a coveted ideal but a practical means to maintain global order and stability. History has made America the hegemonic hyperpower and, as Barber says, has given it a “special responsibility.” And this brings us back to the question of the *Pax Americana*. Benjamin Barber’s *Fears Empire* asks the important question about how America should exercise its “responsibility.” When America was busy building its empire in the 1890s by assuming control of the Philippines in the American-Spanish War, the British imperialist poet Rudyard Kipling was inspired to write his famous *White Man’s Burden*. How far the language of “responsibility” is from Kipling’s idea of an imperial “burden” is for the reader to decide.