Can’t we all just get along? If not, do you mind awfully if we do away with you? Paul Berman argues that realists and leftists alike ignore irrational forces—“pathological mass movements”—that motivate global violence. He accordingly urges that liberal Western societies intervene militarily to stamp out these threats with, as the venerable saying goes, extreme prejudice. Berman delves into the extraordinarily complex question of terrorism and, in so doing, displays a desperate need to occupy the middle ground no matter where it may be. This hoary tactic can place one in strange, and even silly, positions. Where exactly is the middle ground regarding mass murder or female circumcision or slavery? (Spartacists may be annoying extremists but was Spartacus an extremist?) So Berman prudently takes the precaution of controlling where he winds up by dictating where the loony left and right margins are supposedly set.

In Terror and Liberalism Berman tirelessly reiterates whatever the mainstream American media finds fit to print. Saddam in 1991 was poised to roll over Saudi Arabia. Arab problems are internally generated because heaven forfend that anyone mention colonial legacies or neo-imperial ploys. Saddam “threw the inspectors out” in 1998 (when they were withdrawn under severe White House pressure). The U.S. consequently “complained from the sidelines”—from which it had infiltrated CIA agents into UNSCOM. Scapegoating is Saddam’s “special genius”—although CIA Director George Tenet may beg to differ these days.

Saddam gassed “his own” people, although most Kurds, as the gory record over many decades shows, hardly viewed themselves as “his” people, or even as Iraqis. Gas, of course, evokes gasps of horror in the West, partly because the West cannot be accused of using it, at least not since the RAF lavishly gassed rebel Kurdish and Arab villages in the conveniently forgotten 1920s. Even so stodgy a journal as Foreign Affairs noted in 1999 that economic

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sanctions have killed more people than all other weapons of mass destruction combined. Yet this daintier, distant form of death-dealing doesn't appear to faze Berman, or most Westerners, at all. Berman knows, and plays to, his audience.

Berman also recycles the tall tale that Clinton persuaded Barak to withdraw from “all but small portions of the West bank” so, accordingly, there is no rational “explanation for Arafat’s refusal of this magnanimous offer.” Palestinians do not want peace; ergo, they crave jihadic glory. Berman further speculates that they sought wider borders; a ravenous Palestinian imperialism clawing at Israel, or Lebanon or even New Jersey. As for Israel, anything short of Waffen SS behavior is construed as a heartwarming testament to its unparalleled humanity. Jenin was not Lidice; hence, the Israelis there accomplished a “breakthrough in relatively civilized army tactics.” Can Israelis, who hail the stand at Masada, really fail to grasp what happens to a populace which feels it has its back to the wall?

Suicide bombers are a stunning inexplicable barbarity who “produced a philosophical crisis, among everyone around the world who wanted to believe that a rational logic governs the world,” says Berman. One can say much the same for many who watched the Bush team at work after 9/11. Berman seems to believe that the degree of civilization is measured by the distance at which a state neatly can kill. One gets the impression that if Palestinians had a nifty weapons lab devising remote control devices, Berman would think better of them. By contrast, Berman sees Israel as a perfectly reasonable liberal state, a judgment only about half of Israelis may grant him at any given time, depending on who is in charge.

Berman laments that “war and hysteria” work to keep fearful citizens distracted and obedient, but he imagines this ancient formula applies only to Middle East tyrannies. Berman, like Christopher Hitchens, champions an “anti-totalitarian war” and, thus flatteringly framed, who but fools and tools of tyrants can object? The dark but distinct possibility that overtly noble wars really would be conducted according to realpolitik tenets and exploitative aims seems lost on Berman who likes to chide leftists who fret about “America’s imperial motives, about the greed of big corporations, and their influence in White House policy; and could not get beyond their worries.” Apparently after 9/11 no one was so depravedly partisan as to attach their own agenda to the security crisis for their own advantage. Pay no attention to
the man behind the curtain, Berman admonishes, watch the impressive fireworks and shut up.

Berman is wary of realists, too. Realists figure that "world politics is driven by wealth, power, and geography" (although a lot of realists overlook the role of wealth). While it may be unwise to start or end with realist precepts about power, one cannot ignore them, as Berman does, when examining how the world works. To characterize the first Gulf War as fought in defense of Muslims in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia is mad hatter logic — like saying the U.S. cavalry wiped out the Indians to protect Chinese coolies toiling on the railroads. In this same vein, Berman imagines that America sided with the Palestinians. He even quotes an Israeli negotiator lauding Clinton for doing more for the Palestinians than any one else. It’s rather like a participant praising the diplomatic feats of Chamberlain at Munich.

Turning to Islam after a brief detour through Camus, Berman contends that "pan-Arabism and the philosophical roots of Europe’s right wing nationalisms were the same." Islamic extremism (unlike other religious extremisms?) preaches utter obedience to an unrealizable ideal, and so generates totalitarianism. Totalitarianism and terror are the same. So terror, as defined by the White House, is totalitarian. Naturally, Berman exempts state-sponsored terrorism. All progress, he also says, depended on "a freedom that recognizes the existence of other freedoms too." This sounds okay, but he blithely proceeds to applaud "the idea of progress toward ever more freedom, ever more rationality, ever more wealth" — as if these pursuits were not difficult to coordinate, or were not contradictory.

To sustain the pretty notion that liberal democratic societies cannot do systematically illiberal things, he predictably taps a "heart of darkness" argument about King Leopold’s atrocities in the Congo. There, liberal colonialists, evidently demented by the primitive milieu, took up "murder for murders sake." No, it was murder for profit’s sake. They operated in environs where it was expeditious to work natives to death to extract resources quickly. Liberals aren’t immune to such tempting incentives. Why that would be irrational. One would never guess when reading Berman that the simple-minded Western optimists of the nineteenth century, as he describes them, swiftly conquered 85% of the earth.

Berman’s knowledge of Islam is, to say the least, shaky. He states: "Islamism got under way in Pakistan in the 1930s (organizationally in 1941)," when
Pakistan was still only a flickering gleam in Jinnah’s eye. (Perhaps he means the Punjab, or part of it, but how did this get past the editors?) Pious people—one can be pious about a secular ideology too—are very scary critters mostly because their piety usually conceals nasty motives. Throughout the wobbly course of this book he writes as if religion or ideology alone dictates action, with no attention needed for underlying political or economic drives.

Sayyid Qutb, Berman’s key Islamic figure, was a sort of Muslim Straussian, an elitist textual interpreter who spun out an Islam-based theory of alienation. Here was the very same siren song every cult belts out: we offer safe harbor in the bosom of Abraham or Allah or L. Ron Hubbard in exchange for every earthly thing you’ve got. Qutb blamed Socrates’ belief in reason for the ensuing split between materiality and spirit, which inflicted a “hideous schizophrenia” on poor humanity. Even so, Qutb had his lucid moments: as when remarking that John Foster Dulles “wants merely to mobilize a religiously-veneered patriotism that might protect the western order from communism.” The Saudis too were keen to keep their restive populace in line via importing Qutb’s severe brand of religion. The big question is how widespread is this doctrine?

Berman says that the governing elite of Pakistan (presumably Zia) viewed Islamist fundamentalists as better neighbors than secular Marxist ones. (Washington certainly hoped so too, and dished out cash and arms accordingly.) Berman claims that Shariah law in Khomeini’s Iran after 1979 “excited admiration and envy in the Arab and Muslim world.” If so, why was it not instituted in every Muslim majority state? Berman says that the Taliban were celebrated through the Islamic world.” Evidence, please. His whole case rests on the uniqueness of the Islamic fundamentalist threat. So he mentions Sadat’s assassination by a Muslim fundamentalist in 1981 but omits that of Rabin by a Jewish fundamentalist in 1994. Berman’s answer for all our worldly woes is “pathological mass movements.” This diagnosis allows him to remark on “communism morphing into nationalism” in former Yugoslavia without bothering to pry into the role that neo-liberal Western banks had in demolishing the federation in the first place.

Berman scolds the sappy hand-wringing Left for being seduced by Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot—all of whom at one time or another were allied with the U.S. government (which, as we all know, was in thrall to sappy hand-wringing leftists). He then castigates a faction of 1930s French socialists for
an imprudent anti-war stance but somehow fails to mention the French Right’s hearty slogan “Better Hitler than Blum.” He blandly compares peace demonstrations today to 1930s appeasers. Indeed, dissenters are pictured as nothing less than dyspeptic collaborators with the rabid Taliban whom the West subsequently did not so much bomb as bribe into submission. So those teeming Muslim fanatics know the value of a dollar after all which, perversely, is a hopeful sign. Nonetheless, Berman envisions a long “war between liberalism and the apocalyptic and phantasmagorical movements.”

Noam Chomsky is pilloried for explaining “every last quirk of human behavior by invoking a tiny number of factors,” unlike, say, the professions of economics or sociology or political science. Berman, by contrast, narrows our buzzing, blooming confusion down tidily to one factor, those damned pathological mass movements. So he apparently believes that Pol Pot would have slouched toward Phnom Penh for his own inscrutable Oriental reasons, and without the midwifery of B-52 carpet bombing or bloody “incursions.” Nothing distresses Berman more than the fact that while American media sagely regard Chomsky as a “crank,” much of the rest of the planet treats him as a voice worth heeding. But what ultimately becomes crystal clear is that for Berman the whole planet now is pretty much a “pathological mass political movement” mobilizing irrationally to resist the liberal national interests of the United State, as ordained by born again George W. Bush.

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