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Liberalism and the War on Terrorism

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The events of September 11 focused minds around the world in a dreadful way. Suddenly, terrorism, which has always been ghastly, seemed immensely powerful. The whole world seemed to stop in its tracks, stunned by the audacity, the damage, the anger that the events of the day represented. The government of the most powerful country in the world seemed bewildered—almost unhinged—by the attack. Within hours, the Bush administration concentrated its attention on military responses. The U.S. government’s construction of the attack not as a crime but an act of war met very little opposition, at least among Americans, and it justified a massive military effort, first against Afghanistan and then, less directly, in Iraq.

This accent on force was neither the only policy response available at the time nor is it the only option open to the United States today. There was, from the outset, a minority opinion—within and, more vocally, outside the government—that advocated a multilateral policing operation,

framed by international law. Typically, this position was associated with an emphasis on a limited military response and a refusal to credit the authors of the attacks with the sort of influence in the Muslim world both they and the Bush administration seemed to accord them. It also rested on a conviction that the attacks—indeed, the very appearance of al Qaeda and other Islamist movements—were indications of deeper problems whose solution would require a broad-based and multifaceted approach.

Until the aftermath of the war in Iraq, the Bush administration evinced little interest in this line of argument. Having taken office declaring that “we don’t do nation-building,” the president and his advisers approached the challenge of September 11 less as the symptom of a systemic or organic problem in the Middle East and more as what might be called—with apologies to Durkheim—a mechanical puzzle. That is, they appeared to believe that by unseating a couple of already unpopular governments (say, Afghanistan and Iraq), intimidating a few others, rounding up several thousand people who might have connections with al Qaeda, monitoring illicit transfers of money, and tightening up visa procedures, they would have the problem under control, perhaps even solved.

However, attacks on Americans increased rather than declined as these measures were taken—largely, of course, because these measures put more Americans directly in harm’s way in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whether recruitment to groups espousing anti-American aims actually increased worldwide as a result of the administration’s conduct of its war on terrorism is impossible to know, but it is certainly plausible. In any event, the Bush administration was soon forced to concede that something very like nation-building—or more accurately, state-building—was indeed on the agenda.

Rather than simply trumpet “I told you so,” those who

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argued earlier for a more inclusive and multipronged response should now seize this new opportunity. Instead of castigating the misguided architects of the war on terrorism, all of us who care both about the well-being of Americans and the security and prosperity of the rest of the world—indeed, who believe the two may be linked—should consider the nature of the deeper troubles that spawned the attacks and the U.S. policies that might constructively contribute to addressing them.

Three Considerations, Three Tasks

At least three features of such a consideration are important. First, as suggested, it is not actually *nations* that we should contemplate helping to build but states and civil governments. Second, taking seriously the efforts to construct such institutions abroad will demand that we be more faithful to our own institutions at home and to the values they represent. Finally, we must think seriously about how we choose our prospective partners in these projects of reconstruction and development. Let me take each of these points in turn.

The distinction between nations, on one hand, and states and civil governments, on the other, points to the difference between those elements of our social lives that reflect personal identity—language, ethnic attachments, religious affiliations, national identity—and those constructed to allow us to enjoy those attachments and identities undisturbed. The United States has no business building, or even helping to build, nations or ethnic groups or religions. But there may be something to be said for assisting in building states, or better still, commonwealths—societies of people, as John Locke put it in his justly famous 1689 *Letter Concerning Toleration*, “constituted only for the procuring, preserving and advancing of their civil interests.” By “civil interests,” Locke intended “life, liberty,

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health and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like.” In other words, it is the responsibility of governments to preserve and protect the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

These are the ideas and values that underlie such policies as democracy promotion, advocacy of the rule of law, governance programs, and human rights monitoring. They are all, in their own way, efforts to instill respect for the liberal institutions that permit individuals and communities to enjoy their personal affections and private attachments in peace. Far too often in U.S. policy circles, these programs have seemed expendable in, or even detrimental to, our pursuit of other purposes, such as economic development or, more often, military security. Yet, if nothing else, the attacks of September 11 demonstrate that, in this global era, neither personal security nor collective prosperity—our treasured “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—are secure in the absence of the institutions that procure, preserve, and advance such interests around the world.

By no coincidence at all, Locke’s argument should sound very familiar to Americans—it is the bedrock of our liberal tradition, codified in our very own Bill of Rights. It says nothing about language or ethnicity, nationalism, or, most important, religious preference. Indeed, Locke’s whole purpose was to “distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion.”

To uphold this attachment to the civil government of a commonwealth may be difficult in the face of the taunting religious rationales that the authors of the attacks of September 11 offered. Yet the temptation to respond in kind must be energetically resisted. The Bush administration’s reaction—not simply in President George W. Bush’s initial reference to a

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“crusade” against this enemy but in the moral justification of the war on terrorism as a “righteous cause” against an enemy that is “absolutely evil”—conveyed a message that is deeply antithetical to the liberal purposes of what might be called commonwealth-building. The Bush administration’s enthusiasm for “faith-based initiatives,” whether in war or welfare, cannot privilege religious commitments—of any kind—over the preservation of liberal rights without distorting and confusing the purposes of the United States in the world.

Moreover, America will not be able to advocate effectively for institutions based on liberal rights abroad if we are not scrupulous in their observance at home. Obviously, terrorists have little sympathy with a world in which the process of arriving at a conclusion—electoral competition, for example, or trial by jury—is as important as the conclusion itself—a new government or policy, a determination of guilt or innocence. In the face of the insult and injury of the attacks of September 11, some Americans have been tempted to follow suit, suspending adherence to conventional procedures and declaring a virtual state of emergency in which virtuous ends excuse deplorable means.

The temptation to cheat to win is a powerful one, particularly when confronting an enemy that seems to know no restraint. But ultimately, what is true of terrorism is also true of the response: certain means are never justified, no matter what the end. We cannot compromise our commitment to the rule of law and remain either the society for which we are fighting or a society we will be able to persuade others to emulate.

Commonwealth-building thus entails two sets of demands—those we make on ourselves and those we may make on others. We cannot bend the law at home—creating novel classifications of convenience like “unlawful combat-

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ants” for terrorist suspects, according them the rights of neither criminal suspects nor prisoners of war. If we evade the recognized standards of the laws of war, for example, or suspend habeas corpus to hold individuals suspected of terrorist attachments without trial for months, we cannot expect others to observe the rule of law elsewhere.

Let us imagine for a moment that we do succeed in meeting our own high standards. If we were to regain our equilibrium and acknowledge the foundational importance of the liberal values embedded in both our own Constitution and in many of the international institutions to which our deference has long been far too cavalier, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with whom would we talk in the Middle East or the Muslim world?

It is certainly not self-evident to most Americans, including policy makers, that the region in which Osama bin Laden and his confederates cavort, stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan or even Indonesia, is home to many liberals. Certainly, the area’s many admirers of bin Laden, who celebrate his ability to upset the world’s last superpower, to threaten local governments around the region, and to divide the free world against itself, are not liberals. Nor, it must be said, are any of the region’s governments, whatever lip service they may pay to liberalism whenever Congress is considering next year’s foreign and military aid authorizations.

Yet there are increasingly vocal, articulate voices in the region itself—people who are refusing to let their societies sink into a war between the illiberal tyranny of the regimes and the nihilist anarchy of the opposition. These will be our true allies in building commonwealths.

Note that I said allies, not collaborators or instruments. Listen to the authors of the *Arab Human Development Report*:

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The only way to meet the challenge [in Iraq] is to enable the Iraqi people to exercise their basic rights in accordance with international law, free themselves from occupation, recover their wealth, under a system of good governance representing the Iraqi people and take charge of rebuilding their country from a human development perspective.

This is the voice of people who share the values Locke articulated, arguing for a vision, as they put it, “guaranteeing the key freedoms of opinion, speech and assembly through good governance bounded by the law.” So, yes, there are liberals in the Middle East. They are prominent academics, journalists, NGO activists, business consultants, international organization representatives, even the occasional government minister or parliamentarian. Rather than ignore them, portraying the battle in the region as one simply between friendly, pliant governments and divisive, dangerous oppositions or, even worse, between absolute and singular incarnations of good and evil, we should listen for, and indeed amplify, these voices.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the liberal authors of the *Arab Human Development Report* also exhibit an attachment to self-reliance that most Americans would certainly recognize and celebrate in themselves. Anyone who has ever tried to learn to do something only to be told it would be easier if the putative instructor just did the job alone will know part of the frustration of liberals in the Arab world. Building a commonwealth is indeed a complex project, but for that very reason, it cannot be bought off the shelf in some ideological supermarket and delivered fully assembled.

It will only be in working with allies like these liberals that we will be able to fully understand the nature of the deeper troubles that spawned the attacks. Judging from what our potential allies are already telling us, in the *Arab Human Development Report* and elsewhere, the lack of investment in educa-

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tion, in scientific research and development, in empowering women has had a corrosive effect on the economies and societies of the region, leaving too many young people, ignorant, frustrated, and understandably furious. There is much the rest of the world, including the United States, could do to rectify those deficits.

To do so, however, requires more than simply directing aid and technical assistance to family-planning projects, investing in local universities and scientific research centers, providing tax credits to technology companies willing to invest in building the information technology infrastructure in the region—although all of that would be desirable. It requires more than simply resisting the temptation to view policy toward the region wholly through the lens of terrorism and counterterrorism—although that is essential. It requires, most important, much greater respect for and fidelity to the liberal values to which we say we adhere, both at home and abroad.