

conclusion is evident. Though a response to September 11 in line with justice was possible, the United States failed to undertake it. Its disproportionate actions, however unfortunate, should come as no surprise to students of the recent past. ♦

LET GOD SORT THEM OUT

Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos

ROBERT D. KAPLAN
RANDOM HOUSE, 2002
XXII + 198 PGS.

The dust jacket of Mr. Kaplan's book made me suspicious. Henry Kissinger, that vest-pocket Bismarck,¹ calls the book "one of the most thought-provoking and profound . . . that I have ever read." John Gray, whom I have reviewed several times in these pages with incomplete sympathy, concurs: he speaks of a "profound and timely meditation." If these people praised the book, I thought, it must be deeply flawed.

Of course these suspicions did not disturb my complete objectivity; nevertheless, they proved entirely well

¹I adapt this from M.F. Sciacca's phrase for Bertrand Russell: a vest-pocket Voltaire.

founded. Mr. Kaplan begins with an engaging premise. The study of the classics of political philosophy has great value; the wisdom found in these books still very much has point today. But what he derives from his very selective looks at these classics is nothing short of horrendous.

We learn from Machiavelli, our author holds, that in foreign affairs morality must take a back seat to self-preservation. "Machiavelli believed that because Christianity glorified the meek, it allowed the world to be dominated by the wicked: he preferred a pagan ethic that elevated self-preservation over the Christian ethic of sacrifice, which he considered hypocritical" (p. 52). Whether Kaplan endorses every jot and tittle of Machiavelli's view I do not presume to say; but the entire book makes emphatically clear that he thinks Christian morality irrelevant to foreign policy.

Let us see how well Mr. Kaplan's pagan ethos works in practice. Rather than select examples of my own, I shall let our author put his best foot forward. What does *he* consider the triumphs of

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an ethics that spurns moral absolutes and instead seeks self-preservation?

His list is not without a certain macabre interest. “In 1988, during the Palestinian Intifada, Israel’s defense minister, Yitzhak Rabin, reportedly told Israeli soldiers to ‘go in and break their bones,’ referring to Palestinian protestors. . . . Rabin’s actions were condemned by American liberals. . . . Once elected prime minister, Rabin used his new power to make peace with the Palestinians and Jordanians” (pp. 52–53). If one looks at the present situation in the Middle East, I cannot think Rabin’s Machiavellian course of action an entire success.

Unfortunately, Kaplan has not yet finished. “A famous example of good public virtue and bad private virtue might be Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s somewhat mischievous evasions of truth in getting an isolationist Congress to approve the Lend-Lease Act in 1941” (p. 56). What is supposed to be so virtuous about Roosevelt’s efforts, against the wishes of the majority that had elected him, to embroil us in world war?

Abraham Lincoln, “the ultimate prince” of course, counts as an exemplar of the pagan ethos. “Lincoln was sufficiently ruthless to target the farms, homes, and factories of Southern civilians in the latter phase of the Civil War. Thus Lincoln reunited the temperate zone of North America, preventing it from falling prey to European powers and creating a mass society under uniform laws” (p. 61). Uniform laws are worth a great deal of bloodshed, are they not?

Kaplan praises Machiavellian virtue as a source of compromise. Because it recognizes that values are plural, it avoids the religious fanaticism that insists on imposing the supposed will of God on the recalcitrant. But if Lincoln and Roosevelt count as Machiavellians in good standing, Kaplan’s favored policy often leads to ideological crusades and mass death. May we not say that, in Karl Popper’s term, his hypothesis has been falsified?

But must we not acknowledge that Kaplan’s case has some merit? If foreign policy is governed by strict standards of morality, then will there not be endless interventions wherever human rights are violated? If we reject Kaplan, we seem committed to the “moralism” famously condemned by George Kennan. Unless, like the “Christian Realist” Reinhold Niebuhr, we temper morality with considerations of self-interest and power, we seem doomed to futile Wilsonian crusades.

This argument rests on a false premise. Why should we assume that morality requires frequent intervention

in foreign affairs? I should have thought the traditional American foreign policy of nonintervention much closer to the demands of ordinary morality. Do not the requirements of just-war theory rule out ideological

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interventions? In practice, few wars except those of self-defense meet the stringent standards of this view.

Kaplan responds that just-war theory is outdated. "[Hugo] Grotius's 'just war' presupposed the existence of a Leviathan—the pope or the Holy Roman Emperor—to enforce a moral code. But in a world without a universal arbiter of justice, discussions of war as 'just' or 'unjust' carry little meaning beyond the intellectual and legal circles in which such discussions take place" (p. 130). This comment displays a complete misunderstanding of the just-war tradition. This view is precisely not a version of legal positivism,

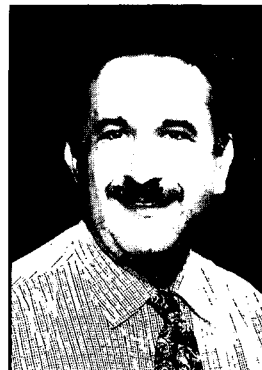
in which a valid law must be promulgated by a sovereign power. The principles of just-war theory set requirements for all nations, even in a world where most countries flout them.

Our author has yet another argument to bring in support of his "pagan ethos" in foreign relations, this one an old warhorse. In a discussion of Kant, he contrasts a morality of intention with a morality of consequences. (Oddly, he does not refer to Max Weber's famous essay on this topic.) Are not proponents of abstract justice concerned only with personal integrity, ignoring the effects of the rules they support? "What if goodwill leads to disastrous results?" (p. 112).

Once more Kaplan has misapprehended the principal alternative to his position. Advocates of just war do not embrace a theory according to which purity of intention is all that matters. Quite the contrary, their doctrine offers very concrete guidance for particular situations. If Kaplan here responds that the precepts of this theory can result in disastrous outcomes, is not the burden on him to give us some examples?

Those concerned with bad consequences would do better to pay attention to Kaplan's approach. He favors an American empire: "The power of this new imperium will derive from its never having to be declared, saving it from the self-delusive, ceremonial trappings of the United Nations" (p. 148). Of course our empire will be benevolent, since its military is "demonstrably multiethnic." I am glad of the news. ♦

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