

*Blood in the Sand: Imperial Fantasies,
Right Wing Ambitions, and the Erosion of
American Democracy*

by Stephen Eric Bronner, University of Kentucky Press, 2005, 207. pp.

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One should never judge a book by its cover, but in this case of this book, it is very hard not to do so. The title suggests the book will be an ideological screed, and it is. The cover has an American tank in the Iraqi desert in the middle of a sandstorm. Not far away is a shirtless man, presumably an Iraqi, with his arms outstretched. The man is meant to be a symbol of Iraqi resistance to the American invasion. But, of course, from a different point of view, the man could be seen as welcoming the liberation of Iraq. This view, however, is not possible in Bronner's book, since it is yet another diatribe against the Iraq war. The author, a professor of political science at Rutgers University, spares no effort in fitting the war into the dominant narrative of the anti-war left.

There are many books of this type, but there is no sense in buying more than one. The genre hardly varies at all. In their pages, you will find a series of ideological platitudes and canards which constitute an entire mythology of negativity and despair: anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, simplistic anti-militarism, quasi-religious pacifism, vicious ideological attacks on neo-conservatism, and a steadfast refusal to acknowledge some simple sociological and historical facts about the war. Among those facts are the following: that most Iraqis welcomed the war; that it has brought one of the world's greatest despots and threats to the dock; that it has created, within the space of just three short years, a constitutional democracy that has witnessed free and fair elections in which millions of Iraqis have voted for the first time in their history to reclaim their sovereignty; and that the war has allowed Iraqis the possibility of claiming the basic human rights guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (which had been denied to them by that very organisation by virtue of its control by illiberal blocs of anti-democratic forces, in alliance with nefarious political and economic interests of certain members of the Security Council, and other profiteers from Saddam's bloody regime).

Bronner's book is a fairly straightforward series of theoretical reductions, but the principal one is that the war was 'little more than an imperialist ambition' led by a cabal of neoconservatives in the United States, and supported by several deluded left-wing intellectual traitors. This account, however, completely ignores the fact that the main ideological driving force for the war emanated from two sources that have very little to do with Bush, neo-conservatism, or American imperialism. The first was the Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998 which was signed into law by President Bill Clinton (who has since changed his mind; during his recent trip to the Middle East he denounced the war as 'a mistake.')

Bronner seems to remember nothing of this. He ignores the fact that regime change in Iraq has been a matter of public law in the United States since 1998 and was duly and legally authorised by the US Congress in 2003. He also ignores another ideological source of the war. Tony Blair, perhaps the most principled liberal statesman of modern times, was a leading force in calling the world to its senses about the nature of Saddam's tyranny and the need to stop him from wreaking further havoc in the Middle East. In an impassioned speech in Chicago in 1999, Blair, a great friend of Clinton, and no doubt with Clinton's imprimatur and support, called for an end to Saddam and the democratisation of the Middle East. This occurred while George W. Bush, an isolationist governor in Texas, was most likely not dreaming of imperial hegemony, but figuring out how to get elected by appealing to domestic dissatisfactions. Bush was, so to speak, Blair's poodle on the matter of Iraq and foreign policy more generally after 9/11.

Pacifisms

Bronner's book opens with a paean to Gandhi. It makes very little sense, since Gandhi would almost certainly have thought it impossible to overturn a regime such as Saddam's through non-violent means (he said as much about the impossibility of fighting Hitler, and other totalitarians, with his methods). But Bronner seems simply eager to proclaim himself a man of virtue and pacifist piety, a member of the naïve camp of pacifists who emerged in strength after 9/11 to declare that 'war is not the answer', but who really had no clue as to what the 'question' was. The question, for the record, was: how to deal with (a) Afghanistan, which harbored the al-Qaeda terrorists that launched the mass murder of Americans on a sunny morning in September 2001, and (b) the clear and present danger of a global network of terrorists who had as their objective the launching of further such attacks, if possible using WMD.

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To his credit, Bronner grudgingly admits that the war in Afghanistan was justifiable and had the good consequence of disrupting the most important base of the al-Qaeda network. But Bronner cannot help declaiming – against all available evidence – that Afghanistan is doomed to a future of disaster and factional warlordism. In fact, the war succeeded in establishing a functioning, if imperfect, democracy in a country that just a short time ago wreaked of terror and fascism. It is wonderful to see the newly elected Afghan president sitting in Washington rather than watching the Taliban stoning women to death for adultery and blasting away at age-old Buddhist monuments. One finds no reflection on such awkward facts here. One comes away from books like these suspecting that their authors really want these experiments to fail so that they can proclaim that they were right after all about the whole misadventure.

But back to the pacifists. Bronner has the distinction of having been one of the members of the Delegation of Independent United States Academics to the Iraqi-American Academic Symposium which was held at the University of Baghdad on January 14-16, just a few months before the war began. Bronner takes great pains to assert that he and his contingent, as well as the 33,000 academics who signed a related petition, sought to distance themselves from Saddam's regime. In his own words, he tried 'not to become a dupe.' He admits that Saddam was a brutal and ruthless thug. But how could Bronner escape the label of 'dupe' after failing to see that Saddam was manipulating this well-meaning group to his own advantage? There is little question that Saddam saw such people as dupes. He was enamored of the political simplicities of the anti-war movements in the democracies which were fighting to stop the war against him. To show up in Iraq at this time, at the invitation, and with the approval, of Saddam (there was no other way into Iraq) was to make oneself partisan to the regime.

While guests of the regime in Iraq, the US 'peace' delegation publicly named the numerous sins of the United States. But they made no mention of the transgressions of Saddam. How could they while on Iraqi soil with Saddam's apparatus of terror in power? The fact is that Bronner and others were lending symbolic legitimacy to Saddam Hussein's regime and no amount of posturing can deny the objective validity of this fact. The delegation confirmed George Orwell's famous dictum that in times of struggle between liberal democracies and totalitarian states, pacifists are 'objectively pro-fascist' despite their declamations that they are only third parties trying to seek peace through negotiations and diplomacy.

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Nowhere in the book do we see any acknowledgement of the fact that Saddam was in material breach of 17 UN Resolutions. Nowhere do we find a realisation that diplomatic channels were only a means for Saddam to wreak further havoc on his own population and to pursue his drive for the ace card of a nuclear weapon which would make him untouchable. And nowhere do we find mention of the nefarious Oil-for-Food Program, the details of which give lie to the fact that the United Nations and certain members of the Security Council were the moral paragons in the run-up to the war. One would like to give Bronner the benefit of the doubt that the book was written before the sordid details of this scandal were entirely known. But since the book was published in fall of 2005, it would seem attendant on the author to acknowledge the affair. Of course these facts are excluded because they do not fit into the dominant leftist mythology that the United States is the principal culprit for anything that goes wrong in the so-called 'world community.' This is a view shared by huge numbers of illiberal states in the world. Sadly, it is being echoed by many left-liberals who have thrown their lot in with the latter, wittingly or unwittingly.

Don't you know there's a war on?

In the chapter titled 'Us Versus Them' Bronner relies on the Nazi propagandist Carl Schmitt to theorise George Bush's propaganda strategy in the war against terror. One can grant Bronner some credit for pointing out Bush's tendency toward Manicheanism, which is often troubling. But the critique lacks an awareness of the core realities of the war on terror. As Christopher Hitchens once pithily put it, beyond Bush and Blair and their supporters, al-Qaeda seems to be the only party in this war that realises it is at war. Our enemies are also prone to binary thinking, to say the least. But while, in recent months, the American system of checks and balances has worked to counter, to some extent, the excesses of Bush's policies, al-Qaeda is only checked by Western power.

In the days leading up to World War I, John Dewey declaimed against both pacifists, who failed to see the true threat of Germany, and the ultra-patriots, who saw any dissent as anti-American. He argued for a pragmatic program to stop Germany which did not rely on any overt ideological excesses. Bronner most likely sees himself as being in the tradition of patriotic dissent, but his rhetorical excesses lead him away from acknowledging the reality of Islamofascism, and its war, and lead him towards overplaying the dangers of the so-called American empire.

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WMD: No Easy Choices

Bronner makes some valid criticisms of the arguments used to legitimate the war. There has been no small amount of debate in the United States about whether Bush and his allies actually lied about the intelligence about WMD, or whether the intelligence was simply faulty. Bronner believes that lies were told, and one must agree with him that it is not easy to believe any politician when he tells you that he was not lying. Yet there is one argument that is seldom heard in this kind of attack on the supposedly duplicitous Bush: that the burden of proof to show the world that he was not in violation of UN Security Council resolutions regarding WMDs was on Saddam Hussein himself and not Western powers or the United Nations. One would like to see, just once, an acknowledgement that the actions of Saddam Hussein led many of the most sophisticated intelligence agencies in the world to believe that he was hiding something. Soon after he was deposed, we discovered from the Duelfer report, that Saddam Hussein had every intention of restarting this campaign to acquire WMD as soon as he had got the United Nations off his back (something despots have a generally good track record in accomplishing).

What characterises this book, like so many of its genre, is that the author does not pose questions about the realities of Saddam Hussein and his brutal regime. What do you do with a tyrant who has used WMD, committed two genocides, and has proclaimed his desire to acquire nuclear weapons, and who refuses to comply with the will of the international community? Do you wait until he acquires a nuclear weapon? Or do you prevent him from acquiring one at a time of your own choosing? Politics is never about easy choices and I am quite willing to believe that lies were told about the reasons for going to war. And I am willing to believe that intelligence in this complex world is difficult to acquire with any degree of certainty. Yet it is crucial not to give a genocidal dictator the benefit of the doubt. The most troubling thing about the international community and its large-scale anti-war movement was its steadfast lack of judgment in almost always giving Saddam the benefit of the doubt, but not the leaders of Western liberal democracies.

Reductionisms and Iraq

Bronner's discussion of the war in Iraq is full of ideological platitudes and reductionisms. He paints a portrait of a disaster, a quagmire, America's Vietnam, etc. He tells us, in an example of what might be called 'left-wing orientalism', that the people of Iraq are not capable of democracy because they have no heritage of it. (What of Japan and Germany? After World War II each was suffering from the

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legacy of total war, and without any durable history of democracy. These countries are now among the leading democracies in the world.) Bronner fails to acknowledge any of the successes of the post-war period. That the Coalition forces committed grave errors of judgment in administering post-war Iraq is unquestionable. But a balanced account would acknowledge the signs of success: the deposition of Saddam, the passage of a constitution, free elections, the return of the refugees, the re-flooding of the southern marshlands, the rise of vibrant civil society – especially women’s groups and labor groups. Opinion polls carried out by independent organisations show that about 70 percent of Iraqis are optimistic about the future. This level of optimism would be hard to find in Boston or London! And it would be nice to hear that in the interim Iraqi parliament, 31 percent of the members were women, as opposed to 16 percent of the American House of Representatives (a fact which has caused me at times to quip sardonically to my female students that if they want to succeed in politics they should go to Iraq.)

Bronner has constructed a narrative of disaster in which there is no room for even a glimmer of hope. He cannot escape that narrative because to do so would be to acknowledge that some good has come of a war he must continue to believe was elementally evil. Hewing to this narrative causes a betrayal of some of the most basic principles of liberal internationalism. In this case, failing to aid in the reconstruction of a liberal state in place of the rogue state which existed before. Bronner cannot do this because, like Noam Chomsky, he thinks America is the rogue state – not Saddam’s Iraq, not Iran, which wants to wipe Israel off the map, and not North Korea, which has recently starved to death two million of its own citizens.

It would, of course, have been better if the current Iraqi democracy had not been forged from war. But no far-reaching revolutions for human rights have been bloodless. What is better: a just but illegal war, or an unjust peace? As cold and utilitarian as it might sound, the war was justified on the grounds that Iraqi public opinion supported it and many millions of Iraqis voted and voted again, in the face of death threats against them, to reclaim their country. Yes, a coalition of powerful states broke international law but they built a democracy in the Middle East, with the support of the majority of people in the country concerned. And should we really put our faith in the UN, as Bronner suggests? What of the virtual takeover of the institution by blocs of illiberal tyrants? What of election of Libya as the chair of the Commission on Human Rights? What of the bystanding in the face of genocide in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur?

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Liberals, in spite of their loathing of George Bush, should be able to support the millions of Iraqis participating in this bold new democratic experiment rather than consigning them to the oblivion of their theoretical constructions. But Bronner's book will reinforce the negativity of those contemporary left-liberals who have been against the liberation of Iraq from Day One. In a recent American poll, 42 percent of registered Democrats felt that the world would be better off if Saddam were still in power. What does this tell us about the moral compass of the party which pretends to speak for the underclass? I read Bronner's book at the same time that I was listening to the defeatist pronouncements of American Democrats such as Howard Dean, John Kerry, and Ted Kennedy. Bronner, not being a politician, is no doubt a much more decent man because he is not maligning the Iraqi effort for political advantage, as these American Democrats are. I am sure that Bronner really does believe every word in his narrative. But that is precisely the problem. His narrative allows him no place for the optimism and hope for liberty, freedom, and democracy that once defined liberal internationalism. By constructing a dark, cynical, self-referential, and apocalyptic scenario, he has not only betrayed the central principles of liberal internationalism, but has helped to cede moral high ground to the neoconservatives. It will be very difficult to win that ground back if the left fails to assist the nascent Iraqi democracy and insists on surrendering the fight to Zarqawi and Saddam loyalists.

One would like to stop at this point, since all critics have the power to become excessively vituperative when confronted with arguments that seem absurd. Just when I was about to give up on it, I came across the chapter entitled: 'Dub'ya's Fellow Travelers': Left Intellectuals and Mr. Bush's War', co-authored by Kurt Jacobsen. My first reaction to this chapter was simply to laugh. Was the author not a 'fellow traveler' of Saddam Hussein when he went to Iraq to denigrate the US just before the war? The chapter is an all-out attack on those left intellectuals who supported the war in Iraq. One could have written a serious intellectual history of serious intellectuals such as Paul Berman, Mitchell Cohen, Christopher Hitchens, and others (he mistakenly includes Michael Walzer in this list, though it is well-known that Walzer was not a supporter of the Iraq war.) But the chapter seldom rises above vicious, mocking, ad hominem attacks. Being familiar with the arguments of this group I can honestly say that the chapter offers only the crudest caricature of their complex and nuanced arguments. Bronner could have taken the time to write a serious intellectual history but such books as we have here do not aspire to complexity. They cleave to piety, orthodoxy, and ideology, that triumvirate enemy of serious thought which resists all attempts to penetrate it.

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There are serious critiques of the war, such as those written by Larry Diamond and George Packer. Bronner's book, by contrast, is an ideological screed. Like others of its kind, the book reduces the complex history of the last few years to an illustration of an 'anti-war' ideology. Yet history can never be written as ideology. As Leszek Kolakowski once noted, an ideology is never wrong: it is a self-referential, self-reproducing mythology, like religion, and it resists or deflects all data which is foreign to it. Hence, all evidence of progress in Iraq is resisted and deflected. When the history of the Iraq war and the democratic experiment in Iraq is written, this 'anti-war' ideology will be judged as a betrayal of liberalism and as the rationale for actively tolerating rogue states and actively working against democratic futures.

I am unsure what the future holds. But I am hopeful that it will bring, at least in the case of Iraq, something much better than Bronner's dire prognostications. I shall strive to keep him and the other doyens of despair informed about all progressive outcomes in Iraq, even though they will not want to hear about them.

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