

## *Interrogating Terror and Liberalism: An Interview with Paul Berman*

Paul Berman is the author of *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (1997), *Terror and Liberalism* (2003) and *Power and the Idealists, or, The Passion of Joschka Fischer and its Aftermath* (2005). Over the years he has written about politics and literature for *The New York Times Magazine* and *Book Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Village Voice*, *Mother Jones*, and other magazines. He is a contributing editor of the *New Republic*, a member of the editorial board of *Dissent*, and a writer in residence at New York University. Ellen Willis has written that ‘The left’s ability to address the issue Berman raises is nothing less than a test of its ability to make sense of the contemporary world.’ The interview was conducted on May 24 2006.

### **Part 1: Personal and Intellectual Background**

**Alan Johnson:** In an interview with Brian Lamb for Book TV you talked about your ‘social democratic heart.’ How did you acquire one of those? Can you tell me about your family and early experiences?

**Paul Berman:** I come from a typical New York Jewish background. My family came to America as immigrants more than a century ago and worked in the garment industry. My grandfather, who was a factory tailor, was active in building his trade union and he took part in the socialist movement, too, on its more conservative side. I grew up naturally identifying with the labour movement and the democratic left. In college I was active in the New Left, which was a lot more radical. But now I find myself reverting to the politics of my grandfather, who, it now seems to me, had a lot of wisdom.

**Alan Johnson:** What were your intellectual influences? You have said that you ‘romanticised Durruti, the militant leader of the Spanish Anarchists, and the anarcho-syndicalists of the Spanish Civil War.’ What movements or thinkers have been especially influential for you?

**Paul Berman:** During the course of the new left, a great number of people veered off rebelliously into Leninist directions of various sorts – to Maoism or Trotskyism or old-line Moscow communism. But I rebelled against the rebels. I

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found myself fascinated by an entirely different wing of the old left, which was the Anarchists, at a point when, in New York, any number of my own comrades were taking up a nostalgic cult of the old American Communist Party. The old working class Anarchists of New York had created an organisation innocently, and rather cautiously, called The Libertarian Book Club. The club contained a number of people who had participated in the Russian Revolution. There were people who gone to Spain during the Civil War there. There were a lot of Wobblies around. I got to know those people.

**Alan Johnson:** What were the most important ideas you took from that milieu?

**Paul Berman:** What drew me to that milieu was a revulsion against the Leninist passions that were claiming so much of the New Left. I always thought of the New Left as an anti-authoritarian movement, and suddenly here were too many of my friends and comrades drifting in ever more authoritarian directions. The old-time anarchists, on the other hand, exuded a natural spirit and culture that was inherently libertarian. The Anarchists entertained a very thorough critique of Communism. They had a whole literature on the Soviet Union and a criticism of Communism that was at once philosophical and practical. A very bitter literature. There was also, in New York, beginning in the 1960s, a serious anarchist criticism of Castro, which came from the exiled Cuban Anarchists in Argentina and even in Miami, who had their newspapers. These writings were taken very seriously by some people in New York. In the old anarchist circles, you could learn about the firing squads and the prisons.

There was something of a 'high culture' spirit among the Anarchists. They took writing and literature seriously and this, too, was attractive to me. And from still another point of view there was a certain reasonableness to them, believe it or not. Some of those old militants were pretty extreme – there was a fairly wild group of Italians, among others. And yet, a good many of those people were affiliated in one way or another with the old social democrats in New York. The Jewish anarchist newspaper was supported by the garment workers union – my grandfather's union, the old social democrats of the labour movement. Those old anarchists were not as cut off from the institutions and spirit of American liberalism as you might imagine. All that was attractive and it gave me a good education and a spirit of independence.

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I also took from them an example of how someone could be genuinely independent and indifferent to the opinions of the great majority. The old Anarchists in New York were brave. Anti-Castro on one hand, and opposed to the gangsters in their own unions on the other hand. They were indifferent to the rest of the left – really, to everybody: faithful only to their own judgments and opinions – and I found this really inspiring. I learnt a habit of independence of mind, or I like to think that I did.

**Alan Johnson:** In the 1980s you travelled to Nicaragua to report on the Sandinista Revolution. Did the independence of mind you speak of play a part in your reporting?

**Paul Berman:** I travelled to Nicaragua many times, beginning in 1985 at the invitation of *Mother Jones* magazine. I went there with a journalistic idea that drew on the old anarchist notion of workers' autonomy – which was also pretty much the idea that was in vogue on the left in those days amongst the Marxist and Marxist-influenced historians. This was the idea that you could find in the writings of E.P. Thompson, or of Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery and other people in the United States – the idea of writing history from the bottom up, the history of workers' grass-roots movements and organisations, and of trying to get an accurate picture of the mode of production, not just abstractly but with faces and names. I had read pretty widely in these historians, and I went to Nicaragua precisely with the idea of studying the revolution from this point of view.

I spent a lot of time in a provincial town called Masaya, which had been the original home of the revolution against the Somoza dictatorship. Masaya is an industrial town in the eighteenth-century style. Shoe-making is a big industry. I became friends with some of the shoemakers. They had a co-operative, and I studied its history, which led back into the history of Central American Marxism. The shoemakers in Masaya had played their part in the revolution against the old dictatorship. I began to look at events from their point of view – to see the revolution from below. And I found myself in an odd situation.

On the one hand I was writing some of the most classically left-wing journalism (in my own eyes) to come out of Nicaragua – I was talking to workers' organisations and telling the story from their point of view. On the other hand, telling the story from the point of view of the Masaya workers did not put the Sandinistas in a flattering light. It took me a little while to realise that the Sandinistas were

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running a version of a Leninist revolution and that they had created a thorough system of top-down oppression which descended all the way into the workplace and the cooperatives and the home and the neighbourhood and the school, which was really quite resented by a lot of people – the same people who had been at the forefront of the revolution against the Somoza dictatorship. This was a big story. I suppose I had stumbled onto a Central American Kronstadt.

I was a little timid at first about arriving at conclusions that were at odds with those of so many friends and comrades. But I became more confident. And then I found that I had become very unpopular among a great many people, and this was a little daunting. Then again, I found myself encouraged and cheered on by some of the old Anarchists back in New York. A friend went to see my old Wobbly friend and mentor, Sam Dolgoff, not too long before his death, in the late 1980s. Sam asked about me, and when he was told that I had gone to Nicaragua and was reporting on the Sandinistas, he said, ‘He better not come back liking them.’

I also came out of Nicaragua having developed an enormous passion for Nicaraguan literature and Latin American literature more generally, and I have been writing about that, though most of what I’ve written hasn’t been published yet.

**Alan Johnson:** You are one of the few people on the left – Irving Howe was another figure of course – who are comfortable in the worlds of literature and politics. How does that love for literature impact on the way you think politically?

**Paul Berman:** The name of Irving Howe is entirely apropos because all this time that I was interested in the old Anarchists, I was reading *Dissent* magazine and became a huge fan of Irving Howe, and then, eventually, his friend. I became associated with *Dissent*. Yes, for me, it’s always been entirely natural to be literary and political at the same time. Maybe my literary roots run a little deeper than my political ones, though that might not be entirely obvious to my readers. Of course, there is an enormous difference between political thinking and the literary spirit, but it has always been my instinct to think in both categories at the same time. There is a particular intellectual tradition in New York which is literary and political at the same time – *Partisan Review* was famous for that from the 1930s but it actually goes back to *Masses* magazine in the 1910s and even earlier to the immigrant world you can read about in Emma Goldman’s autobiography. It’s a cultural tradition. Irving himself, as you point out, was a representative of that tradition, and it has always been my own natural impulse.

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### Part 2: *Terror and Liberalism*

**Alan Johnson:** *Terror and Liberalism* has been one of the most important and influential books published since 9/11. What was your goal in writing that book?

**Paul Berman:** At one level I was trying to interpret the events of September 11. At a deeper level I was proposing an interpretation of modern history. And the whole of the interpretation is really contained in the title – there is a dialectic between terror and liberalism. I offer a theory of terror – I draw some aspects of this from Camus – that sees terror as an expression of a larger idea, which can be described as totalitarianism, admittedly a vexed label. Totalitarianism, of which terror is an expression, is a rebellion against liberal civilisation and the liberal idea. It is an anti-liberal rebellion which is generated by liberalism itself. Sometimes the rebellion is generated by liberalism's strengths and sometimes by liberalism's shortcomings. The rise of liberalism over the last few centuries and the rebellions that have been inspired by that rise can account for the rise of the great totalitarian movements of one sort or another. That's the theoretical idea expressed in the book. It's a pretty simple idea, in the end. I don't think that my simple idea explains everything in the world. But it does explain some things.

My other purpose was to look at the modern Muslim world through this kind of lens and so bring the Muslim world into world history and not exclude it. I looked for things that might be recognisable in the Muslim world as opposed to things that were utterly foreign. And I found things. I found this relationship between liberal civilisation and totalitarian rebellion. I found the modernity of our current situation. Other people were imagining that we were facing some anthropological exoticism from the long-ago past, or something that might just as well have come from outer space. I was able to show that, on the contrary, we were facing a modern and recognisable phenomenon which was different, but not all that different, from what we knew from the history of modern Europe.

**Alan Johnson:** And what did you find in common between the Muslim totalitarianism of today and the European totalitarianism of yesterday?

**Paul Berman:** First, an underlying mythology: people of good who are oppressed by a cosmic conspiracy which is external and internal at the same time; an all-extermimating war of annihilation; and after, the arrival of a grand utopia that is going to be a leap forward into the sci-fi future, and, at the same time, a leap back into a lost golden age. This kind of mythology underlies all the totalitarian movements,

in one fashion or another. Second, I thought a lot about Camus's insight that the romantic rebellions of the late 18th century and early 19th century were caught up in a frenzy which became a nihilism – a cult of death, of murder and of suicide. Camus described a strange process that has overtaken one movement after another. The movement begins as a conventional rebellion in the name of principles that can be admired and for reasons that can be understood and applauded. Then they are overtaken by a nihilistic cult of murder and suicide.

It is the combination of these two things – the nihilist cult of murder and suicide on the one hand, the paranoid and utopian mythology on the other hand – that has created the great totalitarian movements. Stalinism, fascism, and Nazism offer variations of this phenomenon. But we ought to be able to see that the Ba'athism of Iraq and the more radical currents of Islamism are likewise variations. They arose in the same period – 1920s and 1930s. They were a little slower than their European cousins in coming to power – in 1979 Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini both came to power, in Iraq and Iran respectively. But, once they did establish their power, these people and their fellow thinkers began to bring about in the Muslim world the same phenomenon that we had already seen in Europe, and this was a wave of mass killings. One of the shocking aspects of the modern world is how vast has been the killing within certain sections of the Muslim world within the last quarter century. There appears to be literally millions of people killed. My interpretation in *Terror and Liberalism* was that the terrorist attacks of September 11 – like those in London and Madrid and other places more recently – ought not to be seen as isolated events. They ought to be seen as the foam from a larger wave. The great mass of the wave has swept across the Muslim world. A few flecks of foam have reached New York and London and other places. The really devastated places have been Iraq, Iran, Algeria, Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and so on. By looking at these Muslim events with an eye to the totalitarian past of Europe we can get them into focus a little more clearly. At the same time we can begin to recognise some of our own difficulties in understanding what is going on.

**Alan Johnson:** Why do liberals insist on treating pathological mass movements as normal rational political movements with grievances that can be negotiated? In 2004, Mo Mowlam (the former Labour Cabinet Minister for Northern Ireland, who died tragically in 2005) proposed that the government sit down with al Qaeda at the negotiating table just as she had sat with Sinn Fein. How do we explain what you call the 'rationalist naiveté that is shared by almost every part of modern liberal society?'

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**Paul Berman:** The ‘rationalist naiveté’ is built into liberal civilization and the liberal idea. It’s a very deep thing. Liberalism proposes that people *should* act rationally and that we *want* to act rationally. Liberalism’s first step is to agree that we want to make a division in our own minds and imaginations between the rational and the theological. We agree to say, ‘well, we may have religious ideas, we may believe in divine revelation, we may believe anything we want, in one corner of our minds, but in another corner we are going to try to think things through rationally, according to criteria that can be judged and evaluated and contradicted.’ We agree to make this division in our own mind. Then we agree to make this division in society as a whole – the church will stay in this corner and the state will remain in that corner, and each institution will try to remain independent of the other. And we hope that by doing this the state will be able to make rational decisions no matter what the advocates of divine revelation may say. The advocates of divine revelation are free to say what they want but they will say it in the church. The state will operate, hopefully, on the basis of rational discussion, analysis, and free and open debate. The whole presupposition is that by allowing there to be a sphere of rational thought and behaviour we will be able to have a more successful society. And, on balance, the ways this has worked out well have outweighed the ways in which it has worked out badly.

The liberal idea makes us very reluctant to believe that *anyone* is acting in a non-rational way. In the most naïve version it is imagined that really *nobody* acts in an irrational way. There are two aspects of this kind of naiveté that are worth commenting on.

First, this kind of naiveté is itself one of the sources of the rebellion against liberalism. There is something appalling, or at least deeply unsatisfying, in the idea that men and women are strictly rational. So people are always tempted to rebel against it. The romantic writers were the first modern people to see this and to want to rebel against the rational calculations of liberal society. They rebelled in the form of literature, which is the right way to rebel, but they saw something, and they were right to see it and to rebel.

Second, the liberal idea comes at a terrible cost in political understanding. In the pre-modern age the rational and the irrational could both be understood. It was possible to think and to speak about such things as the soul in political terms, and to think about distortions and perversions of the soul. This became impossible after the rise of liberalism. Political language became impoverished. If you read

Plato, his idea of tyranny is very different from a modern liberal idea of tyranny. For Plato, tyranny is not a system based on bad institutions. It's a perversion of the soul. The tyrant is someone who has lost the proper discipline over his soul and so is lost to his appetites and desires. There is even a fleeting passage or two where Plato mentions the tyrant might succumb to an appetite for cannibalism. This is amazing to see because it means Plato has already identified a cult of death as a temptation, one of the possible perversions of the soul that can take place. This is *exactly* the kind of thing that – after the rise of liberal ideas – it became harder for people to understand. We took all the questions of the soul, and of virtue, and of the perversions of the soul, and removed them to a corner reserved for religion or psychology. In a different corner we assigned political questions. In the political world, just as in the economic world, we wanted to accord everyone rationality, so we took all the questions of irrationality and put them in a different place entirely. It became very difficult to conceive that people might be behaving in irrational ways or might have succumbed to the allure of a cult of death

**Alan Johnson:** When you talk about the pathological character of mass movements, the cult of death, and, more recently, about Andre Glucksmann's notion of self-sustaining hatred, are you deliberately trying to overcome this impoverishment of our political language and make it possible for us to speak again of the irrational?

**Paul Berman:** Yes, this is the whole purpose. I want us to be able to say to ourselves that there are other impulses than rational ones, to recognise these other impulses and discuss them. And here, let me discuss the style of my book. I tried to speak about these things in a variety of tones and at different emotional levels. It is necessary to find new ways of writing and speaking, different from the social sciences, and which can express things lucidly but with emotion. I wrote *Terror and Liberalism* with the very deliberate notion that there was a stylistic question at issue.

### Part 3: Interrogating *Terror and Liberalism*

**Alan Johnson:** I want to raise five kinds of criticisms that have been made of *Terror and Liberalism* and invite you to respond.

#### A Political naivety?

**Alan Johnson:** The first criticism indicts you as politically naïve. Danny Postel in The Washington Post, and Ellen Willis in Salon, thought *Terror and Liberalism* was vitiated by a faith in the Bush administration as a force for freedom that was



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just naïve. Edward S. Herman in Z Magazine (July-August 2003) called you a ‘very model of a Cruise Missile Leftist’ because you ignored the fact that ‘U.S. liberalism is attached to an advanced, globalised, militarised, capitalist political economy whose material interests might be a more important force shaping its external policies than liberal principles.’ ‘Berman deals with this,’ he said, ‘by complete evasion.’ Similarly, Kurt Jacobsen, in Logos, suggested that ‘the dark but distinct possibility that overtly noble wars ... would be conducted according to realpolitik tenets and exploitative aims seems lost on Berman.’ ‘Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, Berman admonishes, watch the impressive fireworks and shut up...’ Writing in The Nation, George Scialabba listed some US imperialist interventions and commented that ‘Not one of these episodes is mentioned in Terror and Liberalism.’ How do you respond?

**Paul Berman:** First, on the topic of naiveté and the imperialist nature of the west or the USA. One of the arguments I make in the book is that the totalitarian movements represent something that was originally tried out by western imperialists in the colonised world and which then swept back over Europe: the Belgian atrocities in the Congo, the German colonisers who set out to exterminate the Herrero tribe, and so on. These were first steps in what became the totalitarianism of Europe. The USA was not exempt from this sort of thing itself, in the Philippines and elsewhere. But US imperialism – if we are to use the word in any kind of reasonably defined sense – has mostly been a story of East Asia and Latin America, not of the Arab world.

In regard to the US I think the naiveté is the other way. It takes two forms. There is an idea which comes out of Lenin’s book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which argues that the western countries are in effect operating as a bloc in oppressing the rest of the world. It’s possible to draw an analysis out of that book according to which western imperialists as a whole are enriching themselves by impoverishing the countries in the rest of the world. In this analysis one views the US as very nearly a single unit (this is Lenin’s argument) and everything that the US does must have very nearly a single quality – imperialist and oppressive. And this is hard to accept. The United States, like any society, consists of thousands of different currents which go this way and that way, and the actions of the US – both of private individuals and the state – can likewise go this way or that, with many different effects. The same United States which acted so catastrophically and irresponsibly in Guatemala in the 1950s managed to liberate France and give it back to the French a few years earlier, and defeated the Nazis in order to give Germany back to the

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Germans. The US is a country which can act this way or that way according to decisions that are made – decisions which can be influenced by the citizens. It's naïve to assume that what the US does is always, simply, by definition, imperialist.

And there is an American version of this idea which is not Leninist at all. Rather it's a kind of Protestant idea. In this case what matters is our inner soul. If our inner soul is good our outer actions must, by definition, be good. This is a naïve idea in the extreme and the source of a certain kind of American nationalism. The person who expresses this idea with intuitive ease is George W. Bush. He said after the 7/7 bombings, while he was in Britain: 'If they could only see into our hearts they would know how good we are,' and he honestly believes that. He looks into his own heart and believes he is a good man and therefore his policies must be good, and everything the US does must be good. But there is a flip side of that. Other people say, 'Well, my own heart is not so good. I see envy, rapacity, greed, lust, therefore I know I am not a good person, therefore nothing the United States does can be good. Everything must be bad.' It's George W. Bushism flipped on its head. There is a great deal of this. People say, 'what are we doing trying to fight bad guys in other parts of the world? We should look in our own hearts and see that we are bad.' Instead of trying to rescue oppressed people in other parts of the world, let us try vigorously to improve our own characters.

**Alan Johnson:** Are we touching here on one of the deep background factors shaping the character of US interventions? Was it Joschka Fischer who said 'Americans don't play chess?' His thought is that there is a certain carelessness in US foreign policy. Might we associate that carelessness with this notion that 'if we are right in our hearts, we can't go wrong?' Does that mentality get in the way of a more prudential calculating mentality?

**Paul Berman:** I think some element of that entered into the Bush administrations thinking about Iraq. Like everyone I have been dumbfounded at the stupidity of many of the things that have been done, and I try to understand how they could have thought things through so poorly. I think there was a simple faith that everything was going to work out for the best. Bush thought his intentions were good in his own heart and therefore the results were going to be good. Some elements of Fischer's criticism are true – though you can go too far with that criticism very easily.

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One critic accused *Terror and Liberalism* of presenting a Whig view of history, according to which everything gets better and better. No! On the contrary, I think the rise of liberalism contains within itself some horrors. It contains a blindness which leads not only to the inability to recognise the enemies of liberalism, but also an inability to recognise its own crimes. The story of King Leopold in the Congo is of a genocide committed under the slogans of progress. In this fashion, liberalism goes stumbling ahead, sometimes committing crimes, sometimes failing to recognise these crimes, and then inspiring rebellions. The history is not a gradual achieving of good but a spiral of progress and horror.

**Alan Johnson:** And would it be fair to say that you don't see any point seeking guarantees that the spiral of progress and horror will straighten itself out over time and tend towards the good?

**Paul Berman:** It's just not an interesting question. We know that in the meantime millions of people can be slaughtered. And we have no guarantee that nuclear weapons are not going to go off en masse. To posit a teleology towards the good is meaningless. It's a ridiculous way to think. The whole point of my analysis is to get us to focus on the terrible things that do happen and not on an imaginary steady progress towards good.

### Bush and the need for a Third Force

Immediately after 9/11 I wrote the draft of the essay 'Terror and Liberalism,' which ran in *The American Prospect*. That essay was completed by September 18 and edited on the 21st. In that essay I worried about the Bush administration. My fears about a neocon 'romance of the ruthless' were already expressed in that piece. I was already worried about a diplomat, John Negroponte. As a Central America reporter from the 1980s I remembered Negroponte's role as Ambassador to Honduras at the time the death squads were appearing. Since he was already Bush's proposed UN ambassador at the moment of 9/11, I was already expressing in public my worries about how the administration was going to respond.

I banged on that particular drum more than once in the period before the invasion of Iraq. In February 2003 I wrote an article in *The New Republic* that concluded that Bush appeared to be leading us over a cliff. I could see the failure to act in ways calculated to gain political legitimacy, the diplomatic failure, the failure to draw on the precedents from Kosovo, and so on. Excuse me, but I made some of these

points earlier and a lot more loudly than some of my critics ever did. Thank God for the Internet, I say, which preserves forever what everyone had to say, and when they said it.

There is a misunderstanding of the argument of *Terror and Liberalism*. People with views like mine tried to say, ‘OK, Bush is screwing things up, and we must warn against what might be the results. But, meanwhile, we want to propose actions of our own. We don’t want to just say “no.”’ In *Terror and Liberalism* I tried to revive the idea of Leon Blum, the French socialist, from the 1940s. He proposed what in the US would be called cold-war liberalism, but was in his case cold war socialism – my grandfather’s position, by the way. Blum wanted to resist the Communists but he wanted to do it from the left not the right, in the belief that a leftwing opposition was bound to be more effective. Therefore he supported the socialists, and the social democrats, and the trade unionists, and he opposed Communism by being in favour of democratic reforms. My effort in *Terror and Liberalism* was to revive that sort of idea, in regard to the Ba’athism and Islamism of our own time. People who criticised this idea described it as a ‘liberalism for Bush,’ but that was never the idea.

In our version of the Third Force we recognised that the Bush administration was not going about things correctly, and so we called for an alternative. Totalitarian movements are fundamentally ideological movements – they are driven by ideas. The ideas they are driven by are modern ideas, even if they are presented as exotic and are clothed in seventh century Muslim robes. If the ideas are modern we can argue against them, just as we could argue against fascists and communists. Winning the argument is actually the only victory that can be obtained. We are facing a mass movement with a huge number of adherents. There is no way we can defeat such a movement with Police or Military force. The only way to defeat such a movement is to convince its adherents and sympathisers, and potential sympathisers, that the ideas of that movement are wrong and ought to be abandoned in favour of better ideas. Now this sounds preposterous to some people who can’t imagine that anything can be won by force of persuasion. But what finally caused Communism to collapse was that the Communists themselves recognised that they were wrong and that their own ideas were not worth defending.

In the present case it’s more difficult still because these movements are not dependent on states, and the ideas can be held by people in civil society. The possibility of crushing these movements by force does not exist. We have to win by persuasion.

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That means the central thing that should be going on is a war of ideas – even if, at times, there is also a need for a war of weapons.

The left and the intellectuals in the Western countries ought to throw themselves into these debates and criticisms. But look what has happened. The left, in its great majority, has remained unengaged. It conducts itself as if the only struggle is between Bush and his enemies. You can see this in the last couple of months in the rise of tensions over the Iranian nuclear programme. The more Ahmadinejad threatened to obliterate Israel and build nuclear weapons the more people around the world wrote about...Bush! 'Oh, no! What is Bush going to do?' As if the problem here was Bush! Bush may well be a problem, but the first problem has surely got to be Ahmadinejad. A great campaign should arise to persuade the Iranians and their supporters not to think along these lines. And this is what should have been done with the Islamists and the Ba'athists. But it has not been done.

The crucial place for this war of ideas, by the way, is Europe. In so much of the Arab world, and Iran, it is very difficult to have a serious debate because the conditions don't exist. In Europe they do. And in Europe there is a vast Arab and Muslim population. In fact many of the deep underlying ideas of radical Islamism, Ba'athism, and radical Pan-Arabism were European ideas to begin with. Not all of the ideas, but some of the crucial ones. So the debate should be taking place in London and Paris and Berlin and Madrid. It should be a very forceful debate. We see a right-wing version of it in which there is prejudice and racism against Muslims and against an ancient and noble religion, Islam – which only bolsters the Ba'athist and Islamist arguments. But the left-wing antitotalitarian contribution to this debate we hardly see. It's like a unilateral disarmament on the part of the liberal left and the intellectuals has taken place.

Bush isn't going to do it. He does not want to do it and even if he did, he does not have the talent. It should be done on the left. It should be done by us engaging our fellow thinkers in the Arab and Muslim world (who are becoming ever more visible) and by arguing against the various champions of what I call the Muslim totalitarian idea in its different forms. A Third Force should put its greatest emphasis on that. Military actions and police actions may well be necessary. But they should be put in their place. They are ultimately less important than this battle of ideas.

Totalitarian movements have regularly been greeted by the blindness to which liberalism is prone, and even by apologetics. Hitler, and not just Stalin, had his

apologists. Without these apologists neither one of those dictators would have been able to get as far as he did. And what we are seeing now is something exactly parallel. There are only a few screwballs defending al Qaeda, or Zarqawi in Iraq, or applauding Saddam. But the people who really matter are those (many more numerous) who find some way to say either that these totalitarian movements are normal, natural, rational, or, in any case, that they should be ignored because we should focus our attention on defeating Bush. In these ways, the adherents of the totalitarian movements are not given much opposition and sometimes are even given a back-handed support. So, naturally, the movements prosper.

**Alan Johnson:** In the meantime, the Muslim democrats who desperately need our support are often ignored. There are very few solidarity movements with the beleaguered Muslim democrats.

**Paul Berman:** Exactly. And you and I both know that there is nothing more fashionable than to look at some Iraqi liberal democrat and sneer. People will even sneer at Afghani liberals. If I say, 'Hamad Karzai is making a good effort,' the initial response will be to say, 'Tsk, he only rules three blocks in Kabul!' and leave it at that. The situation in Iraq is really shocking. The trade unionists have suffered terribly, many have been killed. One certainly cannot say they have received enough support from their fellow thinkers in the west. I think that is just a shocking scandal. The kind of journals that used to publish Havel, Michnik, and the other dissidents of the Eastern Bloc will not have anything to do with the dissidents of Iraq and of the Arab world. We do see some rallying to the democrats in Iraq and Iran – people like you and me are not entirely isolated on these matters. So the picture is mixed. But overall, it's pretty terrible.

### A simplistic intellectual history of Islam?

**Alan Johnson:** Hamid Algar, in a letter in the New York Times, argued that you had 'failed to show any line of filiation from Qutb, executed in 1966, to al Qaeda.' He argues that you exemplify a wider tendency 'to conflate into a malevolent blur all Muslims regarded as troublesome.' Stephen Schwartz claimed to find in your book 'an Islam completely without nuance.' He alleged you had 'made no effort to place Qutb in the context of the diverse intellectual trends and developments in Islamic history.' How do you respond?

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**Paul Berman:** In regard to Stephen Schwartz's criticism, I don't write about Islam at all. I only write about Islamism. I assume that Islam, like the other great religions, is a huge piano keyboard on which one could play this tune or that. Islam isn't the cause of the problem. Islam is the setting of the problem. Islam has offered a language for the totalitarian movements but an anti-totalitarian language could just as easily be drawn out of Islam, and is by some people. Schwartz is complaining that I do not do something that I did not set out to do.

As regards Hamid Algar – one of Qutb's translators and a great admirer of Qutb – I think it's a pretty conventional view that Qutb is a master-thinker for al Qaeda. With all due respect to Algar, I don't think this part of my book is very controversial. I make the point myself that Qutb worked out a lot of theories, that it was a long time ago (he was hanged in 1966) and that the line from Qutb to al Qaeda is not necessarily straight. And yes, Qutb does say some things that are more moderate at some points. He went through different phases, he had his contradictions. But still, I think al Qaeda has a pretty good claim to be faithful to the inspiration that you find in Qutb, though it is certainly the case that other people have drawn from Qutb without being wild extremists.

### An ideologism that ignores material causes?

**Alan Johnson:** Some critics argue that you ignore the material causes of Muslim (and every other) totalitarianism. According to Kurt Jacobsen in Logos, '[Berman] writes as if religion or ideology alone dictates action, with no attention needed for underlying political or economic drives ... [he] ... narrows our buzzing, blooming confusion down tidily to one factor, those darned pathological mass movements.' George Scialabba, in *The Nation* (April 28 2003), argued that you explained totalitarian mass movements as a 'mysterious upwelling of hatred for liberal values,' and he asked, 'Were there no predisposing material influences?' Ellen Willis argues you fail to explain the roots of totalitarianism because your 'framework for discussing the totalitarian impulse is moral and literary.' She suggests you end up 'suggesting that totalitarian terror is an unfathomable mystery.' How do you respond?

**Paul Berman:** We have got caught up in a materialist error. In other words, we think material causes are everything. When Marx says we make our own history but not in circumstances of our own choosing there is a temptation to focus *all* of our attention on the circumstances. That is, on the material conditions that

shape what people think and do. There is a tremendous error in modern social and political thinking which is to fail to see that ideas have a force entirely of their own. Yes, ideas, and the movements that draw on ideas are constrained and shaped in different ways by material conditions but, nonetheless, ideas have an independent role. Sidney Hook made this argument very persuasively in *The Hero in History* where he explains that the greatest disproof of the theory of historical materialism is the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which was conducted precisely in the name of historical materialism.

Everyone who has examined that revolution closely, beginning with the Bolsheviks themselves, recognised that the Revolution would not have taken place without Lenin. If you've got something as huge as the Bolshevik revolution – which is one of the biggest events in world history – and it would not have happened if one man had been removed, then you are obviously showing that historical materialism is not enough to explain great events. It can explain some things but it is not sufficient. Among the things that it can't explain is the independent role of ideas in history. The twentieth century is an illustration of that. The rise of Communism, then the collapse of Communism is something that took place, above all, in the history of ideas. Communist ideas arose because they were very powerful and appeared to be very convincing. And they were defeated intellectually, not militarily. The Eastern bloc did not collapse out of material poverty. It collapsed out of intellectual poverty.

Yes, the rise of a mass Islamist movement has been shaped by all sorts of conditions – immigration, sociological events, economic displacements, and so on. And I am in favour of other people analysing those things. I am aware of the work of Gilles Kepel and others. But I don't think those analyses can suffice. There remains this other factor: the force of an idea which carries people along and in part because the idea has an intellectual strength. Let's go back to Qutb. He is a marvelous writer and a wonderful thinker. He is a brilliant person and his books are engrossing. If he wasn't and they weren't then I think the movement he has helped to inspire would be a lot weaker. That's why we need to fight, finally, on the plane of ideas – to argue against this writer and his books and their independent history. This factor is systematically omitted because we are ourselves in the grip of this rationalist naiveté. If material factors (economic and sociological facts) are the only thing to consider, then everything that happens is rationally explicable...



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**Alan Johnson:** ...and we don't need to pay any attention to the specific ideological complexion of particular movements because it's all just a surface reflection of something deeper...

**Paul Berman:** ...yes, but it's more than that. The presumption also means we end up distorting those ideas by converting them into ideas that we find more easily recognisable. So we end up saying, for instance, 'It's not true that Hamas has encouraged a cult of suicide and murder. People in the West Bank and Gaza are engaging in suicide bombing because they lack water rights, or because the Peace Plan offered by Clinton created a border which was inadequate.' In other words we end up attributing to people ideas that are not theirs, but which fit our assumption that everyone acts in accord with a rational calculation of their material interests.

The same thing has been happening in regards to Iraq. A lot of people assume the insurgency in the Sunni districts represents a natural Iraqi nationalist reaction to foreign occupiers. But there is nothing natural about it! The vast majority of the Iraqi people do not support the insurgency. In fact the insurgency has been engaged in a programme of mass indiscriminate extermination of Shiites – that is *Iraqis*. There is nothing rational about that. It's not a simple nationalist response to occupation. It has to do with a very different and much more alarming set of ideas. We fail to perceive the ideas that are at work. Then we attribute to those people ideas they do not have, but which we find easy to comprehend. This distortion on our part happens systematically. And it arises, in part from the materialist assumptions of modern social science, liberal rationalist assumptions.

**Alan Johnson:** You recently reviewed Francis Fukuyama's new book, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy*. I found it an excellent book in many ways, but I did feel there was an element of that going on. Islamism seemed to disappear from view...

**Paul Berman:** ...*ideas* disappeared from view! That's also true of *The End of History*. Fukuyama wants to talk about structures – economic structures, social structures, psychological structures. He systematically neglects the independent role of ideas. I think he is typical of many modern thinkers. We have a real problem. Bush thinks that force, inadequately deployed, plus advertising in a kind of Madison Avenue spirit, is enough. On the other hand Bush's opponents seem to agree with him that there is nothing to *argue about*. Bush's critics are not talking about movements animated by ideas either.

**An anachronistic history?**

**Alan Johnson:** Joshua Micah Marshall argued that you ‘inflate the threat of Islamist violence – and particularly its intellectual stakes – to levels beyond what they merit and to force them into a template of an earlier era.’ The charge is that you seek to ‘lay the template of fascism and anti-fascist commitment onto the current reality of fanatical Islamic terrorism and Arab nationalist authoritarianism’ and that this distorts. In his view, while the existential threat of a terror network getting a WMD is real enough, Islamism is ‘hardly the kind of ideological or political threat that great totalitarianisms posed a half a century ago.’ You offer, he claims, a dangerous grandiosity and ‘the distorting prism of our grandparents’ world.’ How do you respond?

**Paul Berman:** The threat from the radical Islamists is different from the threat from Nazis and Communists, yes. And it’s obviously the case that Ahmadinejad’s fantasy that the whole world will convert to Islam has a singularly unconvincing quality. But we face terrorism of a nihilist kind, different to anything we have faced before. Brezhnev was never going to launch a nuclear war out of destructive zeal (though perhaps we delude ourselves in thinking that the cold war had to end in the peaceful way that it did end). Look, if you got up tomorrow morning and learnt that a gigantic bomb had destroyed a major capital in the western world you would not be surprised. You would be horrified but you would not be surprised. Now, if we all know that millions of people could be killed tomorrow then we make a big mistake in thinking we are not facing an existential threat. Some may respond by saying ‘well, there is no desire to kill millions of people.’ But there is such a desire. We know the goal of the 1993 Trade Center bombing was to topple the buildings over on their side, and, by setting off a domino effect, to kill 250,000 people. They admitted that. What’s standing between that kind of intention and mass killing, apart from our security systems, is just the failure thus far of those who hold the intention to come up with a clever-enough idea to achieve it. It seems to me we can’t bank on that lack of imagination for long.

Joshua Micah Marshall’s kind of objection rests, I think, on an assumption that Islamist terrorism should be compared to the kind of terrorism that was widespread in Western Europe in the last thirty years – IRA, RAF, ETA, and so on. That threat was not existential. Islamist terrorism is different. The Islamist threat is not that some hundreds of people will be killed, or even that once every so often they will get ‘lucky,’ and kill some thousands. In the Muslim world the victims of totalitarian movements have been in the millions. In the western countries we have experienced

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a few flecks of foam from that wave. So it is easy to imagine that that is all we will ever experience. Many find it impossible to grasp that one day the victims here could be in the millions. From the non-West to the West is not such a great distance. Sometimes the two places are the same place. It's a fantasy to think we can weigh the terrorist threat we face in the west without considering this background in the Muslim countries.

Something ought to bother us, too, in the nonchalance of Marshall's claim that Islamism is 'hardly the kind of ideological or political threat that great totalitarianisms posed a half a century ago.' How many victims does he want? Algeria, the Sudan, Afghanistan...those places are already at a level Europe lived through. Here is the liberal blindness.

### Hubris and Mayhem?

**Alan Johnson:** Reviewing *Terror and Liberalism* in The New York Review of Books, Ian Buruma found you guilty of hubris. 'Policies based entirely on revolutionary ideals can only end in zealotry,' he says. 'There is something in the tone of Berman's polemic that reminds me of the quiet American in Graham Greene's novel, the man of principle who causes mayhem, without quite realising why.' And he feels he knows the source of your zealotry. 'Berman calls himself a liberal, but it is hard to distinguish him from the more radical neoconservatives, whose mentors under Reagan mixed up Straussian conservatism with the revolutionary zeal of their Trotskyist origins.' How do you respond?

**Paul Berman:** Baruma's also wrote that I had jumped on the Bush bandwagon. His charge of zealotry only makes sense if that is true. I think he read some parts of my book, and skipped other parts. I thought it was a good idea to overthrow Saddam; and I thought that Bush was going about it in the wrong way: we needed a third force. Buruma did not want to acknowledge the second part of that statement. Still, I should add that, in his book *Occidentalism*, he and his co-author, Avishai Margalit, produced a very valuable little study – useful and insightful in many ways, even if they never told us what to do about the problem that they discussed.

### Part 4: The Iraq War

**Alan Johnson:** 'The invasion of Iraq was a tragedy from the start,' you wrote in *Power and the Idealists*. You note that leftist humanitarian interventionists watched gog-eyed as it unfolded. To take only Bernard Kouchner, we are told he was 'beside

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himself; 'fumed,' was 'dumbfounded,' 'amazed' and 'apoplectic.' Your own reaction, you wrote, was to 'devot[e] most of this past year to composing op-eds, conference papers, Q&As, and statements of every shape and size, and lobbing these things into the pages of newspapers and magazines in some 15 or 20 countries in a one-man campaign to minimise whatever sorry consequences the National Security Strategy and sundry related White House policies might be having on world opinion and events in Iraq.' And you have written about the war that might have been. You insist:

We could have presented a human rights case to the world, instead of trying to deceive people about weapons and conspiracies – and we would have ended up with more allies, or, at least, with allies who understood the mission. We could have applied the lessons of Kosovo, which would have meant dispatching a suitable number of soldiers. We could have protected the government buildings and the National Museum, and we could have co-opted Saddam's army – further lessons from Kosovo. We could have believed Saddam when he threatened to wage a guerrilla war in Baghdad. We could have prepared in advance to broadcast TV shows that Iraqis wanted to watch. We could have observed the Geneva Conventions. (What humiliation in having to write such a sentence!)

Is it reasonable to think that that kind of war might have been fought (and might be in the future)?

**Paul Berman:** A better intervention was unquestionably possible. Before the war I was arguing to continue in the path of the Kosovo intervention: marshalling the right arguments, doing the diplomacy, assembling the right allies, making adequate plans, recognising what sort of occupation was going to be necessary. Kosovo was not brilliant by any means, but neither was it a total catastrophe. I made those arguments as an observer reading the newspapers. Now we have books like *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, by Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, the present and past military correspondents of *The New York Times*. Trainor is a retired Marine Corps Lt General. It turns out top generals were arguing for precisely that kind of thing – for drawing on the Kosovo model. The criticisms of outside observers like me turn out to have run parallel to criticisms made inside the armed forces.

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What seems to me odd is that an ideology as peculiar as Rumsfeld's could have prevailed. This has not been examined enough. We have heard a lot of discussion about the motivations – a naïve American nationalism, imperialist ambitions and the lust for oil, racism against Arabs – that are said to have determined how the Bush administration proceeded. But what appears to have been critical was a somewhat bizarre doctrine of Rumsfeld's. What has been applied to military doctrine by Rumsfeld is a set of theories drawn from modern business school theory (stripping down corporations to their minimum personnel on the basis of computer models, this kind of thing). It's called 'military transformation' and the Iraq war has been conducted according to this doctrine. It turns out to have almost wholly inapplicable to situations like Iraq, and would have been inapplicable in Kosovo as well (to everything except the first days of the war). If we want yet another example of the strange and unpredictable role of ideas in history here it is. And now we know that many generals were protesting against it.

In regards to the future, of course we are going to be called on to make interventions and we ought to. Bush has blundered, but it would still be right to intervene in Darfur. There is now a long history of liberal and humanitarian interventions. Some have gone badly, some so-so, and some pretty well. The struggle we face is fairly simple: to try and do as best we can.

### Neoconservatism and the Iraq War

**Alan Johnson:** You have been highly critical of the neoconservatives on many grounds over many years. You wrote that 'Neoconservative foreign policy thinking has all along indulged a romance of the ruthless.' What did you mean?

**Paul Berman:** The very word 'Neoconservatism' has become troubling. There are a vast number of fantasies about who 'the neoconservatives' are, what they stand for, and what role they have played. It has reached the point that whenever you read the word you should say it out loud in falsetto, as if a mouse had just run across your foot. Otherwise you will not have captured the right tone. At some level I don't like to use the term. Many people who are called neoconservatives, it seems to me, are just Washington operatives who have worked for Republican and Democratic administrations, and who have held a variety of views. Some were for the Kosovo intervention, others were against it. To some extent, *there is no ism in the ism*. What distinguishes them from other cliques and factions is that some of them have a certain intellectual style. Some of this style comes out of University of Chicago,

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some from *Commentary* magazine. And because they have this intellectual style they are able to dress up their various political moves in a lofty manner. But it's difficult to point to fundamental texts of neoconservative doctrine. Where are the books?

Fukuyama *has* written some interesting books but he is his own man and always has been. The neoconservative movement has had magazines and journalists rather than books and intellectual leaders. In short, much too much is made of the ism. Still, there is a clique with a style and that style is marked by ruthlessness. I've been talking about this 'romance of the ruthless' for a long time – for decades. It was visible in Central America during the Reagan administration – the expectation that a small number of people could be very effective if they acted ruthlessly enough; an over-reliance on military force and proxy armies, a tendency to an apocalyptic hysteria about the danger that Communism in Central America presented to the United States, and so on.

This ruthless style has contributed to the gigantic errors that have been committed in Iraq. When you believe that if a small number of people act ruthlessly then a larger force is not necessary, it leads you to say 'let's not send a large number of troops but let's not tie the hands of those we do send.' That is, you send too few troops on the one hand and practice torture on the other. Neoconservatism is in this respect compatible with the errors of 'military transformation' theory. And yet – here is the complication – some of the leading neocons have been loudly and insistently arguing against the application of military transformation theory. So there you are. Neoconservatives exist; but there isn't much of a consistent doctrine.

Another element of neoconservatism – or maybe just of right-wing republicanism – I have always found very unattractive is a PR approach to debate. Debate is manipulated. Reagan's administration engaged in all kinds of propaganda machinations. The same approach was exactly what we saw in the build up to the Iraq war – the emphasis on WMD on the one hand, and the supposed conspiracies between Saddam and Bin Laden on the other hand. Instead of laying out the whole complex issue of strategic and humanitarian and ideological issues that was really behind the war, the administration chose to present arguments based on manipulations that could make an easy 30-second sound-bite on the TV news. This conformed to ways the Reagan administration used to operate – sometimes with the same personnel.

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**Alan Johnson:** You have written ‘There are many paths to hell, and one of those paths is called the ‘National Security Strategy’ of 2002.’ What’s the problem with the NSS 2002?

**Paul Berman:** The NSS of 2002 made two disastrous points. First, it argued in effect for an American hegemony. This was foolish in the extreme because it’s not desirable and it’s not achievable. The only way we can successfully confront the dangers we faced is to arouse the support of an enormous number of people and states all over the world. Second, the NSS 2002 – and this was commented on scarcely at all at the time – argued that the anti-totalitarian ideological struggles of the twentieth century were ‘over.’ The new danger, it said, was rogue states. This was one of the intellectual errors that led to the disaster in Iraq. It underpinned a belief that the enemy in Iraq was not motivated by powerful ideas. It led people to think all bad guys were now like Manuel Noriega of Panama, whom Bush the father had captured in 1989. Noriega was a gangster-dictator with populist rhetoric. His support was thin and Panama was a rogue state. The US invasion encountered very little resistance – a great many Panamanians were thrilled to have the US invade. Noriega had his irregular forces, the Dignity battalions, but they folded immediately. Noreiga-ism commanded the support of nobody. I think the people who wrote the NSS 2002 imagined that the world consisted of Noriegas and all peoples would be more or less like the Panamanians.

I’m guessing the Bush administration anticipated something similar in Iraq. (By the way, some of the administration personnel were the same in both invasions.)

The Bush administration made the error of assuming the world is no longer populated by people animated by totalitarian ideas. But Saddam’s followers did and do honestly believe in key elements of the Ba’ath doctrine. The Islamists believe fervently. And people who believe in this way – in a sinister cosmic American-Zionist conspiracy to annihilate Islam, or to crush the Arab people – are going to fight to the death. They are not going to fold the way Noriega’s Dignity Battalions did. The ideas contained in 2002 NSS led to any number of catastrophic errors in the years that followed. For one thing, it meant Bush refused to admit there was an insurgency for a very long time. For another, it meant Bush was desperately slow in realising that he had to talk about ideas in order to counter other ideas. It was a calamitous statement.

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The existence of the NSS should have signalled to us on the left that we needed to come up with our own analysis. That was my goal in writing *Terror and Liberalism* – to add my own two cents. But one would have to say that a lot of people have responded by just folding their arms and saying no.



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