

The Nation.

Beyond *Jihad* Vs. *McWorld*

by BENJAMIN R. BARBER [from the January 21, 2002 issue]

The terrorist attacks of September 11 did without a doubt change the world forever, but they failed to change the ideological viewpoint of either the left or the right in any significant way. The warriors and unilateralists of the right still insist war conducted by an ever-sovereign America is the only appropriate response to terrorism, while the left continues to talk about the need for internationalism, interdependency and an approach to global markets that redresses economic imbalances and thereby reduces the appeal of extremism — if, in the climate of war patriotism, it talks a little more quietly than heretofore. The internationalist lobby has a right to grow more vociferous, however, for what has changed in the wake of September 11 is the relationship between these arguments and political realism (and its contrary, political idealism). Prior to September 11, *realpolitik* (though it could speak with progressive accents, as it did with Ronald Steel and E.H. Carr before him) belonged primarily to the right — which spurned talk of human rights and democracy as hopelessly utopian, the blather of romantic left-wing idealists who preferred to see the world as they wished it to be rather than as it actually was.

Following September 11, however, the realist tiger changed its stripes: "Idealistic" internationalism has become the new realism. We face not a paradigm shift but the occupation of an old paradigm by new tenants. Democratic globalists are quite abruptly the new realists while the old realism — especially in its embrace of markets — looks increasingly like a dangerous and utterly unrealistic dogma opaque to our new realities as brutally inscribed on the national consciousness by

the demonic architects of September 11. The issue is not whether to pursue a military or a civic strategy, for both are clearly needed; the issue is how to pursue either one.

The historical realist doctrine was firmly grounded in an international politics of sovereign states pursuing their interests in a setting of shifting alliances where principles could only obstruct the achievement of sovereign ends that interests alone defined and served. Its mantras — the clichés of Lord Acton, Henry Morgenthau, George Kennan or, for that matter, Henry Kissinger — had it that nations have neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies but only permanent interests; that the enemies of our enemies are always our friends; that the pursuit of democratic ideals or human rights can often obfuscate our true interests; that coalitions and alliances in war or peace are tolerable only to the degree that we retain our sovereign independence in all critical decisions and policies; and that international institutions are to be embraced, ignored or discarded exclusively on the basis of how well they serve our sovereign national interests, which are entirely separable from the objectives of such institutions.

However appealing these mantras may seem, and though upon occasion they served to counter the hypocritical use of democratic arguments to disguise interests (as when true democrats attacked Woodrow Wilson's war to make the world "safe for democracy"), they can no longer be said to represent even a plausible, let alone a realistic, strategy in our current circumstances. To understand why, we need to understand how September 11 put a period once and for all at the end of the old story of American independence.

Many would say the two great world wars of the past century, even as they proved American power and resilience, were already distinct if unheeded harbingers of the passing of our sovereignty; for, though fought on foreign soil, they represented conflicts from which America could not be protected by its two oceans, struggles whose outcomes would affect an America linked to the then-nascent global system. Did anyone imagine that America could be indifferent to the victory of fascism in Europe or Japanese imperialism in Asia (or, later, of Soviet Communism in Eurasia) as it might once have been indifferent to the triumph of the British or Belgian or French empires in Africa? By the end of the twentieth century, irresistible interdependence was a leitmotif of every ecological, technological and economic event. It could hardly escape even casual observers that global warming recognizes no sovereign territory, that AIDS carries no passport, that technology renders national boundaries increasingly meaningless, that the Internet defies national regulation, that oil and cocaine addiction circle the planet like twin plagues and that financial capital and labor resources, like their anarchic cousins crime and terror, move from country to country with "wilding" abandon without regard for formal or legal arrangements — acting informally and illegally whenever traditional institutions stand in their way.

Most nations understood the significance of these changes well enough, and well before the end of the past century Europe was already on the way to forging transnational forms of integration that rendered its member nations' sovereignty dubious. Not the United States. Wrapped in its national myths of splendid isolation and blessed innocence (chronicled insightfully by Herman Melville and Henry James), it held out. How easy it was, encircled by two oceans and reinforced lately in its belief in sovereign invincibility by the novel utopia of a missile shield —

technology construed as a virtual ocean to protect us from the world's turmoil and dangers — to persist in the illusion of sovereignty. The good times of the 1990s facilitated an easy acquiescence in the founding myths, for in that (suddenly remote) era of prideful narcissism, other people's troubles and the depredations that were the collateral damage of America's prosperous and productive global markets seemed little more than diverting melodramas on CNN's evening "news" soap operas.

Then came September 11. Marauders from the sky, from above and abroad but also from within and below, sleepers in our midst who somehow were leveraging our own powers of technology to overcome our might, made a mockery of our sovereignty, demonstrating that there was no longer any difference between inside and outside, between domestic and international. We still don't know authoritatively who precisely sponsored the acts of September 11 or the bioterror that followed it: What alone has become clear is that we can no longer assign culpability in the neat nineteenth-century terms of domestic and foreign. And while we may still seek sovereign sponsors for acts of terror that have none, the myth of our independence can no longer be sustained. Nonstate actors, whether they are multinational corporations or loosely knit terrorist cells, are neither domestic nor foreign, neither national nor international, neither sovereign entities nor international organizations. Going on about states that harbor terrorists (our "allies" Egypt and Saudi Arabia? Our good friend Germany? Or how about Florida and New Jersey?) simply isn't helpful in catching the bad guys. The Taliban are gone, and bin Laden will no doubt follow, but terrorism's network exists in anonymous cells we can neither identify nor capture. Declaring our independence in a world of perverse and malevolent interdependence foisted on us by people who despise us comes close to what political science

roughnecks once would have called pissing into the wind. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia still foster schools that teach hate, and suicide bombers are still lining up in Palestine for martyrdom missions in numbers that suggest an open call for a Broadway show.

The American myth of independence is not the only casualty of September 11. Traditional realist paradigms fail us today also because our adversaries are no longer motivated by "interest" in any relevant sense, and this makes the appeal to interest in the fashion of *realpolitik* and rational-choice theory seem merely foolish. Markets may be transnational instruments of interests, and even bin Laden has a kind of "list of demands" (American troops out of Saudi Arabia, Palestine liberated from Israeli "occupation," down with the infidel empire), but terrorists are not stubborn negotiators pursuing rational agendas. Their souls yearn for other days when certainty was unencumbered, for other worlds where paradise offered other rewards. Their fanaticism has causes and their zeal has its reasons, but market conceptions of interest will not succeed in fathoming them. Bombing Hanoi never brought the Vietcong to their knees, and they were only passionate nationalists, not messianic fundamentalists; do we think we can bomb into submission the millions who resent, fear and sometimes detest what they think America means?

Or take the realist epigram about nations having neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies. It actually turns out that America's friends, defined not by interests but by principles, are its best allies and most reliable coalition partners in the war on terrorism. Even conservative realists have acknowledged that Israel — whatever one thinks of Sharon's policies — is a formidable ally in part because it is the sole democracy in the Middle East. By the same token, we have been consistently betrayed by an odd assortment of allies born of shifting alliances that have been forged and broken in pursuit

of "friendship" with the enemies of our enemies: Iraq, Iran and those onetime allies of convenience in the war against the Soviets, the Taliban. Then there are the countless Islamic tyrannies that are on our side only because their enemies have in turn been the enemies of American economic interests or threats to the flow of oil. I will leave it to others to determine how prudent our realist logic is in embracing Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen or Pakistan, whose official media and state-sponsored schools often promulgate the very propaganda and lies we have joined with them to combat.

On the other hand, the key principles at stake — democracy and pluralism, a space for religion safe from state and commercial interference, and a space for government safe from sectarianism and the ambitions of theocrats — actually turn out to be prudent and useful benchmarks for collecting allies who will stand with us in the war on terrorism. In the new post-September 11 realism, it is apparent that the only true friends we have are the democracies, and they are friends because they *are* democracies and share our values even when they contest our interests and are made anxious by our power. In the war against terror or the war for freedom, what true realist would trade a cantankerous, preternaturally anti-American France for a diplomatic and ostentatiously pro-American Saudi Arabia?

Yet the pursuit of democracy has been a sideline in an American realist foreign policy organized around oil and trade with despots pretending to be on our side — not just in Republican but in Democratic administrations as well, where democracy was proclaimed but (remember Larry Summers) market democracy construed as market fundamentalism was practiced. In the old paradigm, democratic norms were very nice as emblems of abstract belief and utopian aspiration, or as rationalizations of conspicuous interests, but they were poor

guides for a country seeking status and safety in the world. Not anymore. The cute cliché about democracies not making war on one another is suddenly a hard realist foundational principle for national security policy.

Except the truth today is not only that democracies do not make war on one another, but that democracies alone are secure from collective forms of violence and reactionary fundamentalism, whether religious or ethnic. Those Islamic nations (or nations with large Islamic populations) that have made progress toward democracy — Bangladesh, India or Turkey, for example — have been relatively free of systematic terrorism and reactionary fundamentalism as well as the export of terrorism. They may still persecute minorities, harbor racists and reflect democratic aspirations only partially, but they do not teach hate in their schools or pipe propaganda through an official press or fund terrorist training camps. Like India recently, they are the victims rather than the perpetrators of international terrorism. Making allies of the enemies of democracy because they share putative interests with us is, in other words, not realism but foolish self-deception. We have learned from the military campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda how, when push comes to shove (push has come to shove!), the Egyptians and the Saudis can be unreliable in sharing intelligence, interdicting the funding of terrorism or standing firm against the terrorists at their own door. Pakistan still allows thousands of fundamentalist *madrassahs* to operate as holy-war training schools. Yet how can these "allies" possibly be tough when, in defense of their despotic regimes, they think that coddling the terrorists outside their doors may be the price they have to pay for keeping at bay the terrorists already in their front parlors? The issue is not religion, not even fundamentalism; the issue is democracy.

Unilateralism rooted in a keen sense of the integrity of sovereign autonomy has been another keynote of realism's American trajectory and is likely to become another casualty of September 11. From the Monroe Doctrine to our refusal to join the League of Nations, from the isolationism that preceded World War II, and from which we were jarred only by Pearl Harbor, to the isolationism that followed the war and that yielded only partially to the cold war and the arms race, and from our reluctance to pay our UN dues or sign on to international treaties to our refusal to place American troops under the command of friendly NATO foreigners, the United States has persisted in reducing foreign policy to a singular formula that preaches going it alone. Despite the humiliations of the 1970s, when oil shortages, emerging ecological movements and the Iranian hostage crisis should have warned us of the limitations of unilateralism, we went on playing the Lone Ranger, the banner of sovereign independence raised high.

We often seem nearly comatose when it comes to the many small injuries and larger incursions to which American sovereignty is subjected on a daily basis by those creeping forms of interdependence that characterize modernity — technology, ecology, trade, pop culture and consumer markets. Only the blunt assault of the suicide bombers awoke the nation to the new realities and the new demands on policy imposed by interdependence. Which is why, since September 11, there has been at least a wan feint in the direction of multilateralism and coalition-building. The long-unpaid UN bills were finally closed out, the Security Council was consulted and some Republican officials even whispered the dreaded Clinton-tainted name of nation-building as a possible requirement in a postwar strategy in Afghanistan.

Yet there is a long way to go. While the Colin Powell forces do battle with the Dick Cheney forces for the heart of the President, little is being done to open a civic and political front in the campaign against terrorism. After what seemed a careful multilateral dance with President Putin on missile defense, President Bush has abruptly thrust his ballroom partner aside and waltzed off into the sunset by himself, leaving the Russians and Chinese (and our European allies) to sulk in the encroaching gloom. Even in Afghanistan, Nicholas Kristof, in his first contribution as the *New York Times's* new crisis-of-terrorism columnist, complained that even as other nations' diplomats poured into the capital after its fall, the United States posted not a single representative to Kabul to begin nurturing a postwar political and civil strategy — a reticence it has only just now begun to remedy.

Is there anything realistic about such reluctance? On the contrary, realism here in its new democratic form suggests that America must begin to engage in the slow and sovereignty-eroding business of constructing a cooperative and benevolent interdependence in which it joins the world rather than demanding that the world join it or be consigned to the camp of the terrorists ("You are with us or you are with the terrorists," intoned the President in those first fearful days after September 11). This work recognizes that while terrorism has no justification, it does have causes. The old realism went by the old adage *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* and eschewed deep explanations of the root causes of violence and terror. The new realism insists that to understand collective malice is not to pardon it but to assure that it can be addressed, interdicted and perhaps even pre-empted. "Bad seed" notions of original sin ("the evil ones") actually render perpetrators invulnerable — subject only to a manichean struggle in which the alternative

to total victory is total defeat. Calling bin Laden and his associates "the evil ones" is not necessarily inaccurate, but it commits us to a dark world of *jihad* and *counterjihad* (what the President first called his crusade), in which issues of democracy, civil comity and social justice — let alone nuance, complexity and interdependence — simply vanish. It is possible to hate *jihad* without loving America. It is possible to condemn terror as absolutely wrong without thinking that those who are terror's targets possess absolute right.

This is the premise behind the thesis of interdependence. The context of jihadic resistance and its pathology of terrorism is a complex world in which there are causal interrelationships between the jihadic reaction to modernity and the American role in shaping it according to the peculiar logic of US technology, markets and branded pop culture (what I call McWorld). Determining connections and linkages is not the same thing as distributing blame. Power confers responsibility. The power enjoyed by the United States bestows on it obligations to address conditions it may not have itself brought into being. *Jihad* in this view may grow out of and reflect (among other things) a pathological metastasis of valid grievances about the effects of an arrogant secularist materialism that is the unfortunate concomitant of the spread of consumerism across the world. It may reflect a desperate and ultimately destructive concern for the integrity of indigenous cultural traditions that are ill equipped to defend themselves against aggressive markets in a free-trade world. It may reflect a struggle for justice in which Western markets appear as obstacles rather than facilitators of cultural identity.

Can Asian tea, with its religious and family "tea culture," survive the onslaught of the global merchandising of cola beverages? Can the family sit-down meal survive fast food, with its focus on individualized consumers, fuel-pit-stop eating habits and nourishment

construed as snacking? Can national film cultures in Mexico, France or India survive Hollywood's juggernaut movies geared to universal teen tastes rooted in hard violence and easy sentiment? Where is the space for prayer, for common religious worship or for spiritual and cultural goods in a world in which the 24/7 merchandising of material commodities makes the global economy go round? Are the millions of American Christian families who home-school their children because they are so intimidated by the violent commercial culture awaiting the kids as soon as they leave home nothing but an American Taliban? Do even those secular cosmopolitans in America's coastal cities want nothing more than the screen diet fed them by the ubiquitous computers, TVs and multiplexes?

Terror obviously is not an answer, but the truly desperate may settle for terror as a response to our failure even to ask such questions. The issue for *jihad's* warriors of annihilation is of course far beyond such anxieties: It entails absolute devotion to absolute values. Yet for many who are appalled by terrorism but unimpressed by America, there may seem to be an absolutist dimension to the materialist aspirations of our markets. Our global market culture appears to us as both voluntary and wholesome; but it can appear to others as both compelling (in the sense of compulsory) and corrupt — not exactly coercive, but capable of seducing children into a willed but corrosive secular materialism. What's wrong with Disneyland or Nikes or the Whopper? We just "give people what they want." But this merchandiser's dream is a form of romanticism, the idealism of neoliberal markets, the convenient idyll that material plenty can satisfy spiritual longing so that fishing for profits can be thought of as synonymous with trolling for liberty.

It is the new democratic realist who sees that if the only choice we have is between the

mullahs and the mall, between the hegemony of religious absolutism and the hegemony of market determinism, neither liberty nor the human spirit is likely to flourish. As we face up to the costs both of fundamentalist terrorism and of fighting it, must we not ask ourselves how it is that when we see religion colonize every other realm of human life we call it theocracy and turn up our noses at the odor of tyranny; and when we see politics colonize every other realm of human life we call it absolutism and tremble at the prospect of totalitarianism; but when we see market relations and commercial consumerism try to colonize every other realm of human life we call it liberty and celebrate its triumph? There are too many John Walkers who begin by seeking a refuge from the aggressive secularist materialism of their suburban lives and end up slipping into someone else's dark conspiracy to rid the earth of materialism's infidels. If such men are impoverished and without hope as well, they become prime recruits for *jihad*.

The war on terrorism must be fought, but not as the war of McWorld against *jihad*. The only war worth winning is the struggle for democracy. What the new realism teaches is that only such a struggle is likely to defeat the radical nihilists. That is good news for progressives. For there are real options for democratic realists in search of civic strategies that address the ills of globalization and the insecurities of the millions of fundamentalist believers who are neither willing consumers of Western commercial culture nor willing advocates of jihadist terror. Well before the calamities of September 11, a significant movement in the direction of constructive and realistic interdependence was discernible, beginning with the Green and human rights movements of the 1960s and '70s, and continuing into the NGO and "antiglobalization" movements of the past few years. Jubilee 2000 managed to reduce Third World debt-service payments for some

nations by up to 30 percent, while the Community of Democracies initiated by the State Department under Madeleine Albright has been embraced by the Bush Administration and will continue to sponsor meetings of democratic governments and democratic NGOs. International economic reform lobbies like the Millennium Summit's development goals project, established by the UN to provide responses to global poverty, illiteracy and disease; Inter Action, devoted to increasing foreign aid; Global Leadership, a start-up alliance of corporations and grassroots organizations; and the Zedillo Commission, which calls on the rich countries to devote 0.7 percent of their GNP to development assistance (as compared to an average of 0.2 percent today and under 0.1 percent for the United States), are making serious economic reform an issue for governments. Moreover, and more important, they are insisting with Amartya Sen and his new disciple Jeffrey Sachs that development requires democratization first if it is to succeed.

George Soros's Open Society Institute and Civicus, the transnational umbrella organization for NGOs, continue to serve the global agenda of civil society. Even corporations are taking an interest: Hundreds

are collaborating in a Global Compact, under the aegis of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, to seek a response to issues of global governance, while the World Economic Forum plans to include fifty religious leaders in a summit at its winter meeting in New York in late January.

This is only a start, and without the explicit support of a more multilateralist and civic-minded American government, such institutions are unlikely to change the shape of global relations. Nonetheless, in closing the door on the era of sovereign independence and American security, anarchic terrorism has opened a window for those who believe that social injustice, unregulated wild capitalism and an aggressive secularism that leaves no space for religion and civil society not only create conditions on which terrorism feeds but invite violence in the name of rectification. As a consequence, we are at a seminal moment in our history — one in which trauma opens up the possibility of new forms of action. Yesterday's utopia is today's realism; yesterday's realism, a recipe for catastrophe tomorrow. If ever there was one, this is democracy's moment. Whether our government seizes it will depend not just on George Bush but on us.