

## Rationalizing the “Global War on Terrorism”

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**Michael Ignatieff. *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.**

How can liberal democracies effectively combat terrorism without undermining the values for which they stand? Ignatieff presents this issue as the main theme of his book, while granting that much of his discussion is influenced by how the United States has responded to 9/11 [p. vii]. In particular, he considers the political and moral questions raised by the Patriot Act and the Bush administration’s war on terrorism.

With regard to the issue of whether civil rights may be restricted during terrorist emergencies by adopting such measures as preventive or investigative detention, greater surveillance, and more police powers of search, Ignatieff seeks to articulate a political ethics of “the lesser evil” as a middle course between civil libertarianism and consequentialism [pp. 7-8]. On his account, the “pure” civil libertarian denies that new security concerns may ever trump any prevailing civil rights and rejects the argument that temporary suspension of some rights is a lesser evil compared to the great evil of numerous deaths caused by a terrorist attack. The consequentialist espouses the opposite view and sees just policy as a matter of optimizing the collective well-being of citizens, leading to the opposite mistake of holding that rights suspensions are unobjectionable if they are needed to enhance security. The “lesser evil” approach holds that rights suspensions are evil, that only some rights may be restricted, and that measures must be taken to ensure their temporality. Moreover, suspensions must be a last resort and subjected to open adversarial review by legislative and judicial bodies [p. 24] –to prevent liberal democracy from succumbing to the greater evil of destroying its own institutions and values.

Ignatieff further discusses in detail what constitutes the “greater evil” of terrorism and what kind of “lesser evil” military and coercive responses are consistent with liberal democratic values. He warns against “the temptations of nihilism,” i.e., responding in kind to terrorist violence, notably in the form of torture. Granting that liberal democracy may be defeated once terrorists would acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Ignatieff concludes that we must support such lesser evils as preventive war and greater restrictions on the free exchange of scientific ideas, technology, and materials related to developing WMD capabilities.

Ignatieff mischaracterizes his lesser evil view as fundamentally different from the moral absolutism of the civil libertarian. Unlike the pure consequentialist, he is not prepared to give up all civil rights for the sake of security. He writes: “we cannot fight and prevail against an enemy [terrorism] unless we know who we are and what we wish to defend at all costs” [p. 154]. On his account, we should, for example, never set aside habeas corpus rights [p. 49] or the prohibition against torture [p. 140]. It is only within such constraints, he says, that we may engage in consequentialist reasoning. This position, however, does not differ fundamentally from the absolutism of the civil libertarian, since both positions hold that human dignity implies moral demands that cannot be compromised; they only disagree

about the scope and content of these demands and neither wants to deny that consequentialist logic has a role to play in determining public policy once the most basic imperatives of human dignity have been satisfied. Moreover, most civil libertarians in the U.S. do not adhere to what Ignatieff describes as pure civil libertarianism, holding that all our liberties are absolute, even though many of them may defend a more extensive list of absolute rights than he accepts.

Drawing on historical examples, Ignatieff concludes that “the weakness of the strong” is that they tend to overreact in imposing restrictions on rights in response to terrorist attacks. He explains this phenomenon by claiming that elected politicians fear the price of underestimating threats, while the public senses that it has been foolish in allowing their extensive freedoms to be exploited by the terrorists. Ignatieff adds that politicians use emergencies to promote their own agendas [p. 59] but does not explore this further with regard to how 9/11 has led to the adoption of repressive anti-terrorist policies in the U.S. and other liberal democracies.

Ignatieff’s more serious error is that he supports the so-called “global war on terrorism” as a lesser evil, even after the war against Iraq has made it abundantly clear that this “war on terrorism” has become a crucial ideological tool for the pursuit of American global dominance. Having discussed the costs of the war and occupation, he writes: “Yet further unilateral action is inevitable, given the extent to which the United States remains the first-order target for Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups.... Preemptive war is going to be a rare occurrence, but even so it would be a lesser evil” [p. 166].

What seems partly to account for Ignatieff’s embrace of U.S. hegemony as a lesser evil is his one-sided conception of terrorism. He argues that terrorists are engaged in morally reprehensible violence, are rarely effective in realizing their political goals, and may create a trend of political brutality within a society where they do succeed. This analysis has merit but is too limited in that the state is viewed only as a responder to terrorism rather than also as a frequently very successful executor of terrorist policies that provoke opposition groups to resort to terrorist tactics. Clearly, once a broader picture of terrorism is adopted, the calculation of what counts as the lesser evil changes.

Another factor is that even though Ignatieff grants that terrorist groups seeking to overthrow a government or create a separate state might have legitimate concerns that liberal democracies should try to address, he also claims that many terrorists—especially Islamist terrorists—are or become nihilists who embrace violence for its own sake or as a matter of religious sacrifice and a “cult of death” [p. 124]. Thus, he argues, seeking justice as a strategy of combating terrorism appears naive. Ignatieff writes:

Certainly we have a responsibility to work toward relieving the global burden of injustice. But we should be clear that we are doing so for reasons of justice, not in the delusive hope of greater security. Having responded to injustice with justice, we have no right to expect peace and good feeling in return. This is to misunderstand evil, to forget terrorism’s essential connection to nihilism, its indifference to the suffering it purports to represent, its contempt for our gestures at reparation [p. 168].

Add to this that Ignatieff fails to question the credibility of the scenario that terrorists may at any moment acquire WMD, and the upshot of his argument is that any

critical discussion of the United States and its role in the world becomes a moral luxury that we cannot really afford; instead, he tells us, we should cheer for the lesser evil of growing American military presence around the globe as it aims at crushing the ungrateful supreme evil ones.