

# EDITORS RESPOND TO EDITORS

[DISSENT EDITORS' SALON](#)

[DISSENT EDITORS ONLINE](#)

[RECENT BOOKS BY DISSENT EDITORS](#)

Response 1: David Bensman

Response 2: James B. Rule

Response 3: Ann Snitow

Response 4: Jo-Ann Mort

## **Response To Michael Walzer**

*by David Bensman*

The United States is in an unprecedented position; it is not only the world's only superpower, but it possesses unprecedented military and economic might. More than any nation in the history of the world, the U.S. can impose its will on the rest of humanity.

The reason why this is a dangerous situation is not that the U.S. is uniquely evil. Those on the left who portray the U.S. as monstrous have a distorted picture of reality; the U.S. is no more monstrous than other nations, and better than many.

But as an unprecedentedly powerful superpower, the U.S. is prone to become an arrogant bully, one which willfully ignores the perspectives of less-powerful nations. America's historical tendency to isolate itself and to see its white Christian civilization as superior exacerbates the tendencies inherent in its position in the world.

Incidentally, these dangers present themselves to all Americans, those on the left as much as those on the right. When those on the left see themselves as morally superior, while Amerika is uniquely corrupt, they are claiming a doubly distorted moral superiority.

Given the dangers posed by America's innocent self-image and unprecedented global power, I would argue that what the nation as a whole, and the left in particular, need to do is attempt to lean towards multilateralism, rather than unilateralism, and to make every effort to engage in sustained dialogue with people around the world whose perspective and culture differs from ours.

America's actions vis a vis Al Qaeda and the Taliban seemed singularly dangerous to me because they were based on precisely the opposite stance - their radical unilateralism threatens to isolate us from allies and to feed our sense of

righteousness and morality superiority. In the long run, these are greater threats to Americans, and citizens around the world, than are all the terrorists in the world combined.

[back to top](#)

---

## **In Search of Michael Walzer**

*by James B. Rule*

Michael Walzer's "Can There be a Decent Left?" sends a disturbing message, both about his state of his mind, and the course he seems to chart for Dissent. Despite elements of agreement—for example, on the need for a military response against the perpetrators of 9/11—I find the attitudes, assumptions and directions underlying his statement profoundly disappointing. I can't respond at length here. But let me register a few points in brief.

The statement consists largely of sweeping and bitter disparagement of a vaguely defined category identified only as "the left". Members of this "left" are said to consider "any hint of patriotic feeling as politically incorrect". They had "difficulty in responding emotionally to the attacks of September 11", or they even experienced "barely concealed glee" at those hard blows. One would think that the author had special powers to see into the hearts and minds of his political antagonists. In fact, such extremely serious charges should never be made without attribution to specific persons, and without evidence to substantiate such attributions—quotations or observations of specific deeds at specific moments. No doubt some specific advocates of the policies Michael Walzer faults experienced such moral failings. Let him identify them by name. The insinuation that criticism of America's military activities necessarily stems from lack of concern for American suffering or failed patriotism places Michael Walzer in the worst of company. That idea is unworthy of Dissent.

In 1995 Timothy McVeigh, with many fewer resources and far less wit than the terrorists of September 11, killed 168 of his fellow Americans. We will never know all the grievances underlying that barbarous act, but they apparently included resentment against some grave abuses of American power within this country—notably, needless killings of unarmed citizens by federal forces. As far as I can recall, no one has held that continued objections to those abuses imply sympathy for McVeigh or his actions. Perhaps there is a lesson here for all of us.

And who are "the left" that Michael Walzer disparages? I thought that we of Dissent, too, help constitute the left. Most Dissent editors and writers, as far as I am aware, feel that a military response to Sept. 11 was essential. Those horrific events have certainly brought to light bad thinking and bad politics in some circles on the left—apt targets for critical comment. The same events have also focused attention on many another unseemly reality in all sorts of geo-political quarters—equally worthy targets for our critical faculties, if only we don't relinquish the latter to Michael Walzer's righteous obsessions.

You can see that Michael Walzer is losing just those critical faculties when you read his musings as to whether there can be "a decent left in ....the only superpower?". As usual in this sort of overheated special pleading, you lose the argument, if you accept the premises of the question. The questions we ought to be asking include: Do we want to live in a world dominated by a 'superpower'? By any superpower? By the kind superpower being created under our political noses by Bush and company? Doesn't the world deserve better than the sort of high-handed Pax Americana emerging around us? Doesn't Dissent have anything so say about alternatives to never-ending world domination by this sort of power?

Particularly disturbing in this lapse of critical instinct is the drift toward support of American unilateralism. In fact, America's ascendancy as the world's Big Enchilada is not the only historic recent development in international affairs. Of perhaps even greater potential significance is the hesitant but unmistakable rise of multilateral, supra-national institutions for resolving grave world issues. We see new forums and organizations beginning to play positive roles in prosecuting human rights violators, fighting climate change and global pollution, mediating and peace-keeping in regional conflicts, and other settings. These efforts, inevitably far from fully satisfactory at the outset, deserve our deep interest and critical support. The Bush administration consistently seeks to undermine or bypass them. So, apparently, does Michael Walzer.

I can't believe that "Can There Be a Decent Left?" is written by the same Michael Walzer whose work I've so much appreciated in Dissent and elsewhere—the Walzer of subtle distinctions and humane judgment. I hope that we get the good Michael Walzer back. Otherwise, despite his words to the contrary, I fear that Dissent is becoming a one-note magazine. And if I discern that note correctly, we'll have to change its name.

James B. Rule  
Port Jefferson, N.Y.  
6 March 2002

[back to top](#)

---

## Still More Responses

*by Ann Snitow*

What follows are responses to "Michael Walzer Replies" and Walzer's "The Argument about Humanitarian Intervention" (both Dissent, Winter 2002), and Michael Walzer's web piece "Can there be a Decent Left?" Though this list sounds like a Walzer-only situation, the Dissent Board meeting February 23, 2002 revealed a wide range of opinion about the issues Michael raises in these pieces. Here I am joining this broadened discussion of what Dissent should do (and by extension left institutions should do) post September 11th.  
Ann Snitow

Unsure as I am about how we should proceed in what Jo-Ann Mort called this

“fuzzy” period, post September 11, I continue to oppose US unilateral interventionism and see it as very dangerous. It became clear at the Dissent Board meeting on February 23rd that a number of others are still willing to talk about their former doubts about the value and efficacy of the US interventions of the last decade, too. It would be a great loss if Dissent and the democratic left silenced these currently outmoded doubts too soon in order to distinguish ourselves from what Paul Berman called “the screwball” left. Walzer’s piece, “Argument about Humanitarian Intervention,” passes over the alternative possibilities to US unilateral intervention too quickly to help us much. It brings up multilateralism and internationalism only to say that these have proven inadequate or reluctant or too-slow sources of response, so back to US unilateralism as the fall-back position. His principle, “Who can, should,” as a rule of thumb for who will invade in times of the vicious slaughter of civilians keeps turning out to be the US. I agree that the extraordinary concentration of power which now marks the US alone brings with it great responsibilities, great potential for positive action – but what sort of action? Internationalism and “utopian” calls for peace have failed repeatedly, Walzer’s argument goes, so therefore they will continue to fail. We are left once more with the United States as above all a military resource, as the one which “can” and which therefore “should.”

How can I express how inadequate I think this position is without sounding “anti-American”? Indeed, as Walzer says, the position of loyal critic seems far to seek, but Walzer’s (of course, thoughtfully qualified) confidence in the U.S. remains surprising. Is the pop front pro-Americanism Walzer remembers from the thirties the right analogy here? Yes, people want to be part of something fine, larger than themselves, to see happy girls going back to school in Afghanistan, but Bush’s unity of effort is only momentarily readable as congruent with left intentions. But surely this is obvious. What do we gain by silencing our criticism now at a moment when as Paul Berman said “The whole country is open to suggestions. No one knows what we are facing”? Will our acquiescence bring the left back into the cultural main stream? No. In his “Decency” piece, Walzer criticizes the alienation of the left, giving its often kneejerk stance a poetic and accurate anatomy. But we should not short change the small but also populist surge against the war. These people cannot be summed up as “the screwball left.” They (we!) are seekers unlikely to think we’ve found a progressive post-cold war politics in something so comically negative as “anti-anti-Americanism.” “Anti-anti-Americanism” is, as its name suggests, an empty set. What would left support for the American values we treasure look like? “Decency,” “Civility,” worrying about the safety of the grandchildren, bonding with our fellow citizens “to defend the country” (Can There be a Decent Left) – none of these begins to fill the conceptual vacuum which is our current, shared state.

The part of Walzer’s Decency piece I admire is his anatomy of this state. He describes the confusion of anti-war leftists about how to feel when it is finally you who have been attacked. A new experience, and its complexity was mostly glossed over by a few pious words of sympathy for the bereaved at the beginning of each speech denouncing US imperialism. “They talked and wrote as if they could not imagine themselves responsible for the lives of their fellow-citizens.” The powerlessness of the left has bred this intellectual passivity, this kneejerk confidence that it has always been right “to oppose the authorities, whatever they did” (“Decency”). As Walzer says, no one seems willing to imagine what a benign exercise of power would look like.

But once again, does Walzer take on this question of what US power should look like? No. Because he shares some of the same angst that his antagonists do about having to live powerless in the imperium. Bush continues to accept Israel's current politics, while taking terrorism seriously elsewhere. This is not a combination all that easy to come by and so Bush is never mentioned as an antagonist to left ideas and values. He becomes "a fellow American," and what Todd Gitlin called his "endless war" becomes less frightening than a left that refuses to see Bush as an ally in any way, not even about Israel.

All the same, Walzer is so right about the malaise on the left. How I agree: "The moral purism of blaming America first" as if this were the same as "taking responsibility for the crimes of the imperial state"! And again, when he says that the left is afraid to criticize politics elsewhere, since who are we, the entitled, the powerful, to criticize the poor, the weak, those we have oppressed?

But what political form should our critique take? If this commitment to criticism of the Other is real, if it means more than going in there and intervening whenever the brutes are cruel or undemocratic, it can only take place in locations of political engagement that hardly exist yet. But Walzer dismisses the still weak and often compromised efforts at internationalism such as the UN or the International Criminal Court. War is the big response, internationalism the weak force. Put up against each other, war seems the far more efficient and morally compelling and responsible response, unless one stays behind in Grenada, Somalia, Kosova, Afghanistan to see what we are capable and willing to leave in our wake. In his section "Endings" ("Intervention"), Walzer acknowledges that the quick in-out won't serve in a number of instances. Reconstruction after civil war, totalitarian terror, followed by bombing and sometimes invasion is, as he says, "not work for the short term." But the US has a bad track record on this one. And the world's skepticism about the eternal wisdom of even the best US intentions is so well earned that it would be a mere evasion to chalk these feelings up to kneejerk anti-Americanism. I think the only path towards reducing massacres and ethnic cleansing is a (yes, slow) process of building a world consensus against military solutions to long term problems. This would include long term political engagement with and support for democratic struggles. (Think of those 10 years of Albanians' resistance to Serbian minority rule in Kosova while the world ignored their plight and their efforts.)

In his "Response" piece, Walzer said I lack a plan. His plan is Bush's war. Maybe he's right. The war on terrorism is a plan. Walzer establishes values and limits for the war, but are these in any way similar to the President's? Beyond war, I don't see all that many "plans" out there, in his piece or in any of the responses. The absence of a political consensus on the left is indeed the problem at hand. Still, since Walzer challenged me to name them ("MW Replies") here are some "plans":

First, money. At a recent Counsel on Foreign Relations meeting, someone from the State Department admitted that after the capture or death of Osama, we're out of there. This would not be a good thing. But the creation of a climate of hopefulness, growth, mobility, opportunity for the young would have a big price tag. Are we willing to pay? Maybe the urgency of citizen "protection" which Walzer posed as a value in his "Five Questions About Terrorism" (Dissent, Winter 2002) could extend this far, to the serious spending of money, for example a sum like that just used to bail out the airline industry. And of course it will be necessary to go much further, to reverse the policy direction of entities like the

World Bank or the IMF, in order to export US prosperity.

Second, Israel. This is really money too. Enough to support the transition. But the anguish Walzer feels about the difficulties is an emotion he has earned through his long engagement. Might it be that when one knows a country well, with a full knowledge of the complexity of the forces at work, one is less inclined towards the intervention model? I cannot make a contribution here but can only gesture towards the potential usefulness of fair-handed US participation. What would the "Humanitarian Intervention" of Walzer's title look like in Israel? The crisis in Israel is an often unnamed specter haunting all Walzer's pieces under discussion here.

Third, a war on terrorism, by which I mean basic, internationally shared human rights values to be enforced by multilateral agreement. Opposing bullies – wherever they appear: Ireland, Israel, etc. Obviously this has to be done by means of international standards and enforcements. This leads to #4.

Four, the creation of international bodies like the criminal court that are neither corporate nor direct expressions of national interests.

It is here that Walzer's charge (in "Replies) that I am "mythical" comes in. I would have to agree with him: I AM "mythical," if the word can be rescued from the contempt with which Walzer uses it. I think this dreaming – and then, theorizing – is part of our job. I confess: in the current political climate, I cannot imagine the path from here to there. What is the internationalism of my desire? Workers of the world uniting? Ha, ha. The United Nations? Weak, and if strong, worrisome. Corporate culture? The Soros Foundation? (Actually, not bad. But as the emanation of one man's will, unthinkable as a model.) NGOs? Again weak, and potentially undemocratic. A general building up of civil society and local control so that people can bargain from some kind of political base? Good, but slow, and sounds utopian. Once again, "mythical." Rather than be "mythical," much of the left has abandoned such far-fetched idealism. I remain committed to wanting creative, radical solutions that simply aren't in the cards right now. But what price do we pay for rejecting such thoughts as Walzer did at the Board meeting as "an exercise in Utopian futility"?

Which brings me to another point about this "Utopian futility." There was much talk at the Board meeting about the young, their fledgling movements, their confused quest for a politics, their need for leadership (or as Paul Berman said in a blithe moment of vanguardism, for "brilliant" leadership.) Michael Walzer and Maxine Phillips told us (movingly) about their quest for a staff person by going to the internet site "Idealism.com." Ah ha. There is no way that the young people I meet will be stirred by calls for protection of a threatened America. (They rightly see this threat as greatly exaggerated, a way for our government to get the kind of carte blanche no democratic government should have.) There is no way that the young people I meet will be stirred by calls to "decency" and "benign intervention." For all the downsides of the Vietnam legacy and the false moral superiority of many anti-colonialist movements which conveniently blame all their failures on US imperialism, this next generation believes in the coherence and depth of independence of other cultures in ways that gives me hope for international exchanges quite different from those of the past. There is no way that the young people I meet will be stirred by calls to be reasonable, to accept the real politique that the US is the sole world super power and that we can't do

anything if we don't accept that fact. There is no way that the young people I meet will be stirred by military solutions as a left's main offering. The young are anti-war, not only because of the Vietnam and South American legacy, but because they are seriously questioning military solutions, trying to imagine something else. (Vide: "Another world is possible.")

And it's not only the young who won't be stirred by this amalgam of "decency" and benign wars. I'll take myself as an example of the sixties generation and the problem of our continued engagement in politics. What politics do I do now? I'm working on getting a discussion going about whether or not we want a trade union for adjuncts at Lang College, New School University. And I'm continuing to work away at building and maintaining the fragile, small but now (finally!) quite focused and active international NGO I helped start a decade ago, The Network of East-West Women (NEWW). In the face of terrorism, unanswered questions about US world hegemony, a weakened and confused left unable to locate a reasonable stance of critique that goes beyond being the unthinking nabobs of negativism, how can these tiny, tiny activities possibly seem relevant? If one expects me to say here that every drop of water helps make the ocean, etc. etc., one would be far off my point. I don't think these activities have any political usefulness at all without some larger vision of coherence and long-term intent. If I didn't believe that resisting the US government's labor policies and its view of internationalism weren't part of some larger project, I would stop doing this work at once. After all, why bother. At this age, one begins to get it; our days are numbered. I think "decency" is the by-product of other things, of entitlements, relationships, idealisms, sustained community. If "exercises in Utopian futility" is the only name we have for this stuff, I quit, with glee. There are so many other things to do with the immense freedoms and privileges I enjoy, living here so safely and prosperously inside the imperium. It's Sunday. Life is short. Go ahead, enjoy the grandchildren.

That's enough, I guess. Maybe a few end notes. Rarely did I observe that delight Walzer describes on the left after September 11th that finally WE had been hit. Rather, I and most of the people I know in my left/liberal world in New York were terrified, and were pulled into the suffering of the firemen in our neighborhoods and of the people we knew who lost family and friends. I believe the schadenfreude Walzer describes in his "Decency" piece was the primary emotion of a very few in the US, our left antagonists, who loom so large in our minds but not in anyone else's. Europe is another matter but its skepticism about just how wounded we are may turn out to be of some use further along. I agree that a religious totalitarianism is a threat. But, like many of our European critics, I'm for disaggregating this dangerous other, finding their differing ideological strains, motives, strategies, rather than circling the wagons and assuming "they" are (already) a collective enemy. Such reductionism makes us the dangerous ones.

One more thing about that (I know comic) "anti-anti-Americanism": As a veteran of the anti-anti-pornography movement, I can tell you no one in the media can handle those double negatives. Of course it was ridiculous when, in reaction, the media dubbed us "the pro-sex faction." Ha. Still, there it is. We have to be pro-something, and it won't help anyone understand our complex position to call ourselves "the Pro-America faction."

I was greatly heartened by two things about the Dissent Board meeting discussion. First, it was interesting to discover how much unity the group had

about our dislike of a moralistic, unselfcritical, purist left. This dislike of self-righteousness is something I try to bring to feminist debates and I see now that discussions at Dissent have helped me maintain my resistance to any feminism that is either sure that “women” are right on the one hand or that gender is an untenable political category on the other. The way in which everything was up for reassessment at the meeting was bracing. Michael Walzer’s willingness to be the stalking horse for these discussions is admirable, and I hope and think that the many disageements with his arguments expressed at the meeting will continue to be a lively part of the magazine.

Which brings me to my second reason for liking the meeting. Beyond a shared critique of the current weak and moralistic left, there was great, even fundamental disageement. I felt better about being “mythical” as charged, when others, too, expressed doubts about trusting in this very dangerous government. To resist a president with this kind of approval rating may be Quixotic, but it is also necessary, as many said. I was also relieved to discover that others thought calling the anti-war movement “irresponsible” is a kind of name calling that won’t get us anywhere. All peace movements are irresponsible in this sense, since militarism is so pervasive that anti-militarists place themselves in a powerless (not to mention, unarmed) minority. Nonetheless, the great peace movements of the 1980s helped end the Cold War. They were one variable among many. They were full of screwballs. They were sometimes confused and self-righteous. That’s how mass movements are. It doesn’t help to call our students’ anti-militarism “irresponsible.” That only leaves a blank where thought about conflict resolution should be.

When James Rule asked “Do we want America to be a superpower?” a whole new area of discussion opened out. He called American unilateralism “shocking” (too few Americans are anxious or shocked) and he said that we should at least START on the project of multilateralism. He asked “Are we at Dissent planning to support American unilateralism?” If the Board meeting is any indication, I would (happily) say no. Bogdan Denitch argued that we needed to ask for more than merely “a more humane version of the current new world order.” And Todd Gitlin listed among the emergencies we face the possibility that we are signing on to Bush’s “endless war.” Horst Brand said he “fears the alliances the US is forming” and David Bensman said he feared “this enthusiasm for American unilateralism: We will do whatever we want because we’re right.” Someone described students as trying on Chomsky-ism but not necessarily finding it a good fit. Jean Cohen said that in seeking something better we should avoid numbing dichotomies that get us into the conceptually over-simple place where patriots square off against utopian globalists, etc.

So, dissent at Dissent. What else would anyone expect? Of course this range of opinion must remain a part of what we are doing. Nothing would hurt us more than to be seen as the pro-war, American-values-first, anti-visionary, pro-decency magazine. And in fact that’s not how the conversation went in the end at all. To repeat Paul Berman’s call: “The whole world is open to suggestions now.” And as Mark Levinson said, “We have to be the place where the important discussions take place.” Et voila, a great circulation.

Ann Snitow  
February 24, 2002

[back to top](#)

---

## Response to Michael Walzer

*By Jo-Ann Mort*

Michael's article is, as one would expect from Michael, beautifully written and argued in a style well-known to Dissent readers—a polemical poetry that shows a love for language and for argument—and most important, an admiration of clarity within a social democratic model that is more of a construct in our heads and on our pages than in the real world—alas, no real existing social democracy for us in this era.

Yet, while it's true that there is no existing social democracy—at least not that perfect universe in which Dissent editors would like to live—I don't see either, that there is that Left alive today which Michael so pointedly condemns. Indeed, when he asks “can there be a decent left?” I would counter with “where is/what is the Left today?” If the Left is purely in the academy then yes, the Left failed on 9/11 and afterwards to articulate a politics of sense, a politics that would or could connect them to America, to their fellow citizens, to their neighbors, indeed, even to themselves. It failed in articulating a vision that would make them worthy of arguing in dissent if, in fact, they didn't agree with the U.S. action post 9/11. But, I question whether that is the Left—and whether the academy and its professors and even those students who follow the Chomskys could comprise a Left that would in fact bring real social change to America—change that would have an impact on people's lives.

Chomsky has never been part of my Left or my vision of social justice—nor has he shared the values that distinguish Dissent as a journal and community of people committed to democracy and socialism and liberal thought. To be a leftist is to be a democrat in all that entails—social, cultural, political, and economic transformation.

And while there are student followers among his ilk, there were also students and 20-somethings to which I spoke post 9/11 who proudly supported government intervention against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. One young person said to me that he was concerned because his parents, 60s generation folk, didn't appreciate his support for military intervention. I suspect there was a fair amount of this generational table turning.

There was even an unabashed return to religion for, at the least, the time immediate to the terrorist attacks. In my own synagogue, in a neighborhood of Brooklyn-Park Slope—filled with 1960s radicals of all stripes and many who today work professionally in civil rights, civil liberties, and social change organizations, a hastily called service drew close to 1000 people in the middle of the week. Whether that religiosity lingers remains to be seen, but with or without 9/11 there is, certainly among Jewish progressives, a flirtation with various shades of religion that includes grounding political motivation within the religious ethos.

My Left, such as it is, is represented by the dictum of swords to ploughshares, lifting strangers from Egypt, and by the struggling trade union movement—which

lost 800 members on 9/11, including flight attendants, firefighters, cops, and immigrant janitors, hotel, and restaurant workers. The Left, in fact, can and should make the case for the professions that don't draw the big bucks—all of a sudden the corporate king has been displaced in the public mind by a building trades worker riding on a fork lift or an heroic firefighter running into a burning building. The notions of selflessness, of service, and of public good need to be strengthened; but they were seen by all who chose to look on 9/11 and the aftermath.

My Left was the portion of the women's movement that supported the war and the repatriation of rights for the women of Afghanistan who were so brutally denied by the Taliban. My Left were the voices arguing not against intervention, but for a truly multi-lateral intervention that would strengthen, not diminish world bodies in this era when, indeed, America is the sole super-power. (Only multilateralism will aid us in putting a damper on the use of American super-power force).

And, for good or for bad, (that is, for the watered-down version that it is) my Left was represented in the actions of Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister who was able to keep his Labor Party together in support of his government's actions post 9/11; Gerhard Schroeder's willing support, and that of Javier Solano, George Robertson, and others who are all social democrats, some weaned in the 1960s, and now heading up the EU foreign offices and NATO.

This period has reminded me of an earlier time, when the divisions on the Left surrounding the Vietnam War were played out in the early days of SDS. At one of the first anti-war demonstrations in Washington, Norman Thomas, the head of the Socialist Party, out of which tradition Dissent sprung, said no to the demonstrators who wanted to rip apart the American flag. "We have come to cleanse the flag, not burn it," Thomas warned. Granted, much of the Left didn't listen to him; much of the Left still feels uncomfortable waving the flag. But others don't and the ones who can wave the flag—can claim the flag as their own symbol of solidarity—are the ones who are connected to America in a way that could enable political and economic transformation. That is the Left that needs to be strengthened. And that Left may be found in places we are not used to looking—among the firefighters, the ironworkers, and the immigrant restaurant workers.

[back to top](#)

---

DISSENT / WINTER 2002 / VOLUME 49, NUMBER 1