

Reviving Liberalism. A New Course for US Foreign Policy

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Confronting global terrorism and American neo-conservatism : the framework of a liberal grand strategy / Tom Farer. - Oxford [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 2008. - x, 257 p. - (Collected courses of the Academy of European Law; 16/2). - ISBN 978-0-19-953472-2; 978-0-19-953473-9 (pbk)

A renowned expert on international law and human rights and Dean of the Graduate School of International Studies at Denver, Tom Farer has written a highly sophisticated and dense book which provides an analysis of “global terrorism”, a severe critique of the specific interpretation that American neo-conservatives have given this phenomenon, and an inspired illustration of a “liberal grand strategy” to restore America’s power and moral standing in the world after the difficult years of the Bush administration.

The strength and originality of the book is that it fruitfully combines an intellectually stimulating disquisition on the philosophical underpinnings and meaning of such broad concepts as liberalism, conservatism, human rights and terrorism with a very concrete discussion of the main controversies connected with the so-called “war on terror”. The latter include the question of the use of force, the morality of torture,

the implications of multiculturalism, as well as the politics of the Middle East and of the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular.

The book’s weak point is that the reader may be overwhelmed by the amount of information, notions and arguments that the author condenses into just over two hundred pages. The book draws on a series of lectures dealing with broad and complex questions which Farer’s elegant and lucid eloquence successfully weaves together. The result, however, may be too rich for the general public and a bit disorienting for the specialist who will find some crucial issues, which are the object of vast and heated debates, such as the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, confined to a single section of the book.

These problems with the structure of the book, however, are more than offset by a multitude of insightful observations and well-documented arguments. A particularly enlightening distinction is the one Farer draws between the human rights doctrine and the idea of exporting democracy. Farer associates the former with liberalism – he sees it as an outstanding product of liberal theory and thought – and the latter with the “neo-conservative project”, as he puts it. The doctrine of human rights, Farer argues, may lead to an active and even

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interventionist foreign policy which has to stop, however, when the nature of the intervention inevitably leads, as in the case of an armed invasion, to the violation of basic human rights. As Farer states, “the one thing certain about armed intervention is the death and mutilation of the innocent, and because core human rights are imperative claims by individuals not open to trumping by some supposed long-term general good, a crusade to defend human core rights has built-in restraints that a crusade for the general expansion of democracy has not” (p. 40).

Farer then goes on to show skilfully how the doctrine of human rights can orient US foreign policy towards not just fair, but also viable solutions to many of the most pressing problems of the world, including the Arab-Israeli conflict. This extremely complex and tragic controversy, Farer explains, could be innovatively approached as a question involving communal and individual rights, that is, communities and persons, as well as, of course, ideologies, foreign interests, etc. The conceptualisation of the conflict as two opposing sets of rights – the rights of established and recognised communities, such as the state of Israel, against the rights of communities that are not states, the Palestinians; and the rights of communities against the inalienable rights of individuals irrespective of the society they live in – leads Farer to suggest an intellectually-provoking, although debatable, analogy with South Africa. Farer, in fact, explores the meaning of apartheid and invites the reader to apply this concept not only to racial but also to religious and other discriminatory issues. In his view, there are several lessons to be learned from the South African experience, where the bloody conflict between African masses and white elites was addressed by the international community not only as one involving the

protection of human rights from racial discrimination and persecution, but also as one involving the rights of people and communities to self-determination.

Of equal interest is that, in sketching out the framework of a liberal grand strategy, Farer looks to “containment” as a concept and model to resuscitate. Farer is actually only the last of a long series of commentators and analysts of liberal orientation suggesting that there is much to be learned from the strategy that the US used to confront the Soviet Union and communism. Containment, he admits, was interpreted in several different ways throughout the bipolar era, but was nonetheless different from “war”. When open war was chosen, as in the case of Vietnam, the US lost much of its prestige and influence because its foreign policy departed from those humanitarian and liberal standards that have traditionally distinguished it from other international hegemonies.

Farer also stresses the importance of a “pluralist” vs. “reductionist” approach to the threats to American security. He believes that only by discriminating between the different roots and the different kinds of challenges and by distinguishing between the rivals, will the United States be able to pursue a foreign policy that is not synonymous with permanent war and to re-establish its leadership in the world.

A final note on the timeliness of the book. Here, Farer undoubtedly scores high. Neo-conservatism has been seriously and perhaps irremediably discredited in the past years and there is already a vast literature exposing the intellectual weaknesses as well as the practical problems of this political approach, especially when applied to foreign policy. The crisis of neo-conservatism, however, does not exempt liberals from testing their own

tenets and coming up with a strategy that is not only different from the one the Bush administration followed, but better. Farer's sophisticated and detailed discussion of what a liberal grand strategy

should look like is certainly an important contribution to a debate that is vital to the future of the United States and, more generally, liberal societies around the world.