

conservatism are not paternalist squires but rugged individualists who don't know their place: entrepreneurs who build mighty businesses out of nothing, settlers who move out West and, of course, the cowboy. There is a frontier spirit to the Right—unsurprisingly, since so much of its heartland is made up of new towns of one sort or another.'

What struck me most, however, reading this book, is not just the radicalness of American conservative thought, but also its almost existential rebellion against modern society. By this I mean conservatism's refusal to accept what it views as the materialism and conformity, the rootlessness and cultural nihilism found in many modern liberal democracies. American conservatives, if they stand for nothing else, stand for absolute religious belief against liberal agnosticism; for a stoical patriotism and willingness to sacrifice for the nation against liberalism's concern with material well-being; and most important of all, conservatives value a virile righteousness against what they see as the softness and ease of contemporary technological civilisation.

Conservatives fear what Alexis de Tocqueville referred to as the 'benevolent despotism' of modern liberal democratic states, where the citizenry is reduced to child-like dependence on the state, and where individuality and variety are worn down by the relentless conformity of democratic majorities.

I would have liked to see more discussion in *The Right Nation* of what is sometimes referred to as conservatism 'properly understood' and its relationship to American conservatism. Conservatism properly understood refers to the great tradition of conservative politics in

Great Britain and Western Europe, as expounded by Edmund Burke, with its emphasis on community, continuity and tradition. Such a tradition of politics is obviously at odds with the radical individualism and progressive optimism about the human condition inherent in much American conservatism. Indeed, even some American conservatives, like *The Washington Post's* self-styled 'European conservative', George F. Will, have argued that American conservatives would learn more from 'the conservatism of Augustine and Aquinas, Shakespeare and Burke, Newman and T.S.Eliot and Thomas Mann', than from libertarian radicals like Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine.



Be that as it may, *The Right Nation* is a fascinating study of the right in contemporary America. The authors make a powerful case for viewing conservatism as the dominant ideological and cultural force in American politics at present. This book is not only well-worth a look for students of American politics, but anyone interested in how American political culture will affect the rest of the world in the early 21st century.

**Reviewed by
Martin Sheehan**

The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terrorism

By Michael Ignatieff
Princeton University Press,
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It is rare to find a work on the ethics of counter-terrorism that is at once theoretically sophisticated and practically grounded, that draws on the lessons of the past while acknowledging the uncertainties of the future, that takes terrorism seriously without succumbing to fruitless melodrama. Michael Ignatieff's most recent book manages to do all this and more. Written in clear and elegant prose, it demonstrates an unusual breadth of learning, drawing from literature and history as well as from philosophy, politics and law.

Ignatieff's stated aim is to identify what liberal democratic states are entitled and obliged to do in defending themselves from terrorist attack. As against 'civil libertarians' who hold that rights are inviolable side-constraints and 'pragmatists' who hold that rights are merely useful instruments, Ignatieff embraces what he calls a 'lesser evil position'. According to this position, 'neither rights nor necessity should trump' (p. 8). Though, under certain circumstances, it is morally permissible to 'stray from democracy's foundational commitments to dignity' (p. 8),

we should do so, first, in full awareness that evil is involved. Second, we should act under a demonstrable state of necessity. Third, we should choose evil means only as a last resort, having tried everything else. Finally, we must satisfy a fourth condition: we must justify our actions publicly to our fellow citizens and submit to their judgement as to their correctness (p. 19).

Two ideas here are especially worthy

of note. The first is the idea that counter-terrorist policies and institutions must be framed within a context of democratic justification. Democracy offers both the normative ground for such policies and the means of preventing the lesser evil 'from slowly becoming the greater evil' (p. 10). This is democracy's great strength. 'While injustice can always be justified if you have to justify it only to yourself, it is less easy when you have to justify it to other democratic institutions, like courts and legislatures or a free press' (p. 4).

The second is the idea that we must 'never...allow the justification of necessity...to dissolve the morally problematic character of necessary measures' (p. 8). This amounts, in effect, to a plea for collective self-consciousness. Even counter-terrorism of the most morally exemplary kind will inevitably involve wrong-doing. Rather than trying to make ourselves feel better via self-justification, let us freely and openly own up to the wrongs we are thereby doing. Let us be big enough to mourn for the lives that are lost and made worse. To my mind, this represents perhaps Ignatieff's most original and challenging insight, one that, if taken seriously, could dramatically alter the political landscape.

In applying the lesser evil position to the actual world, Ignatieff warns against searching for a one-size-fits-all solution. The only thing to do is proceed on a case by case basis (pp. 8-9). To do this, we must understand both the reality of liberal democracies and the reality of the terrorist threat that they face.

If we scrutinise the former, we find that they have a fairly dubious track-record. They have often 'exaggerated the [terrorist] threat'

as a result of failing to 'distinguish moral condemnation from threat assessment...the anger we feel from the risk [terrorists] actually pose' (p. 54).

If we scrutinise concrete instances of the latter, we find that, far from constituting a single uniform phenomenon, terrorism takes many importantly different forms. This depends, inter alia, upon the *aim* of the terrorists (whether it is

based on insurrection, liberation, independence, de-occupation, global anarchy, or some relatively specific gripe (p. 83)); and the *means* that they employ or might eventually employ, the most frightening of which would include weapons of mass destruction (pp. 145-170). It is

impossible to determine precisely the appropriate response in ignorance of the circumstances of both aggressor and addressee.

Impressive as it is, Ignatieff's work is not immune from criticism. Let me mention two objections in particular. The first concerns the role of democracy. As we have seen, democracy is crucial to Ignatieff's position. It constitutes at once its normative basis and the major safeguard that prevents states from self-destructing.

This is a heavy burden to bear and I doubt that actually existing democracies are up to the task. Actually existing democracies are characterised by overtly politicised judiciaries, unequal access to decision-making, and public opinion that is led more by free-wheeling emotionalism than by the force of the better argument. Ignatieff knows all this and even explicitly acknowledges it (p. 12).

Nonetheless, I believe he underestimates the extent to which

the plausibility of his position presupposes an overhaul of democratic institutions. I am not suggesting that this is impossible. But it does cast Ignatieff's position in what will seem to some as an objectionably utopian light.

The second objection concerns the role of the nation state. The main problem Ignatieff's book addresses is how ought *nation states* to respond to terrorism? But there is a more general problem. This is how ought *the world* to respond to terrorism? This way of putting the problem leaves as an open question what the role of nation states ought to be, a position that strikes me as methodologically and ethically desirable.

It is methodologically desirable since, while nation states remain an important structure in the world, their importance is diminishing, as the importance of sub-national and supra-national structures is increasing. It is ethically desirable since bad consequences tend to follow from states assuming that the solution to the problem of terrorism lies squarely in their hands. Let me emphasise that Ignatieff does acknowledge at a number of points the importance of international cooperation (e.g. pp. 9, 23). He even flags in the final chapter the possibility that we may outgrow Westphalia (p. 147). For all this, there remains a strong bias in favour of the nation state that we should be aware of when appraising his substantive suggestions.

Despite these objections, Ignatieff's work forces the reader to think carefully about issues that are among the most pressing of our time. For this reason and plenty of others, I believe it to be essential reading.

Reviewed by
Nicholas Southwood

