

When You Are - or Are not - a Secular Humanist

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In his editorial „The Immorality of The War Against Iraq” (*Free Inquiry*, Spring 2003), Editor-in-Chief Paul Kurtz points out that although *Free Inquiry* “does not endorse political candidates nor political parties,” it does take a position on „humanist ethical principles on grounds independent of religion.” As a result, says Kurtz, „we object to the impending war on Iraq on moral grounds.” From a humanist viewpoint, a pre-emptive war is immoral.

Until the hawks in the current administration — actually the so-called chicken hawks like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, in particular — developed the doctrine of pre-emptive war, „wiser leaders,” says columnist Robert Reeves, had avoided the “Bush folly.” Reeves quotes Secretary of State John Quincy Adams as saying that America „goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Lincoln also was against pre-emptive wars: “Allow the president to invade a neighboring nation whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion .. and you allow him to make war at pleasure.” So was President Eisenhower: „A preventive war, to my mind, is an impossibility... I wouldn't even listen to any one seriously that [sic] came in and talked about such a thing.”

These were all men incomparably wiser than Bush (not that it is much of a compliment to them), men from whom Bush could learn a lot — if he were not „ignorant or dismissive of history.” Or both.

But in pondering the issue of the morality of the U.S. pre-emptive war against Iraq, humanists need not even study the history of American politics. The principles of secular humanism are clearly spelled out in our Manifestos and Statements of Principles. Here, for example, is the 13th principle of the 2nd Humanist Manifesto of 1973:

This world community must renounce the resort to violence and force as a method of solving international disputes. We believe in the peaceful adjudication of differences by international courts and by the development of the arts of negotiation and compromise. War is obsolete. So is the use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. It is a planetary imperative to reduce the level of military expenditures and turn these savings to peaceful and people-oriented uses.

Several of those humanists who have written to *FI* in response to Kurtz's editorial may not be familiar with the 2nd Manifesto — inexcusable ignorance, if such should be the case — but surely they must have read *FI*'s Statement of Principles currently published in each issue on the 2nd page of the magazine. One of these principles states:

We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to .. ideologies of violence...

The question whether humanists should support a pre-emptive war on Iraq is then a rhetorical question. The answer is clearly „No!” You can be a humanist if you reject war and violence, or you cannot be a humanist if you condone or promote war and violence. It is a tautology: the statement is always true. Kurtz's editorial is not even an argument. In the face of the horror of an impending, unprovoked, unjustified war, Kurtz merely reaffirms what all *bona fide* humanists should already know only too well. Humanists, if they really have the courage to stand up for their principles, must be unanimous in their unqualified rejection and revulsion of pre-emptive war and all the violence and „collateral damage” it involves. Defensive war, yes, limited by Geneva Conventions and other applicable international laws. An intelligent covert international operation to capture those responsible for the 9/11 carnage, yes. But pre-emptive war on the state of Iraq — never!

To disagree is to reject humanist principles; it is to undermine one of the foundations of humanism: peace and pacifism, which make human well-being and advancement possible. (To clarify: I use „pacifism” in the sense of „the belief that international disputes can be settled by arbitration rather than war.”)

Now, consider some of the letters published in response to Kurtz's editorial.

· Mark Vlosky (Colorado): „I do .. take exception to the editors of *FI* using this publication as a forum to hawk their political views. It gives the impression that in order to remain card-carrying humanists we must despise the current administration.”

· Robert Gordon (New Mexico): "It is fine for [Kurtz] to be against [the] war, but he needs to disabuse himself of a broad and sweeping generalization that preemptive war is always and in all circumstances inadmissible [sic] per se. Probably the greatest mistake this country ever made was not to launch a preemptive strike against Hitler.

· Peter Wall (California): „Perhaps for the editors being a secular humanist means abhorring all military action, but their apparent distaste for preemptive strikes sound more like pacificism [sic] than secular humanism, and their remarks should have been presented as such."

· John Fishwick (Florida) „suggests" that the „Affirmations of Humanism" be modified by requiring that „force must be applied to stop" those who seek to destroy these principles.

· Ron Herman (New Mexico): „In my view, the war against Saddam Hussein was fought for humanist principles and values."

The last letter, quite an eye-opener, is evidence that Josef Goebbels was, of course, right: If you repeat a lie often enough, people will eventually believe it. The White House and the U.S. media have told us very often that the U.S. war on Iraq is fought for "humanitarian reasons," and now — indeed — most of the public, including some secular humanists, actually believe the claim.

Likewise, it is baffling to compare the military might of Nazi Germany, a first-rate killing machine and strong economy, to the pathetic remnants of Saddam Hussein's army, after it was pounded by the U.S. military in 1991 and the country sickened and dying after the murderous UN- and US-mandated economic sanctions. Anyhow, Mr. Gordon would like to eat his cake and have it. He would like to have ordered a pre-emptive strike against Hitler (never mind the consequences of such folly for the U.S. in 1939), *and* he would like to have the benefit of knowing what happened when no such attack occurred. Well, dream on, Mr. Gordon! And when you do travel back in time, let us know.

But one should still somehow humanely deal with the others quoted above.

If secular humanism means to these guys what they say it does, then secular humanism is meaningless; it is another lost cause. It is ultimately the same kind of philosophical and moral cop-out as any Machiavellianism, including Soviet Communism or Nazism or Fascism; that is, it is another subhuman or antihuman philosophy which rationalizes any means to accomplish whatever political goals. It is yet another vindication of 1984, which has now become 2003.

According to Vlosky et al., to remove from power and kill *one* man, Saddam Hussein, it is morally acceptable to a humanist to do the following:

· to rip off both arms of an Iraqi boy, to burn him severely, to kill all of his immediate family, and to leave only a distant aunt crying over the little mutilated body in a picture so heart-breaking it defies all description (*Time* magazine, April 14, 2003)

· to kill at least 10,000 civilians, including other babies and children, and to continue to kill them every day

· to bomb military *and* civilian targets, including hospitals, water treatment facilities, bridges, factories, and schools

· to impose economic sanctions and to ignore the starvation and slow death of over half a million Iraqi children

· to invade a sovereign, foreign country that has posed no military threat to the U.S. and has no proven connection to the 9/11 terrorists

· to brutalize daily Iraq's civilian population in search of "the terrorists," which now includes anybody who opposes the U.S. occupation of Iraq

· to allow hundreds (eventually perhaps thousands) of its own troops to be killed in military action and accidents

· to waste maybe 200 billion dollars or possibly much more on a war that can not ever be won unless through a permanent and ruthless occupation

and

· not to capture or kill that one man, after all, even after six months of warfare, and not to find any weapons of mass destruction, the claimed presence of which was the main, stated reason for the war.

If that is humanism and if „humanists" is what these men want to call themselves, then I am *not* a humanist, and I don't want to be associated with such „humanists" as Vlosky, Gordon, or Wall. I find war in general and pre-emptive war in particular such horror that I will

never kowtow to crypto-militarists or „humanist" hawks, let alone to avowed militarists of any sort or nationality.

Mr. Wall's interpretation of secular humanism must have reached a new level of absurdity if he is offended by „pacifism" in humanism. Has Mr. Wall ever read the Humanist Manifestos? Didn't we, humanists, used to value peace until Mr. Wall told us that we shouldn't? What is this guy talking about? What is wrong with „peace" and „pacifism"? What's next? That "militarism," not "pacifism," should be the basis of secular humanism and that you could support Rush Limbaugh and vote for Bush *and* still call yourself a secular humanist?

Humanism is more than pacifism, but without being grounded in pacifism, humanism is not worth a single editorial in *Free Inquiry* or elsewhere. It is not part of my moral calculations to agree to kill even one child, much less thousands, so that I can be more „secure" in the future. It is not my humanist „arithmetic." Of course, we can agree to disagree on matters of politics, but never on matters of humanist principles, regardless of whether they involve politics or not. How can you negotiate a Rogerian compromise between death and life? How can you live well, knowing that half a million children have died so that you can live in comfort and security?

What is it that secular humanists have recently done to compare with what, for instance, the peace activists from the Plowshare Movement have done? These Christian activists put their careers and lives on the line, confronting eyeball-to-eyeball the American Military Monster, which has gotten completely out of control. These courageous women and men are the true humanists, although not secular, of course. And what have we, secular humanists, accomplished? We have become squabbling verbalists who cannot even agree whether to wage pre-emptive war is moral or not. Who are our Berrigan brothers, our Plowshare nuns?

We cannot allow the Vloskys, the Gordons, or the Walls to misrepresent and distort humanist principles. We must be very careful about the public's perception of humanist philosophy, and we must make sure that the public knows that we consider them the lunatic fringe of the humanist movement, whose opinions do not represent the core values of the Council for Secular Humanism or the American Humanist Association. They are welcome, of course, to subscribe to *Free Inquiry*, *The Humanist*, *The American Rationalist*, or any other humanist periodical, but their crypto-militarist and pseudo-humanist views, if published at all, should always be accompanied by an editorial disclaimer.

Otherwise, they may hijack secular humanism and turn it into yet another useless ism in the history of intellectual rubbish.

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Published in the November/December 2003 issue of the *American Rationalist* ©.

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(Publikacja: 25-11-2003)

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