

# Arts & Letters

## BOOKS

[*The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's*, Tom Engelhardt, Haymarket Books, 269 pages]

### Evil Empire

By Brad Birzer

ON NOV. 9, 1989 a number of students crowded into a tight dormitory room, one of the few with a TV, in Zahm Hall at the University of Notre Dame. They had gathered to watch history unfold, as thousands of East and West Germans came together armed with sledgehammers, hope, and joy to tear down the Berlin Wall, skipping, sliding, and shimmering across the top of that concrete monstrosity. Only eight years before, President Reagan, under the watchful eye of Our Lady of the Lake atop her Golden Dome, had stood a few buildings down from Zahm and identified communism as “some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.” The prophecy was coming true, right there on the screen.

Since the early 1960s, Ronald Reagan had been planning an end to the Cold War in what might only be described as the equivalent of a mixture of fantasy baseball and the board game Risk. He stated his aim openly throughout his two terms as president, but predictably few believed him. The kind dismissed

his words as simple optimism from a lovable actor. The cynical—including those who helped shape public opinion—dismissed Reagan’s words as misguided, destabilizing, idiotic, colored by too many White House screenings of “Star Wars.”

But even after Reagan’s vision was fulfilled, the Cold War did not end. The events of 1989 should have offered the West some breathing room, a time to rethink the purpose of our nation and reinvigorate republican ideals. Instead, the past two decades, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, have revealed America and the West as morally and spiritually bankrupt. Plunder and torture best symbolize the bloated American Empire of the last 20 years, a force that exists merely for the sake of self-perpetuation. Our standing in the world has declined precipitously. At home, many are angry and want to change, organize, and harangue. Despite their best intentions, they stand impotent, comprehending neither the past nor the present, looking at the future—when not navel-gazing—with understandable dread.

When voters elected Barack Obama in 2008, his supporters acclaimed him higher than a prophet; he was messianic. As one fine and intelligent person—an expert in high tech as well as a farmer—wrote to me in immediate post-election euphoria, “Brad, why are you so upset, don’t you realize that we finally have a chance to end war and poverty, permanently?”

What the Obama administration has delivered, of course, is not only the continuation of the policies of the previous

three administrations but a profound exaggeration of them. If anything, we suffer more violations of our privacy and civil liberties now than at any time during the Bush administration, all in the name of a national-security state that keeps the populace in its place while perpetuating war abroad.

In his soul-searching, illuminating, and often depressing look at the unholy *ménage* of Demos, Leviathan, and Mars, Tom Engelhardt probes deeply into the war culture of Washington, D.C. He notes that only two positions have any real voice in contemporary public-policy debate: those who want more of this and those who want more of that. The key word is “more.” As Engelhardt writes, when it comes to conflict overseas “however contentious the disputes in Washington, however dismally the public viewed the war, however much the president’s war coalition might threaten to crack open, the only choices were between more and more.” More drones, more troops, more nation-building.

So much for campaign promises and the new messiah who would end war and poverty permanently. The first military budget Obama submitted, Engelhardt notes, was larger than the last one tendered by the Bush administration. “Because the United States does not look like a militarized country, it’s hard for Americans to grasp that Washington is a war capital, that the United States is a war state, that it garrisons much of the planet, and that the norm for us is to be at war somewhere (usually, in fact, many places) at any moment.”

Further, as the *Washington Post* revealed this past summer in a penetrat-

ing series on the intelligence community, no one knows exactly how many persons in how many agencies are spending what levels of taxpayer dollars to keep the espionage machine running. Engelhardt argues the intelligence communities are as bloated as any part of the Department of Defense. (Too bad we don't still call it the Department of War, which would be far more honest.)

As further evidence of our degeneration into a martial empire, the U.S. sells 70 percent of the weapons in the international arms trade. In almost every way, Engelhardt contends, the United States precipitates the militarization of the globe.

How far and fast we've fallen since the relatively peaceful days of the Reagan era. Four interventionist administrations later, we find ourselves as the leaders of international vice and terror. What happened, Engelhardt asks, to the republic our Founders bequeathed to us? What have we done with and to our inheritance?

In the background, I can hear Steve Horgarth's wonderfully English voice from the film "Brave": "The Cold War's gone, but those bastards will find us another one. They're here to protect you, don't you know. Get used to it." He was right.

## WE FIND OURSELVES AS THE LEADERS OF INTERNATIONAL VICE AND TERROR.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REPUBLIC OUR FOUNDERS BEQUEATHED TO US?

The bastards have placed barbed wire, barricades, cameras, and uniformed persons throughout the once republican capital of the United States, Washington, D.C. Those bastards control the levers of power throughout the country, not just inside the Beltway. They just made my wife and I remove our shoes and belts and hand over to the federal government any bottles of liquids with three ounces or more. The bastards are everywhere. And it seems America isn't enough for them: avarice begets avarice.

With an excellent mind and an equally fine pen, Engelhardt demonstrates true patriotism to the America founding and to the larger humane and irenic ideals of the West:

What a world might be like in which we began not just to withdraw our troops from one war to fight another, but to seriously scale down the American global mission, close those hundreds of bases—as of 2010, there were almost 400 of them, macro to micro, in Afghanistan alone—and bring our military home is beyond imagining. To discuss such obviously absurd possibilities makes you an apostate to America's true religion and addiction, which is force. However much it might seem that most of us are peaceably watching our TV sets or computer screens or iPhones, we Americans are also—always—marching to war. We may not all bother to attend the church of our new religion, but we all tithe. We all partake. In a sense we live peaceably in a state of war.

Reading such good prose invigorates like little else in this world of sorrows. But one should not consider Engelhardt merely a writer of golden prose. This

body has a soul as well, and Engelhardt convincingly presents evidence as well as argument throughout the book.

In the first chapter, he shows how the George W. Bush administration went from nothing to everything, how 9/11 "called" Bush to lead a crusade and to give his presidency drive, and perhaps most importantly how the country came to be transformed into a "homeland." Next, Engelhardt considers how to garbison a planet: "Imagine the hubris involved in the idea of being 'global policemen' or 'sheriff' and marching into

a Dodge City that was nothing less than Planet Earth itself." American bureaucrats, diplomats, and army engineers swarmed the globe, remaking a post-Cold War world into post-post-Cold War one. "Naturally, with a whole passel of bad guys out there, a 'global swamp' to be 'drained,' we armed ourselves to kill, not stun."

*The American Way of War* is brimming with insights. Engelhardt develops the fascinating argument that the history of the past 11 decades is the history of the airplane and our use of it for war, from the Sopwith Camel to the drone piloted remotely out of Las Vegas. In rather Chomsky-like (or perhaps Orwellian) fashion, one of Engelhardt's later chapters explores the perversion of words in the English language to make the idea of war more palatable for the public and keep perpetual conflict "hidden in plain sight." Engelhardt claims the Bush administration redefined patriotism and American identity, polarizing the country. Anyone who challenged the war, the Bush line went, must either be a "wuss" or a traitor.

In great detail, the author shows the continuity of thought from Clinton to Obama, revealing, not surprisingly, that the current president controls, possesses, and wields the greatest amount of power—in terms of military, real estate, and budget—anywhere or anytime. Never did Obama plan to follow through with his peace promises made during the 2008 campaign.

Too often, Engelhardt sagaciously concludes, Americans spend their time in a future that cannot possibly be known, imagining their country's role as savior and messiah. But Engelhardt notes that only the past can reveal our true selves. "Not even Americans can occupy the future," he writes. "It belongs to no one."

Not even to the bastards. ■

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[*History Man: The Life of R.G. Collingwood*, Fred Inglis, Princeton University Press, 386 pages]

## Biographer or Ventriloquist?

By James Bowman

IN WRITING HIS BIOGRAPHY of the underappreciated and now mostly forgotten British philosopher R.G. Collingwood, Fred Inglis unfortunately did not obtain the cooperation of his subject's surviving daughter, Teresa, who like her father has become a don at Oxford. Collingwood, who died in 1943 at the age of only 53, is said to have left behind a large archive of letters, which Teresa refused to make available to Inglis. Doubtless that is part of the reason why this book is so short of what would conventionally be considered essential biographical detail. For example, we are left knowing almost nothing about the woman to whom Collingwood was married for 23 years and whom he divorced shortly before his death to marry an actress and former student—or, for that matter, about the actress either.

You'd think that Inglis, a professor emeritus of Cultural Studies at the University of Sheffield, could have done a bit more digging. Somehow he even neglects to tell us the date of Collingwood's birth. Perhaps he excludes it on principle: describing the postwar, post-Collingwood philosophical landscape in Britain, the biographer writes that "Ryle and Wittgenstein had demolished the long-lived psychology of Romanticism whereby human beings are divided into inner states and outer appearances and in which the key to understanding other people is to discover how they truly think and feel about the world." If adopted as a working principle by writers of biographies, this is very bad news for readers.

As an admirer of Collingwood's philosophical writings, especially his works

on history collected after his death in *The Idea of History*, I was glad to find Inglis's book so sympathetic to its subject, and I hope that it sparks a revival of interest in the great man's thinking. But I have to say that in his daughter's place I would not have cooperated with Inglis either. *History Man* is not only badly short of essential information but also terribly overwritten. This is a very un-Collingwoodian volume in several ways, especially in its failure to stick to the evidence and its greater interest in claiming that the philosopher's thought was a cruder prototype of its author's own than in trying to understand what Collingwood actually did think.

Collingwood's greatness as a philosopher was to demonstrate the centrality of history to all thought—and, as he showed, "all history is the history of thought"—together with the idea of "absolute presuppositions," which are largely invisible to those who hold them but increasingly apparent to subsequent generations who don't make the same assumptions. These presuppositions form our thought and, once revealed, compel us to keep re-writing the history of it. The cultural milieu of the years since his death has been characterized by absolute presuppositions that include a politically motivated attempt to cut us off from history, the study of which has lately been devoted to passing judgment on the past rather than understanding it, as Collingwood would have required.

To see the inadequacies of Inglis's book, one has only to read it in tandem with Collingwood's *Autobiography*, a classic of 20th-century literature in English. The crispness, clarity, and narrative energy with which it is written is a standing reproach to the misty moralizing that Inglis spends his time superimposing upon the story he has to tell. Here, for instance, is just one of the *Autobiography's* many thrilling passages, set in Collingwood's father's library where

one day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its

spine 'Kant's Theory of Ethics.' It was Abbott's translation of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; and as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. ... Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. ... I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.

He goes on to describe in similarly perspicuous language the urgent need for reflection that this early encounter with his life's work inspired in him and his escapes into the Wordsworthian landscapes of his Lake District boyhood to indulge that need, which began to make his parents think that "I had fallen into a habit of loafing"—a part of the story that his biographer reduces to paraphrase as follows:

The happy, venturesome little boy was at the same time strikingly removed on occasions from the intent and boisterous family, pursuing thoughts that he could not yet clothe in words, but knowing them to be irresistible, thrilling also, summoning him from across a vast landscape of the mind to the long exploration at the end of which he would find them, the deep forests and dark hills would fall back, and he would be in a sunlit clearing and at peace.

The reader can't help feeling that he is being invited to admire Inglis's muddily poetical translation of the plainer but