



## The Liberal Defence of Murder

*Richard Seymour*

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## **The Liberal Defence of Murder** Richard Seymour

A war that has killed over a million Iraqis was a ‘humanitarian intervention’, the US army is a force for liberation, and the main threat to world peace is posed by Islam.

Those are the arguments of a host of liberal commentators, ranging from Christopher Hitchens to Kanan Makiya, Michael Ignatieff, Paul Berman, and Bernard-Henri Levy. In this critical intervention, Richard Seymour unearths the history of liberal justifications for empire, showing how savage policies of conquest—including genocide and slavery—have been retailed as charitable missions.

From the Cold War to the War on Terror, Seymour argues that the colonial tropes of ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’ still shape liberal pro-war discourse, and still conceal the same bloody realities.

## **The Liberal Defence of Murder Details**

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Author : Richard Seymour

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## Sudarshan says

Gimped, trot Losurdo

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## Scott Neigh says

Reviewed here.

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## Ben says

Really good analysis of history since around the 17th century up until today, with a significant focus on imperialism.

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## Simon Wood says

### USEFUL IDIOTS

I missed Richard Seymours "The Liberal Defence of Murder" first time round (it was initially published in 2008) but having enjoyed his short and sharp "The Meaning of David Cameron" I jumped at the chance of getting my hands on this revised edition (published in June this year) and was not dissapointed.

The book focusses on those ostensibly liberal "thinkers" who supported military interventions by western states (imperial in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, so-called "liberal democracys" in the latter half of the twentieth) against states in the non-western world. Seymour engages with a number of these "thinkers", their justifications for "liberal" military intervention, and highlights the massive gap between the idealistic rhetoric and the sordid reality. On a more general level the degree of ignorance (or mendacity) that such celebrated figures as US president Woodrow Wilson, Bernard Henri-Levy, Paul Berman, Michael Ignatief, Christopher Hitchens and Arthur Schlesinger Jr exhibit in their writings and exhortations is made crystal clear; the degree of continuity between the imperial/colonial mentality, the cold war "CIA socialists" (see Francis Stonor Saunders incomparable "Who Paid the Piper?: CIA and the Cultural Cold War" and that of the liberal interventionists is also examined.

Seymour has a particularly strong accounts of Liberalism and Empire; the trail blazing interventionist Woodrow Wilson; the neoconservatives and their relationship with the liberal interventionists as well as historical events such as the Balkans War. This edition also considers the events surrounding the Arab spring, with particular regard to events in Libya.

Overall this is a solidly researched, clearly written and erudite work that exposes the phenomena of liberal intervention for what it is: intellectually fraudulent, morally repugnant and a fig leaf for the exercise of

military power by strong self interested states against the weak. It is an important work, and one that I'd heartily recommend to anyone with an interest in how the world actually works.

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### **Nathan Fisher says**

Richard Seymour is one of the only contemporary Marxists giving renewed intellectual weight to polemicism. Excellent.

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### **Naeem says**

Richard Seymour is famed for his blog, "Lenin's Tomb." But now he will also be famous for this book.

Like Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine and Zizek's First as Tragedy..., this book consolidates contemporary history so that it comes together as a coherent whole.

The premise of this book is simplicity itself: we should not be surprised by those on the liberal left who have supported imperialist wars, for example, in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Why? Because, (a) the liberal left has a long history of supporting imperialist wars; and (b) the liberal left is just as romanced by the "white man's burden" as the liberal right. White supremacy reigns.

I'll admit to being surprised by the turns taken by, for example, Christopher Hitchens and the British leftists of the Euston Manifesto. But as soon as I started this book, I knew I should not have been. Silly me.

The power of this fine, fine book is in the details. Seymour piles them on. In the USA, UK, and France we learn the history of the left's constant and consistent compromise with imperialism and colonialism. Mark Twain once supported US imperialism we learn. Camus supported French colonization of Algeria (Sartre did not). All kinds of people that we are meant by orthodox history to take as heroes, seemed to have no problem putting the natives in their rightful place. He even has a section on the long history of imperial feminism. And he is not shy about declaring the planet as run on the principles of white supremacy.

The narrative is 267 pages. The rest (170 pages) is devoted to detailed and extensive footnotes. He means to produce some long lasting damage.

Like I felt about the Shock Doctrine, I wish for a few days I could be a reading dictator and make everyone read this book. I'd say it is mandatory reading for anyone who wants a glimpse of reality -- at least the reality that I think is most important to see.

And the cost of this book is \$5.29.

If this book doesn't blow you away, you can ask me for your money back.

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### **Mark Bennett says**

If you're not a poli-sci scholar or politico, not sure why you'd read Seymour? I'm neither and I couldn't put it down. I think his work is a counterbalance to the routine lies and propaganda of imperial governments. Empire thrives and it always conjures a justification and rationale for going to war.

Two phrases/words worth remembering: "humanitarian intervention" and "manifest-destinarianism."

In-depth, scholarly and detailed history of hegemonic policies that always contain a military solution/threat to the global problems that arise.

Seymour points to the truth, and sometimes we simply need to be reminded of all the bullhorn that comes down the pike from our leaders.

I recommend it, if you're into political history.

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This is a slow go, but phenomenal. Stirring and thought-provoking.

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Friend Hamilton lent me the book and said go for it. She said she didn't mind if I mark it up. I am hooked and Seymour's book is in the mix. This from the prologue will invite you in, "... seeks to explain a current of irrational thought that supports military occupation and murder in the name of virtue and decency."

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## **Dale says**

Seymour traces the detailed history of liberal and socialist support for war, colonialism, and imperialism, from the mid 19th century to the present day. I suspect that for most of us this history is too detailed. Many, if not most, of the liberals and socialists whose political trajectories are documented in this book were familiar to me in name only, if that. Nonetheless, I give high marks to Seymour for having researched and written such a specific and focused history.

The general theme of the book is that liberals can always be counted on to act as propagandists for colonialism, imperialism, and war, and this propensity is not something that has been left in the dustbin of history, but continues to the present. The justifications given are generally elitist, paternalistic, or racist in nature: some version of "the white man's burden." Seymour focuses entirely on the (previously) colonial powers in Europe, Great Britain, and the US, for obvious reasons. The similarities between liberal / progressive defense of war in the various countries are far more striking than their differences. In general, colonizing a third world country, or waging war on it, is done because the population there is too "barbaric" or "primitive" to be able to assimilate the many benefits of democracy and capitalism without the "assistance" of the colonizer or invader. It is our moral duty to aid and instruct the benighted populations so that they may advance politically, economically, and morally. If this instruction requires force, then that is merely an unfortunate side effect, and should not deter us from our laudable aims.

Though Seymour doesn't mention it, I think an excellent example of this was the attack on Libya initiated by Obama (without Congressional approval) in 2011. Libya was in the midst of a civil war - a purely internal affair - but US "interests" were at stake. Given that the US was already engaged in war on multiple other

middle eastern countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia) one would naturally expect that there would be substantial liberal opposition to yet another "engagement". But in fact there was substantial support for Obama's Libya adventure among liberals. Some of that support was, no doubt, merely an expression of the unprincipled partisan loyalty that we have come to expect since 2009. But the reasons given for supporting the invasion were identically those that Seymour describes in his book: the imposition of "stability"; ensuring the rise of "democracy"; "humanitarian intervention"; "protection" of civilians.

These justifications for war are always advanced with a kind of ahistorical naivete, as though liberals have forgotten, or never knew, that even the most barbarous of wars (and they are all barbarous) are "justified" on the very same grounds. Whether it was the suppression of the Phillipine rebellion at the turn of the 20th century, or the annexation of Austria in the 1930s, or the invasion of Iraq in 2003: always the aggressor claims the high moral ground, asserting a moral obligation to wage war. Always.

Seymour really comes into his own when he describes, in excruciating detail, the evolution of the Left from the early 1930s to the late 70s. The general pattern was the disillusionment of leftists with the USSR because of its transformation into a brutal and bureaucratic "totalitarian" regime. This disillusionment resulted in a further fragmentation of an already fragmented Left, with disastrous consequences. Adherents of the anti-totalitarian Left soon enough joined forces with the anti-Communist right, going so far as to support the loyalty oaths and witch hunts that characterized the postwar period. The focus on anti-Communism provided a wedge by which radical labor action was suppressed, and the possibility of a genuine Left coalition was destroyed. The political situation in the US and Europe has never really recovered from this. Seymour traces these developments at a level of detail that I found difficult to follow; but the level of detail is important to an understanding of the many routes by which the general left-to-right transformation can take place.

If there is a single takeaway from this book, it is that principled opposition to imperialism and imperialist war is the single step that we can take to avoid being on the wrong side of history. Sadly, though, we know that the next time the US war machine swings into action, there will be a phalanx of liberals there to cheer it on.

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## **Michael Boyte says**

Mainly trotskyist drivel.

I picked this up in light of democrats and ostensible liberals criticizing the trump withdrawal from Syria- thinking it would have some insights. While written in 2008, it's mainly not about Iraq war era supporters of imperialism, but more of a long winded historical overview of support for empire by supposedly progressive thinkers in the west. Complete with a typical simplistic anti-communist condemnation of the Chinese revolution, and seemingly blaming the right-word shift of certain western leftists from the 60's on the Soviet Union; Seymour does little to articulate the failures of the liberal project, or to explain the material causes of the shifts, simply chronicling them historically. He spends an inordinate amount of time talking about Christopher Hitchens.

It's doubtful that this was worth the time in 2008, certainly not worth the time now.

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