
Review

Altruism Plus High Explosives

Richard Gamble

Hillsdale College

Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies, by William S. Smith. *Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019. 236 pp. \$70.00.*

Samuel Johnson, one of eighteenth-century England's great literary geniuses, spotted the problem of imagination that lies at the heart of war and empire. His friend Edmund Burke would later call for the renewal of the "moral imagination" at the outbreak of the French Revolution. And Johnson no less than Burke grasped the implications of utopian dreaming for peace, order, and stability. The exploration of imagination permeates his *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*. Written quickly in 1759 as Johnson mourned the loss of his mother, the fable tells the story of young Prince Rasselas and his quest to make the right "choice of life." The book makes a fascinating contrast to the corrosive skepticism of Voltaire's *Candide* of the same decade. The prince and his companions consult all the professions and wisemen of the day as they seek happiness and contentment, assuming that there is one best way to live in a dangerous and perplexing world. They encounter a Stoic and a stand-in for Rousseau and a mad astronomer who has come to believe that his exact Baconian knowledge of the heavens means that he controls nature. Humanity's fate rests in his hands. The burden is too much to bear. Who will make the sun rise when he is gone? Rasselas will one day inherit a kingdom, and thus the problem of statesmanship is his nagging dilemma. At one point the sincere but naïve prince admits that he has "frequently endeavoured

RICHARD GAMBLE is Professor of History and Anna Margaret Ross Alexander Chair in History and Politics at Hillsdale College

to imagine the possibility of a perfect government, by which all wrong should be restrained, all vice reformed, and all the subjects preserved in tranquillity and innocence. This thought produced innumerable schemes of reformation, and dictated many useful regulations and salutary effects." But Johnson shows the dark side to the prince's untethered imagination. Such dreaming, the young man admits, "has been the sport and sometimes the labour of my solitude, and I start when I think with how little anguish I once supposed the death of my father and my brothers."

This moment in the story is arresting. The point is clear. The prince's utopian imagination made it frightfully easy to see his own family as obstacles to his schemes of human perfection and to picture their deaths as necessary to the inauguration of the new era. Thirty years later, the French Revolution and the political upheavals that followed in Europe and beyond proved Johnson something of a prophet.

Readers of William Smith's *Democracy and Imperialism* will see immediately the parallels between Johnson's moral imagination and Irving Babbitt's. Both saw the threat that a leader's idyllic imagination poses to a well-ordered community and to the very possibility of limited war for limited aims. Most dramatically, Babbitt observed the breakdown of all restraint during the Great War and feared that nothing fundamental had been solved by the "new order" touted by the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. The volatile combination of Baconian naturalism and Rousseauist sentimentalism that defined modernity had survived the war intact and if left unchecked would lead humanity into ever more destructive nightmares in the years ahead. Applied science and mass industrialization had increased the efficiency of slaughter, as the shattered landscape of Europe and the millions of marble and iron grave markers testified. Wedded to a humanitarian determination to transform the world through a vague, emotive "service," technology would be applied to more and more ingenious but diabolical ways of waging war. What was missing was the ethic of self-control, what Babbitt called the "will to refrain." Somehow that discipline had to be restored. And it was national leaders who most urgently needed the right kind of moral education to bring an ethical center back to a centrifugal world.

I first encountered Babbitt in Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* sometime in the 1980s. I was looking for a better intellectual grounding for the conservatism I espoused more by instinct and rearing than by reflection and history. Like a lot of young conservatives in Reagan's America, I assumed that I just needed to align my thinking with Kirk's family tree of ancestors, from Burke to John Adams, John C. Calhoun,

Henry Adams, Babbitt, George Santayana, and T. S. Eliot. I doubt I grasped at the time that Kirk worked to reconstruct a disposition rather than a canon. But the quest I set out on proved fruitful and illuminating. At the time, I was in graduate school trying to understand the American social gospel clergy and their enthusiasm for the Wilsonian war for righteousness being waged at home and abroad. Although Babbitt didn't write directly on the liberal clergy who attempted to transform Christianity, America, and the world, I found his analysis of Woodrow Wilson's temperament compelling. Wilson and his social gospel allies clearly combined the Baconian faith in man's mastery over nature with the Rousseauist dream of brotherhood. The president and his circle came to embrace the war as the means to global transformation, the end of the old order and the beginning of the final, perfect, and universal reign of justice, peace, and harmony, the triumph of "service" over "selfishness"—the worst sin in the progressives' Decalogue. My understanding of religion and the First World War has evolved over time, but I still find Babbitt penetrating as a diagnostician. Smith's account reminds me why and has given me new reasons to think so.

My first published essay after my dissertation appeared in this journal in 1996 as "The 'Fatal Flaw' of Internationalism: Babbitt on Humanitarianism." It was with great enthusiasm, then, that I read Smith's careful and thorough examination of Babbitt's diagnosis of war, democracy, empire, and the corruption of leadership that makes the combination so explosive. I was not disappointed. Smith has at his command a comprehensive knowledge of Babbitt's political philosophy, its enduring significance for the study of war, and how it illuminates the often misunderstood realist-idealist debate among the modern foreign-policy intelligentsia. This is a timely book. It asks the most fundamental questions about power relationships and the prospects for peace in a dangerous world torn by what Samuel Huntington called the "clash of civilizations." The problems run deep, and Babbitt understood that reality a century ago and predicted many of the horrors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Smith seems to have read everything Babbitt wrote—books, articles, archival letters, lectures, and reviews. Babbitt's consistency over the course of forty years is striking in Smith's account. In seven thematic chapters, Smith covers Babbitt's conception of human nature, the naturalist presuppositions at the root of both modern science and sentimentalism, the dangers of democracy divorced from self-control, idealism as inherently revolutionary, imperialism as the inevitable consequence of

false democracy, vague and lazy “brotherhood” as a sham form of cosmopolitanism, and Babbitt’s continuing relevance to the foreign-policy alternatives offered by Francis Fukuyama, Henry Kissinger, and Samuel Huntington. Smith’s short conclusion reflects on the dire consequences of the U.S.’s now-habitual “penchant for international warfare” (177).

Page by page, Smith led me to consider the sources of constraint (what Walter McDougall helpfully calls an ethic of “self-containment”) that had defined U.S. foreign policy until removed in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and then most dramatically in World War I. How did America lose its fear of going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy,” as John Quincy Adams called the temptation in a phrase once celebrated for its wisdom, especially by George Kennan during the Cold War. We see it firmly in place in George Washington’s “Great Rule” and in the Monroe Doctrine. These two articulations of restraint established an orthodoxy that was invoked for generations as limiting American action in the world. They helped form an American conscience. But the temptation to loose these bonds was always there. From the time of the Revolutionary War, there were always those who conceived of the United States first and foremost as an ideological nation. They tended to “weaponize” the Declaration of Independence as a mission statement for a nation with a cosmic destiny. Stripped of its history and reduced to abstractions ready for export, the Declaration was turned into marching orders for the global triumph of transcendent, universal principles in the aid of perpetual revolution on the Jacobin model.

The conflicting visions of U.S. foreign policy—the answers to the question, “What does America owe the world?”—were on full display already in the 1820s as the House of Representatives debated even modest and largely symbolic aid to the Greek War for Independence against the Ottoman Empire. Webster, Clay, Randolph, and other congressmen wrestled on the floor of the House with American exceptionalism, America’s mission, and whether national interests trumped idealism. Randolph even warned of waging an ideological “jihad” (his word) against the Turks. Everyone in the debate affirmed America’s uniqueness. For some that difference demanded that the U.S. perfect its own institutions at home to keep America a worthy model of republican self-government. For others, like Webster, that difference required America to vindicate its great principles by promoting them abroad. Being exemplary in the old sense was hard work. It was a matter of duty more than mission. It required the cultivation of character. Reputation had to be earned. Ideological imperialism, in contrast, thrived on what Burke called, in refer-

ence to Rousseau, the “ethics of vanity.”

My point in this digression is that Babbitt’s analysis of the problem ought to encourage us to add to Smith’s framework by looking for evidence of America’s constrained self-understanding—of the “disciplinary virtues” (116)—and for manifestations of the imperial imagination that undermined it. The temptation has always been there. But it was checked. How was it checked? The effusiveness of American boasting about its excellences and about its calling to be a brightly shining beacon to the world can mislead us into thinking, as Robert Kagan wants so badly to believe, that the U.S. has always been a “dangerous nation”—dangerous, that is, to autocracy in all its real and imagined forms. That misunderstanding feeds all kinds of nonsense and makes crusading authentically American and the whole nineteenth century into some proto-Wilsonian fantasy.

Since antiquity, education in the West has warned against the inordinate love of wealth, power, and glory. Christianity repeated that warning down through the eighteenth century. Colonial and national America sustained that tradition for a century after. As the United States grew in wealth, power, and fame, statesmen knew that humility and self-restraint would become more important than ever. Babbitt honored the Classical and Christian tradition, and in higher education fought valiantly to defend the classicism under siege at Harvard and elsewhere. But where should America turn for renewal in a world in which these traditions seemed to be spent forces and the nation finds itself increasingly under the domination of scientific and sentimental naturalism? The United States has to know how to deal responsibly with nations not rooted in the West’s own traditions. Babbitt turned to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism to find resources for a wider, common understanding of human nature—something larger than Western Civilization—on which to build authentic cosmopolitanism. Every European nation in the lead-up to World War I believed it had a mission to civilize. Empires considered the war of 1914-1918 itself a war for civilization. But when the guns fell silent, they knew they faced the collapse of civilization and not its triumph. That conviction has haunted conservatives of all kinds over the past century. The post-Cold War world now experiences not the globalization of liberalism and secularism or the “end of history” but violent conflicts between civilizations. Still, as Smith emphasizes in his book’s last paragraph, Babbitt did not believe in historical determinism. Now as always, “human beings and nations make their own fate through deliberate moral exertions. The only possible remedy

for the current conditions would, for Babbitt, be the emergence of leaders who are sensible, moderate, and decent so that the body politic can undergo a period of stabilization" (182). We might doubt that possibility, but, for Babbitt and Smith, these are reasons for hope.

At the end of *Rasselas*, in the "Conclusion in Which Nothing is Concluded," the prince seems at last to have found contentment within the limits of ambitions more chastened than his previous utopianism. Indeed, now he "desired a little kingdom in which he might administer justice in his own person and see all the parts of government with his own eyes; but he could never fix the limits of his dominion, and was always adding to the number of his subjects." "Nothing is concluded," because the problem of the human imagination will never be solved. It can only be managed, and leaders must step up to that challenge and give up their "innumerable schemes of reformation" at home and abroad.