

Sorrows of Empire

William Batchelder

Review: Scott Horton, *Enough Already: Time to End the War on Terrorism* (The Libertarian Institute: 2021), paperback, 332 pp., \$19.99.

“As many as three million Iraqis, Afghans, Pakistanis, Somalis, Libyans, Syrians, and Yemenis have been killed in these wars. Their countries have been completely destroyed. The famines in Somalia and Yemen are on Bush, Obama, and now on Trump as well... More than 37 million people have been internally and externally displaced by the wars, more than in any crisis since World War II.”

—Scott Horton (293)

“Massihiyeh ala Beirut, Allawiyeh ala taboot!” (Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave!)

—Chant of CIA-backed Sunni rebels in Syria (200)

“solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant” (They make a desert, and they call it peace.)

—Tacitus, *The Agricola*, Book 30

Scott Horton emerged from pirate radio to become one of Libertarianism’s most colorful public intellectuals. He has completed over 5,000 foreign policy interviews with journalists, academics, and activists for his podcast, The Scott Horton Show, and for Antiwar Radio, which is carried by Pacifica on the West Coast. He is editorial director at Antiwar.com and the director of the Libertarian Institute. *Enough Already* is his second book. Horton has also published *Fools Errand: Time to End the War in Afghanistan* (2017) and *Hotter than the Sun: Time to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (2022).

Enough Already is bookended by thematic chapters. It opens with “Causing Problems,” an overview of US interventions in the Middle East before 2001. The final two chapters survey the disastrous consequences of the War on Terror, both for America and for the Middle East. Chapters Two through Twelve offer factually-dense overviews of the various theatres of the War on Terror, presented in roughly chronological order. One of the benefits of the book is that Mr. Horton separates the Afghanistan and Iraq wars into distinct phases, each with their own causes and consequences, and assigns each phase its own chapter. Another is that he offers succinct chapters on the lesser-known theatres of the war, from Pakistan to Somalia, Libya and Mali. He dedicates a chapter to both the Arab Spring and to the Syrian Civil War which followed. By placing these chapters in chronological order, Horton demonstrates how US involvement in one conflict has often led directly to the next.

SORROWS OF EMPIRE: A REVIEW OF *ENOUGH ALREADY*

Enough Already is a polemical work, offering dense detail in the service of what this reviewer discerns as a four-part anti-imperialist argument:

1. No facet of the War on Terror has been justified to begin with, and every conflagration after 2003 has been caused, in part or in whole, by prior US intervention(s).
2. The wars have failed everywhere they have been tried because victory is impossible.
3. The protection of the American people has never been the principal object of the architects of these wars.
4. The human costs of the war on terror have been so high as to invalidate the entire undertaking.

The first theme woven throughout the fourteen chapters of *Enough Already* is that no facet of the War on Terror has been justified. Horton argues convincingly that the justifications offered to the American people for the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions were either distortions or outright lies. The wars which have followed Afghanistan and Iraq largely resulted from the chaos caused by these earlier US interventions and have also been presented dishonestly to the American people.

Terrorist attacks in the US or Europe have often been presented as the reason the US must continue the War on Terror; Americans are told we must “fight them over there so that we do not have to fight them here.” Horton argues that this is exactly backward, and that the West experiences terror attacks largely because of decades of “fighting them over there,” either openly or covertly. To make this argument, Horton first addresses the notion, commonly found on the American right, that there is some intrinsic defect in Islam which is to blame for terrorist violence. He reminds the reader that there are well over a billion Muslims in the world. If terror were intrinsic to this creed, there ought to be considerably more violence than there is. Those willing to use violence to achieve one or another form of “political Islam” are, in fact, a tiny fraction even among the minority of Muslims we would consider “fundamentalist.”

Horton argues that the origins of “Islamic” terrorism are political. Terrorist violence is “blowback”: a term the CIA first coined in 1954 in an after-action report on the coup against Mossadegh in Iran (15). “Blowback” has come to mean terrorist violence inflicted on

PIETAS

American citizens prompted by US government actions overseas which the average American knows nothing about. Blowback has been compounded by what foreign policy experts have termed “backdraft,” which Horton defines as “the short-term consequences of overt policies blowing up right in our face” (271). Horton argues that the overwhelming majority of terrorist attacks against the US and its allies are not some peculiar expression of Islam, but “blowback” or “backdraft” prompted by US foreign policy.

Both the behavior of the United States government and the terrorists’ own explanations of their actions support Horton’s arguments. If the US government truly believed that Islam was the source of the terrorism problem, that the Muslim world “hates us for our freedom,” and that the individualistic modern culture of Americans inevitably provokes Muslim violence, then why would the United States attack the secular Ba’athist regimes in Iraq and Syria? Before the Afghanistan invasion, the Taliban had offered to turn Osama bin Laden over to a neutral nation. Why did the US refuse to negotiate with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had never sought to export its fundamentalist form of Islam, while remaining closely allied to the Saudi despotism, which is the world’s chief exporter of Wahhabist Islamic fundamentalism? Why did NATO fly as the air support for the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in 2011 while Hillary Clinton publicly crowed over the death of Muammar Gaddafi, an Arab Nationalist?

Those who have carried out attacks against the West have taken pains to point out that their motives are political. Osama bin Laden’s 1996 “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” is largely concerned with US foreign policy. Ramzy Yousef, bomb-maker for the first attack on the World Trade Center, Faisal Shahzad, the attempted Times Square Bomber, and Omar Mateen, the Pulse Nightclub Shooter, each blamed either American occupations of Islamic countries or US violence against Muslim civilians for their attacks. None have *ever* claimed to have been provoked into an attack by American “freedoms.”

The principal argument of *Enough Already* is that the War on Terror has failed in every theatre, and that its many failures have each had the effect of further expanding the war. In the weeks after 9/11, the active members of al Qaeda could have fit comfortably into a 757; twenty years later, there are tens of thousands of militants, active in at least a dozen countries, pledging loyalty either to Ayman al Zawahiri, bin Laden’s late successor, or branding

SORROWS OF EMPIRE: A REVIEW OF *ENOUGH ALREADY*

themselves as ISIS. Bin Laden had hoped for precisely this catastrophic failure of US policy. The al Qaeda mastermind was a veteran of the Mujahedeen insurgency against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. He wanted to repeat the Afghan experience of the 1980's, luring a new "far enemy," the United States, into a never-ending bloody quagmire in the Middle East. Once the weakened and chastened Americans gave up, bin Laden reasoned, they would withdraw their troops from "the Land of the Two Holy Places," Saudi Arabia. With the US military gone, it would be far easier to overthrow the corrupt or secular Middle Eastern regimes he hated and replace them. According to bin Laden's son, Omar, the 2001 attacks were a provocation; he told *Rolling Stone* that his father was thrilled when George W Bush took the bait.

Horton goes to great pains to prove how each action in the war on terror has had the effect of adding another theatre to the war. On the individual level, General Stanley McChrystal described this as "insurgent math": for every terrorist killed, 10 more take his place. On the regional level, one can see again and again the awful cause and effect. To give only three of the worst examples:

- The 2003 toppling of the secular regime of Saddam Hussein effectively handed Baghdad to the Shiite majority in Iraq. Organized Shiite political movements, SCIRI (the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and the Da'wa Party, had ties to the Shiite regime in Iran. The sectarian cleansing which followed the US occupation strengthened Iran's hand in the region, while displacing the Iraqi Sunnis into less desirable areas of Iraq, particularly the Anbar province in the west. Veterans of the Sunni insurgency which followed this displacement ultimately formed the backbone of the Islamic State. ISIS, in its time as a territorial entity, comprehended both Western Iraq and Northeastern Syria. So, ISIS metastasized into most powerful faction in the Syrian Civil War, while proving far more dangerous to the rest of the world than the Assad regime has ever been.
- When the Obama administration and NATO toppled the Libyan regime, Gaddafi's displaced Tuareg mercenary soldiers attempted an insurrection in Mali. The Tuareg failed, but an Islamist insurgency followed, fueled in part by stray Libyan weapons. This caused the collapse of a fragile democratic government and the destruction of much of

PIETAS

the ancient monument of Timbuktu. The Mali insurgency then metastasized: “the terrorists and the wars against them have spread from Libya to Tunisia and Mali, and from there into Mauritania, Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burkina Faso” (176).

- Meanwhile, the “rat line” the CIA established from Benghazi and that runs from Libya through Turkey to Northern Syria sent jihadis and equipment to anti-Assad rebels, most or all of which ended up not with “moderate rebels” but in the hands of bin Ladenite groups or ISIS.

Even supposing there was some “smart” way for the Global War on Terror to have been conducted, one can be confident that US elites would never have discovered it. Horton reminds us that George W. Bush reportedly had to ask what a Shiite was mere weeks before his invasion of Iraq. Once the US foreign policy elite realized how much influence they had given Iran in the region by toppling Saddam Hussein, the next overreaction began: “Bush had brought Iran’s power in the region up two pegs by installing their best friends in Baghdad, so now, realizing his error, he would try to take them down a peg by weakening or overthrowing Iran’s ally in Damascus” (181).

Assad’s brutal response to the arrival of the Arab Spring in Syria gave America and its Gulf State allies their chance. America’s one-party national security state, in the persons of Obama’s Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the chief Republican hawk in the Senate, John McCain, advocated massive spending on the Syrian uprising while unsuccessfully searching for “moderate rebels” in Syria who would serve as Western proxies against the Assad regime. McCain had himself photographed with the Northern Storm Brigade in Syria in an attempt to promote them as the “moderates.” These same men, veterans of the recent Sunni insurgency against the American occupation in next-door Iraq, kidnapped Steven Sotloff, a Western journalist, and sold him to ISIS. The reader with a strong stomach can see what happened next on the internet.

In the Syrian civil war, American money and weapons, wherever they started out, invariably ended up in the hands of the worst bin Ladenites. The leading establishment journal, *Foreign Affairs*, tried to spin this unpleasant truth by running an article on “The

SORROWS OF EMPIRE: A REVIEW OF *ENOUGH ALREADY*

Moderate Face of Al Qaeda” (190). As the carnage in Syria intensified, John Kerry was secretly taped in a meeting in London admitting “we thought we could manage” the Sunni extremists (215). What Obama and Bush, McCain and Kerry actually managed to do was to create ISIS. Horton writes, “The preposterous war propaganda of the Bush Administration and the wildest daydreams of Osama bin Laden ... had actually come true. The terrorists had carved a new Islamist caliphate the size of Great Britain out of the sands of Western Iraq and Eastern Syria. [ISIS “caliph” al Baghdadi] could never have done it without the assistance of the United States of America in the hands of George W. Bush and Barak Obama” (202).

If the war on terror only metastasizes and never ends, what possible motivation could there be for carrying on? After America’s conduct in Egypt and Bahrain during the Arab Spring, to say nothing of its treatment of the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia, no one can believe that US strategic policy is to advance popular government. Horton argues it is also a mistake to focus on oil. Most oil consumed in America does not originate in the Middle East. Whoever is in charge, there is no chance the oil would not be sold; even bin Laden had said of Arabian oil, “we are not going to drink it” (36).

Instead, the War on Terror goes on because it is, in a phrase Horton borrows from the Vietnam era, a “self-licking ice cream cone” (60). That is to say, while the average American does not benefit in any way from carrying on these wars, entrenched interests benefit extravagantly and work hard to keep it going. The military needs a mission, and the manner in which the wars have been conducted has ensured that the mission continues expanding while high-profile commands go to low-character mediocrities like David Petraeus. Defense contractors lobby Congress to sell their wares, and vast fortunes are made; as of 2021, the war on terror has cost 6.4 trillion dollars. Mark Esper, Secretary of Defense for the ostensible war skeptic Donald Trump, rose to the pinnacle of the military industrial complex after having worked as a lobbyist for Raytheon. After 9/11, a security and spying apparatus in the US has grown to an unfathomable size, funded by a black budget in the billions of dollars. In order to vindicate the strategic or financial interests of their funders, think tankers in the pay of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, or the defense contractors insist that the wars must go on. The counties surrounding Washington, D.C. have become the wealthiest in the entire United States. As it turns out, the biggest welfare queens in the world wear epaulettes on their shoulders and lanyards around their necks.

PIETAS

All of this has been very bad for what is left of representative government in the United States. There is nothing democratic about the immense influence foreign governments, especially those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, wield in Washington through their lobbyists, think tanks, and expenditures on big-ticket defense contracts. Neither is there anything democratic about the unaccountable permanent war faction inside the federal government. Horton gives numerous examples. Here are the Republican neoconservatives in the Office of Special Plans, some of whom had earlier worked for Democrat Senator “Scoop” Jackson of Washington, “stovepiping” bad intelligence to the White House and to allied journalists to justify the 2003 Iraq invasion. There is Democrat Joe Biden, advised by Anthony Blinken, rigging the senatorial hearings before the 2003 Iraq invasion to give a one-sided endorsement for war. Here is Hillary Clinton urging Barack Obama to expand the war to Libya, while at the same time and under the same administration, Republican Liz Cheney meddles in the democracy movement in Egypt. When it comes to imperialism, America is a one-party state.

Some of the most memorable passages of the book describe the cruel absurdities of the War on Terror. Three stand out among many. During the “surge” in Afghanistan, the United States was paying billions of dollars *to the Taliban* to allow weapons and equipment to pass into Afghanistan from Iraq. The Taliban took that money and used it to buy those same weapons from the ill-trained enlistees of the Afghan Army, before turning them on American servicemen.

In the drone program in Afghanistan and Pakistan, President Obama, who routinely decried ethnic profiling by American police, adopted a policy that any fighting-age male killed by a missile strike was to be counted an enemy combatant unless it could be explicitly proven otherwise. He also permitted “signature strikes,” the policy that the CIA had authorization to kill anyone who matched the “signature” of a terrorist’s “pattern of life” (144). The United States undertook a policy of “double tap” drone strikes, first striking a convey, vehicle (or funeral or wedding), then firing another missile at anyone who showed up to provide aid. This is the same bombing signature Al Qaeda used in their terror attacks: first bomb the victims, then bomb the first responders.

Many grotesque ironies can be found in the Syrian Civil War. Horton writes, “The US was still fighting a CIA drone war in Iraq against the last of the Iraqi Sunni-based insurgency,

SORROWS OF EMPIRE: A REVIEW OF *ENOUGH ALREADY*

chasing them across the border into Syria where they suddenly became useful “moderate rebels” fighting against Assad” (191). Meanwhile, the US-allied government in Baghdad was sending Shiite militiamen—also experienced in resisting the US occupation from an earlier phase of the Iraq War—to Syria. There they would fight alongside Iranian Quds Force and Hezbollah to uphold the Syrian regime that American-backed rebels were attempting to topple. At one point in Syria, a rebel faction backed by the CIA fell to fighting with a rebel faction backed by the Pentagon.

Horton insists that the human cost of the war on terror has been far too high. He describes the catastrophic impact of the US invasion of Iraq: “It can hardly be overstated: America destroyed Iraq ... At least a million people were killed because of the war, certainly more in the aftermath. The Assyrian and Chaldean Christian communities that had been living in Iraq for 2,000 years have been virtually eradicated. There were almost a million and a half Iraqi Christians before the invasion. Now there are 250,000 left. The Yazidis, Turkmen, Marsh Arabs, and other religious and ethnic sectarian groups ... have been severely damaged in the war and may never recover” (118). Horton describes the enervation of a society where men, women, and children are afraid to go outside on clear days for fear of drone strikes. He laments the ethnic and sectarian cleansings in Iraq and Syria and the horrific civilian toll of the war in Yemen. While decrying the estimated three million that have probably been killed in the Middle East, Horton also laments the American soldiers lost, either in combat or to suicide upon their return.

One defect of *Enough Already* is that the tsunami of detail—focused almost entirely on American policies, their implementation, and the horrific failures that follow—never allows the reader to contemplate deeply the human toll. Hopefully, someone will take up the task of documenting the lived experiences of the survivors of over two decades of US and allied military devastation of the region. One hopes that memoirists in Baghdad, Saada, Aleppo and elsewhere will hold up a mirror to westerners about the real costs of the War on Terror to the terrorized civilians on the ground. One hopes some Gen X or Millennial Wilfred Owen will emerge from the American ranks to help us understand the experiences of our veterans.

Another defect of *Enough Already* is the lack of footnotes. Horton very frequently refers, in the body of his text, to the sources of the articles, interviews and public statements he

PIETAS

excerpts. But, even granting that this is a polemical work, it is frustrating not to be able to check citations.

I would conclude by suggesting that Horton's work should prompt a further difficult reckoning for readers of *Pietas*. In the Middle Eastern context, it is the actions of our government which are proving most destructive to "tradition, place, and Things Divine." The chaos resulting from American foreign policy has done irreparable harm to fragile ancient societies in our own, Christian, tradition. The US invasion destroyed the Christian minority community in Iraq. In their attempt to overthrow Assad, the US and its allies backed jihadis in Syria who displaced, forcibly converted, and murdered men, women, and children in the oldest Christian communities in the world.

We ought also to reflect on what has happened to the Muslim Middle East, both Sunni and Shi'ite. There can be no question that it is their societies, not ours, which are ordered principally around a still-functioning religious culture. While blaming Islam for terrorist acts in the West is an oversimplification and largely contrary to the facts, the power of Islam *in the Middle East, as a means of resistance to American imperialism*, cannot be overstated. Phillip Rieff defined culture as "the form of fighting before the firing actually begins."¹ The strength of Islamic culture daily realized in the lives of most Middle Easterners constitutes a formidable obstacle to remaking their societies. Islam powerfully equips young fighting-age men to resist Western occupations and Western influence. American hawks like to point to the most extreme expression of this, the Wahhabist reactionary Islamic State. But Muslim young men, Sunni and Shia, took up arms against the Western presence in the Middle East before ISIS, and will continue to do so now that it has collapsed. The overwhelming majority of these young men, past and present, will not carry out the atrocities ISIS reveled in. Indeed, many Muslim young men fought on the ground against ISIS in the name of Islam. While he is little interested in culture or religion in themselves, Horton recognizes the fighting power of culture, writing: "Perhaps defending this nation in war is a more reasonable goal than overthrowing and attempting to remake someone else's entirely alien society" (140).

The Islamic societies in the Middle East have powerful traditions, some of which most Americans disagree with, some of which are even repugnant to us. Societies in the Islamic world are organized around a religion with which Western creeds, both sacred and secular,

¹ Phillip Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1.

SORROWS OF EMPIRE: A REVIEW OF *ENOUGH ALREADY*

have often had an antagonistic relationship. But after two decades of the War on Terror, surely only the most hardened Jacobin could still expect that American power can hope to reshape these societies by force? In her memoir, Samantha Power, one of the architects of the destruction of Libya, sought to defend her actions by writing: “We could hardly be expected to have a crystal ball when it came to accurately predicting outcomes in places where the culture is not our own” (169). Just so. Enough already.