Tobias Endler. *After 9/11: Leading Political Thinkers about the World, the U.S. and Themselves, 17 Conversations.*

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This September marks ten years since the 9/11 terrorist attack against the U.S. back in 2001. It is hard to believe that a decade has passed already; the images from that day seem so current, perhaps a result of their emotional resonance or constant reproduction and circulation in the world’s mediascapes. For many, 9/11 was a watershed event which has defined the beginning of the twenty-first century, providing a political-ideological context from which to make sense of a world that had been labeled ‘the post-Cold War world’ since the early 1990s. In his book, After 9/11, Tobias Endler probes the meaning and significance of 9/11 from the viewpoints of a group of American intellectuals while also addressing a range of issues connected to the intricacies of American political culture and America’s role in the world as a superpower.

After 9/11 represents an ambitious attempt to map the intellectual bearings of a nation-state which for the past decade has been a dominant player in global affairs, at times perhaps even behaving as a hyperpower. (While American global power began maturing during the post-World War II era, American unilateralism became more distilled during the dual administrations of President George W. Bush.) In gauging American perceptions about foreign policy, democracy, and the role of public intellectuals, Endler interviews seventeen prominent figures whose vocational backgrounds range from academia to
think tanks, and journalism to positions in government. Complimenting this range of professional callings, Endler has appropriately selected individuals from a variety of ideological leanings. While these intellectuals are all active in debating what role America ought to play in the world, not all share the same degree of exposure in the public sphere. Despite this, Endler points out that these intellectuals are part of “an informal network” where engaged public debate takes place and public opinion is shaped. To what degree do these public intellectuals educate the American public? This is an example of the type of questions Endler puts to the interviewees.

The book takes shape through a succession of interviews in which the respondents, by and large, are all asked the same questions by the interviewer. While there might be a slight departure from this formula from time to time due to the varied specializations of the interviewees, Endler is consistently loyal to his template. For some the use of interviews might seem to be an easy undertaking: a set of questions asked by the interviewer in which the respondent, in cooperative fashion, provides an ‘adequate’ response. My response to such thinking is: easier said than done. Eliciting responses requires a high degree of skill and understanding of the issues under discussion, and developing a rapport with the interviewee in such a short amount of time requires some finesse. One must admit that Endler has assembled a very impressive list of individuals who represent a wide cross section of America’s intellectual community. Prominent figures like Benjamin Barber, Noam Chomsky, Francis Fukuyama, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Cornel West, and Howard Zinn are just a few of the individuals who provide their insights into American political culture and foreign policy since the events of 9/11. So, in terms of form and content, this book provides fascinating reading for anyone interested in the intellectual contours and ideological premises that are embedded in contemporary American political debate and discourse.

By and large the interviews in this volume proceed in an appropriate manner, with respondents articulating their ideas coherently with an ample supply of examples to support their views. In some cases, however, explication is lacking. For example, I eagerly looked forward to reading the responses of Zbigniew Brzezinski, someone who has served in the government as well as being active as an author and an academic. Despite Endler’s efforts, Brzezinski was utterly taciturn. One can only imagine the agony the interviewer must have experienced at the hands of such a reluctant respondent. One also might have hoped Strobe Talbott to be more forthright with his responses; he came across as exceedingly diplomatic. Jean Bethke Elshtain’s interview read nicely, especially with her input on post 9/11 reaction: “I express in my book a lot of frustration at many academic intellectuals after 9/11 as they just fell into lockstep with one another. There was an automatic response that seemed to me not to be faithful to the occasion, that is not to take it as an occasion for rethinking some things” (65). Personally I felt Endler’s interviews with James M. Lindsay, Joseph S. Nye, and Clyde V. Prestowitz went extremely well in terms of the respondents’ candor and insightfulness. Lindsay on public intellectuals: “The Robert Kagans and Francis Fukuyamas of the world are in the business of both generating and propagating ideas. In some sense, they are sowing apple seeds: They are throwing out ideas, hoping they fall on some fertile soil and something takes root and prospers” (99). Or, for example, Nye on the ‘flow of information’: “In the age of cable networks and the Internet, the danger is that the public segments itself into a niche, so people listen to the things they want to listen to that reinforce their pre-existent feelings” (128). Of all the interviews, Cornel West takes things to a different level. He
responds to Endler’s questions and elaborates in directions not anticipated by the reader and possibly the interviewer. In short, individual readers will extract much from these interviews regardless of whether or not one is in agreement with the viewpoints and ideological persuasions of the interviewees.

Some readers, however, may find the largely predictable line of questioning an approach lacking spontaneity. For others, it invites comparison of the responses given and an opportunity for reflection. Another observation is that readers might benefit from an extended introduction which would provide background coverage of the topics which form the basis of the interviews. The six pages Endler provides may be inadequate for those unfamiliar with the intricacies of U.S. foreign policy, American political culture, and contemporary intellectual thought and practices. Despite these potential shortcomings, overall, this is a book that provides a fascinating look at how a part of American public opinion is shaped. Endler’s skillful and informed questioning of some of America’s key intellectuals results in some very revealing discussion and exchanges of opinions. In sum, After 9/11 represents a project worthy in its inception, and admirable in its execution.

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