

Review - Virtuous War

Written by Thomas Messer

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THOMAS MESSER, APR 15 2013

Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network

By: James Der Derian

London: Routledge, Second Edition, 2009

The end of the last millennium was a challenging period for the international relations discipline. Many theories had failed to predict the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), leaving many authors with their knowledge on a bipolar world outdated overnight. Within the first decade of the new millennium, non-state actors started to exert more power than extant theories had afforded them. During this period of flux, in which existing theories grappled over acceptable solutions and the rise of humanitarian interventions and other military interventions based upon liberal norms, James Der Derian wrote *Virtuous War*, a rumination on the rise of technology used for 'virtuous wars', based upon the same liberal norms. Rather than writing an abstract, impartial book based upon peer-reviewed theory and literature—*Virtuous War* distills a complex area of inquiry into a 'travelogue' that aims to translate the practical and philosophical thrust of his scholarly work into an entertaining book. Although he manages to make compelling and thought-provoking reading of what can be a dispassionate literary field, Der Derian's book neither provides a cogent alternate theoretical framework, nor makes any serious scholarly advances, beyond stating his thesis.

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Virtuous War and Technology

Der Derian's central argument in *Virtuous War* is that technology has always assisted the waging of war and its integration *per se* with force represents no radical departure. What is new, Der Derian argues, is the use of technology, combined with an 'ethical imperative to threaten, and if necessary, actualise violence from a distance with no or minimal casualties' (p.31). This Der Derian states, means that "technology in the service of virtue has given rise to a global form of virtual violence, virtuous war" (p.27). Derian proceeds to argue that as virtuous war has arisen so too has a 'virtual alliance' between the military and 'media' which has produced a 'military-industrial-media-entertainment-network' or MIMENET (p.27), building upon former US President Eisenhower's warnings of a military-industrial complex that would dominate public life (Eisenhower 1961). Derian posited in his 2000 *International Affairs* article on the same topic that the MIMENET is a new development as it has the ability to "seamlessly...merge the production, representation and execution of war" (2000:787). Derian reiterates his thesis throughout the book, but adopts a unique approach to advancing his argument.

More Rolling Stone than Morgenthau

From the outset, Der Derian positions the book not as a challenge to existing theories or a polemic, but more of a conversation starter, to "intrigue rather than instruct" (p.38). In a subsequent 2012 article on virtuous war, Der Derian claimed he does not wish to provide definitions, as they "close down rather than open up" debate (Der Derian 2012). Der Derian concludes that within the international relations school in the post 9/11 period, realists are fatalists who miss the "stability of the bipolar world", while "liberals wait for a multipolar world that cannot be born" (p.23). Der Derian positions *Virtuous War* as an intellectual middle ground, "a critical yet pragmatic pluralism for understanding and living in an increasingly hetero-polar world" (p. 23). To establish this middle ground Der Derian draws upon what could be considered an 'inter-disciplinary' approach – incorporating gonzo journalistic observations, formal interviews, personal experiences, references to 1990s films and television series, international relations theory, numerous post-modern authors, government publications and other miscellaneous sources. Der Derian also includes photographs from his travels while researching the book, none of which provide anything more than a visual reproduction of description situation or image he has already discussed in text. Compared to standard international relations texts, modern and classic authors such as Bull, Clausewitz, Mearsheimer, Pape and Waltz, the book is refreshing as it broadens the reader's intellectual approach to the concepts. This eclectic combination of source material and research leads to an interesting situation with different types of prose of varying technical and structural styles.

Der Derian's prose when recounting events in a journalistic tone is entertaining and reads easily, yet his prose on more philosophical and theoretical matters is considerably denser and less flowing. While Der Derian's 2000 article in *International Affairs* on the same topic is a cogent, well-structured paper, as other reviewers have also noted (Lynch 2009) many of the author's ruminations on minor matters could have been excised to allow for more discussion on theoretical matters, positioning the book as a genuine counter-point to existing theories. For example, removable elements include Der Derian's belief in UFOs, his involvement in protest theatre at an academic conference, superfluous observations, and semi-humorous pop culture references that add no strength to his argument. As a result, readers are unlikely to see Der Derian or his work as a theory through which to understand international politics and the relationship between technology and military force or have their value propositions altered. Rather, readers are likely to read *Virtuous War* and seek further publications as a result, thus achieving Der Derian's goal.

Scraping the Surface

Given Der Derian's stated purpose of lighting an intellectual fuse, rather than providing an objective analysis, the biases become quickly evident in the book. An evident bias repeated throughout numerous passages is Der Derian's perception of the military. While decrying the lack of objective quality media reporting and their unquestioning co-opting by the military, Der Derian cements a contrary position. Despite being given access to numerous military officials and attending numerous military events, Der Derian's analysis of the military is cursory at best, often based upon narratives of events without genuine analysis and an apparent reliance on confirming military stereotypes that

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many see as negative manifestations of military culture. For instance, Der Derian reports on his interactions with soldiers at information events wearing sunglasses conforming to existing stereotypes and providing answers conforming to the desires of the military's public affairs units. Rather than noting such service personnel would have likely been briefed to provide such statements and avoid off-topic discussions, these passages could easily be seen as a portraying an implicitly negative perception of the military. His cursory approach to the media is similar.

Much of the book addresses the media's apparent co-opting by the military and the media's willingness to trustingly accept what the military provide and distribution of digestible narratives for information, rather than providing incisive reporting and allowing the viewer to draw their own conclusions. This may be true for some networks and news agencies, but this is a massive oversimplification. Der Derian fails to acknowledge the numerous media agencies, many government-owned, buck this trend. While in recent conflicts, there have been widespread instances of media outlets being used to support proffered narratives of conflict favourable to combatants, this does not always occur. Ultimately, in many countries, numerous outlets provide objective reporting and allow consumers to form their own opinions. The media, like the military, is not a homogeneous entity, and to suggest it is not only an oversimplification, but also it is misleading.

Relevance and Theoretical Contribution

A large question that should accompany the second edition of the book is its ongoing relevance. When the first edition went to print, Global Positioning Systems (GPS) were not common, however now they are included as standard in many cars. Similarly, the use of precision munitions was in its infancy and not regularly on public display when the first edition was printed. However, at the time of printing the second edition, the increasing role of technology plays for militaries and governments to assist their operations and minimise uniformed and civilian casualties is widely acknowledged both inside and outside of academia. As such, it is valid to question whether the book is now outdated but for the philosophical questions it raises on the impact of undertaking 'virtuous war' and the light reading most of its chapters provide.

Most disappointingly, despite being published as an international relations text, in this second edition Der Derian has removed the chapter attempting to "elaborate a virtual theory for international relations" as it was "too much for readers preferring a travelogue" (p. 18). While from an editing perspective this makes sense for the casual reader, it is surprising this chapter has been excised and four additional chapters have been added that attempt to "salvage of virtual theory [what was] worthy of the global events that preceded and followed 9/11. (p. 18). What remains could not be considered a genuine and sustained academic exposition of virtual theory, but rather a travel book with occasional chapters on international relations theory and post-modern concepts.

Should You Read This Book?

Readers who are well acquainted with the international relations field will likely see *Virtuous War* as novel more for its twist on the genre than for any contribution of new scholarship. Many of its points are made in illuminating and thought provoking ways, but ultimately its tone and structure seem better suited to entertainment media than to academic literature. Given Der Derian's obvious intelligence, extensive knowledge, and, at times, beautiful prose; his inclusion of superfluous material, and lack of in-depth theoretical examination, may leave the seasoned IR reader disappointed. As a roaming and entertaining look at the interplay of technology and force, *Virtuous War* delivers. However, for a more succinct and cogently argued examination of virtuous war, skip the book and seek out Der Derian's *International Affairs* article.

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Thomas Messer completed a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations and Political Science at The University of Queensland and a Master of Strategic Affairs at the Australian National University. Thomas' interests include Asia-Pacific security, counterinsurgency, international diplomacy, international norms and privatised military firms.

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