

Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War. By Samuel Moyn New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2021. 416pp. \$30. ISBN 9780374173708. Available as e-book.

In *Humane*, Samuel Moyn makes a deceptively simple and yet startlingly original argument: that a “nefarious tandem” (p. 10) exists where the move towards more humane methods of war has paved the way for permanent war. The book is simultaneously a history of pacifism from Leo Tolstoy to the present day and a history of the evolution of international law on war, in particular, its shift from focusing on war itself as a crime (as articulated in the Nuremberg trials) to conduct *in* war. Moyn’s real ambition, however, seems to be to trace the intellectual legacies and precedents that permitted the war on terror and the unquestioning extension of US-led violence across the globe.

Moyn’s contribution is ground-breaking and will likely become a seminal text. It will almost certainly shift the terms of current national security debates. This is true not just because of its content but also because he has captured a generational moment in the United States. In many respects, the book acts as a foil and should be read in tandem with Samantha Power’s *A Problem from Hell* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002). As scholars, both sit between History and Law and capture the zeitgeist of their moment. However, where Moyn focuses on the moral dilemmas and unquestioned assumptions behind US *action*, Power did the same for US *inaction*. Just as Power’s account is today read as evidence of the mood in the 1990s, including an ambivalence about the Bill Clinton administration, Moyn’s reads as a reaction to the post-9/11 administrations.

Humane opens up a new way of looking at the state of permanent war and invites more scholarship, in particular on how institutions completed and entrenched the intellectual progression Moyn outlines. The historian Ernest May once observed that the US government in its current incarnation was itself a legacy of the Cold War, that the creation of a national security state and its defining agencies, including the Department of Defense, National Security Council, and Central Intelligence Agency, showed how ideas about the United States’ global responsibilities became set in stone both metaphorically and physically. Moyn mentions President Barack Obama’s musings about the lack of options available to him and the human rights lawyer Michael Ratner’s observation that the President is “one man on top of a huge national security establishment that is hard to buck.” (p. 295) The story of the post 9/11 world is also one of a new security architecture that hamstrung presidents like Obama.

It is difficult, however, to disagree with Moyn’s criticism of Obama’s “pragmatism.” His analysis of Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize speech nevertheless misses an opportunity to add nuance to the observation elsewhere that “the American tradition of Christian pacifism was almost dead” (p. 149) after the Second World War and relegated to the fringes of the far-left by the time of the September 11th attacks. As he rightly notes, Obama drew from John F. Kennedy’s Commencement Address at the American University but Moyn avoids the more revealing point that Obama and his team selectively quoted a line that confirmed their own inclination towards pragmatism: “Let us focus on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions.” To Obama, war was an inevitable feature of international affairs but, in fact, Kennedy’s speech came to a diametrically opposite conclusion, namely that peace was “the necessary rational end of rational men.” Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s speechwriter, a pacifist and conscientious objector, whose voice seeped through the speech, quoted from the Bible throughout to make an eloquent argument for war as a “manmade problem” that could “be solved by man.” In other words, pragmatism led to peace, not to war.

For sure, the book is US-centric in its analysis and insofar as it focuses on the rationales and legal justifications for US action, it sidesteps important differences between

the wars that the United States has fought, not least those where diplomacy was never pursued in earnest as an alternative to war. Nonetheless, it offers an important challenge to our understanding of contemporary US foreign policy and provides a compelling new framework to consider the road to the current state permanent war.