

Carl Bridges

**Review of Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World***

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. (2003). [\*Just war against terror: The burden of American power in a violent world\*](#). New York: Basic Books. 240 pp. \$14.00

In the post-9/11 world, some church leaders feel called to speak out on matters of geopolitical strategy, either calling the leaders of the United States to account for their perceived failures or supporting the government in its declared war on terror, and occasionally both. Other church leaders take a more quietist approach, not feeling called or qualified to operate in the worldly arena of war and national security. However, even those leaders who try to remain nonpolitical will deal with people in their congregations who struggle with global issues of war and peace, wealth and poverty, environmental issues, and so on. The present book will help such leaders think through their own position on the proper national response to terrorism and equip them to help others process those issues to their own satisfaction.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, who holds a chair in social and political ethics at the University of Chicago, joined 59 other authors and intellectuals in 2002 in signing a position paper called "What We're Fighting For" (pp. 182-207). She wrote the present book a year after 9/11, during the Afghan war but before the current Iraq war. In it she argues that the war on terror as carried on up to that time fulfills Augustine's classic criteria for a just war. Writing in a clear and engaging style, she makes a persuasive case for this limited point.

Anyone interested in reading the book should know what it is and what it is not. Elshtain does not deal with the question of pacifism versus just war. Instead, she assumes just war theory. She does not exegete the biblical passages on war and peace or engage pacifist thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas or John Howard Yoder. (She briefly engages Tony Campolo on pp. 117-118.) Neither does the author deal with questions of personal self-defense. Instead, she assumes Augustine's conclusion that just war theory applies to nations and not to individuals (p. 57). In addition, the timing of the book makes it impossible for the reader to find out from it what Elshtain thinks about the Iraq war, though no doubt she has views on it.

If the reader comes to this book believing that the United States has responded in a morally justified way to the attacks of Islamic terrorists, this book will support that belief. If the reader has not reached a decision on the issue, the book will likely persuade. If the reader is a church leader who needs some help with the political and theological categories that will enable him/her to help others sort out their views, the book will provide great help.