

How to dissent

Interview with Michael Walzer

by *Frédéric Martel*

In this recent interview, Michael Walzer reflects on his life of political commitment. From the creation of *Dissent* to the publication of the acclaimed *Spheres of Justice*, here is the journey of one of the most influential political theorists of the XXth century.

Michael Walzer, born in New York in 1935, is a North American intellectual and political philosopher. A professor emeritus at Princetown University, he also taught at Harvard for more than twenty years. He is often classed as a communitarian, along with Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, although he denied the designation. His major works include *Just and Unjust Wars* (Basic Books, 1977) and *Spheres of Justice* (Basic Books, 1983), in which he respectively addresses war ethics and his conception of social distribution. Walzer is also editor emeritus of *Dissent*, an independent political magazine for which he publishes since its creation.

***Books & Ideas:* Why and when did you decide to start *Dissent*? What were the reasons at that time?**

Michael Walzer: I did not create *Dissent*, although I was there at its creation. The first issue came out in January of 1954, by a group of ex-Trotskyist intellectuals. These men – at that time, they were almost all men – were in their 30s: they were veterans of the political wars of the late 30s. They wanted to create an American socialism, to be part of the politics of their country, to sustain a left internationalism, but without the dogmatic style of the Trotskyist sects. Two of these men were teaching at Brandeis university, where I was a student – I was 15 years younger than they were.

I got to know them, I wrote a few papers that they liked, so they invited me to the party celebrating the first issue of *Dissent*. That was in 1954, at the home of Irving Howe, who was the leading figure in the creation of the magazine. Almost all of these intellectuals were Jewish; the people they admired in Europe were some of the people I later wrote about. Their heroes were Orwell, Camus, Salone in Italy – all of them had sustained left politics while criticizing the stolenness or totalitarian versions of leftism. At that time, I was just a kid, but my parents were left liberals. I had grown up with a “conventional-American-Life” politics, a kind of a “popular-front” politics. My parents were not communists, but they would have said nice things about the Soviet Union, that these ex-Trotskyists would have not say. With them, at Brandeis, I became a member of the anti-Stalinist left. I began writing for the magazine immediately after my last year in college. I did research for Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, who were writing a book about the history of the American Communist Party. I was their research assistant. I read every issue of the *Daily worker* from the 20s to the 50s and took notes for them. So, *Dissent* was the magazine of the anti-communist left. Which reminds me that while I was doing a full-bar fellowship in England, I met Isaac Deutscher who told me it couldn't be any such thing as an anti-communist left.

Books & Ideas: Isaac Deutscher, who was actually Trotsky's biographer.

Michael Walzer: Yes, and if you ask me, a little too generous in his views of Stalinist Russia. So that was *Dissent*. You may have heard of a group that has become kind of famous over the years, by the name of the New York Jewish intellectuals. *Dissent* was their left wing.

Of course, it had non-Jewish participants. Michael Harrington was the most important. *Dissent* struggled to sustain what they called it a political war on two fronts – in reference to War World II. One front was against the Stalinist left, and all its apologists, the other was against American capitalism and its complacent liberal celebration which marked the 1950s. They were always fighting on two fronts, they insisted that was a necessary feature of decent left politics. I think that was *Dissent's* politics for a very long time. After Irving Howe died in 1993, Mitchell Cohen and I became co-editors. I devoted 15 years, almost 20 years to editing *Dissent*, sustaining that magazine in the spirit of its founders. The magazine now is very different and I am quite alienated from its editors today, who don't believe in fighting on two fronts. They are very reluctant to criticize anyone on the left at a time when I think that criticism is morally and politically necessary. So, in my old age, I'm still fighting on two fronts.

Books & Ideas: In this story, of course, it was the 60s: '68 and the student movement, the Vietnam War ... At that time, *Dissent* was at the center of the great turmoil on the left. How did you survive those difficult years for the left?

Michael Walzer: These were exciting years for the left, until everything went sour after 68. The new left kids were a generation after Howe and the other editors of *Dissent*. They were often critical of *Dissent* – and *Dissent* was often critical of them – particularly in their romanticism about the Third-World left, and authoritarian regimes like Castro's in Cuba – which *Dissent* opposed, while much of the new left in the 60s supported it enthusiastically. Vietnam was a time of division between those people who wanted to support a communist victory, and those people like *Dissent* who knew that the war had to be opposed but who were again fighting on two fronts, who were not able to welcome a communist victory.

Well, the older members – and here older means in their 40s – of *Dissent* literally knew the names of every independent leftist, of every Trotsky-leftist in Vietnam who had been murdered by the communists, which made it very hard for them to support a movement where people were carrying Viet Cong flags. Consequently, I was in the position of opposing the war and I worked very hard in the anti-war movement yet refused to carry Viet Cong flags. *Dissent* was consistently left but always at odds with many other leftists.

Books & Ideas: We can summarize that in Latin America you were against both Pinochet and Fidel Castro.

Michael Walzer: Exactly. Or today, I would be very sympathetic to the social democratic regimes in places like Chile or Lula in Brazil, but very hostile to Chavez and his successor in Venezuela. It's a continuation of what you described.

Books & Ideas: When China started to get involved in the debate, criticising the Soviet Union, how did you react?

Michael Walzer: I think that Maoism was for us simply an Asian version of totalitarian politics, and so we were always in support of any dissident activity in China. One of my early articles in *Dissent* was about "the posters on the wall": in the 60s in China, there was a brief moment of relative freedom, and the symbol of freedom was the posters put up on some wall in Beijing. I managed to find a translation of a group of the posters, and I wrote a long piece in *Dissent*, supporting the people who wrote the posters. And since then, our politics has simply been very much like our

politics in Eastern Europe: to write about, to defend, to translate and reprint the work of dissonance in these countries.

***Books & Ideas:* For you “dissent”, as a word, is at the core of the left of course, but is-it also central to the democracy in the western world?**

Michael Walzer: Do I believe that “to dissent” as a verb is a permanent feature of left politics? In my lifetime, yes, but I can imagine a political regime where I would not be a dissenter. And often, I suspend dissent, as I do now: I am a very strong supporter of Kamala Harris and Waltz, her chosen vice president, although I have many disagreements with her, but the prospect of a Trump victory is so frightening that I suspend any kind of internal dissent. I think the Democrats who call themselves uncommitted, and insist they won’t support Kamala unless she says this or that, are very destructive. That’s a very self-destructive kind of Leftism, at this moment, when we’re confronting what really looks like an American version of fascism.

***Books & Ideas:* You’re speaking to a French audience – so it won’t impact her chances – what are your points of disagreement with Kamala Harris?**

Michael Walzer: Well, she was at one time a strong supporter of universal health care, which she is no longer, whereas I think is very necessary in the United States today. She has, in the course of the campaign, made a kind of peace with the corporate section of the democratic party, which may be politically right at this moment, but it suggests a politics that I would be very uncomfortable with, when she wins. Also, on foreign policy, she has not yet said enough, but I guess I am generally sympathetic to what she has said. So, my disagreements would simply be that she is a centrist Democrat and I would like a more leftist version of democratic politics.

***Books & Ideas:* For you, what should be the role of the “intellectual” in politics, and do you even use that word?**

Michael Walzer: I’ve always thought of *Dissent* as a magazine of, for and by intellectuals. I have always tried to avoid claiming any kind of authority for intellectuals. We should function in the political system as citizens, and be judged on the arguments we made. Of course, we intellectuals hope that our arguments will be more sophisticated, more knowledgeable than the run-of-the-mill political arguments going on in the country, that we have a role of making every effort to get to the core of the disagreements and to defend principles when it’s necessary.

I think intellectuals add a certain quality, a certain elan maybe to the political debates. There are sometimes among academics a belief that they speak – I’ve often encountered this among philosophers – with a certain kind of authority, because they know the “truth”, but I don’t think that’s the role of intellectuals. I remember when John Rawls wrote *Theory of Justice*, his wonderful book on the defense of equality, there were some of his followers who thought and said that the Supreme Court should start enforcing Rawls’ doctrine, since it was the “true” doctrine. And I thought: “no, we have to fight for those principles among our fellow citizens”. If we don’t win the fight, then the Supreme Court cannot act on the basis of the “correctness” or the “truth” value of John Rawls’ philosophy. It has to be responsive to the laws of the United States and to the people who make the laws.

***Books & Ideas:* When an intellectual decides to enter the public debate, does he somehow have a responsibility?**

Michael Walzer: I think he has the same responsibilities that any activist citizen has. But if we want to go further ... What would be special intellectual responsibilities? To tell the truth as he or she sees it. Maybe not to make the compromises the politicians make even when those are necessary compromises? I think intellectuals should simply speak right, argue with the knowledge they have, sometimes with their expertise, but without any claim to authority. There is no vanguard in democratic politics, and intellectuals have sometimes in the past taught themselves as a kind of vanguard. We’re not necessarily the rearguard speaking at the end of conflicts, summing them up or evaluating the outcomes: we are participants from the beginning. When I write an article for a magazine, I think of myself as speaking to my fellow citizens. And I always keep in mind that George Orwell has a very famous essay on the politics of the English language, about how people like him, people like us, should write and talk: avoiding jargon, speaking directly, addressing ourselves to the ordinary reader, the ordinary citizen.

***Books & Ideas:* If we take a figure like Jean-Paul Sartre, his case is very different from Orwell’s. You probably disagree with this kind of intellectual, who is probably too detached from reality.**

Michael Walzer: I don’t object to someone who both writes philosophical treatises that very few people will understand, and writes political articles or makes political declarations. But I don’t think he should claim any authority or receive any recognition as an authority because of his philosophical writings. He has to be judged

on the arguments that he makes in the political arena. In the case of Sartre, particularly with regard to Algeria, I think his arguments were not very good, as he ended up defending terrorism. I'm sure he was right to defend the independence, the liberation of Algeria but I've written a critique of his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he clearly is a defender of the murder of innocent people. And that is not what intellectuals or anyone else should be defending, especially not someone who claims to be some kind of authority about political life.

Books & Ideas: When you spoke about the "Third-World left", what was it in your eyes?

Michael Walzer: Well, the postcolonial regimes in much of Africa were authoritarian. Sometimes heroes of the liberation end up as cruel dictators of their own people, and often these regimes called themselves socialists and were celebrated by parts of the Western left. I think our role was to criticize those regimes and to support any opposition in those countries.

But again, we might have to be also critical of the opposition. In the case of Castro's Cuba, I think it was important to criticize the authoritarian style of the Castro regime. On the other hand, the right-wing Cuban exiles in Florida, we couldn't support them either. And maybe at some point there was no one to support, although there has arisen since, both in Cuba and outside of Cuba, there has arisen democratic dissidents. And that's what we should be supporting, and the same thing is true in African countries.

There are people on the left who just long for a homeland, they long for a country – we talked about this a minute ago – where they don't have to be Dissenters. They long for – it's not exactly an utopia – but they long for a regime that they can enthusiastically support, and they are much too eager sometimes to announce that they have found a regime of that sort, when in fact they haven't.

It may be important for the left to be in an ideological sense "homeless". I'm not homeless – I'm an American and even in some ways a patriotic American and at the same time a critic of much of what America does in the world. So, I'm not homeless but I'm not eager to find what people found in the Soviet Union. Then they found it again in Cuba and some found it again in China and some absolutely desperate found it in Albania. But I'm not looking for that kind of place. I have a place, it's my place, it requires internal opposition and I try to provide that. And I don't need to imagine or

to make up another place as leftists have done again and again – always I think with regret later on.

Books & Ideas: If we take Bandung in 1955, the conference raised many hopes, and in fact many of the regimes represented in Bandung, whether Nasser in Egypt, Sukarno in Indonesia, or other African or Asian dictators, developed around values contrary to the spirit of Bandung. How do we explain this?

Michael Walzer: I can't give you an analysis of the politics of that group of countries. What they imagined was a world, I think, of sovereign States living at peace with each other, respecting each other's sovereignty. I don't think Bandung really had a lot to do with internal politics, if I remember correctly they were not committing themselves to liberal democracy. They were committing themselves – I thought initially – to neutrality between East and West with the aim of creating a world without this kind of dominant polarity – a world of self-determining states.

I don't think they succeeded, but at least they established the principle of opposition to this idea that the great powers have a right to a sphere of influence. Implicitly, they were denying that the Soviet Union had a right, after World War Two, to control Eastern Europe and establish a satellite regime and they were denying that America had a right to a sphere of influence in Central America or the Caribbean or South America, simply because we were the power of the region.

So that's what I thought at the time the Bandung conference was about: independence, sovereignty, self-determination everywhere. And now we see a revival on the Left even of the sphere of influence: arguments of people who want to say that Russia is entitled to assure influence, that the expansion of NATO was a threat, and that Russia was right to respond to.

Books & Ideas: You wrote a masterpiece, *Spheres of Justice* (Basic Books, 1983), what was the main idea of the book?

Michael Walzer: The main idea is actually quite simple: it is that different social goods should be distributed in different ways by different sets of people. It is an egalitarian doctrine, but it is not simplistic, it is not supporting equality everywhere. Just to take a simple example, it's not an argument that every book should receive the same favorable review. The distribution of praise for books is the work of critics, and so long as they pay attention to the value of the books, we don't expect any egalitarian distribution of praise.

Now, let me move to the “Importance spheres”. If we take medicine, medical care should belong to people who are sick, not to people who are rich. If we take politics, we want political power to be given to people who can persuade their fellow citizens of the value of a certain set of policies. Elections are a way of distributing political power. It’s not egalitarian, everybody doesn’t get the same amount: we start with one vote, one citizen, but then we distribute power differently through a process of democratic argument and elections. The result is inequality, but if inequality is produced in the right way, it isn’t contrary to an egalitarian doctrine as long as the power you get in one sphere doesn’t allow you to have influence in other spheres. We don’t want someone who wins political power legitimately, to then be able to give positions in the government to his relatives, or to sell political decisions. We don’t want people with power to be able to claim special privileges – as members of the Communist Party in the old Soviet Union had claims to holidays, as well as all kinds of medical care far better than what was available to everyone else.

Each sphere, each social good should be distributed for the right reasons and once people have it, it should not bring any other benefits. Now the most crucial social good I suppose is wealth or money and I am sympathetic to a market distribution of money so long as the people with the “green thumb”, who are able to get money, are not able to buy political power or better healthcare than anyone else, or exemption from criminal prosecution. So long as money can’t buy any other social good it becomes relatively harmless that some people have more of it than others. You have a plurality of distributions: social goods are distributed differently – not everybody gets the same – but so long as each sphere is autonomous, so long as power has no rewards except the reward of exercising power, so long as money can get you nothing more than, maybe, you can afford a rare book or painting that someone else can’t afford, but nothing else. Or so long as – we talked about this before – intellectual prestige doesn’t get you some privileges in the political world. It’s an argument about the different spheres of distribution. The claim is that if each distributor sphere is independent of the others, you get an egalitarian society. I call it *complex equality* because it isn’t simple: everybody isn’t getting the same thing, but it is a world in which there would not be hierarchy and domination, there wouldn’t be humiliation and deference on one side and arrogance on the other – which is what capitalism regularly produces. This was my version. I wrote it in some senses against the radical egalitarianism of the left in the 60s, but it is still, I think, a profoundly egalitarian idea. Yet you see its violation everywhere in the United States, where the wealthy get kinds of healthcare that are not available to everyone, in which powerful people have privileges that have nothing to do with the policies they are supposed to be defending.

It's also an argument against meritocracy. There should be education for citizenship, which is for everybody, and then higher education has to go to people who are qualified: we want people to be surgeons who are going to be competent, we want someone chosen as hospital director who will efficiently direct the hospital. These are not positions that can be distributed equally, but if all the distributions are right, distributions for the right reasons: we will have a decent society and a society without the radical inequalities that we see now in the United States.

***Books & Ideas:* Basically, it's also a criticism of two extremes, for example China and the USSR, that is to say a dictatorship that invades all other spheres of politics, but also, to take an American example, Elon Musk, who wants to interact with politics.**

Michael Walzer: Well, it is certainly a critique of any regime in which politics is pervasive, in the sense that you have to be politically correct to rise. You're not judged by your expertise in the field but by political correctness. I would oppose any regime of that kind, but also any regime in which money is dominant in a similar way, where the rich get into the best schools and then have the best opportunities for promotion in every part of the economy.

In the case of Elon Musk, his wealth allows him to do crazy things and get away with it, but it also gives him an influence in American politics through X that nobody should have. It's a question of exactly how you create a media world, an informational world, where wealth or political power doesn't distort the information that people have. And that's a problem we have certainly not solved here. The world of social media – and I have to say at my age the world of social media is a foreign country, it's my grandkids who live there – has opened up a frenzy of misinformation and I don't know how to distribute access to it, to what I can, or what I can read, in a way that makes democracy possible. That's a problem that the next generation is going to have to solve, if democratic politics is to survive.

***Books & Ideas:* What happens within the different spheres, if we take the intellectual sphere for example - how can it be regulated and how can there be spheres of justice within it?**

Michael Walzer: Well, in some areas regulation is fairly easy : if you ban nepotism, you are limiting the unjust uses of political power. If you fight corruption in the political system, you're limiting the use of money in the legal sphere. If you

create a universal system of healthcare, you are limiting the uses of political power and money in the sphere of health. Some spheres have to be self-limiting.

If you imagine the medical profession: they created an Association like the American Medical Association which tries to regulate the profession, to establish a code or professional ethics which will affect the distribution of whatever is being distributed, in that case medicine, a group like the American Association of university professors has standards and would presumably oppose any effort of the government say, to enforce political correctness in universities. So, there would be an internal effort to sustain a certain distribution of whatever is being distributed. I would certainly defend those kinds of internal efforts. We see now how many public school teachers are in rebellion, against efforts in Republican controlled States to change the curriculum, to bar any kind of critical view of American history. And there is internal opposition, and we see now the librarians across the country opposing the effort to ban books. A lot of the work has to be internal. Of course, I would also favor judicial intervention, I think the banning of books should be an issue that gets challenged in the courts. And so, there would be an external, that the books that children read should be based on the best judgments of trained professionals and we should exclude politicians from that process.

Books & Ideas: In a way, Spheres of Justice is a kind of modern reinterpretation of Montesquieu's basic ideology of the separation of powers and Max Weber's idea of the fundamental difference between knowledge and politics, to take just two examples.

Michael Walzer: I guess yes, although those are not my immediate influences. It was much more local, I mean, it was actually listening to debates about medical care especially that led me to the notion of medical care for the sick and not for the wealthy. You know, my experience with Max Weber was very different. I paid attention to the essay on politics and to the distinction between the politics of responsibility and a politics of conviction, which I assimilated in my own head to Lenin's distinction between trade union consciousness and revolutionary consciousness, where trade union consciousness is the politics of responsibility – responsibility to the workers right now, let's get them the best possible life, the best working conditions, the highest wages, let's focus on their lives right now, that is responsibility. On the other hand, revolutionary consciousness is the conviction that the world has to be transformed, and we have to engage in a politics which may, for the moment, not help the workers

concretely in concrete ways, but will eventually lead to a communist society in which they will be whatever triumphant.

So that was my interpretation of Weber. I've often used the distinction of that sort to defend a social democratic politics against political adventurism and against romantic efforts to leap forward, without regard to the well-being of particular people in the world right now.

***Books & Ideas:* You wrote a singular analysis on Gramsci in your book *The Company of Critics* (Basic Books, 1988), what was your main point about him?**

Michael Walzer: Yes, the long struggle with Gramsci. As I remember it – this is a book I wrote 40 years ago, I was critical of him for not breaking with the Communist – although you can imagine that had he not been in prison his political life might have had a different course. But mostly, what I saw in Gramsci was a very intelligent analysis of what political struggle has to be like, and a very clever theory of the actual meaning of hegemony. For Gramsci, the dominant power actually achieves complete hegemony through a series of compromises with oppositional elements. Hegemony is never a kind of diktat, it's not totalitarian, it is always based, first of all, on long periods of political and cultural work and then when achieved, it is in fact a kind of compromise regime.

***Books & Ideas:* That's the idea, it's totally contradictory to *Spheres of Justice*, it's the idea that politics should direct intellectual and cultural life, because in the end it's a totalitarian society, in order to win the power you need to win cultural and intellectual life. I think that's the problem with Gramsci.**

Michael Walzer: Yet as I read him, he doesn't seem to be a totalitarian, his spirit isn't a totalizing spirit. Does cultural hegemony mean that everybody writes the same kind of books? I don't think that's what he meant. For example, I would want a democratic *ethos* to be dominant in American life. That democratic culture, which you'd have to fight for against totalizing forces, would allow an enormous variety of literary and artistic movements. That's the way I read Gramsci. You may be right, perhaps it's too generous, but that's the way I read him.

***Books & Ideas:* If we take the sphere of culture, do we really have to leave it to itself? That's also the idea of the absolute freedom of the artist, because in any case he is not the political or economic sphere, not even the intellectual sphere.**

Michael Walzer: Yes, and when there were social artistic movements like abstract art in the 50s. If those movements are free, the intellectuals or the ideologues of those movements will not only paint in a certain way, they will argue that other people should paint in that way, but so long as the other people are free there isn't any problem with that. If they become the dominant school because they convince other artists that this is the best way to paint at this moment in history, that's okay, so long as they don't imprison the painters who are painting in some other way. That's what I imagine a sphere of art would be like.

Books & Ideas: If we take the political sphere, basically the goal is what you call "decency" or "public good", the goal of the political sphere. But couldn't we say that the goal of the intellectual sphere should also be democracy, decency and the public good?

Michael Walzer: I think within the sphere of politics, the goal is power. Politics is a competition for power, and the competition for power can take just brutal means like a military coup or it can take arguments about policies so that the people with the most popular policies will win the election and they will have power.

I believe in a democratic sphere of politics that the right distribution of political power should be the ability to convince people that you are doing the right things, you are helping them, that you are creating public goods. And if there is an intellectual sphere distinct from politics, it would include all the things that intellectuals argue about which include literature and art as well as politics. They're the same thing that I said about a sphere of art. Those intellectuals who achieve some version of celebrity or authority should have won that authority by making better arguments than the other intellectuals.

Now I suppose you can win a degree of celebrity and authority by addressing a small section of the intellectual public and saying the same things again and again over a long period of time, as maybe Noam Chomsky has done. Then, you will be very well known and authoritative for the group of people who have been listening to you and agreeing with you for 30-40-50 years. And that's fine too. Intellectual authority can be general across the fields or narrow in one or another way.

Books & Ideas: But if we look at Chomsky in particular, Chomsky is absolutely legitimate as a linguist, but when he ventures into politics or the Israeli question, does he somehow step out of his sphere?

Michael Walzer: Well, he is then speaking as an engaged citizen. In linguistics he has achieved universal respect – and a lot of disagreement, too. In politics he has achieved a different kind of respect in a narrower sphere, and sometimes both cross. I was once in a debate with Noam Chomsky, and I think I lost it because he was able to quote magazines, newspapers and books in six different languages and I just stood there listening. I thought: “maybe he’s making up the quotes but what do I know?” I only had my own opinions, he was talking with footnotes. So, the sphere of his linguistic capacities, his linguistic intelligence created a political advantage. And I guess that’s okay also I wouldn’t want any police to interfere with that kind of advantage.

Books & Ideas: Where do you stand on the Jewish question? In particular, what is your position on Zionism?

Michael Walzer: First, I have always identified myself as a Jew. I live a Jewish life in the sense that I go to synagogue on Shabbat. I think I am religiously tone-deaf: I’m not a secular Jew, if I go to synagogue, it’s more because I value the tradition. I enjoy the music, and I need the company of fellow Jews who share my anxieties and who laugh at my jokes. It is a social, cultural but very strong commitment to sustain Jewish life, to try to raise Jewish children and grandchildren.

Zionism is a form of Jewish nationalism aiming at the creation of a Jewish state after centuries of statelessness, homelessness and persecution. I think it is as legitimate as any other national liberation movement and it is as susceptible as all the others to fanaticism and zealotry and so within what I am, a Zionist in the sense that I believe there should be a Jewish state. I am a liberal Zionist in the sense that I oppose any form of messianic Zionism, any invasion of Zionism with religious zealotry and I oppose any ultra nationalist version of Zionism. Liberal Zionism means self-determination for the Jews and for everyone else: self-determination for the Kurds and for the Tibetans, and for the Palestinians.

I think of liberal Zionism as the authentic version of Zionism, the earliest version. There are political battles now going on, with people who use Zionism as if it is a dirty word, but who are perfectly willing to respect Chinese nationalism, even when it oppresses people in Tibet or the Muslims of Western northwestern China. I think it is important to be a defender of Israel’s existence and a fierce critic of Israel’s government. To me, it’s a familiar politics. During Trump’s years, I was committed to the existence of the United States and I was a fierce critic of its government so it’s not an unfamiliar left position. I was astonished at the number of secular leftists who

support Hamas, which is an Islamist movement committed to the subordination of women, committed to the repression of every other kind of Islamic belief, committed to literally the eradication of any Jewish presence, any version of Jewish sovereignty in the Middle East. That doesn't seem to me to be a politics that anyone who calls himself a leftist could support. It's one more example of leftists falling for political regimes which they could not live in. If they value freedom and democracy, they should be opposing them.

I'm very engaged at this moment in these debates, and I wish for an old age where I would have not to be engaged in arguments of this sort, but they are very important. I respond emotionally when someone like Joe Biden on October 7th just without stumbling, without hesitation, says the right things. And when he went to Israel a week or so later, I found that a moment of joy and of solidarity.

Now I'm not sure he's always been right in his dealings with Benjamin Netanyahu, who is I think a loathsome politician, but that moment of solidarity, I will be forever grateful to Joe Biden. So even when I knew he had to step down, I didn't want to join the chorus of people attacking him.

I don't know what the future is right now. Israel has the worst government in its history at the most critical moment in its history. And my friends in Israel are struggling. They're in the streets demonstrating against this government every week. I have to say my friends or my age, so it's their kids and grandkids who are in the streets. But I talked to them, and I hope for their success. I hope for the survival of Israel as democratic state and I hope that sometime in the future, it stands alongside of Palestinian state. I don't expect now to live to see that.

As a member of various Jewish organizations, I was invited to stand on the White House lawn when Bill Clinton brought Rabin and Arafat together – I watched them shake hands. I thought then that I might live to see two States side by side in peace. I don't think that anymore, but I do believe that is the necessary political ambition of people on the left.

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