

Interviewer:

Today is March 27, 2015. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Pete Kilner interviewing Dr. Michael Walzer. Dr. Walzer, can you give us sort of a quick bio. I mean I'd love to know. Tell us something about your childhood in terms of your family and your education, all the way up to the point where you got your doctorate and became a professor.

Michael Walzer:

Well, I was born in the Bronx in 1935. My parents were both born here, but my mother was the only one of her siblings born here. My father's family came from Austrian Galicia, Austro-Hungarian Empire, as it was, and my mother's family from what is now Belarus, has at various times been Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.

I grew up literally learning to read, reading the newspaper accounts of World War II.

I've often told people that growing up as a Jewish kid in New York in the '40s was an immunization against pacifism. I never doubted that some wars were just and necessary.

When I was nine years old, my father was working in a defense factory which was about to close, and we moved to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, late '44, early '45, where I went to middle school and high school. We lived in a suburb of Johnstown called Westmont. It was a good high school, I think.

And I was a very conscientious student. When I graduated from Westmont - it was a consolidated high school. I should say this. It was a consolidated high school, a working class district, kids whose parents worked in Bethlehem Steel, and a middle class district, kids whose parents were professionals of various kinds.

And the year that I graduated, half the boys in the class went to Korea, and the other half went to college. It was a lesson in American class structure. I went to college, and by the time I graduated, the war was over, so although I knew kids who went from college to Korea, I didn't.

I went to Brandeis University, which was a new university in Waltham, Massachusetts - the first Jewish-sponsored non-sectarian university in the United States - and I studied history there. Mostly intellectual history - that's what was done at Brandeis.

And when I applied to university, I was told by my history professors that I should apply to graduate school in political science, because in political science, you could do anything you wanted, whereas history was a rigorous discipline. You had to go to archives and things like that. So I did apply in political science, and I was admitted to Harvard. I also got a Fulbright fellowship and went to England for one year.

Studied in Cambridge, reading 17th-century English history with a marvelous man named Geoffrey Elton, who was the British scholar who rediscovered Thomas Cromwell, later made famous by Hilary Mantel in her various novels about Thomas Cromwell.

He was a very kind man, and although he didn't believe in political theory, he tolerated my reading 17th-century political theory with him. I went back to Harvard in 1957, and I became active in - I studied as a graduate student. I met all the distribution requirements.

I mostly did political theory. I was - while I had been at Brandeis, a group of professors there founded a magazine called Dissent, which was kind of an American left liberal, social Democratic. I think that's the best - social Democratic magazine.

And learning what my lefty Dissent editors didn't understand - that this was not an uprising of black workers and peasants. This was an uprising of black Baptists. And I visited many churches, listened to many sermons, came back to Cambridge, and helped to organize what was called the Northern Support Movement.

We were picketing the Woolworth stores in the North while they were sitting in at Woolworth lunch counters in the South. That was the - so I was both a graduate student and a political activist at the same time, which is the best way to be a graduate student, because the years of graduate study could be - often are, I think - the most miserable years of anybody's life.

My first job was at Princeton as an assistant professor. I came to Princeton in '62.

Interviewer:

Quick question - what was - so itâ€™s fascinating. You did theory and practice kind of together, right, even at that point.

Michael Walzer:

Yes.

Interviewer:

What was your dissertation on?

Michael Walzer:

Ah. My dissertation followed from the work Iâ€™d done in England on my Fulbright. It was on the Puritan Revolution, as I wanted to write about revolutions and my French wasnâ€™t good enough, so I wrote about the English revolution. I read it mustâ€™ve been 300 Puritan sermons, and many theological treatises, starting with Calvin in Geneva.

And going through to Oliver Cromwell in England, who Iâ€™m going to quote Oliver Cromwell in my talk this afternoon. So it was called â€œThe Revolution of the Saints,â€ my thesis and my first book. It was about the English revolution as a prototype for future revolutions, and it began my interest in the relationship of religion and politics.

Because this was an uprising of religious people, but structurally, it was very much like the Jacobin and Bolshevik revolution. So I went to Princeton, where I taught political theory, and I helped to organize and spoke at what mustâ€™ve been one of the very first teach-ins about the Vietnam War.

In â€™64 or â€™65, one of my last years in Princeton - I came back to Harvard in â€™66. So that was - it wasnâ€™t the first teach-in. I think the first teach-in was at Michigan, but it was one of the very early teach-ins.

And when I went back to Harvard, I became quite active in a group called the Cambridge Neighborhood Committee on Vietnam, which tried to organize politically against the war, but where I found myself in opposition to anti-war activists who carried Vietcong flags and spelled America with a K.

I was the near left, and they were the farther left, and we had some very interesting political battles in this Cambridge Neighborhood Committee, which split at one point, and some of the people went on to draft resistance, and the others, like me, went on to the Eugene McCarthy political campaign.

Interviewer:

Could you say, for those who arenâ€™t familiar with it, or describe it, what was the teach-in? You did one of the first teach-ins.

Michael Walzer:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Describe what that is.

Michael Walzer:

It was an assembly of students and professors, not an academic assembly. It was a political meeting held on many university campuses where a long series of faculty members spoke. And usually it would start 8:00 or 9:00 and continue through till the early morning.

So it was a teach-in, and we stayed in, and it was many voices, and not all of them - I mean there wouldâ€™ve been people defending the war. But basically this was an anti-war effort, but quite open politically to argument and dissent. And there were many of these.

It was a sign of the value of the campus, and I think it led many of us to oppose some leftists later on who tried to bring the war home to the campus. That was it, bring the war home. And we thought, â€œNo. This is a place for argument, not for combat.â€

Interviewer:

You have any concerns that some of that may be lost on campuses today? Do you still feel like theyâ€™re environments where people could gather and have multiple voices listening to each other?

Michael Walzer:

Well, I haven't been at a university since I left Harvard in 1980. I think Princeton is still a place where there are multiple voices. I've been told that many of the debates over the boycott of Israel have gotten very nasty, with a great unwillingness to listen. I think in general in the United States, political discourse has gotten nastier than it was when I began talking about politics. And maybe it even started in Washington, or at least it's been very visible there.

Interviewer:

Yes. Now, we're already talking about war. The one thing, how did you become interested in the Vietnam War, and then how did that lead to your thinking? Sort of take us from your interest in the Vietnam War up till your decision to write *Just and Unjust Wars*.

Michael Walzer:

Yes. Well, I think many of us move from the Civil Rights movement to the anti-war movement. It was part of the '60s spirit, oppositional spirit, and it was perhaps especially easy for those of us white Americans who had been active in the Civil Rights movement.

And then were sort of thrown out of the Civil Rights movement by the rise of black nationalism, when, for reasons good and bad, they wanted the movement to themselves. And so we were at a loss for causes, and the Vietnam War seemed a cause. So there was a drift of people, some of the same people, from the Civil Rights.

And Martin Luther King accompanied us in this movement. And I was quite active, first at Princeton and then in Cambridge, where I was the co-chair of the Cambridge Neighborhood Committee on Vietnam, and I also traveled around the country making speeches. And after a while, you begin listening to yourself.

And I heard myself using all these terms - non-combatant immunity, and aggression, and intervention - terms that were from a disciplined discourse that I didn't know. And I decided - the crucial moment when I decided came in '67, when I was literally running around the country, arguing about Vietnam.

And suddenly I was also arguing in defense of the Israeli preemptive attack on Egypt. And when I was speaking to lefty audiences, this was incomprehensible to them. How can you favor one war and be against another? And so I had to think about making distinctions, which is the central feature of any serious political or moral discourse.

And I began thinking seriously about what makes a war just and unjust, and what makes the conduct of a war just and unjust. And at some point in the late '60s, I decided I was going to write a book about all this, and I began reading. I'm going to talk about my reading this afternoon.

I had never been a soldier. I had relatives that I could talk to who had been in World War II and Korea. But I began reading military history - a lot of it - and I began reading the memoirs of soldiers, and novels about war, written by people who had been soldiers.

And journalistic accounts of war. And that was my reading for the next five years, before I began writing. And I was at that time also part of a philosophical discussion group, a very high-powered philosophical discussion group, of which I was the least educated member, because I'd studied political theory at Harvard.

But this was a group of philosophers that included Jack Rawls, and Ronald Dworkin, and Bob Nozick, Robert Nozick, and Tim Scanlon, and Judith Thompson. Owen Fisk from Yale Law School, several other people.

And we met once a month, alternatively in Cambridge and New York, and read each other's papers, and several chapters of my book on just war were read by that group of people. And that was my philosophical education - I had not studied philosophy.

It was my philosophical education, but I also reacted in some ways against what these philosophers were doing - not Jack Rawls so much, but many of the others - with their weird hypothetical cases. And I decided, since I was reading all that military history, that I wanted to use actual cases. I wanted to force my readers to confront the kinds of decisions that people had actually had to make in war.

And so I wrote the book partly together with this group of philosophers, but also somewhat against them.

Interviewer:

Do you remember the first chapter you wrote?

Michael Walzer:

I didn't write the chapters consecutively, but I do think that the first chapter I wrote was the first chapter against realism. It was very important to get that argument out of the way.

Interviewer:

And where did you come across the Melian argument - was that from your reading as an undergraduate?

Michael Walzer:

Yes.

Interviewer:

On intellectual history?

Michael Walzer:

Yes. Yes. And George Orwell, who gave me the soldier holding up his pants, George Orwell was one of the favorite writers of the editors of Dissent magazine. We all read everything that George Orwell wrote.

And I loved Homage to Catalonia, where that story appears.

Interviewer:

When did you realize you had written something special? Like when you were writing it, were you on fire, like, "Wow, this is going to be seminal," or when did you realize that there was something different about this book?

Michael Walzer:

I don't think - I think the first realization that I might have done something more than I thought I was doing was when the book was adopted as a text here at West Point, which came very, very quickly after its publication, and really a complete surprise to me.

And I don't - over the years I've realized that - I mean the book sells more copies than all my other books put together, so obviously it is something different that I did here than I was able to do in any of the other cases. But it took me a long time to realize that it was that kind of a book.

Interviewer:

Can you say something about your relationship with West Point? You've been up here over the years - well, maybe West Point, and even larger, the Army. Can you share some of which, you know, do you go out and talk with units? What kind of feedback have you gotten from the Army? How's the discourse between you and the U.S. military been?

Michael Walzer:

Well, I came here first to meet the group of officers who had adopted the book. They were all, or almost all of them, veterans of Vietnam, and they had obviously been shaken by the war. They didn't necessarily agree with my view of the war, but they agreed that it had to be talked about, and they liked the way I had presented the issues.

And I found this group of people - well, coming from a lefty background this was totally unexpected. And they were such impressive human beings. I learned - I meant to say this this afternoon.

I don't think there's anyplace in the country where war and the ethics of war is taken more seriously than right here, and I had no idea that that was or could be the case. So - and I've come back here often. I've met - that original group of officers also provided, I suppose they provided, a lot of materials to go along with the book.

Like questions for class sessions and so on. And the book continued to be used by officers who I think were less committed to it than that first group, but who had all this material already provided. But I continued to be impressed by the people I met here. It took a while before I got invited to Annapolis. That came quite a bit later.

And I think I've been only to the Air Force Academy once. I've been to the Army

War College. That was fairly recently, I think in 2010 or '11, and again, I met there with a group of Colonels who were just back from Afghanistan. Must've been before 2010 - 2009.

Because I think this was the group of people who were working on the new rules of engagement that were issued in 2010. And once again, I thought they were - they were very impressive people. I've never been to the Pentagon. I've never been consulted on issues of war and peace, or had a fight at the Pentagon, so I haven't had that kind of a relationship with the U.S. Army.

My relationship has been much more with people here and at the Army War College. And last week I went to Fort Jackson - that was my first visit to a military base. And there, I was talking about asymmetric warfare, with some trepidation, to a group of Sergeants, all of whom had been in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who obviously knew much more about asymmetric warfare than I did.

And so I tried to tell them that, and to try to get them to give me the arguments if they thought I needed to hear any. But they were, as I've often found with Cadets here, very polite. I think I got a few hints of disagreement, but not any forthright engagement.

I have - the only other Army that I've had any engagement with is the Israeli Army, which also uses - Just and Unjust Wars has been translated into Hebrew. Also into German, and I think into Chinese, and one or two other languages. But it is used at Israeli military academies.

And I have met with some of the people using it, and I've also met with soldiers who've been in battle. And some of them have been much more willing than American soldiers to fight with me, to argue against me.

And I don't know - I assume you know that it is an argument in the IDF [Israeli Defense Force], but also in all the NATO armies, and in our Army, too, how to fight asymmetric war, and specifically, what risks can you ask soldiers to take to minimize the risks they are imposing on enemy civilians.

And after General McChrystal's rules of engagement were issued, the New York Times reporters did some interviews with soldiers on the ground who were very angry, and said, "These rules made war too dangerous." But there were other soldiers who said, "Yes, this is the way we ought to fight." And I found the same disagreement in Israel. And I think the result of those disagreements is that in a battle - I don't know about Afghanistan.

I've been told in Gaza, different Army units fought differently, because the Junior Officer in the field had different convictions about what he could ask his men to do.

Interviewer:

I would say - I know I'm supposed to be the interviewer, but - part of it is their safety. The other part of it is how do you believe war is won? And some people say you win a counter insurgency or asymmetric by killing the enemy, and some say you win it by winning over the civilians. So that may be the more primary thing of how do you believe this kind of war is won.

Michael Walzer:

Yes.

Interviewer:

That influences, then, how much risk you're going to put on your people. 'Cause you'll put risk on your people to protect civilians if you think those civilians will help you win the war.

Michael Walzer:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. It's fascinating. You don't have to - this one is less historical, it's more asking, so feel free if you don't want to answer this one. But what do you think of the current state of scholarship within just war theory? I know historically there wasn't - well, actually, you can start historically. As you look back pre-Just and Unjust Wars, and as

you look at things now, can you describe how the field has changed?

And maybe that would be the way to start.

Michael Walzer:

Yeah, yeah, I actually wrote a piece called *The Triumph of Just War Theory and the Perils of Success*. When I began thinking, talking about war, just war theory was taught mostly in Catholic universities. And it was well taught in a couple of Catholic universities, like Georgetown and others that I came to know.

But it was not a subject in philosophy departments or in politics departments around the country. There was some Protestant interest. Paul Ramsey was a Protestant writer who also wrote about these questions, specifically about nuclear disarmament, but this was really a Catholic project, and the Catholic bishops, the encyclical on nuclear war, nuclear deterrents, these were documents that nobody else was producing.

And one of the things I thought I was doing was providing a secular account of Catholic just war theory, and I very much went to school with Catholic theologians. I had also thought maybe I would produce a Jewish account.

But since there was no Jewish state or no Jewish army for 2,000 years, the religious texts dealing with war in Judaism are pretty thin, until now in Israel there are fierce debates, which mostly take place in secular language, in the language of just war theory and international law.

The religious tradition isn't strong, because if you don't have a state, if you don't have an army, you're not asking the questions that produce just war theory, and the Catholics had many states and many armies over a long period of time. So

Interviewer:

But nothing before Augustine, so it's interesting. Once they got the power, then they started addressing it.

Michael Walzer:

Yes. Yes. So that's what I wrote. And because of Vietnam, I think, there has been an outpouring of writing about killing and war, how to fight. It's become a minor academic industry.

I remember when I was in graduate school, every young philosopher had to write something about punishment, and deterrents, and retribution, and all of the questions having to do with punishment. And then there was a time when every young philosopher had to write something about abortion, for or against, all of the arguments. And now, I almost believe that every young philosopher has to write something about war and killing in war.

And I think this is what I'm going to talk about this afternoon. I think that what has happened as this has become an academic field is that the focus has shifted from an engagement with war to an engagement with just war theory.

So that many of the people now writing about just war are not taking five years to read military history and memoirs and all of that. But they are reading the literature on just war theory and moral philosophy.

And the writing about how to fight and when to fight has gotten further and further removed from the actual circumstances in which we have to make those kinds of decisions. So I feel quite strongly about that, which you will hear the polemical tone of my talk this afternoon.

There are some extraordinarily intelligent people. Philosophers tend to be some of the smartest people in American universities. But I think at least quite a bit of the writing is misguided.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Great point. Only tangentially related, over the last almost 40 years, *Just and Unjust War* has been out there. Do you find that there's any parts of your argument that tend to be misunderstood or misinterpreted?

Michael Walzer:

Well, the supreme emergency argument is probably the one that has gotten quite a bit of

philosophical discussion, and some disagreement. It's Winston Churchill's phrase, and I still, it is still part of the way I think about all moral questions.

But there are a lot of people who think that this is an invitation to abuse, and that it is better to stick with an absolute prohibition.

My view has always been you know the saying, "Do justice even if the heavens fall?" So I think, "Do justice until the heavens are about to fall, and then do whatever is necessary to stop them from falling." That just seems to me common sense morality, and I have argued with many people that in the actual moment of decision, they would be with me.

Interviewer:

Now, you do use the term, right, common sense. This is a book of common sense morality. Do you have, are the principles that are inherent in the book, are those the same principles that you think apply in all of life, and are those something that you talk about?

Michael Walzer:

Oh well, no, actually, I don't think that. I think that just war theory is morality adapted to the circumstances of war. And the adaptation is very, very important, and we see it in all kinds of, this is another. You're hearing my afternoon speech.

We see it in many, many different aspects of warfare. One of the things we need now and this would demonstrate the difference that war makes given what's been going on in the United States, in Ferguson and other places, we need rules of engagement for police. And there are rules, most police departments have rules, but there has not been much serious academic philosophical reflection on what the rules are for police. And if you were to think about them, you would see how different they are from the rules for soldiers.

For example, we don't want the police deciding as they pursue some criminal into a crowd, Well, five dead civilians wouldn't be disproportionate to the value of capturing this guy. We don't want the police making calculations of that sort. But that's exactly what soldiers have to do.

So the morality that exists in a zone of peace is different from the morality in the zone of war. And it does require some serious reflection.

Interviewer:

Because the police officer there to control the situation, they can always get that guy eventually.

Michael Walzer:

Right.

Interviewer:

But in war, you're in actually a chaotic situation where you won't. That's interesting. Maybe there was that guy.

Michael Walzer:

Well, but I can tell you a story just about this. When I was at the Army War College, a Colonel from Afghanistan gave me this simplified scenario. American soldiers draw fire from the roof of a small apartment building in an Afghan town. They don't know who's in the building. And then he said, I don't know if this is so, he said, In the old days, we would just pull back and call in the artillery.

Now, under General McChrystal's rules, we're not allowed to do that, or at least not to do that at first. So what are the options? He said, Well, you can try to sneak somebody into the building, to see if there is a family in there. If there's nobody in there, you can call in the artillery. Or you can try to get soldiers onto an adjoining roof to fire directly at the people on this roof.

And both of those involve asking your soldiers to take risks in order not to kill the civilians who may or may not be in the building. Or, if the Junior Officers who are in the field decides that it's too risky to do either of those two things, you should pull back, leave the battlefield to the enemy, which we never like to do, he said. But avoid killing people who may be in the building, on the assumption that we'll have another chance to get the bad guys on the roof.

And when I told this story at Fort Jackson, somebody said, No, we should never pull back.

Interviewer:

Well, it is a principle of the military that you find, fix, and destroy, right? That's what we're trained. Don't let them go.

Right.

Interviewer:

Because the assumption is if you let them go, you'll never get them again, in a typical war. Although I have trouble imagining what those good old days when you would quickly come back and drop a bomb - although maybe '04 to '06 Iraq could've gotten somewhere close to that. If you had - and you do have a pretty big voice, you know. You have three new books that you're writing and everything.

But I imagine, you know, when you watch the news, you watch political debate about wars, do you want - is there a message like that? If you could get a message out to everyone in the military, what should they understand about war? Like what inside of you do you find yourself saying, 'I wish people - if everyone knew this, is there any particular thing?

Michael Walzer:

Well, what I most often feel is not - I mean I obviously believe there are good and bad ways, right and wrong ways to fight. But I also have come to believe that the way the rest of us judge warfare is very, very important. And so often we get it wrong.

Wars these days especially - maybe always, but these days especially - wars are political military engagements, and public opinion, local public opinion, hearts and minds, domestic public opinion, and global public opinion is very, very important. And it affects whether you win or lose these wars.

And so I think it is - I find people who apologize or defend terrorism to be morally reprehensible, because the condemnation of terrorism is part of the fight against it. And I find people who apologize for reckless or immoral conduct on the battlefield also to be wrong.

I think it's very, very important to get our judgments right. And in asymmetric warfare, that's especially difficult, because this is a war of a high-tech Army that looks almighty, and this low-tech insurgency who looks weak. And yet, the Army doesn't usually win these wars.

And people don't realize that, and one of the reasons the Army doesn't usually win, even when the insurgents are bad guys, is because we don't judge the insurgents the way we should. We don't condemn them for - well, not wearing uniforms is a lost cause. The Minutemen in the American Revolution didn't put on uniforms, and the British complained of that. We don't think about that much anymore.

But the insurgents are not blamed for shooting and deliberately killing civilians, and they're not blamed for using civilian cover systematically, for using civilian cover not only for the protection it affords them, but deliberately to provoke attacks that will kill civilians. And I think getting the judgments right is now really very, very important.

Interviewer:

That's a great point. I was just - wanted to follow up, wanted to ask about that. Do you often think about whether moral relativism - and I don't know if relativism is growing in society or not. I don't have that kind of perspective. Do you find a lot of your arguments at war with the people that don't get it, it's a problem of their view of meta-ethics about whether there really is a right and wrong?

Michael Walzer:

There may be a few people like that, people who say, 'Well, that's just the way they do things over there,' and don't really think about what it is they're doing over there.

The author of Reading Lolita in Iran came to the United States. She is obviously a fierce opponent of the Iranian government. And she said she encountered so many Americans who just said to her, 'Well, that's the way they do things over there, and we



can't judge that. And she said, "That's like somebody saying, "Oh, you burn witches in Massachusetts. That's okay.

That's the way you do things over here." So it takes somebody - it's especially important when somebody who has actually been over there, who comes from over there, makes the point that what they're doing over there isn't justified. That's very important. But I think most people are not natural relativists.

I think you have to push, force yourself into that kind of a role for ideological reasons. Most people are judgmental, and rightly. I mean that's the way we live with each other.

Interviewer:

Absolutely. You know, just war theory especially you said has Catholic roots. You talk about the Civil Rights movement being very influenced by the Baptist church. You had collections and written about issues within Judaism. What do you think is the - and I know your upcoming book, "cause you told me, comparative.

Do you have a view on the proper relationship between religion, ethics, and governance?

Michael Walzer:

I think I probably have an American view, which is a separationist, a strong separationist view. But I'm also one of the people who came maybe a little more quickly than some others to realize that the inevitable secularization thesis was just plain wrong.

and now Muslim Jihadis. I don't think it's intrinsic in Islam to fight against infidels, to kill infidels, but we are at a moment in Islamic history where the religion is producing fanatics. And so is Hinduism, and so is Judaism in Israel.

This was totally unexpected, and I think it's very important for people, both religious and secular people who believe in coexistence and mutual toleration, to realize that the struggle against religious fanatics is very, very serious. Sometimes it is an ideological, theological struggle, intellectual struggle. Sometimes it's a political struggle.

And sometimes it's going to be a military struggle, and we have to think very, very seriously about how we deal with religious zealotry, because the academics who have been educating us about how to live in a modern world have told us virtually nothing about this.

They thought religion was going away. And it's obviously with us powerfully, both as traditional piety, and as occasional zealotry. And we've got to figure out how to deal with that, and I think the American way of dealing with it is pretty good. Our - I don't know if you have time for another story?

Interviewer:

Oh, I love stories - yes. I have more questions for you, so we'll go as long as you feel comfortable.

Michael Walzer:

The early American republic was quite radically secular, and in 1810, U.S. Congress decided that mail should be delivered seven days a week. And this produced a Sabbatarian uprising among the more traditional Protestant groups - the Anglicans, Presbyterians. And it became an issue in the country.

In 1829, the issue came back to the U.S. Senate, which sent the issue to its committee on post roads and post offices, which was headed by an evangelical Baptist from Tennessee named Johnson. And this committee brought in a report saying that the U.S. Congress could not recognize a religious day of rest.

And mail had to be delivered seven days a week. And it went on in this incredible text to say that the writers of the U.S. Constitution, seeing religious bondage all over the world, had devised this Constitutional system to free us from religious bondage. And this is an evangelical Baptist writing this.

And we must not - we must separate the state from all religious decision-making.

Extraordinary text, and this man Johnson was later elected Vice President of the United States on a ticket with Martin Van Buren. So this was a popular report.

Interviewer:

And yet we never got Sunday delivery.

Michael Walzer:

We had Sunday delivery in the early Republic. It was ended locally. One by one, one by one, local districts. It wasn't ended nationally until 1905. Of course, by then it wasn't - nobody was delivering mail on Sunday any more. But the law was not repealed till 1905.

Interviewer:

Wow. And there've been a lot of religious immigrants at that point, and the revival of the 1880s, and some other things that may have tipped the scale some. Wow. Speaking of stories, when you described the people in your philosophical reading group, I was thinking, "Wow, I think I've had courses on most of those people." Do any stories or anecdotes, is there anything you can share about any?

That was a collection of great minds in American modern intellectual history. Any stories about any of those that come to mind?

Michael Walzer:

Well -

Interviewer:

Or of your engagements with them as a group?

Michael Walzer:

My engagements were - as I said, this was my philosophical education. I spent a lot of time listening to these people, and to the way they argued, which was different from the way political theorists argue. It was at a level of analytic intricacy and - I don't know - sharpness that I had never encountered.

But I don't remember any - no, I don't remember any particular stories. This was a discussion group. We read papers. We criticized each other's papers. I doubt that it was different from a lot of philosophical discussion groups.

Interviewer:

Except that many of you wrote books that had a big impact.

Michael Walzer:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer:

And you got to see early versions. Are there any - what should people - now this is almost becoming personal, but what would you like people to know about you, right? Cause when people only know what you publish in general - 99% of the people, if they talk about Michael Walzer, it's because they've read things you've written. Is there more about the process? Is there more about the influence?

Is there more about - do you have a larger project you've been working on, but maybe not laid out for people? I'm just wondering, can you let us in behind the print?

Michael Walzer:

I've always thought that the Academy was too rarefied a place, and that I had to keep one foot outside, and that was one reason for my political engagements, and I continued. I recently retired as co-editor of Dissent magazine, which I've written hundreds of pieces for over the years.

And I always felt that that was a very important part of my identity. That I was both a politically engaged citizen, and a professor, and particularly for professors who write about politics and war, I think some engagement in those on the other side as citizens is very, very important.

And I think it's also important that when we engage as citizens, we claim no authority from being professors. I want my arguments to have whatever value they have for you, or for anybody. I don't want you to say, "Well, he's a Princeton or a Harvard professor, so let's listen to him."

And I think that that mix of identities is very important to me.

And I've also been very engaged in Jewish life, in wherever I live, and nationally, and I think that's also important. I think it's - philosophers are supposed to be

universalists and cosmopolitans, and I think it's very useful to have some particularist roots that are important to you. They work as a kind of - they make the cosmopolitanism maybe a little softer.

More tolerant of other people's particularisms, because cosmopolitanism, universalism can also become an absolutist doctrine that overrides what ordinary people value. And so it's good to have some of the values of ordinary people in your own life.

Interviewer:

Amen. Yeah. I'm more than satisfied. I'm thrilled with this conversation. I think it's going to be great for the Center for Oral History and for all of us that come to listen to it. Is there anything more you want to say, you know, that your brain is on, or you're good?

Michael Walzer:

I think we've done pretty well. We've covered a lot of stuff.