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## Bleeding for Humanity

[Stephen Wertheim](#) June 17, 2009 [Blog, Perspectives](#)

### June 2009

Humanitarian interventionists have blood on their hands. Their impulse to “free a nation from the tyrant’s grip,” to pick professor-cum-politician Michael Ignatieff’s formulation, helped to permit the Iraq War. True, humanitarian interventionists were not the war’s architects. Some opposed it altogether. But they may have enabled it. For five years before the invasion, humanitarian interventionists popularized assumptions that made the war seem innocuous at worst and virtuous at best. Quick doses of US military force, they claimed, would easily transform polities on the periphery, forging stability from genocide.

Samantha Power’s *A Problem From Hell*, the wildly popular 2003 Pulitzer winner, epitomized the blindness. Power condemned a century of US inaction without describing how any intervention would have unfolded. The United States self-evidently enjoyed “vast resources” to stop genocide. She ignored the challenge of post-conflict reconstruction, mocked deference to public opinion, and devalued multilateral legal procedures. If these qualities sound familiar, it is because humanitarian interventionism was neoconservatism of the left. Swap the goals of stopping

genocides and toppling tyrannies and the difference was scant.

Now, humanitarian interventionists are back in power — despite the Iraq war’s unpopularity and the US president’s pledges to end not just the war but also the ideology that spawned it. In 2007, Vice President Joe Biden called for US ground troops to end Darfur’s genocide. UN Ambassador Susan Rice has long championed US bombing for that purpose. Power directs multilateral affairs at the National Security Council. While President Barack Obama appears to value prudence and pragmatism, humanitarian interventionism may resonate with him. On entering the Senate, Obama recruited Power to mentor him in foreign affairs after she made her name writing on genocide.

Yet, although humanitarian interventionists are ascendant, humanitarian interventionism is quietly in crisis.

Humanitarians and human rights activists face newfound hostility animated by President George W. Bush’s use or abuse of their cause. In the United States, an overstretched military leaves the movement little choice but to tread water. “Thanks to the war in Iraq,” Power conceded in 2006, “sending a sizable US force to Darfur is not an option.” Even the idealists speak like realists now. The shallow debate among humanitarian interventionists nonetheless suggests a skin-deep conversion, an adaptation to circumstances rather than a revision of principles. What will happen if the United States recovers? Old temptations may well return. For if genocide is so heinous that it absolutely must be stopped, why should quibbles about exit strategies, public apathy, or UN votes stand in the way?

The new administration needs a new posture toward humanitarian military intervention, and fast, before the next crisis erupts. It would be a disaster for US foreign relations if Obama created a quagmire of his own.

Humanitarian interventionists, too, need a doctrine that both embodies their best values and redresses their past mistakes. After a lost decade, helping victims of violence remains a worthy aim. But if humanitarian interventionists

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fail to rethink their assumptions, the future will not be kind.

## When Stopping Mass Killing Is Just

Humanitarian interventionists often adopt the language of absolute, abstract moral obligations. “Never again,” goes the post-Holocaust mantra. Ignatieff asserted a “duty to intervene” to stop genocide. Such attitudes imply an unconditional responsibility to act. They rest, first, on overestimates of Anglo-American power after the Cold War: surely the world’s current and former superpowers could keep, for instance, poor Africans from hacking at each other with machetes? Mostly, they express abhorrence of genocide, succored by an explosion in Holocaust literature. Genocide is regarded as a moral emergency of the highest order. It appears to transcend conventional politics. As the director of a Darfur advocacy group told Congress: “Genocide is not political. It violates every principle of humanity and should be addressed without political considerations.” This view descends from a decades-long tradition of activists who have imagined humanitarianism and human rights as operating on a plane separate from that of normal political contestation. Human rights were “antipolitics,” in Hungarian dissident George Konrád’s 1984 appraisal.

Claims to extrapolitical status might be tenable for the International Committee of the Red Cross, which maintains rigid impartiality by acting only as states allow. Those who want to stop genocide, by contrast, are being eminently political. Thwarting a genocidal state is a political act, subject to practical constraints and moral imperfections. A duty to stop genocide cannot be plunked down *a priori*, abstracted from political realities and competing claims. The morality of intervention depends on accommodating such realities and trumping such claims. In short, humanitarian intervention is politics.

Embracing the political nature of humanitarian intervention concedes nothing of value. In fact, it is morally

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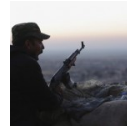


essential. A new doctrine should hold that *humanitarian intervention can be just only if dispassionate and all-encompassing analysis projects it is likely (and not very unlikely) to help the persons affected and unlikely (and not very likely) to require excessive sacrifices of US security.* The latter criterion, protecting US security, honors a genuine moral good. The provision of national security is necessarily the first responsibility of government by and for the people — which does not preclude some sacrifice on others' behalf. The former criterion, though, needs explication. Humanitarian interventionists have long trespassed it.

An end is worthwhile only if the means to that end are worthwhile also. Intervention to stop mass killing requires imagining how an intervention will likely and could plausibly play out, integrating all relevant political dimensions. It means success cannot be assumed, even for a superpower. If troops are unlikely to help, they should not come. Totalizing exhortations about a duty to stop genocide are therefore as misconceived as they are hazardous. They imply the ends justify the means, any means — and thus the matter of *how* to intervene is irrelevant to the calculus of *whether* to intervene in the first place.

If this much sounds obvious, the straw man is all too fleshy. Many interventionists, often not fully consciously, have subscribed to the fantasy that their cause was more important than any obstacle and every other cause. Their moralizing cast of mind imbued stopping genocide with transcendent value, so ends were judged with scant consideration of means. Power's book objected to inaction as such. Its explicit claim was that the United States should "do more." But lifting a pinkie could hardly satisfy. Power really wanted genocide stopped, by any means necessary. Indeed, when the Bush administration in 2004 took several steps she had endorsed, labeling the Darfur conflict a "genocide" and pushing the United Nations to act, Power retorted: "The sin of past Presidents is not that they failed

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to use the word but that then, as now, they failed to stop the crime.”

The time for bromides to “do something” is over. The burden must now be: know what to do before recommending whether to do it. On a policy level, this principle has vital implications. Because humanitarian intervention is politics, deciding whether humanitarian intervention is desirable requires integrating all the considerations normally relevant to decisions of war and peace into projections of probable and plausible outcomes. Interventionists’ past arguments highlight three factors warranting particular attention: post-conflict operations, public opinion, and multilateral cooperation.

The first is the least appreciated. Humanitarian interventionists, like the Bush administration’s neoconservatives, have ignored war’s aftermath. The arresting image of stopping massacres and trouncing “evil” too quickly overshadows the greatest challenge: finding a political solution thereafter. Brookings Institution fellow Michael O’Hanlon, for instance, has proposed the creation of a rapid-deployment US military division dedicated to halting future genocides. Troops would zip in and zip out. But once a force halts the killings, it should not immediately leave, plunging the country back into violence. Countries rarely come equipped with shadow governments that are organized, legitimate, and desirable for installation — especially countries torn by genocidal violence and hatred. Outside troops must stabilize society and construct institutions of government, lest premature withdrawal overturn the mission’s humanitarian purpose. Unfortunately, “nobody knows how to rebuild destroyed societies,” Air Force Colonel Chet Richards admits and post-Cold War attempts in the Balkans, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq attest. Humanitarian interventionists need not be as self-denying as Colin Powell and Caspar Weinberger, who, reacting against the Vietnam War, required the identification of a clear exit strategy prior to military engagement. Sometimes war is a risk worth taking. Still, if excessive conflict or premature withdrawal seem likely to

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follow, it is wrong, not virtuous, to go. In decisions to intervene, the aftermath matters.

So does domestic public opinion. Some who saw genocide prevention as extrapolitical imagined the mere use of the g-word could galvanize effective action. Darfur shattered that myth. For the public, stopping mass killing is, quite reasonably, one of many priorities and hardly the highest. Humanitarian intervention can be worthwhile only with public support for launching the effort — and sustaining it such that human welfare ultimately improves. One looks in vain to US history to find enthusiasm for long occupations, particularly when the sacrifice is measured in lives. The difficulty of sustaining popular support is one reason why, according to political scientist Patricia Sullivan's 2007 study, great powers failed to achieve their primary political objective in nearly 40 percent of military operations against weak states and nonstate actors since 1945. And humanitarian missions need more than consent. There should be genuine and actuating concern for the wellbeing of another society, if humanitarian outcomes are to prevail. It is far from clear that the United States, or any state or coalition of states, can cultivate this. For all the talk of invading Iraq to free a people, the welfare of those people — including millions of refugees and at least 100,000 wartime civilian deaths — has gone shockingly neglected in journalistic reporting and political decision-making. A humanitarianism this superficial and unselfconscious is not a nearly emancipatory force needing but a few tweaks. It seems closer to a menace.

Finally, a less instrumental appreciation for multilateralism and international law would serve humanitarian interventionists well. Until recently, humanitarian interventionists were multilateralism's antagonists, pillorying UN fecklessness in Rwanda and EU dithering in the Balkans. The US-led NATO bombing in Kosovo launched without UN Security Council authorization. Few cared. Even Secretary-General Kofi Annan retrospectively toasted the Kosovo mission, not-so-thinly implying that the international community should countenance



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unauthorized humanitarian interventions. By Bush's presidency, then, the United Nations had been morally discredited by its would-be loyalists. Humanitarian interventionists can no longer pretend contravening international law and institutions comes cost-free. To vitiate one global norm in forging another is a dangerous game, especially before someone less humanitarian minded gets to play.

Several conceptual and rhetorical shifts ought to reflect humanitarians' sobered mentality. The objective of "helping" or "improving" should supplant that of "stopping." Stopping genocide might not be the most humane course, and calls to "stop genocide" wrongly suggest the work is done once genocide halts. Likewise, genocidal states should be deemed "immoral" but not "evil." The impulse to confront evil is not the same as the impulse to help. It undermines humanitarianism by fixating on wrongdoers, distracting from victims. It injects a moralism that makes matters of implementation seem beside the point, and a judgmentalism that chokes off understanding of genocide's political and strategic causes. It also constrains diplomacy domestically, casting the state as irredeemable and agreement as appeasement.

Not least, humanitarian military intervention is war. When it means invading Rwanda or attacking Serbia, "intervention" is as Orwellian as the Ministry of Truth. Performed in other contexts by God and doctors, "intervention" evokes moral clarity, clinical precision, and total control — notions both inapplicable and dangerous here. Just war is still war, however humanitarian the warrior's aim. War is unpredictable and escalation-prone, Clausewitz reminds. Even the Kosovo affair, free of US casualties, was no exception. Clinton administration officials expected the bombing to last just a week. Two months later, before Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's still mysterious surrender, the administration was coming to see a massive ground war as the only alternative to defeat. Needless to say, a 175,000-troop affair

in rugged Kosovo would have tested public resolve and humanitarian pretenses.

“We should never be in a position where we are hesitant to stop a genocide because our troops are otherwise occupied,” O’Hanlon has written. The opposite is better. The United States should always hesitate to stop a genocide, even if troops are available. It should hesitate in order to ensure war does good. It must imagine the plausible and probable consequences and plan realistically and farsightedly. If war will not do good, the United States must not go. Such is the difference between moralism and morality.

## Rethinking Rwanda

A new doctrine of humanitarian intervention merits a fresh look at history. No episode motivates humanitarian interventionists more than the 1994 Rwandan genocide. As a staggering 800,000 Rwandans perished in 100 days, the world acted: the Security Council, under US pressure, cut its feckless peacekeeping force from 2,100 to 270 troops. During the massacres and several years thereafter, commentators treated the genocide as a tragedy that probably could not have been avoided.

But in the late 1990s, as neoconservatives became popular and eager to use force, so did humanitarians. Clinton and British counterpart Tony Blair declared new doctrines of ending ethnic cleansing. Snappy victories in Bosnia and Kosovo seemed to confirm Anglo-American power. Suddenly, the Rwandan genocide looked preventable. The world’s inaction was “one of the most shocking episodes of the past decade,” the *Washington Post* editorialized in 2000. From 1999 to 2003, only one *Foreign Affairs* article doubted the desirability of US military action to stop Rwanda’s genocide.

Conventional wisdom holds that 5,000 ground troops would have readily stopped the genocide. Affirmed by the eminent Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly



Conflict in 1998, the 5,000-troop scenario is routinely cited by statesmen, activists, and analysts. In the commission's judgment, during a "window of opportunity" within the first two weeks, "a modern force of 5,000 troops . . . could have stemmed the violence in and around the capital, prevented its spread to the countryside, and created conditions conducive to the cessation of the civil war" raging between the genocidal, Hutu-run Rwandan government and the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

The feasibility of such an intervention — and thus its morality — can be glimpsed by projecting its consequences. The results are sobering. Consider three levels: halting the genocide, managing the aftermath, and maintaining political support. Stopping the violence, first, would have been far tougher than supposed. The "window of opportunity" never existed. Massacres promptly began everywhere, the countryside included. Airlifting in troops would have taken several weeks, political scientist Alan Kuperman has shown. Policymakers, even human-rights groups, did not widely recognize genocide was occurring until the end of April, once the fictive window had shut. Moreover, the RPF rebels threatened to fight any intervention force, as Romeo Dallaire has recounted. Although ethnic brethren with the victims, the RPF was vying for political power. Humanitarian troops might have wound up fighting the group they were "saving."

What would happen next? Everyone has disregarded post-conflict scenarios, assuming a return to the peace process. But it is folly to expect the parties to be much more cooperative after genocide than before. The belligerents might have kept fighting — one another and the intervention force. They might have readied to resume genocide and war as soon as foreigners left. If governmental institutions disintegrated, the choice would be stark: cut and run or build a nation. Policing historically requires 13 to 20 soldiers per thousand inhabitants. For 8 million Rwandans, that means 100,000 to 160,000 troops.

Nor is it likely Clinton would have garnered the requisite political backing for a risky invasion. Once Americans knew genocide was occurring, hardly anyone, except arch-neoconservative Charles Krauthammer, demanded military intervention. No member of Congress publicly urged using force. Even *The New Republic*, later a bastion of humanitarian interventionism, dismissed armed involvement, citing the debacle in Somalia.

What course of action was most worth discussing in hindsight? Something virtually no one has contemplated: helping the RPF to win the civil war and thereby stop the genocide. This would have provided a clear and obtainable post-conflict objective, reversed the RPF's enmity, and let intervention forces take a supporting role. The downsides would have been serious: the rebels might lose, they might (and did) commit massacres, the United Nations might disapprove, and the principle of sovereignty might suffer. In any case, this scenario is anachronistic, contrary to then-prevalent US peacekeeping policies, domestic political and intellectual conditions, and international norms. But it is less anachronistic and more humanitarian than the scenario usually advanced.

Interventionists' enduring dream of quick victory betrays a profound overestimation of US power, and their unwillingness to contemplate the aftermath and pick sides in the civil war reflects a dangerous denial of the political nature of their program. For so long, many astute observers have maintained fantasies that the Rwandan genocide, like almost any genocide, could be easily stopped. They need a new doctrine and a new spirit.

## **The Responsibility of Prudence**

Feasibility is morally relevant. Humanitarianism succeeds only if it helps those it affects. No witness of the last eight years or student of modern imperialism can take for granted that human welfare will improve once well-meaning outsiders grace the scene. Armed invasions to transform polities are complex and bloody affairs,

exceedingly difficult to pull off. They are infeasible and undesirable in enormous Darfur. Diplomacy and humanitarian relief are noble efforts. If the Obama administration bombs Sudan, it should decide in advance not to invade if Sudan holds firm. Stopping there would be no cause for guilt. The humanitarian's highest calling is to help on earth as best one can, not to crusade against cosmic evil.

The “responsibility to protect,” adopted in 2006, commits the international community to protect victims of genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes — by force if necessary. With this, the norm of humanitarian intervention has advanced far beyond anyone's willingness or capacity to meet. Perhaps far-sighted goal-setting will one day bear fruit, but the responsibility to protect is an immediate duty. It fuels false expectations, stoking delusions of grandeur among humanitarians and victims alike. Already one of Darfur's rebel leaders refused to sign a peace agreement that might have stopped the genocide against his people, partly because he was awaiting international military intervention to give him more power. In politics unrealizable piety slides easily into ruinous sanctimony. Humanitarian intervention most certainly is politics.

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