

On moralism and Rwanda: a reply to Linda Melvern

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Linda Melvern offers sorry comfort to those who wish to carry the torch of humanitarian interventionism undimmed by events of the previous decade. Her response displays the very depoliticizing moralism that my article critiques and that humanitarian interventionism, if it is to do good, must overcome.

Melvorn claims I argued that ‘*nothing* could have been done to have prevented or stopped the progress’ of the Rwandan genocide (her emphasis).¹ My article, she continues, ‘rejects absolutely that the genocide was preventable’.² It endorses the policy actually implemented during the genocide, she writes, and it concludes that because the ‘entire genocide’ was unpreventable, ‘*nothing* could have been done’ (her emphasis).³

I have had to quote her words, not mine, because no such position can be found in my article.

‘A solution from hell’ advanced two arguments about the Rwandan genocide of 1994. First, the US government gave so little consideration to intervening in Rwanda because the idea that genocide must be stopped had yet to develop fully. Only in the late 1990s did it blossom. Second, conventional wisdom was dangerously wrong to presume that the genocide would very likely have been easily ended altogether by an intervention force of about 5,000 troops deployed within the first two weeks of the genocide – a solution that originated with the UN force commander in Rwanda, Roméo Dallaire, and was affirmed by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict in 1998, whereupon it quickly acquired popular approval. This piece of conventional wisdom illustrates, I argued, how US humanitarian interventionists systematically underestimated the difficulties of transformative military intervention in the years leading up to the not unrelated launch of the Iraq war of 2003.

My article made no recommendation about what action should have been taken at the time of the genocide. Rather, it demonstrated the flaws of the intervention scenario most frequently cited by US politicians, analysts, and commentators. In addition, I critiqued several general features of US humanitarian-interventionist discourse about Rwanda:

- It failed almost completely to reckon with the challenge of post-genocide reconstruction and include this challenge in the calculus of whether and how to intervene.

- It disregarded explicit threats by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to fight any outside intervention, including one intended to save fellow Tutsi.
- It wrongly supposed there was a two-week ‘window of opportunity’ to end the genocide easily and completely through intervention in the capital city, Kigali. In fact, genocidal massacres quickly spread beyond Kigali, and hardly anyone, even human rights groups, thought a massive genocide was occurring until the fictive window had shut.
- US humanitarian-interventionist discourse also neglected to square its supposition that presidential salesmanship could have easily marshaled public support with the well-known fact that US citizens at the time uttered scarcely a peep about acting to stop the genocide.

Each of these factors alone would have sufficed to make my point that humanitarian interventionists were overconfident in the efficacy of military intervention. Taken together, they are a staggering testimony to the blindness of humanitarian interventionism in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

So why does Melvern say I endorsed the Rwanda policy taken at the time? Why does she not only mischaracterize my argument but also miss the sympathy for well-conceived humanitarian intervention implied by my suggestion that the most effective strategy for stopping the genocide might have been to align an intervention with the RPF until it conquered the country?⁴ (Such a strategy, though it has its own profound problems, would have obviated the RPF’s threats to fight a foreign intervention and eliminated the need for post-genocide occupation and nation-building.) Is it because Melvern is stuck in the same tired mentality of which, thankfully, many humanitarian interventionists have by now grown sceptical? She says I am for doing nothing because it is the opposite of her position – which is to do *something*. What exactly? Anything, everything, *something*. Lives *could* have been saved, she writes. It was *possible*.

What an incredible article mine would have been had it argued, as she claims, that ‘*nothing* could have been done’ to save any lives (her emphasis).⁵ Nothing at all possibly could have been done to save even one person? To concede the point is no concession: yes, something could have been done to save lives.

Now it is perfectly fine for Melvern to draw up intervention scenarios and hope they had come to pass. Such counterfactuals are necessarily a-historical, because they suppose history turning out other than it did. Even so, I think counterfactual analysis is a legitimate enterprise – so long as one appreciates how a-historical the counterfactual is. To put the matter concretely, the world did not stop the Rwandan genocide. Humanitarian interventionists might inquire carefully into the reasons why, assessing what they were, what would have had to happen for them to change, and what the consequences of changing them would plausibly have been. A few humanitarian interventionists have done this. But most have done what Melvern continues to do: obsess over whether it was *possible* that *something* could have been done to save lives.

Hence her litany of decontextualized troop contingents floating around Africa: 500 Belgian paracommandos here, 250 US rangers there, 80 Italians everywhere! Typical of retrospective wishful thinking, Melvern mixes her troop-salad without mentioning any obstacles intervention would have faced and without appreciating the ways in which her scenarios are a-historical. It is as if the mere presence of troops in Africa self-evidently proves that intervention should have been done. As long as some unspecified number of troops is stationed anywhere between Zimbabwe and the Somali coast, she implies, marching in and saving lives is as simple as summoning the will to act.

There is neither cause nor space to examine every battalion Melvern broaches. I would welcome a serious argument about any particular scenario – an argument that spells out the *objectives* of intervention (stop the genocide outright or save lives as the genocide continues?), the *changes in history* needed to make the intervention transpire (besides the presence of that elastic entity ‘will’), and the probability and magnitude of adverse *consequences* relative to beneficial ones (taking into account the post-genocide phase). Suffice it to say that Melvern’s scenarios are a-historical in the following ways, among others, that she does not acknowledge:

- They assume their hodgepodge of troops would be prepared to work together in a combat operation and would be readily withdrawn from their existing missions.
- They ignore the RPF’s threat to fight outside intervention. This threat might have either kept decision-makers from intervening or hobbled, or even rendered counterproductive, whatever intervention materialized.
- The scenarios require public support that did not exist at the time and might have been very difficult to mobilize. Melvern does not address my article’s argument that it was only in the late 1990s that the notion of a ‘duty to stop genocide’ became widespread. The late blossoming of the humanitarian-interventionist norm explains why US government officials, private organizations, and citizens exhibited so little interest in confronting the Rwandan genocide in 1994.
- Melvern’s proposed intervention in mid-April belies the fact that very few Westerners recognized that a genocide was occurring until the last week of April.
- That intervention scenario, devised by Dallaire, wrongly assumed the genocide was confined to Kigali. Therefore, if Dallaire designed the mission appropriate to his assumption, the intervention would have been undermanned and inadequately conceived.

Then Melvern would have to contemplate the plausible and probable consequences of her particular intervention. Rather than read backward from a desired outcome as her letter does, one must imagine the intervention unfolding forward through time. This means taking seriously the risk of intervention doing more harm than good, even by purely humanitarian standards. What if the RPF delivered on its threat to fight a foreign intervention? The intervention force might have found itself fighting both sides in the civil war – the RPF and the Hutu government and militias. It might

have made the conflict more deadly, not less. It might have bequeathed a worse, not better, long-term future for Rwanda after the genocide. It might have ruined the international community's appetite for humanitarian missions for decades to come. I am not saying it necessarily would have. But to foreclose in advance the possibility of negative consequences – the only question is whether this is absurd recklessness or reckless absurdity.

Of course, if the bare possibility of saving lives is all Melvern seeks to establish, then she need not go to the lengths she has. Anything is possible; we agree. But the important questions in politics are of probability, not possibility. What would the plausible and probable consequences of a particular intervention have been? What would have had to differ in order for successful intervention to result? Only an anti-political ethical framework – a kind of crude deontology – could find overriding significance in the mere possibility that lives could have been saved. As the slogan goes, there is a 'duty to stop genocide'. 'Never again'. If we believe this strictly, it matters only whether there is genocide, only whether we have the sheer physical capacity to fight it. We need think no further. Genocide must be stopped. States must act. All competing values are trumped; politics is adjourned. Never mind what the consequences of a mission to stop genocide might be. No matter if intervention, however intended, seems more likely to do harm than good. Merely inquiring about consequences is subversive: it denies the duty to intervene. For if outcomes matter, one has to entertain the possibility that, on reflection, the most humane way to act might fall short of stopping genocide. It might even be to do nothing at all. In this way, many humanitarian interventionists have adopted a Weberian 'ethic of ultimate ends', wherein intentions count for everything and the results are left to fate. If humanitarianism is about improving human welfare, it requires an 'ethic of responsibility', putting consequences front and center. To be for *something* is never enough. Better to ask what is best to do, based on the foreseeable consequences of doing it.

Melvorn is not content to distort just one of my arguments. She does it again in her attempt to refute my supposed claim that the Rwandan genocide was widely perceived as preventable only in 2000, six years after the fact. She quotes me as stating that the Rwandan genocide 'did not appear to have been easily preventable until the century closed'.⁶ That quotation is fabricated. The closest thing to it in my article is: 'Viewed for several years with resigned dismay, the genocide assumed a new meaning as the century closed'.⁷ Everywhere else in the article – nearly a dozen times in the body text and once in a major section heading – I state that the turning point, when mainstream US political discourse came to regard the Rwandan genocide as easily preventable, was the late 1990s. For example, I write: 'From 1994 to 1997, circumspection still predominated . . . A dramatic shift began around 1998'.⁸ So it hardly cuts against my argument that some interventionist literature was published from 1995 to 1997. If anything, Melvern's evidence supports my point, because despite that early literature, the image of the Rwandan genocide as easily preventable did not permeate mainstream US discourse until the last few years of the 1990s. A new zeitgeist made the difference.

For the record, Melvern also falsely quotes my article as asserting the impossibility of stopping the ‘entire genocide’ and as calling Dallaire’s intervention plan ‘unrealistic’.⁹ Neither ‘entire genocide’ nor ‘unrealistic’ appears anywhere in my article. And Melvern’s quotation of a UK ambassador’s supposed admission that the Rwanda issue ‘landed on the doorstep of the UN without adequate preparation or consideration’,¹⁰ a quotation whose source Melvern does not cite, sounds like a misrendering of David Hannay’s statement that ‘*some believed* [the pre-genocide UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda] had been landed on the UN’s doorstep without adequate preparation or consideration’ (emphasis added).¹¹

Finally, Melvern claims I am wrong to have written that ‘the killings quickly began all over the country’. She notes that Butare, a southern university town, ‘saw no systematic slaughter until 21 April’.¹² To be sure: the killings did not immediately begin in every square foot of the country. But according to Alison Des Forges’ pro-intervention *Leave None to Tell the Story*, as cited in my article,¹³ killings in much of Rwanda commenced by 7–8 April and some of the deadliest massacres of the genocide, many in the countryside, started 11 April, five days in. If Des Forges is right, then the two-week ‘window of opportunity’ to send approximately 5,000 troops to Kigali, where the genocide was supposed to be confined, never existed. Even if she is wrong, the window still never existed because the existence of a large-scale genocide was scarcely recognized in the West for two weeks and airlifting in the troops might well have taken that long, too.

To stand for morality, you cannot just oppose amorality and immorality. You also have to stand against moralism, that depoliticizing self-righteousness that pushes consequences out of view. The sooner humanitarianism takes this insight to heart, the better its chance of living up to its name.

Notes and references

- 1 Linda Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 13, No 1-2, 2011, this issue.
- 2 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 3 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 4 Stephen Wertheim, ‘A solution from hell: the United States and the rise of humanitarian interventionism, 1991–2003’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 12, No 3–4, 2010, p 156.
- 5 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 6 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 7 Wertheim, ‘A solution from hell’, p 150.
- 8 Wertheim, ‘A solution from hell’, p 158.
- 9 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 10 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 11 David Hannay, *New World Disorder* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p 166.
- 12 Melvern, ‘Letter to the editor’, this issue.
- 13 Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp 209–211; cited in Wertheim, ‘A solution from hell’, p 169, endnote 42.

Notes on contributor

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