



The Failures of “Intervention-From-Above”: Is There an Alternative Model for Humanitarian Intervention?

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Humanitarian intervention is generally assumed to be intervention-from-above, that is, under the auspices of states or international institutions. On a global scale such intervention flows unidirectionally from North to South; intervention may also occur regionally within the South itself. Some unresolved tension remains between international legal standards associated with the concepts of sovereignty, non-intervention, and domestic jurisdiction, and the actual practice of humanitarian intervention. The more controversial aspects of this practice, however, have been mainly and appropriately focused on matters of capability, will, and effect. The relevant questions from this latter perspective are: will humanitarian intervention work? does it help? how can it best be done?

The issues of international law should

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probably not be dismissed too lightly, if for no other reason than the congruence of the legal guidelines with a politics of prudence. The following analysis, however, will focus on these questions of capability, will, and effect; seeking to explain the disappointing outcomes of recent instances of humanitarian intervention; and offering some preliminary thoughts on shifting the locus of interventionary energy away from military approaches, relying more, instead, on the capabilities and will associated with an emergent global civil society. At this stage, it is impossible to say whether a more “grassroots” form of humanitarian intervention can succeed where “top-down” interventions have failed. The search for alternative approaches to humanitarian intervention, emphasizing what might be viewed as “intervention-from-below,” will be explored further in a subsequent essay. Suffice it to say for now that such approaches will probably depend, in their broad outlines, on transnational initiatives of relief agencies and human rights organizations, on the voluntary undertakings of citizens, and on a coherent strategy of sup-

port for the democratic empowerment of the target society.

Accounting for Disillusionment

There are, broadly considered, two types of settings for “humanitarian intervention” of a traditional sort, relying on military force to achieve fundamental objectives and carried out under the auspices of one or more states, or by way of the United Nations Security Council or the relevant regional institutions.

The first setting is characterized by interventions in which the positive humanitarian effects can be of great significance, yet incidental to the main purpose being sought by the intervening side. For example, horrifying abuses in the target society may be overcome by intervention that is undertaken principally for security or strategic reasons. Such occurrences are rarely, if ever, called “humanitarian” interventions, although their strategic rationale for public relations reasons may stress the humanitarian stakes of the war. Examples include the destruction of the Nazi state in World War II, the Indian invasion of East Pakistan in 1971, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978. Note that interventions of this type involve very substantial military and political commitments that almost always include invasion and occupation, sometimes of a prolonged character. Genocide or other appalling abuses have not generally prompted effective humanitarian interventions in the absence of such strategic motivations. To the contrary, in places without strategic significance to the major powers, such as Indonesia in 1965, Burundi in 1972, East Timor in 1975, Kurdish regions in the Middle East ever since World War I, and the indigenous peoples of Amazonia from the 1970s to the present, massive offenses against human life and dignity have been basically overlooked [1].

In the second setting, abuses in the target society generate some degree of response at a statist level, but largely for non-strategic reasons. Consequently intervention takes place, if at all, without the depth of commitment on the intervening side to challenge effectively the political structures responsible for the cruelty. Operative in these settings, which are mainly of recent origin, is what can be called “the CNN factor”: vivid, visual portrayals of distress that generate intense public pressure on western governments—especially the U.S. government—to act.

If the objectives of response are modestly delimited, are undertaken with a clear awareness of these limits, and enjoy a measure of good fortune during the period of implementation, such “interventions” can provide notable humanitarian relief to peo-

ples in conditions of severe distress. This has been the case, for example, in relation to the Kurds in northern Iraq since the Gulf War, in the early stages of the Somalia relief initiative, and with respect to the provision by UNPROFOR of food and medicine to beleaguered segments of the population in Croatia, and then, Bosnia. In this latter class of cases, however, there existed no strategic mandate to remove the root cause of the humanitarian crisis and, to varying degrees, the crisis-generating situation has persisted or even worsened. If the intervening side encounters violent resistance that inflicts casualties, then the intervenor is likely to withdraw and subsequently evade the challenge.

The United States government has been the crucial participant in shaping doctrine and practice relevant to humanitarian intervention during this recent period. During the Clinton presidency, the U.S. has abruptly shifted its policy from one of rather cavalier disregard of these limits on humanitarian interventions in settings where no strategic justification has been persuasively set forth, to one of imposing an exceedingly stringent regime of self-limitation. This new course is not even consistent with many modest and viable prior efforts and has the further adverse, if unintended, effect of undermining appropriate responses by international institutions, especially by the UN [2].

The historical setting that has emerged during the last several years has produced intense debate over humanitarian intervention as an active political option. This debate has not carefully enough distinguished these two types of humanitarian crisis, briefly identified above. Hence it has produced frustrating policy failures and has generated an unfortunate disillusionment about humanitarian responses, as well as a dangerously unstable set of public and governmental attitudes toward the role and capabilities of the UN. Unraveling the basic confusion is beyond the scope of this article, but several factors can be mentioned that may set the stage for a more affirmative approach.

Revising Expectations for Intervention

First of all, intervention, if conventionally conceived as a policy instrument, is problematic even when a strategic interest is present, as was the case in Vietnam for the U.S., or in Afghanistan for the Soviet Union. Translating military superiority into desired political outcomes has been difficult ever since nationalism as a mass movement spread around the world. The pre-World War II era of “gunboat diplomacy,” with highly “cost-effective” interventions, presupposed an absence of sustained resistance in

the target societies. More recently, with the spread of fairly sophisticated weaponry and, to an even greater extent, with the discovery of tactics of resistance that exploit the vulnerabilities of high tech societies, the interventionary equation has been rewritten.

An important watershed occurred in Lebanon in 1983, when a single truck bomb exploded in a marine barracks led to the rapid withdrawal of U.S. military forces and abruptly reversed U.S. foreign policy aimed at restructuring governance in Beirut in the aftermath of the 1982 war. President Bush grasped this limit on interventionary violence and refrained from attempting the political restructuring of Iraq after the Gulf War, which would have required in all probability a long and costly occupation that would have been vulnerable to terroristic tactics of resistance. Bush also exhibited this understanding by the careful way in which the U.S. commitment in Somalia was confined to strictly humanitarian goals and by his reluctance to get drawn into confronting the grave challenge to humane values posed by "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia.

There are several features of the global setting since 1989 that have contributed to confusion about what to expect from humanitarian intervention:

- 1) There is a widespread sentiment, given the end of the Cold War, that international cooperation under UN auspices could be effective.

- 2) This sentiment received early reinforcement from the successful UN operation to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty in the Gulf War. The outcome of the war created an illusion of one-sidedness, and a false impression that collective security arguments could now regularly mobilize huge military and financial capabilities to implement UN Security Council decisions. This reasoning overlooks the anomalous nature of the context, which seriously engaged oil interests and Israeli security concerns, as well as the commitment to prevent "backlash states" from acquiring nuclear weapons.

- 3) Several nearly simultaneous severe humanitarian crises have occurred with the collapse of the state, for instance, in a series of African countries, or arising out of imperial collapse in the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, resulting in encounters with several variants of ultra-nationalism and intense ethnic strife.

- 4) Political leaders in the potential

intervening countries have been unable and/or unwilling to advance convincing strategic arguments to justify major commitments of lives and resources or to attain policy unity in the scope and goals of particular interventions.

- 5) Most military advisors have realized that low-cost intervention will not succeed and that effective intervention might also fail and would, in any event, entail a willingness to endure possibly high casualties over a long period of time for purposes other than what were generally understood to be "vital national interests." This factor has been reinforced by the weakness of political leaders in all potential intervening states and the degree to which their leadership has depended upon responding to domestic policy agendas and not being diverted by seemingly remote challenges.

- 6) In Africa and Asia there has been a widespread suspicion that "humanitarian intervention" is a new banner for post-colonial forces in the North seeking to dominate the countries of the South, especially those of Islamic orientation. This suspicion has been reinforced by the perceived willingness of the West to pay any price to retain political control over Gulf oil, but virtually no price to protect the Muslim victims of Serb ethnic cleansing. It was also confirmed by the use of intense high technology warfare against densely populated portions of south Mogadishu in "the hunt" for General Aidid.

The Strategic Politics of Intervention From Above

For politically concerned observers, Bosnia has been the litmus test. As many morally enraged intellectuals have argued, the failure to act, especially given the violence of genocide and its occurrence in Europe, has betrayed the post-Holocaust pledge of "never again!" Though the betrayal is undeniable, the pledge itself was never rooted in the realities of international political life since 1945. Unless genocidal behavior was embodied in a strategic challenge to the main or regional centers of power, it caused not a ripple of public concern. When hundreds of thousands of alleged leftists were killed in Indonesia in 1965, there was a sigh of relief in Washington and elsewhere, where it was perceived that the threat of "losing" Indonesia to communism had been removed

[3]. When a decade later Indonesia invaded the separate state of East Timor, extinguishing its independence and territorial integrity and embarking on a genocidal occupation policy that may have resulted in the death of up to half the population, not a murmur of serious protest was heard at a global level.

Perhaps most revealingly, despite the communist agency of genocide in Cambodia, strategic considerations ("the China card," containment of Vietnam) led the West to oppose the 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and removal from power of the Khmer Rouge. The pattern of international behavior is consistent: strategic realities trump even the most acute humanitarian claims. In this sense the ambivalent and ineffectual reaction to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia is exactly what was to be expected. The evidence since the collapse of Yugoslavia makes it clear that the European powers, despite the claim that European civilization embodies a higher ethic, have been more interested in playing regional geopolitical games than in averting human tragedy. The hope of meaningful humanitarian intervention to stop such genocidal behavior was, from the outset, wishful thinking.

Such reflections suggest that a reassessment of the role of humanitarian intervention is urgently needed. At present there is little public support in democratic societies for spilling the blood of their citizens to achieve allegedly humanitarian goals. This may be discouraging, given the severity of distress and the unity of human destiny in an increasingly integrated world, but it represents a real constraint. Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker has persuasively explained that the Bush administration was led away from an interventionary response by the awareness that the ground forces required in Bosnia to make a credible challenge to Serb-induced aggression and crimes against humanity would not be politically supported. As Baker put it to the Woodrow Wilson School faculty at Princeton in April 1994, "the American people wouldn't support that for three days."

Part of this public opposition is based on an essentially helpful social learning experience associated with the phrase "the Vietnam syndrome": the awareness that intervention with political ambitions, especially against a determined and well-armed adversary in difficult terrain, is a mission impossible. (It was, of course, revealing that Bush's first triumphant claim after the military success of "Desert Storm" was that it showed that "we had kicked the Vietnam syndrome." While this may have been a credible statement with regard to a desert battlefield, it rings hollow

when the situation shifts to ground warfare in a more complex hostile terrain.)

Failures of Leadership Mask a Deeper Problem

This troublesome societal resistance is partly an expression of the low priority attached to humanitarian diplomacy and partly a backlash against a perceived UN/U.S. failure to relate means to ends. The failure can be attributed to poor leadership, to inept and wavering explanations of the interests and values at stake in Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti, and to the impression that the logistics for success in interventionary settings are not clearly understood. A deeper part of this problem of leadership, afflicting all the liberal democracies, is the pressure to pursue a low-visibility foreign policy and to accord overriding attention to the domestic agenda. The U.S. government is especially vulnerable, pushed to take the lead by its allies, yet pulled by its citizenry to avoid being drawn into high-visibility overseas commitments. The result so far has been an impression of incoherence and a juggling act. Emblematic, perhaps, was the long-drawn-out retreat from commitments to Haitian refugees, partially reversed by counter-pressures mobilized around domestic expressions of U.S. constituency concern, and finally broken with the unpopular decision, late in the summer, to end the impasse and to restore Aristide to power through military means, but with Aristide's commitment to abandon his social agenda that had provoked the military takeover in the first place.

The root of the difficulties associated with recent practice under the rubric of humanitarian intervention is fundamentally linked to the overall dubious character of the whole tradition of intervention-from-above: its reliance on state violence to restructure the politics of a foreign country, whether or not applied under the banner of the UN. In short, if an undertaking is humanitarian in the sense that it is principally intended to provide food, medicine, shelter, care for refugees and displaced persons, then it should not be treated as "intervention" even if the host country government (or its equivalent) has not given its consent in unambiguous terms [4]. If the undertaking aims at political restructuring in relation to an unresolved internal conflict, then it will fail even if a part of the motivation of the intervening side is genuinely "humanitarian."

The normative challenge, then, is whether there are better ways of "intervening" to prevent, mitigate, or avoid genocide and other human disasters. In this context, a move toward the perspective of intervention-

from-below presents itself as a largely unexplored and untested policy option. ❧

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