

## Saviors & Sovereigns: The Rise and Fall of Humanitarianism

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On November 9, 2001, George W. Bush created a new public holiday—World Freedom Day. The United States, he explained, would lead the global fight for “liberty, freedom and the universal struggle for human rights”; it would try to help the “more than two billion people” still living under repressive regimes. The idea that America could, or should, do this had informed a certain kind of Washington mind-set throughout the Cold War. But after the Berlin Wall came down, freedom’s crusaders increasingly set their eyes not so much on Communism as on violators of human rights in general. They unfurled the banner of humanitarianism and, righteously, scorned the cowards and skeptics who wanted to keep America’s powder dry.

Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo were all crises that the humanitarian interventionists embraced; largely indifferent to their particularities, they saw them as part of a single phenomenon—the moral bankruptcy and extreme violence of many post–Cold War regimes. They called for the use of force—for going to war (although they shied away from calling it war)—if that was what it took to prevent mass human rights violations. While they generally preferred that force to be sanctioned by U.N. approval, they were often ready to urge the United States and other Western democracies to take the lead and go it alone if necessary.

Yet even by the time World Freedom Day was proclaimed, the difficulties of knowing when and how to make sympathy for one’s fellow men the basis of hostilities had already given some of these liberal hawks pause for thought. The invasion of Iraq divided them. That several of them gravitated toward the Obama camp during the 2008 presidential campaign was not surprising. Yet as President Obama winds down the rights rhetoric and the democracy initiatives of his predecessor, he is also marking out the rather modest limits of their influence. A new era of pragmatism seems to be in the making, and the concept of humanitarian intervention is dying if not dead.

What price moral leadership in foreign affairs? The idea that those living in freedom should act to protect others less fortunate, and assert the primacy of ethical values and human solidarity in international affairs, is a noble but complicated ideal. For once it appears to counsel direct action it is clearly at odds with the idea of sovereignty. International norms are not much help: at different points in its charter, the United Nations, for instance, gestures contradictorily both to the idea of universal human rights and to the right of sovereign states to be free from intervention in their domestic affairs. While it is an organization claiming to represent mankind, the United Nations is also an alliance of member states that imposes no ideological bar on who joins. It’s no surprise, then, that in the age of humanitarian interventionism the United Nations was

challenged to define itself as never before.

But precisely because the United Nations in practice fell so far short of the ideals that drove humanitarian interventionism, this is also preeminently an American story, one of pundits and party politics, in which the left tried to wrest the moral high ground in foreign policy from Reagan Republicans and embryonic neocons. Behind the scenes, it is also a story of institutional and intellectual rivalries, as the universities tried to recoup some of the policy influence they had lost to Washington-based think tanks. But even as Ivy League public policy schools and human rights programs took the lead in pushing this new Wilsonianism, the internal contradictions of the creed itself emerged. Did doing good for others mean doing good for ourselves at the same time? And should we worry more if it did mean this, or if it didn't?

Roughly a decade before Bosnia and Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Kosovo, when calls for humanitarian intervention dominated op-ed columns and talk shows, the intellectual foundations of the new liberal internationalism were being formed. Abroad, a new human rights movement was crystallizing dissent against Communism. Some academics imagined a new kind of liberal foreign policy and repudiated the realism of Henry Kissinger, George F. Kennan, and, finally, Zbigniew Brzezinski, with its hard-nosed talk of banishing values from international relations. But they also assailed the kind of values talk that Reagan had injected into the Republican Party—with its unabashed anti-Communism, its fetishization of American power, and its tolerance for nasty dictators so long as they were not Reds.

What was needed, these liberals believed, was rhetoric of a different, more genuine, and sweeping kind. They spoke of human rights but rejected the defense of right-wing regimes that had accompanied it under Reagan. They argued strongly against the Reaganites for a revival of America's commitment both to international law and to the emergence of new norms in international affairs. Their guiding lights were neither Thucydides nor Hobbes nor the grim émigré Germans, in thrall to Carl Schmitt, who had shaped the minds of so many Cold War-era American students—but rather Aristotle and Kant.

A pair of seminal scholarly articles from the early 1980s, influential on both left and right, offer a starting point: in these, Columbia University professor Michael Doyle argued that democracies were inherently peace-loving. The gratifying implication was that American security and international peace would both be served if existing democracies banded together and—perhaps—if they helped democratize the rest of the world as well.

The message was strengthened by events in Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heartened the Republican view that freedom could be spread by the threat of American force. But it also encouraged liberal Democrats, who looked instead to the European Union and its peaceful and rapid expansion into Eastern Europe as a model for how democracy might be spread through the rule of law, the extension of the market, and the right kind of international institutions.

The early 1990s were the supreme moment for the revitalization of those institutions. It was not only the European Union that seemed destined to ascend. The U.N. secretary general had hailed the end of the Cold War as the chance to make collective security a reality, return the organization to center stage, and make good on its human rights promises.

Yet for both the Europeanists and the U.N. crowd, disappointment was close at hand. The war

for the former Yugoslavia erupted in 1991, and the fighting for Bosnia the following year constituted the moment of truth for the pretensions of Brussels. The European Community and its white-coated monitors—known locally as the ice cream men—were powerless. But the United Nations, under Boutros Boutros-Ghali and his deputy, Yasushi Akashi, was less than powerless; it was abject. Enforcing an arms embargo on all sides, it prevented the Bosnians from defending themselves, and blocked all talk of taking on the Serbs. In the spring and summer of 1992, as reports came in of massacres and then concentration camps, the case for intervention began to be made on both sides of the Atlantic.

The U.N. failure in Bosnia, compounded two years later in Rwanda, was lambasted by critics. They included Samantha Power and David Rieff in the United States, and Michael Ignatieff in Britain. Like others raised on the lessons of the Holocaust, they were burdened by the historical weight of the moment, by the need to act in the face of genocide. Not coincidentally, both Power and Ignatieff became interested in the writings of the Polish Jewish scholar Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term *genocide*.

“Never again” was an admirable resolution. But, as several commentators had noted shortly after the founding of the United Nations, even had that organization existed in the Nazi era, it would have had no legal basis for interfering in Germany’s internal affairs. A generation’s anxious determination to avoid collusion in mass murder thus collided with the structure of the United Nations itself. Lacking its own troops, hostage to the clashing views of the Security Council’s members, poorly equipped in any case for rapid reactions to state-orchestrated violence, the United Nations failed to live up to the expectations Boutros-Ghali had placed upon it.

The interventionists sought to overcome this institutional inertia by pressing their case with the major powers and winning over public opinion. But when intervention came, they were not the prime movers in the eventual policy change. The 1995 NATO intervention that ended the war in Bosnia was spearheaded by British and French military commanders and politicians, for eminently old-fashioned reasons—protecting American, British, and French prestige from humiliation at the hands of Radovan Karadzic’s paramilitaries.

Interventionist idealism had its uses, however. The top brass on both sides of the Atlantic were searching for a post–Cold War identity and the interventionists provided one. The West’s militaries could be rebranded as humanity’s saviors—preventing ethnic cleansing and getting countries back on their feet and refugees back in their homes.

The struggle for Kosovo in 1999 proved that the new interventionism had infiltrated the corridors of power. Madeleine Albright was a very different animal from her predecessor, Warren Christopher; she had learned the lessons of Bosnia, and the Holocaust, all too well. An unabashed advocate of U.S. moral leadership, she famously berated General Colin Powell for his reluctance to get involved and found a staunch ally in Tony Blair, whose Gladstonian enthusiasm for fighting the good fight marked a contrast with the caution of his predecessor, John Major.

At the time, the intellectual case for taking on Slobodan Milosevic in Kosovo was being hammered out by no one in more public detail than by Michael Ignatieff. In the aftermath of

Bosnia, he had mused that the task of the contemporary intellectual was to defend “the universal against the violence and closure associated with the tribal, national, and ethnic.” Somewhat diffidently, he called for a defense of Western universalism as the alternative to tribalism. He did not dissent from the West’s right to intervene abroad on humanitarian grounds; his test was whether a breach of human rights threatened international peace.

This conflation of human rights and national security became a feature of intervention advocacy. Ignatieff was running a new center for human rights and public policy at Harvard, giving greater visibility to the idea. Making the transition from journalism to teaching within schools of government, interventionists became less critical of the state and more attuned to offering policymakers the arguments they needed to hear.

In 2002, worried that the human rights moment was over, sidelined by the more muscular antiterrorism focus of the Bush presidency, Ignatieff argued that for the “movement” to escape irrelevance it must publicly defend human rights and promote national security and international stability. It was all about helping “ordinary people” build strong “civil societies.”

Leaving aside the obvious realist critique, there were at least two problems. One, noted gleefully by the left, was the questionable bona fides of the United States and other governments that talked the humanitarian talk. While surprisingly few commentators objected to the idea of a politics of compassion per se, the standard left critique insisted on the need for legitimate leadership, and looked either to the United Nations, or to some form of universally accepted international law, to provide it. Why states should suddenly sign up to a new, robust rights regime in international law when the entire history of the past century represented a move away from this was never made clear. But radical critics of intervention were willing to abandon the realm of the possible in order to preserve the idea.

At least as worrying was the thought that the “ordinary people” in whom the intellectuals placed their hopes might not exist as imagined. Were they natural democrats? Not according to those who argued that even Yugoslavia’s descent into turmoil had been the product of mass nationalism and the political failure of less divisive movements. Radovan Karadzic and Franjo Tudjman were not tyrants, it was said, but the voices of a popular, deeply nationalistic general will, or the beneficiaries of the collapse of a one-party state and the democratization that followed. Soon, the idea that a “civil society” was waiting to be born in every dictatorship started to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions.

As Gary Bass—the author of *Freedom’s Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*—has noted, spreading democracy might not make the world more peaceful. Perhaps what mattered was the maturity of the political institutions these newly democratizing polities were able to establish. One need not conclude that the answer was to embrace authoritarian allies in order to question whether a “Western model”—whatever that might look like—could be exported.

For many, Iraq was an intervention too far. In Bosnia, one could castigate Western inaction by appeal to a happy fusion of idealist and realist premises: for not only was the “international community” conniving in mass murder, but it was preventing the victims, who had achieved international recognition, from defending themselves, hastening an inevitable readjustment of Bosnia’s borders.

Those appalled by the reports from Omarska and Srebrenica were thus joined in the argument

for Western intervention by those who saw postwar stability in Europe as resting on a defense of the principle that internationally recognized borders were not to be changed by force. And indeed, as we have seen, it was the eminently realistic concern that the Serbs were humiliating NATO and leaving the prestige of the Atlantic alliance in tatters that eventually motivated the intervention that took place in 1995.

Kosovo was already a more ambiguous case, for both humanitarians and realists. Intervention was to be preemptive, to forestall another Bosnia. And, inconveniently, the Serbs themselves had a strong title to sovereignty over the province. But it was Iraq that split the humanitarian interventionists down the middle. While some, like Ignatieff and Christopher Hitchens, initially backed an invasion on human rights grounds, others argued that the appeal to humanitarian sympathy was insufficient and specious. This was not America finding its soul, but losing it in what the journalist Mark Danner termed “the forever war.” For Danner, Afghanistan, despite its inevitability—America, he wrote in October 2001, “had no choice but to respond militarily”—was the beginning of a sea change in what the United States stood for. Iraq was an imperial crusade. As the scale of the Bush administration’s ambitions became clear, so commentators like Danner rowed back to the prudential wisdom of George F. Kennan and the realists. It was 1947 all over again.

One year into the Iraq War, Ignatieff himself was, like many, having second thoughts. Perhaps the interventionist creed, he mused, had always rested upon an unacceptable degree of wishful thinking. Samantha Power, who had been his colleague at Harvard, had already parted company with him over the invasion. Bush’s contempt for the United Nations was part of the reason. But the difficulty for Power was to explain why an organization of states should be more effective than the United States in rolling back sovereignty, especially given the strong opposition to that line of thinking that had emerged since 1999 among former third-world countries. Power’s solution was to single out the secretary general’s office as the one place where an apolitical outlook might prevail over petty national interests. Yet once again, this was to ignore the extent to which the power of the secretary general’s office had eroded since the glory days of Dag Hammarskjöld. Fearful of a “human rights leadership” vacuum after the Iraq fiasco, Power advocated a “coalition of the concerned” to keep the flame alive. How such a force would differ from Bush’s coalition of the willing was unclear. But the scale of Power’s disillusionment was evident enough: human rights violations on a mass scale were going unpunished in Burma and Darfur.

The idea of humanitarian intervention was not a late-twentieth-century invention, of course. William Gladstone’s foray into Egypt more than a century earlier bore all the hallmarks of the idea, and one could go farther back. The re-emergence of the idea in the 1990s was the latest flourishing of a distinctive form of Western liberal thinking about global affairs. If liberal values were the only true values, then the West’s power and prestige should be deployed to promote them. And not merely to promote them, but to save suffering humanity from the excesses of that other Western invention, the idea of state sovereignty. With the United States in the ascendant after 1989—and a public culture steeped in the horrors of the Holocaust and the sinfulness of inaction in the face of evil—the temptation has been to elevate intervention to a general principle. As Jürgen Habermas wrote in 2008, through their mass violations of human rights, many states lost the presumption of innocence that entitled them to claim sovereignty. The

cosmopolitan conscience must trump the autonomy of the evildoing dictator.

But it is just here that this intellectual precept has proven its frailty. It is not that it is wrong to try to help others, or on occasion use force to do so. But without willing the means, intervention leads to political and moral failure and discredits itself. As David Rieff remarked in 1999 in a thoughtful meditation on the fate of interventionism after Kosovo: “Our moral ambitions have been revealed as being far larger than our political, military, or even cognitive means. And there is no easy way out.” Faced with a choice of imperialism or barbarism, as he put it, he (reluctantly) and others (less reluctantly), placed themselves on the side of action. Only rarely did the cheerleaders contemplate just how limited the means of even the most powerful nation were.

The debacle in Somalia—where we had bet on a cost-free cover for doing nothing in Yugoslavia—was an early warning of this. The aftermath in Bosnia and Kosovo then committed us to a kind of protracted nation-building that was not for the squeamish. Toppling dictators might stanch the worst human rights abuses. But the same Western public opinion that welcomed their fall blanched at the years, billions of dollars, and (Western) lives spent to build democratic institutions from scratch. Well before the election of Barack Obama, the drain on military resources posed by Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the fragility of the new institutions in Bosnia and Kosovo, suggested that we should be wary of imperial projects.

Alarmed, a few commentators have denounced this introversion; Daniel Goldhagen, for instance, has only recently deplored the bankruptcy of international law and called for action against a bewildering variety of enemies of humanity. But it was a chastened America whose new president declared in September 2009 that our conception of democracy has been too limited and that “each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people.”

The new realism is welcome. But it carries its own dangers, in particular the risk that one general principle will be replaced by another. Is there a way of giving succor to the victims of state oppression without awakening the ghosts of Western imperialism? Can we support democratic values without embarking on global crusades for democracy? Perhaps, paradoxically, we have a better chance of doing this if we worry a little less about being good universalists. Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq—to take but three of the outstanding cases—differed from one another in critical ways. The first had an internationally recognized government that sought intervention, or at least the lifting of an arms embargo, so the rights-sovereignty dilemma did not apply. The case for Kosovo, by comparison, was muddied by the ambiguity over the province’s constitutional status, and by the lack of any government with popular legitimacy, not to mention the fact that a guerilla war was already underway. In effect, NATO chose to take the side of insurgents over that of an iniquitous but lawful regime in Belgrade. Iraq was at the opposite end of the spectrum from Bosnia: there intervention meant invading another country where an internationally recognized regime was firmly installed. Kosovo and Iraq thus threw into question the stability of international borders in a way that Bosnia did not and, in the case of Saddam Hussein, the validity of sovereignty itself.

To the more ardent interventionists, such considerations represented pure legalism when set beside the chance to topple a dictatorship and prevent mass murder. But the more thoughtful of them have come to realize that the way leaders treat their people is not the only problem that counts in international affairs. On the contrary, if the history of the past century showed anything,

it was that clear legal norms, and the securing of international stability more generally, also serve the cause of human welfare. Let alone the fact that it is much easier to destroy institutions than to build them. Liberalism's characteristic indifference to institutions, both domestic and international, has thus been called into question. In short, the ending of the era of humanitarian interventionism may come to be seen as a sign of the waning of Western power, and mourned as consigning more of the world's peoples to the mercies of the tyrants who rule them. But it is possible to view it more positively, as the belated emergence of a new maturity in international relations.

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