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To cite this article: Stephen Wertheim (2010) A solution from hell: the United States and the rise of humanitarian interventionism, 1991–2003, Journal of Genocide Research, 12:3-4, 149-172, DOI: [10.1080/14623528.2010.522053](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2010.522053)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2010.522053>



Published online: 04 Dec 2010.



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A solution from hell: the United States and the rise of humanitarian interventionism, 1991–2003

STEPHEN WERTHEIM

This article traces the rise of humanitarian interventionist ideas in the US from 1991 to 2003. Until 1997, humanitarian intervention was a relatively limited affair, conceived *ad hoc* more than systematically, prioritized below multilateralism, aiming to relieve suffering without transforming foreign polities. For this reason, US leaders and citizens scarcely contemplated armed intervention in the Rwandan genocide of 1994: the US ‘duty to stop genocide’ was a norm still under development. It flourished only in the late 1990s, when humanitarian interventionism, like neoconservatism, became popular in the US establishment and enthusiastic in urging military invasion to remake societies. Now inaction in Rwanda looked outrageous. Stopping the genocide seemed, in retrospect, easily achieved by 5,000 troops, a projection that ignored serious obstacles. On the whole, humanitarian interventionists tended to understate difficulties of halting ethnic conflict, ignore challenges of postconflict reconstruction, discount constraints imposed by public opinion, and override multilateral procedures. These assumptions primed politicians and the public to regard the Iraq war of 2003 as virtuous at best and unworthy of strenuous dissent at worst. The normative commitment to stop mass killing outstripped US or international capabilities—a formula for dashed hopes and dangerous deployments that lives on in the ‘responsibility to protect’.

Introduction

After five bloody years of war in Iraq, US presidential candidate Barack Obama brandished his early antiwar stance as evidence voters could trust his judgement on foreign affairs. ‘I am running to do more than end a war in Iraq’, he said. ‘I am running to change the mindset that got us into war’.¹ What was this mindset? Obama fingered neoconservatism, with its ambition to remake the Middle East.² Yet if neoconservatism partly animated the George W. Bush administration, neoconservatives constituted just a fraction of the seventy-seven senators who authorized the war and the majority of US citizens who supported it.³ The Iraq campaign was conditioned on a widespread confidence that the United States could transform societies through military force. However hotly members of the US political elite debated the desirability of war, the capacity of the world’s superpower to achieve its objectives was mostly assumed.

What made force appear so efficacious came from the late 1990s. At that time, as neoconservatism grew popular and eager to urge war, so did humanitarian interventionism. To be sure, humanitarian intervention was not invented then. The practice of wielding force primarily to stop slaughter dates to the nineteenth century if not earlier.⁴ It was already prominent in US foreign policy as the 1990s opened. But at the decade's end, humanitarian interventionism flourished in a new way. Only then did humanitarian intervention become a central and insistent preoccupation in US discourse, routinely posited as a *raison d'être* of US global leadership. Only then was humanitarian intervention mainly imagined not as an emergency response to extraordinary episodes but rather as a permanent programme requiring special doctrines, which US and British leaders issued.

Only then, too, did humanitarian interventionists talk of ending genocide and ethnic cleansing altogether—out of a categorical duty to do so—more than of ameliorating their effects. Suffering would be stopped by removing its supposed source, 'inhuman' regimes. And it went largely unquestioned that the US, hopefully joined by allies but acting alone if necessary, could execute the interventionist agenda. This was the final novelty of the late 1990s: a willingness to assume that the US would be well equipped to meet mass ethnic conflict wherever it arose, leaving only moral will to be summoned. Nothing reflected the change in humanitarian interventionism more than the change in attitudes toward the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Viewed for several years with resigned dismay, the genocide assumed a new meaning as the century closed. It now appeared to have been easily preventable, and US inaction a callous and cowardly abdication. Studies that have dated neoconservatism's popularization and militarization to the late 1990s have told only half the story.⁵

That neoconservatism and humanitarian interventionism rose concurrently is no coincidence. Both programmes called for what might be termed 'transformative invasions': they assumed military force could easily transform foreign polities. Of course, their objectives differed. Neoconservatives wanted to fashion US-allied democracies; humanitarian interventionists, ethnically tolerant territories. But both camps promised to instil deep, liberating sociopolitical change through armed force, better dispatched unilaterally than not at all. When neoconservatives gained influence in 2001, humanitarian interventionists had paved the way. Their overconfidence in force primed politicians and the public to regard the Iraq war as virtuous at best and unworthy of severe dissent at worst.

Since then, the travails of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have illuminated the naivety of faith in transformative invasions. Humanitarian interventionism shared this faith and deserves fresh scrutiny. What is required for military action to achieve humanitarian outcomes? The evident incapacity of the international community to confront the killing in Darfur has underscored this question's importance.⁶ But if Darfur demonstrated that wishing to stop genocide hardly makes it happen, this realization need not have been new. The proposition that the US could have stopped the Rwandan genocide with ease—a centerpiece of humanitarian interventionism's appeal still today—is far from self-evident. It did not seem self-evident to observers at the time and several years thereafter. The

Rwandan genocide's image as preventable was constructed in the late 1990s, and its construction exhibits the rise, and blindspots, of humanitarian interventionism more broadly.

Before triumphalism? The first post-Cold War era, 1991–97

Some see 'post-Cold War triumphalism' as an immediate outgrowth of the Soviet Union's downfall, static thereafter.⁷ Not until the late 1990s, however, did neoconservative and humanitarian interventionist views become mainstream in policy circles and public discourse. Before that, they were minority positions, albeit vocal and influential. Neoconservatism, for its part, emanated from a handful of East Coast elites, lacking a broad base of support. Future fellow-travellers like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were yet to associate with the movement.⁸ 'We are reducing our forces significantly', Defense Secretary Cheney announced in 1993 on unveiling a strategy that aimed to cut the US military to pre-Korean War levels of manpower and pre-Pearl Harbor levels of funding as a percentage of GNP.⁹

Humanitarian intervention was more prevalent than neoconservative intervention in the early 1990s. In 1991 and 1992, in particular, an unprecedented flurry of armed deployments intended to help civilian populations threatened by internal warfare, most notably in Iraq, Somalia, Croatia, and Bosnia. The seedling of the kind of humanitarian interventionism that sprouted later was manifest. But it was only a kernel. At this stage, humanitarian interventions sought to assist needy populations without overthrowing established regimes. Missions tended to be conceived as individual emergencies: with the extent of post-Cold War ethnic conflict still revealing itself, few imagined the need for a long-term campaign to rid the world of genocide. Moreover, US operations were relatively if decreasingly deferential to allies and multilateral frameworks.

Ethnic warfare in Bosnia was the locus of humanitarian interventionist outrage in the first half of the 1990s, and US policy and attitudes towards it delineate the extent of early humanitarian interventionism. Commentators drew analogies to the Holocaust and blasted mediation efforts as feckless.¹⁰ Bill Clinton, running for president in 1992, pledged openness to US air strikes—but only air strikes, authorized by the United Nations (UN).¹¹ So, too, on taking office Clinton gave form to his humanitarian aspirations by drawing up a modest directive that encouraged US military support for UN peacekeeping missions, exclusively multilateral and commanded by UN forces. Congressional opposition scuttled it anyway.¹² Most important, intervention in Bosnia, delivered by NATO in 1995 after years of advocacy by humanitarian interventionists, was anything but a 'transformative invasion'. Bosnia's internationally recognized government sought intervention to help it remove foreign forces from its territory. This meant not only that intervention contradicted no legal rights of state sovereignty but also that the postconflict scenario was clear and manageable: Bosnia would be ruled by the existing Bosnian government.

US relations towards Iraq likewise showed the limits of humanitarian interventionism. True, the George H.W. Bush administration fought the Gulf War, but in

order to expel Iraq from invaded Kuwait, not to depose Saddam Hussein (though US officials hoped Hussein would fall to uprisings by Shias and Kurds, who were massacred instead). Regime change, Cheney explained in 1993, would have left the United States ‘bogged down there for a very long period of time with the real possibility we might not have succeeded’.¹³ The humanitarian case against Hussein was a marginal rationale for the war, enough to win over Congressman Stephen Solarz, who excoriated Hussein’s ‘evil’, but few of his Democratic colleagues.¹⁴ House Democrats voted against authorizing the war by 179 to 86; Senate Democrats, 45 to 10.¹⁵ Public intellectuals like liberal *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, who eight years later beat the drums for the ‘total destruction of Mr Milošević’s armed forces, no matter how long it takes’, opposed the Gulf War, forecasting mass US casualties.¹⁶ Following the war, however, US and Britain set up ‘no-fly zones’ to protect Kurds in northern Iraq and Shias in the south. This humanitarian intervention commanded bipartisan Congressional support through the 1990s, its modest objective underscoring the early reluctance to topple a regime or build a new one.

On the ascent through 1992, humanitarian interventionism was then devastated for years when a Mogadishu street fight claimed eighteen US Rangers in October 1993.¹⁷ Clinton swiftly terminated the US mission in Somalia, whose objective of delivering food aid had ballooned to that of disarming and reconciling warring factions.¹⁸ One might therefore ask whether humanitarian interventionism was fully formed by 1992 but temporarily set back by Somalia. But one must also ask why the loss of eighteen soldiers was able to set back the cause of humanitarian intervention so deeply. Humanitarian interventionist norms were not yet what they later became. The notion that there was a duty to stop mass ethnic conflict, as late 1990s Anglo-American doctrines put it, was still inchoate; humanitarian interventions still *ad hoc* more than systematically conceived; the transformational capacity of military force still presumed doubtful. Interpretations of events did not straightforwardly flow from the events themselves. They were mutually constituted with ideational norms. The next three years were dominated by the ‘lesson of Somalia’, namely that interventions produced ‘mission creep’.¹⁹ This lesson—and, beneath it, the absence of a normative commitment to stop genocide anywhere—shaped the US response to genocide in Rwanda.

Inaction in Rwanda: a non-deliberation

The horrors of Rwanda later became humanitarian interventionists’ rallying cry, and for a reason. The ‘fastest, most efficient killing spree of the twentieth century’, the genocide claimed 800,000 lives in 100 days after 6 April 1994.²⁰ The first question is: Why? Why did the United States let genocide happen? The US government not only let genocide happen but gave intervention little consideration. ‘For me, for the president, for most of us at senior levels’, national security adviser Anthony Lake recalled, ‘it never became a serious issue’.²¹ Clinton never convened his senior advisers to discuss intervention.²² This is the outcome that needs explanation: not some deliberative decision against

intervention but rather the fact intervention was scarcely contemplated. What accounts for the absence of motivation even to test whether military intervention might work?

At the broadest level, there is an almost tautological answer. Americans did not yet feel their government had a duty to attempt forcible intervention to stop genocide. That norm was still developing. The administration did have humanitarian interventionist impulses, displayed before the Somalia debacle, and a low- to mid-level interagency task force on Rwanda convened to gather intelligence and devise intervention scenarios ('strictly feasibility discussions', which, a participant recalled, 'never went anywhere').²³ But intervention was never debated by the principals of Clinton's cabinet, let alone the president. Existing humanitarian interventionist impulses did not amount to a principle, far less a policy, that genocide must be stopped, simply by virtue of being genocide. Intervention received scant attention 'because there was no predetermined foreign policy goal of halting genocide when feasible, and because there was a lack of political will to do so', the Pentagon's assistant for regional humanitarian affairs reflected in 1998.²⁴ To the administration, the bare existence of genocide did not self-evidently demand the use of armed force to stop it.

Other US politicians and commentators agreed. Accordingly, and contrary to existing interpretations, there is little evidence Clinton officials delayed calling the killings 'genocide' chiefly from fear of eliciting intense public pressure for action.²⁵ It is true that in April the US (and especially Britain) insisted a Security Council statement omit 'genocide', and State Department lawyers expressed concern that, in the Pentagon's paraphrasing, a 'genocide finding could commit US government to actually "do something"'. Both positions, however, seem to have reflected legal reservations—care not to violate the genocide convention—more than fear of public outcry for intervention.²⁶ Indeed, the main opposition to declaring 'genocide' came from lawyers, and the head of the Rwanda Task Force later said the 'actually "do something"' line conveyed sarcasm over the State Department's avoiding the empirically justified g-word, not worry that using the word would prompt protests for action.²⁷

On balance, in fact, the US government judged an announcement of 'genocide' would help its public perception more than hurt it. By mid-May, when high-ranking State Department officials considered in earnest whether to announce publicly 'genocide has occurred' and 'acts of genocide have occurred', they agreed to do so. Declaring 'genocide' was deemed not only 'lacking in legal consequences' but actually advantageous to the administration's public standing. The US government should 'seize the opportunity' to acknowledge the genocide, concluded three assistant secretaries and the department's legal adviser. Otherwise 'our credibility will be undermined with human rights groups and the general public, who may question how much evidence we can legitimately require before coming to a policy conclusion'. Secretary of state Warren Christopher approved this recommendation.²⁸ He and his spokesperson distinguished between 'acts of genocide' and 'genocide' until 10 June, when Christopher used the latter term publicly.²⁹

In addition to the absence of a fully formed humanitarian interventionist norm, several more proximate and conscious factors further explain senior Clinton officials' non-consideration of intervention. For one, because the earliest policy-makers would have known of the existence of genocide was two weeks into the conflict, they would have hitherto coded the violence, accurately, as a civil war between the Hutu-run Rwandan government and the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Documentary evidence suggests high-level State Department officials began discussing whether the slaughter qualified as genocide only in mid-May. Even once they knew genocide to be occurring, officials might have continued to see a civil war first and foremost: this narrative had structured their understanding of Rwanda since 1990.³⁰ The returning US ambassador to Rwanda, David Rawson, viewed the genocide as being of a piece with the civil war.³¹ Second, the Clinton administration remained committed to multilateralism in military operations, and the UN lacked the will to act.³² Third and most important was Mogadishu. The last troops departed Somalia one week before Rwanda's genocide began. The debacle spoiled Clinton's appetite to risk US lives in Africa.³³

It also convinced the administration to devise stringent criteria governing the participation of US troops in UN peacekeeping operations, criteria that intervening to stop Rwanda's genocide would have blatantly violated. Presidential Decision Directive-25, signed one month into the Rwandan genocide, set four standards: 'participation advances US interests', 'risks to American personnel have been weighed and are considered acceptable', 'an endpoint for US participation can be identified', and 'domestic and Congressional support exists or can be marshaled'.³⁴ Although the Clinton administration held no significant discussions relating Rwanda to PDD-25,³⁵ any intervention to bolster existing UN peacekeepers and stop the genocide surely would have failed the test. No US interests were perceived to be at stake. Public support for intervention was non-existent though some could have been marshaled. An endpoint would have been impossible to foresee; troops likely would have had to stay until a stable and tolerant Rwandan regime was functioning. And the Clinton administration was worried the public would not tolerate US soldiers simply keeping peace: PDD-25 did not envisage the bloodier task of forging peace out of violence.

In sum, the administration had little intrinsic interest in intervention because, most fundamentally, no widely shared norm held the US morally obligated to stop any genocide. This normative factor was, in turn, both reinforced by, and manifested in, a post-Somalia fear of risky operations as well as a commitment to multilateralism and an attention to the presence of civil war alongside genocide.

The fantasy of easy intervention

If these elements explain the Clinton administration's unconcern, they do not imply what humanitarian interventionists later claimed: that greater presidential interest would have yielded a successful humanitarian intervention. Moral will, they said, was the missing ingredient.³⁶ Intervention with just 5,000 equipped

troops would have stopped the genocide. Did Rwanda, then, deserve its later status as ‘the most easily preventable genocide imaginable’?³⁷ Had the administration resolved to act, would a 5,000-strong intervention have ended the killings and achieved humanitarian results?

This notion originated with the UN force commander in Rwanda, Canadian Major-General Roméo Dallaire, who from 10 April onward requested 5,000 troops, though only to secure Kigali.³⁸ The 5,000-troop scenario was affirmed and explicated by an eminent panel of military leaders convened by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict in 1998. Then it was popularized by members of Congress, the African Union, human rights organizations, and wide-ranging political commentators.³⁹ In the Carnegie Commission’s judgement, during a ‘window of opportunity’ between 7 and 21 April, ‘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’.⁴⁰ The feasibility of such an intervention can be assessed by imagining it unfold, particularly in three respects: halting the genocide, managing the aftermath, and maintaining domestic support. By this standard, the 5,000-troop scenario appears infeasible at best and dangerously deficient at worst.

Halting the killings, first, would have been far more difficult than the Carnegie Commission recognized. The commission’s conclusion depended on intervention occurring during a two-week ‘window of opportunity’ when genocide was confined to Kigali. Afterward intervention would have required ‘massive amounts of force’, the report conceded, since the massacres had spread.⁴¹ In reality, the window of opportunity never existed. Subsequent research found the genocide did not emanate from Kigali: the killings quickly began all over the country. The deadliest massacres of the genocide, many in the countryside, started on 11 April, five days in.⁴² This finding suffices to overturn the 5,000-troop projection. So does another: US policymakers did not think a genocide was occurring until the fictive window of opportunity had shut. Even human rights groups saw no genocide. The first credible and influential use of ‘genocide’ came on 19 and 20 April, when Human Rights Watch estimated a death toll as high as 100,000. Until then, reports had portrayed the conflict as a pure civil war, with perhaps 20,000 killed.⁴³

Had policymakers acted immediately, the whole force would have needed airlifting into landlocked Rwanda. The airlift would have taken time—about two weeks.⁴⁴ Then the Carnegie Commission’s ‘massive amounts of force’ proviso would apply. Alan Kuperman estimates the requirement at 15,000 troops, and this may be an underestimate considering that September Clinton deployed 21,000 troops to stabilize Haiti, less populous and violent than Rwanda.⁴⁵ Compared with the genocide that came to pass, perhaps twenty-five per cent of the final victims, or 125,000 Tutsi, would have been saved, supposing the deployment stopped killings immediately and for good.⁴⁶ Then again, perhaps news of an impending invasion would have deterred the genocidaires sooner. Or they might have accelerated the killings in anticipation, like Serbia’s army before the Kosovo war.

The key point is that although one cannot know how intervention would have unfolded, a war to stop the Rwandan genocide would have been nothing like as

simple as interventionists later claimed. Total willingness to stop the genocide would have failed to prevent a genocide from occurring. At best, it might have saved more than 100,000 lives in the short term—a scenario that assumes the RPF rebels would have welcomed intervention. In fact, the RPF declared its opposition to intervention from the outset. Its leader demanded existing UN peacekeepers leave Rwanda and threatened to fight any new force: ‘[The RPF] made it quite clear’, Dallaire recounted. ‘Not only did they not want an intervention force, but they would take action if such an option was presented’.⁴⁷ The RPF was trying to win a civil war and seize the country. A humanitarian intervention, they knew, would likely have demanded restoration of the peace process.⁴⁸ Foreign interveners might well have found themselves fighting all sides, even representatives of people they were ‘saving’.

That both sides might have opposed intervention speaks to a consideration that few if any humanitarian interventionists later found relevant to a decision to intervene. What happens after genocide is halted? The Carnegie Commission ignored this question, calling vaguely for a resumed peace process. Even Kuperman, the foremost skeptic of intervention in Rwanda, asserted that ‘after the acute genocidal situation was relieved, the mission would have been handed off to a multinational force’.⁴⁹ Can the best-case scenario be assumed?

The Rwandan government and RPF might have continued to attack one another, if not the intervention force. They might have prepared to resume civil war and genocide as soon as foreign troops left. If governmental institutions disintegrated, the occupiers would face a choice: abandon Rwanda or try to rebuild it. Policing has historically required thirteen to twenty troops per thousand inhabitants.⁵⁰ For eight million Rwandans, that means 100,000 to 160,000 soldiers. (The most feasible strategy might have been to aid the RPF until it conquered the country, although some humanitarians, seeing their cause as extrapolitical, might have objected to such partiality and distrusted the RPF for killing tens of thousands of defenceless civilians.)⁵¹ Interventionists truly committed to achieving humanitarian results must appreciate the difficulties of forging peace after war—and register the potential harms of postconflict occupation in the calculus of whether to intervene in the first place.

Finally, it is far from clear that the Clinton administration could have mustered the requisite public support for an initial invasion, much less sustained it if the going got tough. By all accounts, news of the genocide inspired ‘society-wide silence’.⁵² This silence confirms that the norm requiring forcible intervention to stop genocide was still budding in 1994. No one publicly urged military intervention in Congress. Republican Senator Bob Dole and Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton flatly stated their opposition. One Representative heard her constituents cry louder for the gorillas of Rwanda than for the people.⁵³ The lone Senate resolution during the genocide, passed on 26 April, called on top Rwandan government officials (the *genocidaires*) to ‘accede to an immediate and unconditional ceasefire’. It commended Clinton for ‘his swift condemnation of and response to this crisis’. It did tepidly ask the UN to ‘consider carefully both military and diplomatic options’ that among other things would ‘ensure the safety of innocent

civilians'.⁵⁴ The most determined effort to promote military intervention lay in a private note sent to the White House on 13 May by Paul Simon and James Jeffords, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa. Lake rebuffed the overture, citing no 'base of public support for taking any action in Africa'. The semi-movement for intervention ended there.⁵⁵

Lake had a point. Public pressure for armed intervention never came, even after the occurrence of genocide was widely reported. If demand for intervention had existed anywhere, it would have streamed from the pages of *The New Republic* (*TNR*), which had already pleaded for strong action against ethnic killings in Bosnia. But remarkably, *TNR*'s editorial page explicitly opposed intervention in Rwanda. In fact, *TNR* doubted the very idea that force could resolve complex political problems. 'Somalia underscores the practical and political risks of a more muscular approach to sorting out the underlying conflict, which is fundamentally internal', *TNR* wrote on 16 May. 'The tragedy of the American experience in the Horn of Africa is that our too-ambitious efforts arguably compounded Somalia's political problems even as we alleviated the starvation'. The editorial counselled Clinton not to let Rwanda divert his focus from Bosnia, whose genocide, unlike Rwanda's, threatened to destabilize 'large and strategically vital parts of the world'.⁵⁶ In 1994 no *TNR* opinion pieces favoured US intervention to stop the Rwandan genocide, including in hindsight.⁵⁷

The opinion pages of leading newspapers were equally unenthusiastic. The 'immediate answer' to Rwanda's crisis 'appears to be: not much', the *Washington Post* editorialized on 17 April. The US had no important interests in Rwanda, the *Post* observed. Like *TNR*, the *Post* cast aspersions on what military force could generally achieve. In 'disintegrating societies', 'others can help but most of the load falls on the particular country. When a fire of Rwandan dimensions breaks out, it means the country has utterly failed'.⁵⁸ Six days later, a *New York Times* editorial identified 'genocide' in Rwanda but defended the UN withdrawal of peacekeepers. 'What other choices really exist? . . . Somalia provides ample warning against plunging open-endedly into a "humanitarian" mission'. The *Times* did float an idea to create a quick-response force 'under U.N. aegis' to quell ethnic conflict in the future.⁵⁹ By November, the *Post* likewise recoiled at the horrors of genocide and proposed the creation of a rapid-reaction UN force (named the Rwandan Memorial Corps).⁶⁰ At no time, however, did either newspaper mention unilateral US interventions against genocide.

One of the most passionate and prominent advocates of military intervention during the Rwandan genocide was neoconservative Charles Krauthammer. 'Rwanda is the one unequivocal case of genocide occurring in the world today', he wrote on 27 May, 'and genocide demands intervention'. Even so, Krauthammer deemed confronting the genocidaires to be 'too ambitious and difficult'. He wanted troops to establish havens to protect and feed civilians, presumably on Rwanda's outskirts. There would be no 'nation-building fantasies'. Africans would supply the troops, Americans stepping in as a 'last resort' and leaving within ninety days.⁶¹

The kind of intervention proposed by Krauthammer—one designed to provide relief and avoid combat while the rebels won—was probably the most Congress and the public would have accepted in the spring of 1994 after strenuous presidential salesmanship. By contrast, the kind of intervention retrospectively advocated by the decade's end—aimed at confronting and stopping the genocide—would have constituted a tremendous risk. A 15,000-troop requirement would have been more likely than a 5,000-troop one, and force requirements after initial operations would have been anyone's guess.

It took four years for inaction in Rwanda to be represented as cowardice in the face of preventable evil. The lesson of Rwanda did not need to have been so. Under different conditions, the prevailing lesson might have resembled the one Lake drew in 2003. 'We sure as hell should have explored [intervention] a lot harder', Lake said. But 'I still believe, in the end, [intervention] would have failed. I don't think Congress would have ever gone along. I'm not sure you could have designed a serious peacekeeping mission that could have fixed it'.⁶² As Lake recognized, the success of military intervention cannot be taken for granted, even for the world's superpower, even against genocide. Determining whether an intervention is worthwhile requires thinking about how it could plausibly play out, step by step, and weighing benefits against harms.

To end all genocide, 1998–2001

Americans drew a different lesson: Rwanda was the war that wasn't, and a US military response to genocide should be axiomatic unless proven infeasible. These attitudes took several years to develop. From 1994 to 1997, circumspection still predominated. In *Foreign Affairs*, both sides in a debate on 'preventive diplomacy' agreed on one thing: armed intervention must be opposed, whether or not diplomatic pressure could head off crises like Rwanda before they exploded. Military intervention in Rwanda would have 'turned a fluid battlefield into a protracted war', Stephen Steadman wrote. In places like Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, the use of force carried 'the risk of prolonged involvement in a civil war'.⁶³ On the eve of US bombing of Bosnia in 1995, the *New York Times* opined that diplomacy was 'clearly the better course' than force.⁶⁴ Even future bastions of interventionism showed relative caution. A resigned *Washington Post* merely frowned on Western 'detachment' from Rwanda. Looking ahead, the *Post* encouraged not unilateral war but rather exploration of Clinton's proposal for an African-manned intervention force for the continent.⁶⁵ Similarly, the *TNR* editorial page, despite trumpeting the bombing of Bosnia lest the US be an 'accomplice to genocide', remained silent on the Rwandan genocide from 1995 to 1997.⁶⁶ One lengthy treatment of Rwanda asked US policymakers to focus on supporting Rwanda's war crimes tribunal, not on preventing future genocides.⁶⁷

Not for long. A dramatic shift began around 1998. It brought a new belligerence, confident that US troops would have ended Rwanda's genocide easily and should stop any other. This view permeated the US foreign-policy establishment

in 1999 and 2000, appearing in both government doctrines and popular commentary, among neoconservatives and humanitarian interventionists alike.

Willing the ends

In believing the US could reliably stop genocides and help victims, humanitarian interventionists often assumed military challenges away, failing to think concretely how intervention might unfold. In public discourse, *TNR* was emblematic. From 1998 on, military intervention against genocide ranked among its chief causes. Opposing what became the International Criminal Court, a *TNR* editorial declared that genocidal and aggressive states ‘got away with their crimes because no one dispatched soldiers to challenge them, not because there were no lawyers dispatched to indict them. Prosecutors do not deter evil. Armies do’. Because stopping genocide was a transcendent imperative, unilateral action was required. ‘If it is recognized that the only proper response to genocide is the prompt use of force’, *TNR* wrote, ‘then it must also be recognized that only the United States has the political and military muscle to lead such a response to genocide’.⁶⁸ Contributor Michael O’Hanlon, a respected national security analyst, proposed an even more radical standard: ‘Military intervention should be considered whenever the rate of killing in a country or region greatly exceeds the US murder rate, whether the killing is genocidal in nature or not’. This standard translated to six conflicts, including Rwanda, that merited Clinton’s intervention.⁶⁹ Literary editor Leon Wieseltier spoke for many when he wrote: ‘For the purpose of stopping genocide, the use of force is not a last resort; it is a first resort’.⁷⁰

According to these writers, intervention carried few risks and small costs. O’Hanlon claimed his interventionist programme might ‘cost dozens or even hundreds of American lives’ and a few more percentage points in defence spending. Postconflict operations, when mentioned, were an afterthought, portrayed as irrelevant to whether to initiate intervention. To O’Hanlon, the Rwandan genocide required unflinching military action, so ‘whether [US] forces then stayed on for years to help the country rebuild or took the radical step of partitioning Rwanda would in this urgent case have been a secondary concern’.⁷¹ The idea that the US needed an ‘exit strategy’ prior to intervention was, Wieseltier decided, pacifism disguised, ‘a scruple about the use of force itself’. Facing uncertainty, ‘the antithesis of ‘exit strategy’ is courage’.⁷²

If few other commentators deployed such moralistic rhetoric, most agreed in substance. The turning point in *Foreign Affairs* came in 1999, when discussion of genocide and Rwanda proliferated as NATO bombed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. From 1999 to 2003, only one *Foreign Affairs* article doubted the desirability of US military intervention to stop Rwanda’s genocide, and it provoked three pro-intervention responses.⁷³ Michael Hirsh summed up the consensus: ‘The United States unforgivably failed to act in Rwanda’.⁷⁴ Persons otherwise opposed agreed that stopping genocide was an imperative above all others. For instance, two law professors, who regarded humanitarian intervention as illegal under the UN Charter absent a threat to international peace, debated whether

international law should be changed to permit such interventions or whether such interventions should simply go forth in contravention of law.⁷⁵ Either way, interventions were a must. So too went a debate over Clinton's foreign policy between self-described realists Stephen Walt and Richard Haass. Walt, taking the pro-Clinton side, nevertheless condemned the 'tragic failure in Rwanda' that 'might have been prevented had the United States acted promptly'. The anti-Clinton Haass agreed.⁷⁶ One-quarter of Haass's 1999 article on US grand strategy concerned humanitarian intervention, a measure of the subject's centrality.⁷⁷

The story was similar at the more popular level of newspaper opinion. Between the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, the *Post* took a somewhat more hawkish and unilateralist position—mirroring later differences over the Iraq war. The 'lesson of Rwanda', the *Post* judged, was to stop similar slaughters by force. Five thousand troops could have prevented the genocide. Inaction was 'one of the most shocking episodes of the past decade'. Any future hesitation and the US would 'lose its ability to lead'.⁷⁸ The *Times* took a supportive but more sober line, applauding, for instance, the bombing in Kosovo while warning that intervention against ethnic conflict should be performed only where extreme violence threatens to destabilize other nations.⁷⁹

At the same time that humanitarian interventionism gained popularity, so did a newly militarized neoconservatism. By the late 1990s, neoconservatism had undergone a generational transition. Figures like Robert Kagan, William Kristol, and Paul Wolfowitz replaced the less hawkish leaders of old. They took up residence in Washington think tanks and created new ones, such as the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), whose 1997 statement of principles bore the signatures of Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz.⁸⁰ With new blood came fresh ideas: 'force as the preferred policy option, black-and-white moralism as the preferred form of analysis, and unilateralism as the preferred mode of execution', Stephen Halper and Jonathan Clarke write. Halper and Clarke see these principles as distinctively neoconservative, but they apply to humanitarian interventionism, except that unilateralism was grudgingly accepted more than preferred.⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, genocidal prevention ranked among PNAC's causes. Its featured newspaper opinion pieces urged war to stop genocide, citing a 'bipartisan, right-left, 'never again' consensus'.⁸²

The growing popularity of the use of force encouraged and reflected the increasing hawkishness of the second Clinton administration and US politics in general.⁸³ The outward signs were many. Clinton led NATO in bombing Kosovo to stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians. He replaced lawyerly Warren Christopher with the bolder Madeleine Albright as secretary of state, and the ambassadorship to the UN went to Richard Holbrooke, an ardent interventionist who later championed the Iraq war. In 1998, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, which adopted as US policy the replacement of Hussein's regime with a democracy. After years of defence cuts, Clinton pledged in 1999 to add \$112 billion over six years, the largest increase since the 1980s.⁸⁴

Such actions had a purpose, indicated by the administration's doctrinal shift toward humanitarian interventionism. Back in 1996, Lake had laid out an 'exit

strategy doctrine: 'Before we send our troops into a foreign country, we should know how and when we're going to get them out'.⁸⁵ Over the next three years, Lake left the government, Clinton publicly apologized for inaction in Rwanda — attributing it to a deficit of empathy with the victims — and a new doctrine was born.⁸⁶ 'Whether you live in Africa or Central Europe or any other place', Clinton proclaimed, 'if somebody comes after innocent civilians and tries to kill them en masse because of their race, their ethnic background or their religion, and it's within our power to stop it, we will stop it'.⁸⁷ Here was a more sweeping normative commitment to stop ethnic slaughter than had existed in the first half of the decade. Delivered in June 1999 after victory in Kosovo, it cast Kosovo as an instance of a general principle, the first of many humanitarian wars to come.

Why militarization?

Why did humanitarian interventionism pervade mainstream thought at the end of the Clinton administration and not sooner? An explanation should also accommodate the related rise of neoconservatism in the US and humanitarian interventionism in Britain, where Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'doctrine of the international community' entailed opposing 'the evil of ethnic cleansing' by armed force.⁸⁸ Two factors suggest themselves. First, it took time for the post-Cold War period to acquire intellectual frameworks that made habitual interventions look alluring. By the late 1990s, a globalizing world appeared threatened by the disintegrative forces of ethnic conflict and 'rogue states' (a term that gained currency in 1997).⁸⁹ Meanwhile the UN appeared impotent, and no great-power rival had emerged to challenge US ascendancy, invalidating earlier fears. Global leadership seemed necessary, and the US could supply it.

Second, observers extrapolated from very limited—and lucky—interventions in the Balkans. In Bosnia and Kosovo, precision airstrikes sufficed to force Serb capitulations within weeks. NATO suffered few casualties, including zero deaths in Kosovo, and not by accident: planes flew at an unusually high 15,000 feet to minimize danger to themselves while increasing danger to civilians. Interventionists disturbed by NATO's aversion to casualties could not help but marvel at the technological prowess that permitted the coalition's moral calculus to be so craven.⁹⁰ Opponents of recent military actions, from the Persian Gulf to the Balkans, seemed stuck on the wrong side of history. Predictions of a 'Balkan quagmire' looked shamefully defeatist in hindsight.⁹¹ Australia's humanitarian intervention in East Timor in 1999, and the ongoing no-fly zone in Iraq, further exhibited how war could save lives.⁹²

In this context, the sovereign equality of states came under new attack, and not only in the US. Sovereignty was now argued to rest upon respect for individual human rights, such that mass abuses entitled if not required an outside agent to intervene, regardless of whether the sovereign powers composing the UN Security Council consented. The Kosovo war marked the first time a group of states acting outside UN authority claimed a primarily humanitarian rationale for violating another state's sovereignty.⁹³ Debate over this 'new world order' roiled the UN

General Assembly and academic presses.⁹⁴ In May 1999, the International Campaign to End Genocide formed under the leadership of Washington-based Genocide Watch.⁹⁵ Even the UN secretary-general toasted victory in Kosovo. Kofi Annan not-so-thinly implied the international community should countenance unauthorized humanitarian interventions. He invoked Rwanda to make the point:

To those for whom the greatest threat to the future of international order is the use of force in the absence of a Security Council mandate, one might ask—not in the context of Kosovo—but in the context of Rwanda: If, in those dark days and hours leading up to the genocide, a coalition of States had been prepared to act in defense of the Tutsi population, but did not receive prompt Council authorization, should such a coalition have stood aside and allowed the horror to unfold?⁹⁶

Rwanda was personally wrenching for Annan. He headed the UN peacekeeping department during the genocide and was later blamed for passivity.⁹⁷ Guilt over Rwanda, and recognition of crisis of legitimacy facing the United Nations, perhaps underlay his strong humanitarian interventionist posture.⁹⁸ Although Annan doubtless believed he was honouring the UN charter's spirit by condoning violations of its letter, this was a fine line to walk. Increasingly, the UN was morally discredited, even from within.

Again, the same reality might have been differently perceived if filtered through more cautious assumptions about armed force. Bosnia and Kosovo illuminated the general nature of humanitarian intervention only partially. In some genocides, like Rwanda's, a state oppresses its own people. But Bosnia and Kosovo were part of the Yugoslav wars of succession. NATO bombing was able to aid an established government in Bosnia and insurgents in Kosovo. Serbia's high level of economic development also provided ample bombing targets. Postwar reconstruction was more manageable because European powers would contribute to maintaining stability in their continent.

Nor did the advantages of the Balkan theatre ensure the missions went as planned. US policymakers and human rights groups failed to predict that bombing Kosovo would cause Milošević to accelerate his campaign of ethnic cleansing, causing a massive humanitarian crisis involving one million refugees.⁹⁹ For this reason, old-guard humanitarians like Human Rights Watch divided over the wisdom of the Kosovo war.¹⁰⁰ Projections of force requirements were equally off base. The Clinton administration reportedly expected the Kosovo bombing to last no more than a single week.¹⁰¹ It took seventy-eight days, and Milošević's reasons for surrendering remain mysterious, since his forces were not defeated on the battlefield.¹⁰² Had he kept fighting, the next step would have been to introduce ground troops—175,000 worth, 100,000 American, according to NATO plans.¹⁰³ In the weeks before Milošević's surprise capitulation, the Clinton foreign-policy principals were coming to see a ground war as the only alternative to defeat. According to national security adviser Sandy Berger, Clinton himself decided in favour of an invasion.¹⁰⁴ A ground war in rugged Kosovo would have been exceedingly difficult and deadly.¹⁰⁵

Near misses are never as vivid as actualized results. The consensus saw success in Kosovo. Humanitarian interventionism, on the ascent since 1997, received a further boost. As the Clinton administration prepared to depart, mainstream foreign-policy thinkers were disposed to believe that US military force could and should remake benighted parts of the world. Where the US intervened, it seemed to succeed—and where it abstained, like Rwanda, omission was the ultimate sin.

On the eve of Iraq, 2001–03

‘No challenge weighs more heavily on American foreign policy at the beginning of the 21st century than that of humanitarian intervention’, a Council on Foreign Relations report observed.¹⁰⁶ Humanitarian interventionism was not, of course, popular in all political quarters. The ‘realist’ wing still predominated among Republicans and supplied most of the opposition to Clinton’s interventions. It subscribed to Colin Powell’s doctrine requiring knowledge of an exit strategy prior to the engagement of hostilities. But now realism had to contend with a swelling neo-conservatism on its right flank and humanitarian interventionism on its left. No less than Henry Kissinger departed from *realpolitik*, stating that where genocides occur ‘moral outrage has to predominate over any considerations of power politics’. In Rwanda, he claimed, ‘I personally would have supported an intervention’.¹⁰⁷ Whether Kissinger spoke from conviction or for appearances, his statement marked the breadth of Americans’ predisposition to favour armed intervention for humanitarian ends. In the new century, Michael Ignatieff wrote, the United States had a ‘duty to intervene’.¹⁰⁸

A solution from hell

For a window into the prevailing mood on the eve of the Iraq war, the obvious place to turn is Samantha Power’s *A Problem from Hell*, a chronicle of US non-responses to twentieth-century genocides. Researched in the late 1990s, released in 2002, awarded a Pulitzer Prize as the Iraq war began, the book met an ebullient reception in mainstream US discourse, on both left and right. Reviews hailed it as ‘one of the decade’s most important books on US foreign policy’, ‘the standard text on genocide prevention’, and even, in *TNR*, ‘a book from heaven’.¹⁰⁹ Holbrooke passed out copies to co-workers.¹¹⁰ President Bush read a summary of the chapter on Rwanda and wrote four words in the margins: ‘NOT ON MY WATCH’.¹¹¹

The key to the book’s popularity was that it willed the end of armed intervention without quite admitting it—and without thinking twice about means. *Problem* concluded, for every genocide documented, that the US did too little. Objecting to inaction as such, it shrunk from recommending how exactly the US should have acted. It presented no extended counterfactual scenarios that explained how an intervention would have unfolded and weighed potential harms against benefits. Its prescription was *do more*. But doing more did not actually satisfy Power. In

most moments, she wanted genocide stopped by any means necessary. Though she condemned the US for refusing military as well as ‘countless’ non-military options in Rwanda—declaring ‘genocide’, jamming hate radio, expelling Rwanda’s UN ambassador—would her outrage have been less if the US took not-even-half-measures against a genocide that, by her lights, could be easily ended?¹¹² Indeed, in 2004 the Bush administration labelled violence in Dafur as ‘genocide’ and attempted to rally the UN to act against Khartoum, to little effect, and Power was scathing: ‘The sin of past Presidents is not that they failed to use the word but that then, as now, they failed to stop the crime’.¹¹³ In *Problem* the embrace of war is shrouded, but it is omnipresent.

Problem could have tempered its endorsement of the ends of humanitarian intervention with a recognition that interventions face constraints and can turn out counterproductive. It did the opposite. It assumed US military capabilities were practically unlimited. At the start, post-1945 America was said to enjoy ‘vast resources’ to stop genocide ‘without undermining US security’. This claim went undefended. Public opinion was no obstacle to intervention, in Power’s telling. Equally oblivious was the neglect of intervention’s aftermath. Once troops march in to protect civilians, how soon can they realistically withdraw? They would not have protected Rwandan civilians in stadiums, as Power proposed, only to leave and let genocide resume. What if counterinsurgency or policing became necessary? These questions were begged but not asked. In Power’s world, nothing could prevent US presidents from stopping genocide. ‘American leaders did not act’, she summed up, ‘because they did not want to’.¹¹⁴

Power’s antidote was simple: courage, the guts to fight apathy, even to appear ‘unreasonable’. If her moralism resembled that of neoconservatism, the kinship was more than rhetorical. *Problem* had no tolerance for multilateral and legal niceties that might block stopping genocide.¹¹⁵ Power cheered the unauthorized Kosovo intervention and proposed US intervention in Rwanda might have been unilateral. Whenever Clinton consulted with allies, she portrayed dithering. Small wonder that neoconservative Richard Perle, an early advocate of intervention in Bosnia, made a favourable cameo, in which he equated European-ness with weakness.¹¹⁶ Not least, Power directed the imperative to stop genocide to the US, not the UN or regional organizations.

If one squinted a bit, something resembling neoconservative wars of liberation could be glimpsed in *Problem*. Power told the story of postwar Kosovo through one survivor, a ‘fair-skinned’ (!) fourteen-year-old girl who watched Serb paramilitaries kill her family. ‘We knew it was better to die with a fight’, the girl said. ‘NATO fought and now we, at least, are free’. *Problem* did not assess Kosovar sentiment further, but the meaning was clear. US might was a force for liberation. Could the neoconservative image of Iraqis ‘dancing in the streets’ after a US invasion have been far from a reader’s mind by 2002?¹¹⁷ In fact, it was approximated in *Problem*. Power described Clinton’s visit to postwar Kosovo where people ‘jammed into the stadium’ and ‘cheered wildly, chanting “Clin-ton! Clin-ton!”’ ‘No one can force you to forgive what was done to you’, Clinton said to applause. But when Clinton told Kosovars to try, he drew, Power relayed, ‘a sullen silence

from the raucous crowd'.¹¹⁸ In a book otherwise quiet on long-term consequences of intervention, it was an unwittingly telling moment. Ethnic tensions might not evaporate upon the introduction of American arms. A period of oversight—or more—might follow, for who knew how long. In the hills of Samantha Power's Kosovo, the civilizing mission once discharged by European empires was reborn.

The Iraq war: humanitarianism's burden

Samantha Power opposed the Iraq war of 2003. The war was not an instance of humanitarian intervention, for it did not stop or pre-empt mass killing.¹¹⁹ The war was neither motivated by nor justified on primarily humanitarian grounds.¹²⁰ Although many humanitarian interventionists supported the war, the Bush administration would have proceeded regardless.

Humanitarian interventionism nevertheless facilitated the war, mainly through the assumptions it primed politicians and the public to hold.¹²¹ Since the 1990s, humanitarian interventionists assumed US military force could reliably transform societies in those societies' own interests. The world they depicted was riddled with enemies of humanity; it needed more US intervention, not less; and interventions would succeed if willed, postconflict conditions posing no obstacle to a mission's fulfilment or its morality. It is impossible to know how far these assumptions permitted the Iraq war to go forward, but they may have hollowed out what strong dissent would have otherwise existed. Through their prism, the Iraq war looked, if not virtuous, then at least not worth protesting strenuously.

Thus humanitarian interventionists who opposed the war did so on superficial grounds. Power lambasted the war because she distrusted Bush's motives and regretted his unilateralism. Still, she did not doubt US objectives would be met. 'A unilateral attack would make Iraq a more humane place', she predicted, 'but the world a more dangerous place'.¹²² The Iraq war was wrong not because it would fail to transform Iraq as Bush wanted but because it would succeed. Power even praised 'two attractive aspects to Bush's approach: He saw that evil-doers littered the planet; and he saw that, like it or not, if the United States didn't become police chief of the world, Americans, too, would pay a price'.¹²³

Power's dissent was among the most forceful. Many humanitarian interventionists instead supported the Iraq war. As they saw it, they were applying their movement's principles: so said policymakers like Holbrooke, academics like Jean Elshtain, Ignatieff, and Fernando Tesón, Michael Walzer, and public intellectuals like Peter Beinart, Christopher Hitchens, David Remnick, Andrew Sullivan, and Wieseltier. Ignatieff—'there was no more effective intellectual spokesperson for war', the *Nation* wrote—chided liberals to remember Bosnians and Kosovars were among the 'many peoples who owe their freedom to an exercise of American military power'.¹²⁴ Some of the most cutting defenders of Bush's unilateralism were humanitarian interventionists for whom the imperative of removing Hussein, as of stopping genocide, overrode the niceties of legal procedure. Holbrooke deflated antiwar multilateralism by arguing Clinton was the greater unilateralist than Bush. Whereas Bush obtained Security Council Resolution

1441 vowing ‘serious consequences’ against Iraq and pressed for further authorization, Clinton had bombed the Balkans without seeking UN approval, Holbrooke reminded.¹²⁵ As one writer observed in 2002: ‘Having supported unilateralist intervention outside the UN framework during the 1990s, liberals and progressives are simply unable to make a credible case against Bush today’.¹²⁶ Even Annan took a year and a half to dub the Iraq war illegal.¹²⁷

Most debilitating of dissent was perhaps the assumption that war would be quick. Humanitarian interventionists were accustomed to pronouncing interventions as moral without considering postconflict challenges, and they extended the same logic to Iraq. Ignatieff foresaw an untroubled future in which Iraqis would take over ‘as soon as the American imperial forces have restored order and the European humanitarians have rebuilt the roads, schools and houses’.¹²⁸ Beinart, at least, contemplated a worst-case postwar scenario, but his was generous: Bush might have to install a friendly strongman to rule Iraq.¹²⁹ Although one month after the invasion Holbrooke detected that democratizing Iraq would be protracted, he reckoned before the war that ‘rapid and successful’ intervention would cause even the antiwar left to believe it had backed the war from day one.¹³⁰ The Bush administration was not alone in neglecting to think through post-invasion scenarios.¹³¹ Its failure was of a piece with the way humanitarian interventionists had reasoned for years. Whatever humanitarian interventionism contributed causally to the Iraq war, this may be the salient point. Iraq exposed the faulty underpinnings of the brand of humanitarian interventionism ascendant since the late 1990s. As it catalyzed a period of self-examination among humanitarians, the consensus around America’s duty to stop genocide looked like it had been an illusion all along, resting on a failure to will the means.

The responsibility of prudence

At the turn of the twenty-first century, humanitarian interventionists attempted to construct a normative commitment to stop mass ethnic killing. To many, stopping genocide was a matter of summoning the will to do it. On this assumption, humanitarian interventionists could imagine themselves as political actors as well as analysts. By writing of the need to stop genocide, they could build the will that would make it so. They could set in motion a virtuous circle of idealism: the easier it sounded to stop genocide, the easier stopping genocide would turn out to be, because the greater the will to act. From this perspective (conscious or not), airing impediments to intervention only set back human progress.¹³²

Humanitarian interventionists discounted three challenges of intervention. First, they downplayed the difficulty of halting ethnic conflicts, understating force requirements and dismissing risks of escalation. Second, they ignored what happens after war. Once a force halts genocide, it cannot leave, inviting violence. Premature withdrawal would threaten the mission’s humanitarian purpose.¹³³ Unfortunately, ‘nobody knows how to rebuild destroyed societies’, as an Air Force colonel writes.¹³⁴ Interventionists either ignored or bracketed postwar nation-building, divorcing it from the calculus of whether to intervene

at all. Third, many thought public opinion would or should not constrain decisions to deploy troops. Yet mounting casualties could provoke the ire of legislators and force a premature withdrawal.¹³⁵ If far-flung strangers have a duty toward victims of mass violence, surely it is to undertake actions that are likely to help them and not to inflict ever more pain.

In 2006 the UN Security Council adopted the ‘responsibility to protect’. The international community must now protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, by force if necessary.¹³⁶ But it cannot effectuate what it has pledged. More than missing willpower stands in the way of protection from slaughter. Over the past decade, the norm of humanitarian intervention, briefly girded by dreams of US military invulnerability, advanced beyond the ability to undertake the actions it prescribed. This was a recipe for dangerous deployments and dashed hopes: the former when leaders take the norm seriously, the latter when they finally realize there is no good way to deliver. Already, a rebel leader in Darfur refused to sign a peace agreement that might have stopped the killings against his people partly because he expected international military intervention would give him more power.¹³⁷ But the dream of harmony among peoples is too precious to be subverted by the masked bigotry of empty moralism. True idealists harbour no particular fear of standing idly by. They ask not whether to do something but what is best to do, and they act, or forbear, accordingly. They know that if humanitarian interventionism is a worthy cause, it has everything to gain from squarely confronting its costs. It can start by facing up to its past.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Matthew Connelly, Mark Mazower, Thomas Meaney, A. Dirk Moses, Samuel Moyn, and the anonymous reviewers for their indispensable insights.

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