

THE MUNK DEBATES

THE CASE **AGAINST** HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

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There is no doubt that the moral case for humanitarian intervention is convincing. Who would not want to help those in dire need? The reality, however, is somewhat more complex. More often than not, the use of force for humanitarian purposes simply causes more problems than it solves.

The myriad of arguments against humanitarian are as diverse as their wide array of proponents - from radical leftists to isolationist conservatives, from African development workers to Chinese leaders. All caution against promoting a practice whereby militaries are used, countries are invaded and wars are waged in the name of humanitarianism.

There are eight diverse arguments against humanitarian intervention.

First, humanitarian wars are rarely, if ever, fought for purely humanitarian reasons. National interest is almost always a critical factor governing the motives of the intervening states. More often than not, geopolitics rather than human interests drives humanitarian intervention. In Kosovo, for example, there were clear NATO interests at stake. In Rwanda there were not. There are two costs to the role of national interest in humanitarian operations. First, if the primary interest is geopolitical, rather than humanitarian, then the means of force used will bias the former over the latter - such as the near exclusive reliance of airpower in Kosovo. Second, states that intervene for purely humanitarian reasons quickly lose interest and go home (such as is Haiti, Somalia); those that stay almost always have dubious motives.

Second, humanitarian intervention is a guise for a new era of colonialism, driven by a neo-liberal agenda. Rationalized through the theory of a 'liberal peace' - that countries with open markets and democratic governments

won't go to war - proponents of intervention have replaced the colonialist goal of "civilizing" the third world, with the humanitarian goal of freeing the developing world from human right abuses. The result is that the economic order promoted and established by the intervening powers, often works against the interests of those the intervention was meant to protect.

Third, breaches of sovereignty in the name of humanitarianism erode the principle of sovereignty that has successfully governed the world since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This has two costs. First, it diminished the authority of the entity best suited to protect the interests of humans. Intervention delegitimizes the very body that for the past 400 years, has been the single best protector of human wellbeing - the nation state. Second, humanitarian intervention sets a very dangerous precedent for future violations of the principle of national sovereignty. Just because we may think a breach of sovereignty was appropriate in Kosovo, would we feel the same way if Russia invaded Georgia to "protect" the peoples of South Ossetia? Or China, to "protect" the Taiwanese?

Fourth, the problems in many of the conflicts in which proponents would like to see us intervene, are either the direct or indirect consequence of European colonialism and Western inference to begin with. Whether in Colonial Africa, in shaping the borders of the Middle East or in fueling the proxy wars of the Cold War, the "west" has been at the root of many of the wars they now use as a rationale for further interference. Perhaps it is time we stay away.

Fifth, the principle of humanitarian intervention have been co-opted as a Trojan horse for US imperialism. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, humanitarian rationales have been evoked to justify what are clearly being fought for US, rather than humanitarian interests. As Richard Falk states "After September 11, the American approach to humanitarian intervention morphed into post hoc rationalizations for uses of force otherwise difficult to reconcile with international law." There is no doubt that the Iraqi people have been liberated, although for what remains obscure."

Sixth, it is sometimes better to let a conflict run its course, than to prematurely step in and stop it. As political scientist Edward N. Luttwak has noted "Although war is a great evil, it does have a great virtue: it can

resolve political conflicts and lead to peace." Humanitarian interventions often impose short term solutions to trump real long term peace and stability.

Eighth, with regard to the Responsibility to Protect. Once we open the vault of intervention, where does the "responsibility" end? For example, R2P has already in its short life, been cited as a reason to: invade Iraq; to protect the artifacts in the National Museum in Iraq; to implement stringent domestic counterterrorism policies in the US; as a reason to stop Iran from processing enriched uranium; and, to use force for the promotion of democracy. While the intentions of R2P may be sound, it has already been used to rationalize profoundly un-humanitarian acts.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, humanitarian interventions often do more harm than good. In fact, they often result in precisely what proponents say they are meant to prevent - gross violations of human rights and international law. Militaries, no matter what their mission, will fight to win. The process of winning a war, will often make the humanitarian situation worse in the short term. This is exacerbated by our unwillingness to take casualties. A recent air strike in Afghanistan killed 90 civilians. In what way is this act "humanitarian"? In Kosovo, a reliance on airpower, while ultimately successful in achieving a military victory, provoked the Serbs to accelerate their murder and displacement of Albanian Kosovars.

While few of these arguments may be convincing on their own, and there are surely no individuals who would agree with all of them, together, they offer an overwhelming caution for those who seek the wider use of force in the name of humanitarian interests.

The world would be far safer, and people more secure, if less intervention took place, not more.

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