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The Politics of Rescue*

BY MICHAEL WALZER

To intervene or not?—this should always be a hard question. Even in the case of a brutal civil war or a politically induced famine or the massacre of a local minority, the use of force in other people's countries should always generate hesitation and anxiety. So it does today among small groups of concerned people, some of whom end up supporting, some resisting interventionist policies. But many governments and many more politicians seem increasingly inclined to find the question easy: the answer is *not*! Relatively small contingents of soldiers will be sent to help out in cases where it isn't expected that they will have to fight—thus the United States in Somalia, the Europeans in Bosnia, the French in Rwanda. The aim in all these countries (though we experimented briefly with something more in Mogadishu) is not to alter power relations on the ground, but only to ameliorate their consequences—to bring food and medical supplies to populations besieged and bombarded, for example, without interfering with the siege or bombardment.

This might be taken as a triumph for the old principle of nonintervention, except that the reasons on which the principle is based, which I will rehearse in a moment, do not appear to be the reasons that move governments and politicians today. They are not focused on the costs of intervention or, for that matter, of nonintervention to the men and women whose danger or suffering poses the question, but only on the costs to their own soldiers and to themselves, that

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is, to their political standing at home. No doubt, governments must think about such things: political leaders have to maintain their domestic support if they are to act effectively abroad. But they must also *act effectively abroad* when the occasion demands it, and they must be able to judge the urgency of the demand in the appropriate moral and political terms. The ideology of the cold war once provided a set of terms, not in fact always appropriate to the cases at hand, but capable of overriding domestic considerations. In the aftermath of the cold war, no comparable ideology has that capacity. The question, to intervene or not? gets answered every day, but with no sign that the judgments it requires are actually being made.

What About "Humanitarian Intervention"?

I am going to focus on the arguments for and against "humanitarian intervention," for this is what is at issue in the former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, parts of Asia, much of Africa. Massacre, rape, ethnic cleansing, state terrorism, contemporary versions of "bastard feudalism," complete with ruthless warlords and lawless bands of armed men: these are the acts and occasions that invite us, or require us, to override the presumption against moving armies across borders and using force inside countries that have not threatened or attacked their neighbors. There is no external aggression to worry about, only domestic brutality, civil war, political tyranny, ethnic or religious persecution. When should the world's agents and powers (the United Nations, the European Community, the Pan American Alliance, the Organization of African Unity, the United States) merely watch and protest? When should they protest and then intervene?

The presumption against intervention is strong; we (on the left especially) have reasons for it, which derive from our opposition to imperial politics and our commitment to self-determination, even when the process of self-determina-

tion is something less than peaceful and democratic. Ever since Roman times, empires have expanded by intervening in civil wars, replacing "anarchy" with law and order, overthrowing supposedly noxious regimes. Conceivably, this expansion has saved lives, but only by creating in the process a "prison-house of nations," whose subsequent history is a long tale of prison revolts, brutally repressed. So it seems best that people who have lived together in the past and will have to do so in the future should be allowed to work out their difficulties without imperial assistance, among themselves. The resolution won't be stable unless it is locally grounded; there is little chance that it will be consensual unless it is locally produced.

Still, nonintervention is not an absolute moral rule: sometimes, what is going on locally cannot be tolerated. Hence the practice of "humanitarian intervention"—much abused, no doubt, but morally necessary whenever cruelty and suffering are extreme and no local forces seem capable of putting an end to them. Humanitarian interventions are not justified for the sake of democracy or free enterprise or economic justice or voluntary association or any other of the social practices and arrangements that we might hope for or even call for in other people's countries. Their aim is profoundly negative in character: to put a stop to actions that, to use an old-fashioned but accurate phrase, "shock the conscience" of humankind. There are some useful, and to my mind justified, contemporary examples: India in East Pakistan, Tanzania in Uganda, Vietnam in Cambodia. Interventions of this sort are probably best carried out by neighbors, as in these three cases, since neighbors will have some understanding of the local culture. They may also, however, have old scores to settle or old (or new) ambitions to dominate the neighborhood. If we had more trust in the effectiveness of the United Nations or the various regional associations, we could require international or at least multilateral endorsement, cooperation, and constraint. I will consider this possibility later on. It might be a way of controlling the economically or politically self-aggrandizing

interventions of single states. For now, though, the agent-of-last-resort is anyone near enough and strong enough to stop what needs stopping.

But that's not always easy. On the standard view of humanitarian intervention (which I adopted when writing *Just and Unjust Wars* almost twenty years ago), the source of the inhumanity is conceived as somehow external and singular in character: a tyrant, a conqueror or usurper, or an alien power set over against a mass of victims. The intervention then has an aim that is simple as well as negative: remove the tyrant (Pol Pot, Idi Amin), set the people free (Bangladesh), and then get out. Rescue the people in trouble from their troublemakers, and let them get on with their lives. Help them, and then leave them to manage as best they can by themselves. The test of a genuinely humanitarian intervention, on this view, is that the intervening forces are quickly in and out. They do not intervene and then stay put for reasons of their own, as the Vietnamese did in Cambodia.

But what if the trouble is internal, the inhumanity locally and widely rooted, a matter of political culture, social structures, historical memories, ethnic fear, resentment, and hatred? Or what if the trouble follows from state failure, the collapse of any effective government, with results closer to Hobbes's than to Kropotkin's predictions—not quite a “war of all against all” but a widely dispersed, disorganized, and murderous war of some against some? No doubt, there are still identifiable evil-doers, but now, let's say, they have support at home, reserves, evil-doers in waiting: what then? And what if there are overlapping sets of victims and victimizers, like the Somalian clans and warlords or, perhaps, the religious/ethnic/national groupings in Bosnia? In all these cases, it may well happen that the quick departure of the intervening forces is followed immediately by the reappearance of the conditions that led to intervention in the first place. Give up the idea of an external and singular evil, and the “in and out” test is very hard to apply.

We are extraordinarily dependent on the victim/victimizer, good guys/bad guys model. I am not sure that any very forceful intervention is politically possible without it. One of the reasons for the weakness of the United Nations in Bosnia has been that many of its representatives on the ground do not believe that the model fits the situation they have to confront. They are not quite apologists for the Serbs, who have (rightly) been condemned in many United Nations resolutions, but they do not regard the Serbs as wholly “bad guys” or as the only “bad guys” in the former Yugoslavia. And that has made it difficult for them to justify the measures that would be necessary to stop the killing and the ethnic cleansing. Imagine that they took those measures, as (in my view) they should have done: wouldn't they also have been required to take collateral measures against the Croats and Bosnian Moslems? In cases like this one, the politics of rescue is certain to be complex and messy.

It is much easier to go into a place like Bosnia than to get out, and the likely costs to the intervening forces and the local population are much higher than in the classic humanitarian interventions of the recent past. That is why American politicians and military officers have insisted that there must be an exit strategy before there can be an intervention. But this demand is effectively an argument against intervening at all. Exit strategies can rarely be designed in advance, and a public commitment to exit within such and such a time would give the hostile forces a strong incentive to lie low and wait. Better to stay home than to intervene in a way that is sure to fail.

Where the policies and practices that need to be stopped are widely supported, sustained by local structures and cultures, any potentially successful intervention is not going to meet the “in and out” test. It is likely to require a much more sustained challenge to conventional sovereignty: a long-term military presence, social reconstruction, what used to be called “political trusteeship” (since few of the locals—at least, the locals with power—can be trusted), and along the way, making

all this possible, the large-scale and reiterated use of force. Is anyone ready for this? The question is especially hard for people on the left who are appalled by what happened or is happening in Bosnia, say, or Rwanda, but who have long argued, most of us, that the best thing to do with an army is to keep it at home. Even those who supported humanitarian interventions in the past have emphasized the moral necessity of a rapid withdrawal, leaving any ongoing use of force to indigenous soldiers.

Now this moral necessity seems to have become a practical, political necessity. Hence the general search for a quick fix, as in President Clinton's proposal (never very vigorously pursued) to "bomb the Serbs, arm the Bosnians." I would have supported both these policies, thinking that they might produce a local solution that, however bloody it turned out to be, could not be worse than what was happening anyway. But what if the quick fix failed, brought on an ever more brutal civil war, with no end in sight? Would we be ready then for a more direct and long-lasting military intervention—and if so, with what sort of an army? Under whose direction? With what weapons systems, what strategy and tactics, what willingness to take casualties and to impose them?

Putting Soldiers at Risk

This last question is probably the crucial one in making intervention increasingly difficult and unlikely. It is very hard these days, in the Western democracies, to put soldiers at risk. But humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping operations are first of all military acts directed against people who are already using force, breaking the peace. They will be ineffective unless there is a willingness to accept the risks that naturally attach to military acts—to shed blood, to lose soldiers. In much of the world, bloodless intervention, peaceful peacekeeping is a contradiction in terms: if it were possible, it

wouldn't be necessary. Insofar as it is necessary, we have to acknowledge the real status and function of the men and women whom we send to do the job. Soldiers are not like Peace Corps volunteers or Fulbright scholars or USIA musicians and lecturers—who should not, indeed, be sent overseas to dangerous places. Soldiers are destined for dangerous places, and they should know that (if they don't, they should be told).

This is not to say that soldiers should be sent recklessly into danger. But acknowledging their status and function poses the question that has to be answered before they are sent anywhere, at the moment their mission is being defined: is this a cause for which we are prepared to see American soldiers die? If this question gets an affirmative answer, then we cannot panic when the first soldier or the first significant number of soldiers, like the eighteen infantrymen in Somalia, are killed in a firefight. The Europeans in Bosnia, it has to be said, didn't even wait to panic: they made it clear from the beginning that the soldiers they sent to open roads and transport supplies were not to be regarded as *soldiers* in any usual sense; these were grown-up Boy Scouts, doing good deeds. But this is a formula for failure. The soldiers who were not soldiers became, in effect, hostages of the Serbian forces that controlled the roads: subject to attack if anyone challenged that control. And the European governments became in turn the opponents of any such challenge.

Should we put soldiers at risk in faraway places when our own country is not under attack or threatened with attack (not Maine or Georgia or Oregon) and when national interests, narrowly understood, are not at stake? I am strongly inclined, sometimes, to give a positive answer to this question (whether volunteers or conscripts should bear these risks is too complicated to take up here). The reason is simple enough: all states have an interest in global stability and even in global humanity, and in the case of wealthy and powerful states like ours, this interest is seconded by obligation. No doubt, the "civilized" world is capable of living with grossly uncivilized

behavior in places like East Timor, say—offstage and out of sight. But behavior of that kind, unchallenged, tends to spread, to be imitated or reiterated. Pay the moral price of silence and callousness, and you will soon have to pay the political price of turmoil and lawlessness nearer home.

I concede that these successive payments are not inevitable, but they come in sequence often enough. We see the sequence most clearly in Hannah Arendt's description of how European brutality in the colonies was eventually carried back to Europe itself. But the process can work in other ways too, as when terrorist regimes in the third world imitate one another (often with help from the first world), and waves of desperate refugees flee into countries where powerful political forces, not yet ascendant, want only to drive them back. For how long will decency survive *here*, if there is no decency *there*? Now obligation is seconded by interest.

As I have already acknowledged, interest and obligation together have often provided an ideology for imperial expansion or cold war advance. So it's the political right that has defended both, while the left has acquired the habit of criticism and rejection. But in this post-imperial and post-cold war age, these positions are likely to be reversed or, at least, confused. Many people on the right see no point in intervention today when there is no material or, for that matter, ideological advantage to be gained. "What's Bosnia to them or they to Bosnia/that they should weep for her?" And a small but growing number of people on the left now favor intervening, here or there, driven by an internationalist ethic. They are right to feel driven. Internationalism has always been understood to require support for, and even participation in, popular struggles. Liberation should always be a local initiative. In the face of human disaster, however, internationalism has a more urgent meaning. It's not possible to wait; anyone who can take the initiative should do so. Active opposition to massacre and massive deportation is morally necessary; its risks must be accepted.

Enduring the Intervention

Even the risk of a blocked exit and a long stay. These days, for reasons we should probably celebrate, countries in trouble are no longer viewed as imperial opportunities. Instead, the metaphors are ominous: they are “bogs” and “quagmires.” Intervening armies won’t be defeated in these sticky settings, but they will suffer a slow attrition—and show no quick or obvious benefits. How did the old empires ever get soldiers to go to such places, to sit in beleaguered encampments, to fight an endless round of small, wearying, unrecorded battles? Today, when every death is televised, democratic citizens (the soldiers themselves or their parents) are unlikely to support or endure interventions of this kind. And yet, sometimes, they ought to be supported and endured. Consider: if some powerful state or regional alliance had rushed troops into Rwanda when the massacres first began or as soon as their scope was apparent, the terrible exodus and the cholera plague might have been avoided. But the troops would still be there, probably, and no one would know what hadn’t happened.

Two forms of long-lasting intervention, both associated in the past with imperial politics, now warrant reconsideration. The first is a kind of trusteeship, where the intervening power actually rules the country it has “rescued,” acting in trust for the inhabitants, seeking to establish a stable and more or less consensual politics. The second is a kind of protectorate, where the intervention brings some local group or coalition of groups to power and is then sustained only defensively, to ensure that there is no return of the defeated regime or the old lawlessness and that minority rights are respected. Rwanda might have been a candidate for trusteeship; Bosnia for a protectorate.

These are arrangements that are hard to recommend and that would, no doubt, be hard to justify in today’s political climate. The lives they saved would be speculative and statistical, not actual lives; only disasters that *might have* occurred (but how can we be sure?) would be avoided. This is

rescue-in-advance, and it will be resisted by those local elites who believe that the need for rescue will never arise if they are allowed to take charge—or who are prepared to take charge at any cost. The very idea of a “failed state” will seem patronizing and arrogant to a group like, say, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which hasn’t yet had a chance to succeed. Nor is the history of trusteeships and protectorates particularly encouraging: the contemporary horror of the Sudanese civil war, for example, is no reason to forget the oppressiveness of the old “Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.” Nonetheless, given what is now going on in Southeast Europe and Central Africa, morally serious people have to think again about the human costs and benefits of what we might call “standing interventions.” Haiti today [October 1994] might provide a test case, since the U.S.-led, multinational force serves as the protector of the restored Aristide government—and that role is likely to be an extended one.

Which States Should Intervene?

Who will, who should, do the “standing” and pay the price of the possible but often invisible victories? This is no doubt the hardest question, but it isn’t, curiously, the one that has attracted the most attention. The public debate has had a different focus—as if there were (as perhaps there once were) a large number of states eager to intervene. So the question is: who can authorize and constrain these interventions, set the ground rules and the time frame, worry about their strategies and tactics? The standard answer on the left, and probably more widely, is that the best authority is international, multilateral—the UN is the obvious example. Behind this preference is an argument something like Rousseau’s argument for the general will: in the course of a democratic decision procedure, Rousseau claimed, the particular interests of the different parties will cancel each other out, leaving a general interest untainted by particularity. As with individuals

in domestic society, so with states in international society: if all of them are consulted, each will veto the self-aggrandizing proposals of the others.

But this isn't a wholly attractive idea, for its result is very likely to be stalemate and inaction, which cannot always be the general will of international society. It is also possible, of course, that some coalition of states, cooperating for the sake of shared (particular) interests, will have its way; or that stalemate will free the UN's bureaucracy to pursue a program of its own. Multilateralism is no guarantee of anything. It may still be better than the unilateral initiative of a single powerful state—though in the examples with which I began, India, Vietnam, and Tanzania, local powers, did not do entirely badly; none of their interventions, with the possible exception of the last, would have been authorized by the U.N. In practice, we should probably look for some concurrence of multilateral authorization and unilateral initiative—the first for the sake of moral legitimacy, the second for the sake of political effectiveness—but it's the initiative that is essential.

Can we assume that there are states ready to take the initiative and sustain it? In Somalia, the United States made the undertaking but was unprepared for the long haul (perhaps the long haul was not called for in this case: no one is reporting today on conditions in the Somalian countryside, so we don't know). Bosnia provides a classic example of a serial rejection of the undertaking: everyone deplored the war and the ethnic cleansing; no one was prepared to stop them—and no one is prepared now to reverse their effects. Similarly, the African states and the Western powers stood by and watched the Rwandan massacres. (Remember the biblical injunction: "Do not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor." The Rwandans, it turned out, had no local or global neighbors until they were dying by the thousands on foreign soil and on television.)

It seems futile to say what is also obvious: that some states should be prepared to intervene in some cases. It is probably equally futile to name the states and the cases, though that is

what I mean to do, on the principle that even futility is improved when it is made less abstract. The European Community or, at least, the French and British together (the Germans were disqualified by their aggression in World War II) ought to have intervened early on in Bosnia. The Organization of African Unity, with the financial help of Europeans and Americans, should have intervened early on in Rwanda. (I concede that the Nigerian-led intervention in Liberia is not an entirely happy precedent, though it has probably slowed the killing.) The United States should have intervened in Haiti months before it did, though the probably necessary protectorate would best have been undertaken by a coalition of Central American and Caribbean states. It is harder to say who should have stopped the killing in southern Sudan or East Timor: there isn't always an obvious candidate or a clear responsibility. It is also hard to say how responsibility passes on, when the obvious candidates refuse its burdens. Should the United States, as the world's only or greatest "great power" be nominated agent-of-last-resort? With the transportation technology at our command, we are probably near enough, and we are certainly strong enough, to stop what needs stopping in most of the cases I have been discussing (though not in all of them at once).

But no one really wants the United States to become the world's policeman, even of-last-resort, as we would quickly see were we to undertake the role. Morally and politically, a division of labor is better, and the best use of American power will often be to press other countries to do their share of the work. Still, we will, and we should be, more widely involved than other countries with fewer resources. Sometimes, the United States should take the initiative; sometimes we should help pay for and even add soldiers to an intervention initiated by somebody else. In many cases, nothing at all will be done unless we are prepared to play one or the other of these parts—either the political lead or a combination of financial backer and supporting player. Old and well-earned suspicions

of American power must give way now to a wary recognition of its necessity. (A friend comments: you would stress the wariness more if there were a Republican president. Probably so.)

Many people on the left will long for a time when this necessary American role is made unnecessary by the creation of an international military force. But this time, though it will obviously come before the much heralded leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom, is still a long way off. Nor would a UN army with its own officers, capable of acting independently in the field, always find itself in the right fields (that is, the killing fields). Its presence or absence would depend on decisions of a Security Council likely to be as divided and uncertain as it is today, still subject to great-power veto and severe budgetary constraints. The useful role played by the UN in Cambodia (organizing and supervising elections) suggests the importance of strengthening its hand. But it wasn't the UN that overthrew Pol Pot and stopped the Khmer Rouge massacres. And so long as we can't be sure of its ability and readiness to do that, we will have to look for and live with unilateral interventions. It is a good thing, again, when these are undertaken by local powers like Vietnam; most often, however, they will depend on global powers like the United States and (we can hope) the European Community.

Despite all that I have said so far, I don't mean to abandon the principle of nonintervention—only to honor its exceptions. It is true that right now there are a lot of exceptions. One reads the newspaper these days shaking. The vast numbers of murdered people; the men, women, and children dying of disease and famine willfully caused or easily preventable; the masses of desperate refugees—none of these are served by reciting high-minded principles. Yes, the norm is not to intervene in other people's countries; the norm is self-determination. But not for *these* people, the victims of tyranny, ideological zeal, ethnic hatred, who are not determining anything for themselves, who urgently need help from outside.

And it isn't enough to wait until the tyrants, the zealots, and the bigots have done their filthy work and then rush food and medicine to the ragged survivors. Whenever the filthy work can be stopped, it should be stopped. And if not by us, the supposedly decent people of this world, then by whom?