



BULLETIN

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The Politics of Rescue

by Michael Walzer

Should we put soldiers at risk in faraway places when our own country is not under, or threatened with, attack, and when national interests, narrowly understood, are not at stake? I am strongly inclined, sometimes, to give a positive answer to this question. 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 'civilised' world is capable of living with grossly uncivilised behaviour in places like East Timor, say - offstage and out of sight. But behaviour of that kind, unchallenged, tends to be imitated or reiterated. Pay the moral price of silence and callousness, and you will soon 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. 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.

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 on the right see no point in intervention today when there is



no material or ideological advantage to be gained. And a small but growing number of people on the left now favour 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 anywhere in the world. But that meant: we have to wait for the popular struggles. 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

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be accepted.

Even the risk of a blocked exit and a long stay. These days, 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 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. If some powerful state or regional alliance had rushed troops into Rwanda when the massacres first began, 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: 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; and 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.

Such arrangements are hard to recommend and 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 would be avoided. This is rescue-in-advance, and it will be resisted by those local elites who believe there will be no need for rescue 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 patronising to a group 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 has gone 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'.

Who will, who should, do the 'standing' and pay the price of the possible but often invisible victories? This is the hardest question, but not one that has attracted the most attention. The public debate has had a different focus - as if there were a large number of states eager to intervene. So the question is: who can authorise 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.

But this isn't wholly attractive, for its result is very likely to be stalemate and inaction. It's also possible 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 programme 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 cases of India's intervention in East Pakistan, and Tanzania's in Uganda, local powers did not do entirely badly; of these interventions, possibly only the second would have been authorised by the UN. In practice, we should probably look for some concurrence of multilateral authorisation 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.

Some states should be prepared to intervene in some cases. The European Community or, at least, the French and British together, ought to have intervened early on in Bosnia. 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 East Timor: there isn't always an obvious candidate or 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.

But no one really wants the United States to become the world's policeman, even of-last-resort. Morally and politically, a division of labour 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 someone 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.)

I don't mean to abandon the principle of non-intervention - only to honour its exceptions. It is true that right now there a lot of exceptions. One reads the newspapers these days shaking. The vast numbers of murdered people, 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, 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?

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