

RESPONSIBILITY TO PRETEXT: WHY 'HUMANITARIAN' INTERVENTION IS IMPERIALISM BY ANOTHER NAME

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Orthodox academic opinion almost ubiquitously embraces humanitarian intervention as a welcomed normative development in international politics – one that should receive the uncritical endorsement of any right-thinking observer. Gone are the days of imperial conquest as humanitarian intervention has ushered in a new era of Western powers risking life and limb in the name of saving strangers. Contrary to the notion that humanitarian interventions are fought in the name of human rights and liberty, I argue that humanitarian interventions are fundamentally no different to wars not described as such. To state my case, I will explore in detail two case studies: the NATO interventions in Yugoslavia in 1999 and Libya in 2011. These interventions will be analysed using the following criterion: a review of the motives of the interventions, the means used throughout the interventions, and the interventions' outcome.

Before delving into the specifics of the aforementioned cases, a point of clarification is in order. There is nothing inherently objectionable about humanitarian intervention in the abstract. As Teson argues “the deeply ingrained view that war is always immoral regardless of cause is mistaken. Sometimes it is morally permissible to fight; occasionally,

fighting is even mandatory” (Teson, 2001: 6). Teson (2001: 7) further states “proponents of humanitarian intervention simply argue that humanitarian intervention in some instances ... is morally justified”. With respect to what these justifiable circumstances may be, Wheeler (2000: 28) cites Waltzer's just war criteria stating humanitarian intervention is “justified when it is a response...to acts that ‘shock the moral conscience of mankind’”. Therefore, in these “exceptional cases of supreme humanitarian emergency”, states “should accept the risk of casualties to end human rights abuses” (Wheeler, 2000: 50). In short, the concept of using military force in faraway lands to protect oppressed groups from genocide or other crimes against humanity is one this author supports.

The problem is that empirical instances of humanitarian intervention very seldom match this description. As mentioned in the introduction, to best demonstrate the fundamentally non-humanitarian nature of such interventions, assessing the motives, means, and outcomes of any given instance of humanitarian intervention is most instructive. This criterion was selected as it is most often referred to by the strongest proponents of humanitarian warfare. Former Australian Foreign Minister and stalwart supporter of the

'Responsibility to Protect' principle, Evans (2008: 60) describes the "criteria of legitimacy" for intervention as follows: "the motivation or primary purpose of the proposed military action [...] the proportionality of the response; and [...] the balances of consequences".

As was also mentioned above, this essay will rely on the case studies of Kosovo and Libya. It is worth mentioning why these particular interventions were selected. Firstly, the chosen cases are some of the most infamous instances of post-Cold War humanitarian intervention. Secondly, the view that these interventions adhere to at least part of the aforementioned criteria is near-ubiquitous in the literature, rendering them at least partly 'humanitarian', according to the conventional wisdom. By way of example, Roberts (1999: 102) argues that NATO's intervention in Kosovo "marked a high point in the increasing emphasis on human rights and humanitarian issues". In the few cases where the war is challenged at all, scholars merely critique how the war was conducted. Wheeler (2000: 284), for example, argues that "NATO acted preventatively and it was right to do so, but it employed the wrong means". In order for the Atlantic Alliance to better demonstrate its unquestioned 'commitment to defending human rights' it should have deployed an invasion force, rather than solely relying on air power. Taking at face value the professed just motives of 'humanitarian interventions' was a theme repeated in much of the post-Libya commentary. Articles asserting the intervention was "paved with good intentions" (Carpenter, 2018: 19-31) and simply "mismanaged" (Zambakari, 2016: 44-62) constituted regular staples in the academic

post-mortem of the war. Simply put, scholars limit their critiques to procedural objections; the sanctity of Western planners' motives are never questioned.

A solid foundation in which to begin any interrogation of the motives of humanitarian interventionists resides in the fundamentally selective nature of their 'humanitarian' wars. If humanitarianism were a principle sincerely held by foreign policy practitioners, surely it would be applied indiscriminately and not only in a handful of ostensibly arbitrary cases. With respect to Kosovo, the apparent double standards surrounding the NATO intervention helps call into question the alliance's professed motivations. After all, the crisis in the Balkans was far from the world's sole human catastrophe taking place throughout the decade, as the Kurds in the south-east of Turkey, the East Timorese, and the residents of Grozny can all attest to.

In response to this common charge, it is often argued that selectivity, in and of itself, doesn't undermine the humanitarian credentials of a given intervention. It is Wheeler's (2000: 49) view that "just because governments are selective [...] does not necessarily mean we should treat their humanitarian justifications as bogus in every case where they are employed". Similarly, Biggar (2013: 233) succinctly states that "it is better to be inconsistently responsible than consistently irresponsible". This is undoubtedly true, but it ignores why the double standards exist in the first place.

It is not just any country whose crimes go seemingly unnoticed by the international

community. Typically, a state is afforded the right to act as they please if they are on good terms with Washington. This was true of NATO member Turkey during their aforementioned slaughter of 30,000 Kurds (Pilger, 2000). The same rules applied to long-time ally Indonesia whose leader, Suharto, was deemed “our kind of guy” (Sanger, 1995) by the Clinton administration, despite the near-genocidal levels of violence he was directly responsible for. Equally, Washington’s one-time ally Russia received unwavering support during their aerial bombardment of Chechnya, with Clinton comparing Boris Yeltsin’s efforts to those of Abraham Lincoln during his campaign against the secessionist south (Basken, 1996).

Expressions of diplomatic flattery notwithstanding, it is often argued that it is simply unfeasible for a state to intervene in defence of an oppressed people wherever they may be found. In some instances, not only would intervention be impractical, it would be disastrous for global security. Addressing the common charge that the West’s failure to act in Chechnya or in defence of the Kurds undermines the humanitarian motives of NATO’s war in Kosovo, Biggar points out that intervention in either of these cases would have almost certainly triggered wider conflicts with Turkey and nuclear-armed Russia. Therefore, “prudence forbids action that is likely to be disproportionate” (Biggar, 2013: 234). Whilst a desire to avoid potentially catastrophic wars is a perfectly reasonable explanation for Western military reticence in either of these cases, it in no way accounts for their proactive role in facilitating these very crises.

For example, 80% of Turkey’s military arsenal used against the Kurds was American-supplied. The Turkish crimes so unfazed Washington that, at the height of the atrocities in 1994, Ankara was the single largest importer of American military hardware (Chomsky, 2012: 11). So, while it is perfectly reasonable to maintain that intervention can often be impractical and counterproductive, is there any moral imperative for refusing to cut off arms sales?

The aforementioned case of Indonesia and East Timor is also instructive. After declaring their independence in August 1999, the East Timorese had the wrath of Jakarta to contend with. Indonesian troops are estimated to have killed 10,000 people and said to have driven as many as 750,000 out of their homes as part of their effort to deny the people of East Timor their right to self-determination (Chomsky, 2012). In this instance, not only were Western powers once again intransigently arming the aggressor, but extraordinary measures were deployed to obstruct attempts at bringing the Indonesian authorities to justice.

The United Nations wished to send a team of forensic experts to the scene to gather evidence of war crimes. Washington had other ideas and blocked the deployment of these investigators until Indonesia’s rainy season commenced (Chomsky, 2015). Isabel Ferreira, East Timor’s Human Rights co-ordinator, left no doubt as to what this meant “when the rainy season begins, all the bodies will be washed away into the rivers and there will be no evidence left to investigate” (Chomsky, 2012).

In short, what the above examples demonstrate is that the same actors who professed to value the lives of Kosovar Albanians and insisted that ‘something must be done’ to stop Serb atrocities had no qualms about facilitating – and covering up – slaughters of equal or greater proportion. This serves as a clear illustration that NATO’s decision to intervene in Yugoslavia was not based on a sincerely held conviction to avert human suffering. Instead, it seems clear that the intervention was guided by a different set of ulterior motives.

There were a number of motivating factors that drove NATO’s war but one, in particular, is worth underscoring. It had long been an American objective to fully marketise the European continent, a fact admitted internally by Washington policymakers. For example, in 1982, the Reagan administration published U.S. National Security Decision Directive 54: United States Policy Towards Eastern Europe. This text called for a “quiet revolution” to break-up Europe’s communist governments (Parenti, 2000: 25). This was followed by a similar strategy document two years later, USNSDD 133: United States Foreign Policy Towards Yugoslavia, which called for bringing the socialist state into the “orbit of the world market” (Parenti, 2000: 25). It is through this lens that NATO’s war against Yugoslavia must be viewed.

Viewing the intervention as part of an American effort to marketise the Yugoslav economy helps explain subsequent remarks made by the then-Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. Writing in the foreword of a 2005

book on the subject, Talbott candidly stated “it was Yugoslavia’s resistance to the broader trends of political and economic reform – not the plight of Kosovo Albanians – that best explains NATO’s war” (Norris, 2005: xxiii).

Talbott’s earnest writing helps provide crucial context to the, arguably, even more significant admission from the then-Supreme Commander of NATO, General Wesley Clark. According to Clark, the NATO intervention drawn up by the “political leadership” was not “designed as a means of blocking Serb ethnic cleansing. It was not designed as a means of waging war against the Serb [...] forces in Kosovo. Not in any way. There was never any intent to do that” (Chomsky, 1999: 36). If this isn’t enough to call into question the intervention’s ‘humanitarian’ credentials, the words of Elmar Schmähling – the then-head of German military intelligence – should leave little doubt about NATO’s true motives. The NATO strategy, Schmähling insists, was to “put pressure on the civilian population” and “to destroy the Yugoslav economy so deeply it would not recover” (Pilger, 2016: 148).

These admissions from figures intimately involved in the war’s planning serve as a useful explanation for the means used during the 78-day bombing campaign. Keeping in mind that the intervention was not designed as a means of blocking Serb ethnic cleansing and was instead intended to put pressure on the civilian population, it is little wonder NATO’s ‘humanitarian’ bombs destroyed bridges, water supplies, and electricity sources, often in areas of no discernible military importance. The case of Vojvodina is an instructive example. A region

located hundreds of miles from Kosovo - which, according to international observers, was entirely peaceful just days before the bombing commenced on March 24, 1999 - experienced some of the highest levels of NATO violence (Chomsky, 1999:34). Similarly, Podgorica's refusal to participate in Yugoslav military action did not spare Montenegrin cities from the Atlantic Alliance's aerial bombardment (Chinkin and Kaldor, 2017: 192).

With respect to destroying the Yugoslav economy so deeply it would not recover, it is worth examining what NATO targeted, specifically. During the campaign, NATO destroyed fuel storage facilities, oil refineries, chemical factories, airports, railways, and warehouses (Parenti, 2000: 167). Perhaps the most transparent demonstration of NATO's true agenda comes from a study by the Confederation of Trade Unions of Serbia. According to their research, of the 164 factories destroyed during the bombing, all were state-owned (Parenti, 2000: 166).

In addition to selecting highly questionable targets, NATO's weapons of choice should cast further doubt on the 'humanitarian' nature of the war. How, for example, the use of illegal depleted uranium was intended to alleviate the suffering of Kosovar Albanians was never explained (Rudic, 2018). Similarly, the military necessity of using prohibited cluster bombs - which accounted for half of all the British bombs dropped - remains unclear (Curtis, 2003: 146).

As would be expected after employing such violent means in predominantly civilian areas, the ultimate outcome of NATO's intervention

was far from 'humanitarian'. An estimated 1,200 to 2,500 Serb civilians perished as a result of the bombing (B92, 2006). Moreover, those fortunate enough to have survived the conflict did not necessarily escape unscathed. NATO's use of illegal chemical weapons condemned Serbia to the highest cancer mortality rate in the whole of Europe (B92, 2015).

In fairness, NATO's intervention was not waged in defence of Serbs; rather, the Western powers acted to protect Kosovar Albanians from imminent harm. Therefore, to consider the war's ultimate outcome 'humanitarian', one ought not to look further than NATO's success in this regard. Unfortunately, here too the Atlantic Alliance failed.

The OSCE's December 1999 report on the conflict found that the majority of Serb violence against the Albanians took place after NATO's bombing commenced - the precise opposite of the alliance's professed intentions (Pilger, 2016: 150). To make matters worse, this is the exact outcome Western powers anticipated before deciding to go to war. By way of example, the American diplomat Norma Brown stated in the bombing's aftermath that "there was no humanitarian catastrophe until NATO began to bomb ... Everyone knew that a humanitarian crisis would arise if NATO started to bomb" (Curtis, 2003: 136). Similarly, the then-Chair of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Shelton, reportedly warned prior to the bombing that intervention would "provoke Serb soldiers into greater acts of butchery" (Curtis, 2003: 139). Even General Wesley Clark has subsequently conceded that it was "entirely predictable" military action would worsen the humanitarian

situation (Curtis, 2003: 139).

Turning to Libya, it is instructive to begin an analysis of NATO's motivations in this intervention by, once again, highlighting the transparently selective nature of the conflict. Just like Kosovo, the violence in Libya was hardly aberrational. To illustrate this point, it is worth examining the case of Sri Lanka. In 2008 and continuing into 2009, Colombo waged its final assault against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam insurgents in an attempt to bring an end to its decade-long conflict. In so doing, it is estimated that as many as 40,000 civilians were killed (Doucet, 2012). Despite some calls for the invocation of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, the Western humanitarian warriors, who could not possibly countenance sitting on the sidelines in the face of Libya's (comparatively far less severe) violence, appeared uninterested in coming to Sri Lanka's rescue (Herman and Peterson, 2011: xii). By now, there is little need for detailed elaboration. Washington was on very good terms with the Sri Lankan authorities. As an expression of gratitude for these cordial relations, the U.S. had sent two billion dollars' worth of military aid Colombo's way, which would prove instrumental in ensuring the deadly efficiency of their violence (Herman and Peterson, 2011: xvi).

Perhaps the most revealing example concerns the West's long-standing allies in Saudi Arabia. Western powers were so determined to give their Libyan intervention a veil of legitimacy that they brokered a deal with their counterparts in Riyadh. According to diplomatic sources at the United Nations, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised to "green light"

the Kingdom's incursion into neighbouring Bahrain in return for an Arab League endorsement of NATO's proposed action (Curtis, 2018: 373). Simply put, in order to put a stop to one government's suppression of peaceful protesters, Washington consciously authorised another. This, in itself, should completely refute any suggestion of NATO's benign intentions.

To further undermine NATO's professed intentions it is worth considering that, although serious, the humanitarian situation in Libya in the war's prelude was far from catastrophic. As Professor Alan Kuperman observes, "the best evidence Khadafy did not plan a genocide in Benghazi is that he did not perpetrate it in the other cities he recaptured" (Forte, 2012: 242). This was true in the cities of Ajdabiya and Zawiya where the death toll barely reached the hundreds. In Bayda, between 59 and 64 are estimated to have been killed (Forte, 2012: 244). In one of the more extreme cases, Misrata, 257 lost their lives, a figure just north of the 232 killed by the Egyptian authorities in Cairo (Forte, 2012: 244). Readers can draw their own conclusions as to why there were no calls for intervention to stop these relatively comparable atrocities in Egypt.

Perhaps because the violence in Libya was not particularly exceptional, Western planners resorted to grossly exaggerating the on-ground situation to lend their proposed action much-needed credence. The then-U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice charged that Gaddafi had armed his troops with Viagra as part of an effort to encourage mass rape (MacAskill, 2011). Hillary Clinton echoed these baseless allegations, proclaiming the Libyan army was

using both violence against women and rape as “tools of war” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2012). Eventually, after these claims had outlived their usefulness, the truth emerged. Cherif Bassiouni, who led the UN’s Libya human rights investigation, determined that these charges were nothing more than the product of “massive hysteria” (Harding, 2011).

Worse still was the aforementioned charge of imminent slaughter in Benghazi. Central to NATO’s justification for war was the claim Gaddafi had hired black mercenaries from neighbouring African states to commit “genocide” in the coastal Libyan city (Smith, 2011). This allegation was nothing more than a total fabrication, a fact implicitly admitted by even the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). In their February 2016 report, they concluded that charges of looming genocide were completely unfounded. So, if Western leaders really were convinced by the sanctity of their own case, why did they engage in such atrocity propaganda?

Naturally, this raises questions about the alliance’s actual motivations. It is not far-fetched to suggest wars for oil have long been staples of Western foreign policy (Muttitt, 2012). Based on the internal record, Libya appears perfectly in keeping with this long-established practice. To demonstrate this point, the following leaked 2007 internal memo from the U.S. embassy in Tripoli is worth examining. It lamented that Gaddafi’s oil policy was becoming increasingly “nationalistic” which “could jeopardize effective exploitation of Libya’s extensive oil and gas reserves” (The Telegraph, 2011). Gaddafi further provoked the ire of the West after renegotiating

preexisting oil contracts with foreign firms one year prior to NATO’s intervention. Under Libya’s new terms, private companies would only be entitled to 12% of the oil revenue, as opposed to the previous arrangement of 50%. According to The Wall Street Journal, this so frustrated Western oil giants that they “hoped regime change in Libya ... would bring relief in some of the tough terms they had agreed to in partnership deals” (Faucon, 2012). It may still be speculative to suggest this was the impetus for war, but leaked emails from Hillary Clinton’s close adviser Sydney Blumenthal strengthens this view. According to Blumenthal, France’s intervention was primarily driven “by a desire to gain a greater share of Libya (sic) oil production” (Edwards and Cromwell, 2018).

Despite their insistence that the intervention was strictly for the purposes of civilian protection, the above strongly indicates that NATO planners had other ideas. This is further evidenced in the way the war was prosecuted. Far from protecting civilian life, the Atlantic Alliance went so far as to, on occasion, directly target it, along with much civilian infrastructure (Ahmed, 2015). This was, perhaps, most viciously done in the Gaddafi loyalist stronghold of Sirte. An entirely peaceful city before NATO arrived, the benign humanitarians visited a ferocious aerial bombardment on its residents from the earliest stages of the conflict (Forte, 2012: 86).

Also inconsistent with NATO’s limited mandate is their direct targeting of Gaddafi himself. Contrary to their repeated denials of wanting regime change, NATO forces regularly targeted the Libyan leader throughout the entire campaign. Then-British Defence Secretary Liam Fox, for example, revealed that NATO

intelligence and reconnaissance assets were utilised in an attempt to “hunt down” Gaddafi (Forte, 2012: 121). Similarly, Fox’s American counterpart, Leon Panetta, boasted “it was a U.S. drone combined with the other NATO planes that fired on the [Gaddafi] convoy” (Forte, 2012: 125).

Naturally, NATO’s self-serving agenda did not yield a humanitarian outcome. Once they had succeeded in removing Gaddafi from power, the Atlantic Alliance cared little for the welfare of the country. In the true spirit of humanitarianism, Libya was abandoned and left to its own devices as competing bands of militias - many of whom received clandestine support from Western capitals (Hosenball, 2011) - fought for power in the ‘liberated’ nation. The result was a civil war which continues to plague the country to this day. What was formerly the richest country in Africa is now home to, among other things, slave markets (BBC, 2017).

Despite the official pronouncements stemming from Western policymakers, along with much of the academic community and mainstream journalism, humanitarian intervention is in no way representative of a normative foreign policy development. On the evidence of everything just discussed, it seems clear that ‘humanitarian’ interventions are antithetical to any discernible interpretation of humanitarianism. That the concept has persisted for so long and met limited serious scrutiny speaks to its great utility. Humanitarian intervention is not an expression of Western planners’ desire to put a stop to human suffering wherever it may be found; rather, it is a prolific weapon in the propaganda arsenal of politicians seeking to make their self-serving imperialists pursuits more palatable to war-weary publics.

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