

Humanitarian Imperialism

The New Doctrine of Imperial Right

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Jean Bricmont's concept "humanitarian imperialism" succinctly captures a dilemma that has faced Western leaders and the Western intellectual community since the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the origins of the Cold War, there was a reflexive justification for every resort to force and terror, subversion and economic strangulation: the acts were undertaken in defense against what John F. Kennedy called "the monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" based in the Kremlin (or sometimes in Beijing), a force of unmitigated evil dedicated to extending its brutal sway over the entire world. The formula covered just about every imaginable case of intervention, no matter what the facts might be. But with the Soviet Union gone, either the policies would have to change, or new justifications would have to be devised. It became clear very quickly which course would be followed, casting new light on what had come before, and on the institutional basis of policy.

The end of the Cold War unleashed an impressive flow of rhetoric assuring the world that the West would now be free to pursue its traditional dedication to freedom, democracy, justice, and human rights unhampered by superpower rivalry, though there were some—called "realists" in international relations theory—who warned that in "granting idealism a near exclusive hold on our foreign policy," we may be going too far and might harm our interests.¹ Such notions as "humanitarian intervention" and "the responsibility to protect" soon came to be salient features of Western discourse on policy, commonly described as establishing a "new norm" in international affairs.

The millennium ended with an extraordinary display of self-congratulation on the part of Western intellectuals, awe-struck at the sight of the "idealistic new world bent on ending inhumanity," which had entered a "noble phase" in its foreign policy with a "saintly glow" as for the first time in history a state is dedicated to "principles and values," acting from "altruism" and "moral fervor" alone as the leader of the "enlightened states," hence free to use force where its leaders "believe it to be just"—only a small sample of a deluge from respected liberal voices.²

Several questions immediately come to mind. First, how does the self-image conform to the historical record prior to the end of the Cold War? If it does not, then what reason would there be

¹ New York Times chief diplomatic correspondent Thomas Friedman, quoting a high government official, January 12, 1992.

² For more, and sources, see my *New Military Humanism* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 1999).

to expect a sudden dedication to “granting idealism a near exclusive hold on our foreign policy,” or any hold at all? And how in fact did policies change with the superpower enemy gone? A prior question is whether such considerations should even arise.

There are two views about the significance of the historical record. The attitude of those who celebrate the “emerging norms” is expressed clearly by one of their most distinguished scholar/advocates, international relations professor Thomas Weiss: critical examination of the record, he writes, is nothing more than “sound-bites and invectives about Washington’s historically evil foreign policy,” hence “easy to ignore.”³

A conflicting stance is that policy decisions substantially flow from institutional structures, and since these remain stable, examination of the record provides valuable insight into the “emerging norms” and the contemporary world. That is the stance that Bricmont adopts in his study of “the ideology of human rights,” and that I will adopt here.

There is no space for a review of the record, but just to illustrate, let us keep to the Kennedy administration, the left-liberal extreme of the political spectrum, with an unusually large component of liberal intellectuals in policy-making positions. During these years, the standard formula was invoked to justify the invasion of South Vietnam in 1962, laying the basis for one of the great crimes of the twentieth century.

By then the U.S.-imposed client regime could no longer control the indigenous resistance evoked by massive state terror, which had killed tens of thousands of people. Kennedy therefore sent the U.S. Air Force to begin regular bombing of South Vietnam, authorized napalm and chemical warfare to destroy crops and ground cover, and initiated the programs that drove millions of South Vietnamese peasants to urban slums or to camps where they were surrounded by barbed wire to “protect” them from the South Vietnamese resistance forces that they were supporting, as Washington knew. All in defense against the two Great Satans, Russia and China, or the “Sino-Soviet axis.”⁴

In the traditional domains of U.S. power, the same formula led to Kennedy’s shift of the mission of the Latin American military from “hemispheric defense”—a holdover from the Second World War—to “internal security.” The consequences were immediate. In the words of Charles Maechling—who led U.S. counterinsurgency and internal defense planning through the Kennedy and early Johnson years—U.S. policy shifted from toleration “of the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military” to “direct complicity” in their crimes, to U.S. support for “the methods of Heinrich Himmler’s extermination squads.”

One critical case was the Kennedy administration’s preparation of the military coup in Brazil to overthrow the mildly social democratic Goulart government. The planned coup took place shortly after Kennedy’s assassination, establishing the first of a series of vicious National Security States and setting off a plague of repression throughout the continent that lasted through Reagan’s terrorist wars that devastated Central America in the 1980s. With the same justification, Kennedy’s 1962 military mission to Colombia advised the government to resort to “paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents,” actions that “should be backed by the United States.” In the Latin American context, the phrase “known communist

³ Boston Review (February 1994).

⁴ For detailed examination of the role assigned to China in the “virulence and pervasiveness of American visionary globalism underlying Washington’s strategic policy” in Asia, see James Peck, *Washington’s China* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

proponents” referred to labor leaders, priests organizing peasants, human rights activists, in fact anyone committed to social change in violent and repressive societies.

These principles were quickly incorporated into the training and practices of the military. The respected president of the Colombian Permanent Committee for Human Rights, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfredo Vásquez Carrizosa, wrote that the Kennedy administration “took great pains to transform our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades, accepting the new strategy of the death squads,” ushering in what is known in Latin America as the National Security Doctrine,...not defense against an external enemy, but a way to make the military establishment the masters of the game [with] the right to combat the internal enemy, as set forth in the Brazilian doctrine, the Argentine doctrine, the Uruguayan doctrine, and the Colombian doctrine: it is the right to fight and to exterminate social workers, trade unionists, men and women who are not supportive of the establishment, and who are assumed to be communist extremists. And this could mean anyone, including human rights activists such as myself.

In 2002, an Amnesty International mission to protect human rights defenders worldwide began with a visit to Colombia, chosen because of its extreme record of state-backed violence against these courageous activists, as well as labor leaders, more of whom were killed in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined, not to speak of campesinos, indigenous people, and Afro-Colombians, the most tragic victims. As a member of the delegation, I was able to meet with a group of human rights activists in Vásquez Carrizosa’s heavily guarded home in Bogotá, hearing their painful reports and later taking testimonials in the field, a shattering experience.

The same formula sufficed for the campaign of subversion and violence that placed newly independent Guyana under the rule of the cruel dictator Forbes Burnham. It was also invoked to justify Kennedy’s campaigns against Cuba after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. In his biography of Robert Kennedy, the eminent liberal historian and Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger writes that the task of bringing “the terrors of the earth” to Cuba was assigned by the president to his brother, Robert Kennedy, who took it as his highest priority. The terrorist campaign continued at least through the 1990s, though in later years the U.S. government did not carry out the terrorist operations itself but only provided support for them and a haven for terrorists and their commanders, among them the notorious Orlando Bosch and joining him recently, Luis Posada Carilles. Commentators have been polite enough not to remind us of the Bush Doctrine: “those who harbor terrorists are as guilty as the terrorists themselves” and must be treated accordingly, by bombing and invasion; a doctrine that has “unilaterally revoked the sovereignty of states that provide sanctuary to terrorists,” Harvard international affairs specialist Graham Allison observes, and has “already become a de facto rule of international relations”—with the usual exceptions.

Internal documents of the Kennedy-Johnson years reveal that a leading concern in the case of Cuba was its “successful defiance” of U.S. policies tracing back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which declared (but could not yet implement) U.S. control over the hemisphere. It was feared that Cuba’s “successful defiance,” particularly if accompanied by successful independent development, might encourage others suffering from comparable conditions to pursue a similar path, the rational version of the domino theory that is a persistent feature of policy formation. For that reason, the documentary record reveals, it was necessary to punish the civilian population severely until they overthrew the offending government.

This is a bare sample of a few years of intervention under the most liberal U.S. administration, justified to the public in defensive terms. The broader record is much the same. With similar pretexts, the Russian dictatorship justified its harsh control of its Eastern European dungeon.

The reasons for intervention, subversion, terror, and repression are not obscure. They are summarized accurately by Patrice McSherry in the most careful scholarly study of Operation Condor, the international terrorist operation established with U.S. backing in Pinochet's Chile: "the Latin American militaries, normally acting with the support of the U.S. government, overthrew civilian governments and destroyed other centers of democratic power in their societies (parties, unions, universities, and constitutionalist sectors of the armed forces) precisely when the class orientation of the state was about to change or was in the process of change, shifting state power to non-elite social sectors...Preventing such transformations of the state was a key objective of Latin American elites, and U.S. officials considered it a vital national security interest as well."⁵

It is easy to demonstrate that what are termed "national security interests" have only an incidental relation to the security of the nation, though they have a very close relation to the interests of dominant sectors within the imperial state, and to the general state interest of ensuring obedience.

The United States is an unusually open society. Hence there is no difficulty documenting the leading principles of global strategy since the Second World War. Even before the United States entered the war, high-level planners and analysts concluded that in the postwar world the United States should seek "to hold unquestioned power," acting to ensure the "limitation of any exercise of sovereignty" by states that might interfere with its global designs. They recognized further that "the foremost requirement" to secure these ends was "the rapid fulfillment of a program of complete rearmament," then as now a central component of "an integrated policy to achieve military and economic supremacy for the United States." At the time, these ambitions were limited to "the non-German world," which was to be organized under the U.S. aegis as a "Grand Area," including the Western hemisphere, the former British Empire, and the Far East. As Russia beat back the Nazi armies after Stalingrad, and it became increasingly clear that Germany would be defeated, the plans were extended to include as much of Eurasia as possible.

A more extreme version of the largely invariant grand strategy is that no challenge can be tolerated to the "power, position, and prestige of the United States," so the American Society of International Law was instructed by the prominent liberal statesman Dean Acheson, one of the main architects of the postwar world. He was speaking in 1963, shortly after the missile crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. There are few basic changes in the guiding conceptions as we proceed to the Bush II doctrine, which elicited unusual mainstream protest, not because of its basic content, but because of its brazen style and arrogance, as was pointed out by Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who was well aware of Clinton's similar doctrine.

The collapse of the "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" led to a change of tactics, but not fundamental policy. That was clearly understood by policy analysts. Dimitri Simes, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, observed that Gorbachev's initiatives would "liberate American foreign policy from the straightjacket imposed by superpower hostility."⁶ He identified three major components of "liberation." First, the United States would be able to shift NATO costs to its European competitors, one way to avert the traditional concern that Europe might seek an independent path. Second, the United States can end "the manipulation of America by third world nations." The manipulation of the rich by the undeserving poor has always been

⁵ McSherry, *Predatory States* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

⁶ Simes, "If the Cold War Is Over, Then What?," *New York Times*, December 27, 1988.

a serious problem, particularly acute with regard to Latin America, which in the preceding five years had transferred some \$150 billion to the industrial West in addition to \$100 billion of capital flight, amounting to twenty-five times the total value of the Alliance for Progress and fifteen times the Marshall Plan.

This huge hemorrhage is part of a complicated system whereby Western banks and Latin American elites enrich themselves at the expense of the general population of Latin America, who are then saddled with the “debt crisis” that results from these manipulations.

But thanks to Gorbachev’s capitulation the United States can now resist “unwarranted third world demands for assistance” and take a stronger stand when confronting “defiant third world debtors.”

The third and most significant component of “liberation,” Simes continues, is that the decline in the “Soviet threat...makes military power more useful as a United States foreign policy instrument...against those who contemplate challenging important American interests.” America’s hands will now be “untied” and Washington can benefit from “greater reliance on military force in a crisis.”

The Bush I administration, then in office, at once made clear its understanding of the end of the Soviet threat. A few months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the administration released a new National Security Strategy. On the domestic front, it called for strengthening “the defense industrial base,” creating incentives “to invest in new facilities and equipment as well as in research and development.” The phrase “defense industrial base” is a euphemism referring to the high-tech economy, which relies crucially on the dynamic state sector to socialize cost and risk and eventually privatize profit—sometimes decades later, as in the case of computers and the Internet. The government understands well that the U.S. economy is remote from the free market model that is hailed in doctrine and imposed on those who are too weak to resist, a traditional theme of economic history, recently reviewed insightfully by international economist Ha-Joon Chang.⁷

In the international domain, the Bush I National Security Strategy recognized that “the more likely demands for the use of our military forces may not involve the Soviet Union and may be in the Third World, where new capabilities and approaches may be required.” The United States must concentrate attention on “lower-order threats like terrorism, subversion, insurgency, and drug trafficking [which] are menacing the United States, its citizenry, and its interests in new ways.” “Forces will have to accommodate to the austere environment, immature basing structure, and significant ranges often encountered in the Third World.” “Training and research and development” will have to be “better attuned to the needs of low-intensity conflict,” crucially, counterinsurgency in the third world. With the Soviet Union gone from the scene, the world “has now evolved from a ‘weapon rich environment’ [Russia] to a ‘target rich environment’ [the South].” The United States will face “increasingly capable Third World Threats,” military planners elaborated.

Consequently, the National Security Strategy explained, the United States must maintain a huge military system and the ability to project power quickly worldwide, with primary reliance on nuclear weapons, which, Clinton planners explained, “cast a shadow over any crisis or conflict” and permit free use of conventional forces. The reason is no longer the vanished Soviet threat, but rather “the growing technological sophistication of Third World conflicts.” That is par-

⁷ Ha-Joon Chang, *Bad Samaritans* (Random House, 2007).

ticularly true in the Middle East, where the “threats to our interests” that have required direct military engagement “could not be laid at the Kremlin’s door,” contrary to decades of pretense, no longer useful with the Soviet Union gone. In reality, the “threat to our interests” had always been indigenous nationalism. The fact was sometimes acknowledged, as when Robert Komer, the architect of President Carter’s Rapid Deployment Force (later Central Command), aimed primarily at the Middle East, testified before Congress in 1980 that its most likely role was not to resist a (highly implausible) Soviet attack, but to deal with indigenous and regional unrest, in particular, the “radical nationalism” that has always been a primary concern, worldwide.

The term “radical” falls into the same category as “known Communist proponent.” It does not mean radical. Rather, it means not under our control. Thus Iraq at the time was not radical. On the contrary, Saddam continued to be a favored friend and ally well after he had carried out his most horrendous atrocities (Halabja, al-Anfal, and others) and after the end of the war with Iran, for which he had received substantial support from the Reagan administration, among others. In keeping with these warm relations, in 1989 President Bush invited Iraqi nuclear engineers to the United States for advanced training in nuclear weapons development, and in early 1990, sent a high-level Senatorial delegation to Iraq to convey his personal greetings to his friend Saddam. The delegation was led by Senate majority leader Bob Dole, later Republican presidential candidate, and included other prominent Senators. They brought Bush’s personal greetings, advised Saddam that he should disregard criticisms he might hear from some segments of the irresponsible American press, and assured him that the government would do what it could to end these unfortunate practices.

A few months later Saddam invaded Kuwait, disregarding orders, or perhaps misunderstanding ambiguous signals from the State Department. That was a real crime, and he instantly switched from respected friend to evil incarnate.

It is instructive to consider the reaction to Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, both the rhetorical outrage and the military response, a devastating blow to Iraqi civilian society that left the tyranny firmly in place. The events and their interpretation reveal a good deal about the continuities of policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and about the intellectual and moral culture that sustains policy decisions.

Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 was the second case of post-Cold War aggression. The first was Bush’s invasion of Panama a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in November 1989. The Panama invasion was scarcely more than a footnote to a long and sordid history, but it differed from earlier exercises in some respects.

A basic difference was explained by Elliott Abrams, then a high official responsible for Near East and North African Affairs, now charged with “promoting democracy” under Bush II, particularly in the Middle East. Echoing Simes, Abrams observed that “developments in Moscow have lessened the prospect for a small operation to escalate into a superpower conflict.”⁸ The resort to force, as in Panama, was more feasible than before, thanks to the disappearance of the Soviet deterrent. Similar reasoning applied to the reaction to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. With the Soviet deterrent in place, the United States and Britain would have been unlikely to risk placing huge forces in the desert and carrying out the military operations in the manner they did.

The goal of the Panama invasion was to kidnap Manuel Noriega, a petty thug who was brought to Florida and sentenced for narcotrafficking and other crimes that were mostly committed when

⁸ Reporters’ paraphrase; Stephen Kurkjian and Adam Pertman, *Boston Globe*, January 5, 1990.

he was on the CIA payroll. But he had become disobedient—for example, failing to support Washington’s terrorist war against Nicaragua with sufficient enthusiasm—so he had to go. The Soviet threat could no longer be invoked in the standard fashion, so the action was depicted as defense of the United States from Hispanic narco trafficking, which was overwhelmingly in the domain of Washington’s Colombian allies. While presiding over the invasion, President Bush announced new loans to Iraq to achieve the “goal of increasing U.S. exports and put us in a better position to deal with Iraq regarding its human rights record”—so the State Department replied to the few inquiries from Congress, apparently without irony. The media wisely chose silence.

Victorious aggressors do not investigate their crimes, so the toll of Bush’s Panama invasion is not known with any precision. It appears, however, that it was considerably more deadly than Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait a few months later. According to Panamanian human rights groups, the U.S. bombing of the El Chorillo slums and other civilian targets killed several thousand poor people, far more than the estimated toll of the invasion of Kuwait. The matter is of no interest in the West, but Panamanians have not forgotten. In December 2007, Panama once again declared a Day of Mourning to commemorate the U.S. invasion; it scarcely merited a flicker of an eyelid in the United States.

Also gone from history is the fact that Washington’s greatest fear when Saddam invaded Kuwait was that he would imitate the U.S. invasion of Panama. Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned that Saddam “will withdraw, [putting] his puppet in. Everyone in the Arab world will be happy.” In contrast, when Washington partially withdrew from Panama after putting its puppet in, Latin Americans were far from happy.

The invasion aroused great anger throughout the region, so much so that the new regime was expelled from the Group of Eight Latin American democracies as a country under military occupation. Washington was well aware, Latin American scholar Stephen Ropp observed, “that removing the mantle of United States protection would quickly result in a civilian or military overthrow of Endara and his supporters”—that is, the regime of bankers, businessmen, and narco traffickers installed by Bush’s invasion.

Even that government’s own Human Rights Commission charged four years later that the right to self-determination and sovereignty of the Panamanian people continues to be violated by the “state of occupation by a foreign army.” Fear that Saddam would mimic the invasion of Panama appears to be the main reason why Washington blocked diplomacy and insisted on war, with almost complete media cooperation—and, as is often the case, in violation of public opinion, which on the eve of the invasion, overwhelmingly supported a regional conference to settle the confrontation along with other outstanding Middle East issues. That was essentially Saddam’s proposal at the time, though only those who read fringe dissident publications or conducted their own research projects could have been aware of that.

Washington’s concern for human rights in Iraq was dramatically revealed, once again, shortly after the invasion, when Bush authorized Saddam to crush a Shi’ite rebellion in the South that would probably have overthrown him. Official reasoning was outlined by Thomas Friedman, then chief diplomatic correspondent of the New York Times. Washington hoped for “the best of all worlds,” Friedman explained: “an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein” that would restore the status quo ante when Saddam’s “iron fist...held Iraq together, much to the satisfaction of the American allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia”—and, of course, the boss in Washington. But this happy outcome proved unfeasible, so the masters of the region had to settle for second best: the same “iron fist” they had been fortifying all along. Veteran Times Middle East correspondent

Alan Cowell added that the rebels failed because “very few people outside Iraq wanted them to win”: The United States and “its Arab coalition partners” came to “a strikingly unanimous view [that] whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West and the region a better hope for his country’s stability than did those who have suffered his repression.”

The term “stability” is used here in its standard technical meaning: subordination to Washington’s will. There is no contradiction, for example, when liberal commentator James Chace, former editor of *Foreign Affairs*, explains that the United States sought to “destabilize a freely elected Marxist government in Chile” because “we were determined to seek stability” (under the Pinochet dictatorship).

With the Soviet pretext gone, the record of criminal intervention continued much as before. One useful index is military aid. As is well known in scholarship, U.S. aid “has tended to flow disproportionately to Latin American governments which torture their citizens,...to the hemisphere’s relatively egregious violators of fundamental human rights.” That includes military aid, is independent of need, and runs through the Carter period.⁹ More wide-ranging studies by economist Edward Herman found a similar correlation worldwide, also suggesting a plausible explanation. He found that aid, not surprisingly, is correlated with improvement in the investment climate.

Such improvement is often achieved by murdering priests and union leaders, massacring peasants trying to organize, blowing up the independent press, and so on. The result is a secondary correlation between aid and egregious violation of human rights. It would be wrong, then, to conclude that U.S. leaders (like their counterparts elsewhere) prefer torture; rather, it has little weight in comparison with more important values. These studies precede the Reagan years, when the questions were not worth posing because the correlations were so overwhelmingly obvious.

The pattern continued after the Cold War. Outside of Israel and Egypt, a separate category, the leading recipient of U.S. aid as the Cold War ended was El Salvador, which, along with Guatemala, was the site of the most extreme terrorist violence of the horrifying Reagan years in Central America, almost entirely attributable to the state terrorist forces armed and trained by Washington, as subsequent Truth Commissions documented. Washington was barred by Congress from providing aid directly to the Guatemalan murderers. They were effusively lauded by Reagan, but he had to turn to an international terror network of proxy states to fill the gap. In El Salvador, however, the United States could carry out the terrorist war unhampered by such annoyances.

One prime target was the Catholic Church, which had committed a grave sin: it began to take the Gospels seriously and adopted “the preferential option for the poor.” It therefore had to be destroyed by U.S.-backed violence, with strong Vatican support. The decade opened with the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Romero while saying mass, a few days after he had sent a letter to President Carter pleading with him to cut off aid to the murderous junta, aid that “will surely increase injustice here and sharpen the repression that has been unleashed against the people’s organizations fighting to defend their most fundamental human rights.”

Aid soon flowed, paving the way for “a war of extermination and genocide against a defenseless civilian population,” as the aftermath was described by Archbishop Romero’s successor. The decade ended when the elite Atlacatl Brigade, armed and trained by Washington, blew out the

⁹ Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

brains of six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, after compiling a bloody record of the usual victims. None of this enters elite Western consciousness, by virtue of “wrong agency.”

By the time Clinton took over, a political settlement had been reached in El Salvador, so it lost its position as leading recipient of U.S. military aid. It was replaced by Turkey, then conducting some of the worst atrocities of the 1990s, targeting its harshly oppressed Kurdish population. Tens of thousands were killed, 3,500 towns and villages were destroyed, huge numbers of refugees fled (three million, according to analyses by Kurdish human rights organizations), large areas were laid waste, dissidents were imprisoned, hideous torture and other atrocities were standard fare. Clinton provided 80 percent of the needed arms, including high-tech equipment used for savage crimes. In the single year 1997, Clinton sent more military aid to Turkey than in the entire Cold War period combined before the counterinsurgency campaign began. Media and commentary remained silent, with the rarest of exceptions.

By 1999, state terror had largely achieved its goals, so Turkey was replaced as leading recipient of military aid by Colombia, which had by far the worst human rights record in the hemisphere, as the programs of coordinated state-paramilitary terror inaugurated by Kennedy took a shocking toll.

Meanwhile other major atrocities continued to receive full support. One of the most extreme was the sanctions against Iraqi civilians after the large-scale demolition of Iraq in the bombing of 1991, which also destroyed power stations and sewage and water facilities, effectively a form of biological warfare. The horrific impact of the U.S.-UK sanctions, formally implemented by the UN, aroused so much public concern that in 1996 a humane modification was introduced: the “oil for food” program, which permitted Iraq to use profits from oil exports for the needs of its suffering people.

The first director of the program, the distinguished international diplomat Denis Halliday, resigned in protest after two years, declaring the program to be “genocidal.” He was replaced by another distinguished international diplomat, Hans von Sponeck, who resigned two years later, charging that the program violated the Genocide Convention. Von Sponeck’s resignation was followed immediately by that of Jutta Burghardt, in charge of the UN Food Program, who joined the declaration of protest by Halliday and von Sponeck.

To mention only one figure, “During the years when the sanctions were imposed, from 1990 to 2003, there was a sharp increase in mortality from 56 per thousand children under five years of age in the early 1990s to 131 per thousand under five years of age at the beginning of the new century,” and “everyone can easily understand that this was due to the economic sanctions” (von Sponeck). Massacres of that scale are rare, and to acknowledge this one would be doctrinally difficult. Accordingly, great efforts were made to shift the blame to UN incompetence, “the largest fraud ever recorded in history” (Wall Street Journal). The fraudulent “fraud” was quickly exposed; it turned out that Washington and U.S. business were the major culprits. But the charges were too valuable to be allowed to vanish.

Halliday and von Sponeck had numerous investigators all over Iraq, which enabled them to know more about the country than any other Westerners. They were barred from the U.S. media during the buildup to the war. The Clinton administration also prevented von Sponeck from informing the UN Security Council, which was technically responsible, about the effects of the sanctions on the population. “This man in Baghdad is paid to work, not to speak,” State Department spokesman James Rubin explained. U.S.-UK media evidently agree. Von Sponeck’s carefully

documented account of the impact of the U.S.-UK sanctions was published in 2006, to resounding silence.¹⁰

The sanctions devastated the civilian society, killing hundreds of thousands of people while strengthening the tyrant, compelling the population to rely on him for survival, and probably saving him from the fate of other mass murderers and torturers who were supported to the end of their bloody rule by the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies: Ceau?escu, Suharto, Mobutu, Marcos, and a rogues gallery of others, to which new names are regularly added. The studied refusal to give Iraqis an opportunity to take their fate into their own hands by releasing the stranglehold of the sanctions, as Halliday and von Sponeck recommended, eliminates whatever thin shred of justification for the invasion may be concocted by apologists for state violence.

Also continuing without change through the 1990s was strong U.S.-UK support for General Suharto of Indonesia—“our kind of guy,” the Clinton administration happily announced when he was welcomed in Washington. Suharto had been a particular favorite of the West ever since he took power in 1965, presiding over a “staggering mass slaughter” that was “a gleam of light in Asia,” the *New York Times* reported, while praising Washington for keeping its crucial role hidden so as not to embarrass the “Indonesian moderates” who took over.

The general reaction in the West was unconcealed euphoria after the mass slaughter, which the CIA compared to the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Suharto opened the country’s wealth to Western exploitation, compiled one of the worst human rights records in the world, and also won the world record for corruption, far surpassing Mobutu and other Western favorites. On the side, he invaded the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975, carrying out one of the worst crimes of the late twentieth century, leaving perhaps one-quarter of the population dead and the country ravaged.

From the first moment, he benefitted from decisive U.S. diplomatic and military support, joined by Britain as atrocities peaked in 1978, while other Western powers also sought to gain what they could by backing virtual genocide in East Timor. The U.S.-UK flow of arms and training of the most vicious counterinsurgency units continued without change through 1999 as Indonesian atrocities escalated once again, far beyond anything in Kosovo at the same time before the NATO bombing. Australia, which had the most detailed information on the atrocities, also participated actively in training the most murderous elite units.

In April 1999, there was a series of particularly brutal massacres, as in Liquica, where at least sixty people were murdered when they took refuge in a church. The United States reacted at once. Admiral Dennis Blair, U.S. Pacific commander, met with Indonesian army chief General Wiranto, who supervised the atrocities, assuring him of U.S. support and assistance and proposing a new U.S. training mission, one of several such contacts at the time. Highly credible church sources estimated that 3,000–5,000 were murdered from February through July.

In August 1999, in a UN-run referendum, the population voted overwhelmingly for independence, a remarkable act of courage. The Indonesian army and its paramilitary associates reacted by destroying the capital city of Dili and driving hundreds of thousands of the survivors into the hills. The United States and Britain were unimpressed. Washington lauded “the value of the years of training given to Indonesia’s future military leaders in the United States and the millions

¹⁰ Hans C. Von Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War* (New York: Berghahn, 2006); *Spokesman* 96, 2007. On the oil for food program fraud, see my *Failed States* (Metropolitan, 2006).

of dollars in military aid for Indonesia,” the press reported, urging more of the same for Indonesia and throughout the world. A senior diplomat in Jakarta explained succinctly that “Indonesia matters and East Timor doesn’t.” While the remnants of Dili were smoldering and the expelled population were starving in the hills, Defense Secretary William Cohen, on September 9, reiterated the official U.S. position that occupied East Timor “is the responsibility of the Government of Indonesia, and we don’t want to take that responsibility away from them.”

A few days later, under intense international and domestic pressure (much of it from influential right-wing Catholics), Clinton quietly informed the Indonesian generals that the game was over, and they instantly withdrew, allowing an Australian-led UN peace-keeping force to enter the country unopposed. The lesson is crystal clear. To end the aggression and virtual genocide of the preceding quarter-century there was no need to bomb Jakarta, to impose sanctions, or in fact to do anything except to stop participating actively in the crimes. The lesson, however, cannot be drawn, for evident doctrinal reasons. Amazingly, the events have been reconstructed as a remarkable success of humanitarian intervention in September 1999, evidence of the enthralling “emerging norms” inaugurated by the “enlightened states.” One can only wonder whether a totalitarian state could achieve anything comparable.

The British record was even more grotesque. The Labor government continued to deliver Hawk jets to Indonesia as late as September 23, 1999, two weeks after the European Union had imposed an embargo, three days after the Australian peace-keeping force had landed, well after it had been revealed that these aircraft had been deployed over East Timor once again, this time as part of the pre-referendum intimidation operation. Under New Labour, Britain became the leading supplier of arms to Indonesia, over the strong protests of Amnesty International, Indonesian dissidents, and Timorese victims. The reasons were explained by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, the author of the new “ethical foreign policy.”

The arms shipments were appropriate because “the government is committed to the maintenance of a strong defence industry, which is a strategic part of our industrial base,” as in the United States and elsewhere. For similar reasons, Prime Minister Tony Blair later approved the sale of spare parts to Zimbabwe for British Hawk fighter jets being used by Mugabe in a civil war that cost tens of thousands of lives. Nonetheless, the new ethical policy was an improvement over Thatcher, whose defense procurement minister Alan Clark had announced that “My responsibility is to my own people. I don’t really fill my mind much with what one set of foreigners is doing to another.”¹¹

It is against this background, barely sampled here, that the chorus of admired Western intellectuals praised themselves and their “enlightened states” for opening an inspiring new era of humanitarian intervention, guided by the “responsibility to protect,” now solely dedicated to “principles and values,” acting from “altruism” and “moral fervor” alone under the leadership of the “idealistic new world bent on ending inhumanity,” now in a “noble phase” of its foreign policy with a “saintly glow.”

The chorus of self-adulation also devised a new literary genre, castigating the West for its failure to respond adequately to the crimes of others (while scrupulously avoiding any reference to its own crimes). It was lauded as courageous and daring. Few allowed themselves to perceive that comparable work would have been warmly welcomed in the Kremlin, pre-Perestroika.

¹¹ For a review of the miserable denouement, see my *A New Generation Draws the Line* (Verso, 2000).

The most prominent example was the lavishly praised Pulitzer Prize-winning work “A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide, by Samantha Power, of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School at Harvard University. It is unfair to say that Power avoids all U.S. crimes. A scattering are casually mentioned, but explained away as derivative of other concerns.

Power does bring up one clear case: East Timor, where, she writes, Washington “looked away”—namely, by authorizing the invasion; immediately providing Indonesia with new counterinsurgency equipment; rendering the UN “utterly ineffective” in any effort to stop the aggression and slaughter, as UN ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan proudly recalled in his memoir of his UN service; and then continuing to provide decisive diplomatic and military support for the next quarter-century, in the manner briefly indicated.

Summarizing, after the fall of the Soviet Union, policies continued with little more than tactical modification. But new pretexts were needed. The new norm of humanitarian intervention fit the requirements very well. It was only necessary to put aside the shameful record of earlier crimes as somehow irrelevant to the understanding of societies and cultures that had scarcely changed, and to disguise the fact that these crimes continued much as before. This is a difficulty that arises frequently, even if not as dramatically as it did after the collapse of the routine pretext for crimes. The standard reaction is to abide by a maxim of Tacitus: “Crime once exposed has no refuge but audacity.” One does not deny the crimes of past and present; it would be a grave error to open that door. Rather, the past must be effaced and the present ignored as we march on to a glorious new future. That is, regrettably, a fair rendition of leading features of the intellectual culture in the post-Soviet era.

Nevertheless, it was imperative to find, or least to contrive, a few examples to illustrate the new magnificence. Some of the choices were truly astonishing. One, regularly invoked, is the humanitarian intervention of mid-September 1999 to rescue the East Timorese. The term “audacity” does not begin to capture this exercise, but it proceeded with little difficulty, testifying once again to what Hans Morgenthau, the founder of realist international relations theory, once called “our conformist subservience to those in power.” There is no need to waste time on this achievement.

A few other examples were tried, also impressive in their audacity. One favorite was Clinton’s military intervention in Haiti in 1995, which did in fact bring an end to the horrendous reign of terror that was unleashed when a military coup overthrew the first democratically elected president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 1991, a few months after he took office. To sustain the self-image, however, it has been necessary to suppress some inconvenient facts.

The Bush I administration devoted substantial effort to undermine the hated Aristide regime and prepare the grounds for the anticipated military coup. It then instantly turned to support for the military junta and its wealthy supporters, violating the OAS embargo—or as the New York Times preferred to describe the facts, “fine tuning” the embargo to exempt U.S. businesses, for the benefit of the Haitian people. Trade with the junta increased under Clinton, who also illegally authorized Texaco to supply oil to the junta. Texaco was a natural choice. It was Texaco that supplied oil to the Franco regime in the late 1930s, violating the embargo and U.S. law, while Washington pretended that it did not know what was being reported in the left press—later conceding quietly that it of course knew all along.

By 1995, Washington felt that the torture of Haitians had proceeded long enough, and Clinton sent the Marines in to topple the junta and restore the elected government—but on conditions

that were sure to destroy what was left of the Haitian economy. The restored government was compelled to accept a harsh neoliberal program, with no barriers to U.S. export and investment. Haitian rice farmers are quite efficient, but cannot compete with highly subsidized U.S. agribusiness, leading to the anticipated collapse. One small successful business in Haiti produced chicken parts. But Americans do not like dark meat, so the huge U.S. conglomerates that produce chicken parts wanted to dump them on others. They tried Mexico and Canada, but those are functioning societies that could prevent the illegal dumping. Haiti had been compelled to be defenseless, so even that small industry was destroyed. The story continues, declining to still further ugliness, unnecessary to review here.¹²

In brief, Haiti falls into the familiar pattern, a particularly disgraceful illustration in light of the way that Haitians have been tortured, first by France and then by the United States, in part in punishment for having dared to be the first free country of free men in the hemisphere.

Other attempts at self-justification fared no better, until, at last, Kosovo came to the rescue in 1999, opening the floodgates. The torrent of self-congratulatory rhetoric became an uncontrollable deluge.

The Kosovo case is, plainly, of great significance in sustaining the self-glorification that reached a crescendo at the end of the millennium, and in justifying the Western claim of a right of unilateral intervention. Not surprisingly, then, there is a strict Party Line on NATO's bombing of Kosovo.

The doctrine was articulated with eloquence by Vaclav Havel, as the bombing ended. The leading U.S. intellectual journal, the left-liberal *New York Review of Books*, turned to Havel for "a reasoned explanation" of why the NATO bombing must be supported, publishing his address to the Canadian Parliament, "Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State" (June 10, 1999). For Havel, the *Review* observed, "the war in Yugoslavia is a landmark in international relations: the first time that the human rights of a people—the Kosovo Albanians—have unequivocally come first." Havel's address opened by stressing the extraordinary significance and import of the Kosovo intervention.

It shows that we may at last be entering an era of true enlightenment that will witness "the end of the nation-state," which will no longer be "the culmination of every national community's history and its highest earthly value," as has always been true in the past. The "enlightened efforts of generations of democrats, the terrible experience of two world wars,...and the evolution of civilization have finally brought humanity to the recognition that human beings are more important than the state," so the Kosovo intervention reveals.

Havel's "reasoned explanation" of why the bombing was just reads as follows: "there is one thing that no reasonable person can deny: this is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of 'national interests,' but rather in the name of principles and values... [NATO] is fighting out of concern for the fate of others. It is fighting because no decent person can stand by and watch the systematic state-directed murder of other people....The alliance has acted out of respect for human rights, as both conscience and legal documents dictate. This is an important precedent for the future. It has been clearly said that it is simply not permissible to murder people, to drive them from their homes, to torture them, and to confiscate their property."

¹² See Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood* (New York: Verso, 2007), for an expert and penetrating study of what followed, through the 2004 military coup that overthrew the elected government once again, backed by the traditional torturers, France, and the United States; and the resilience of the Haitian people as they sought to rise again from the ruins.

Stirring words, though a few qualifications might be appropriate: to mention just one, it remains permissible, indeed obligatory, not only to tolerate such actions but to contribute massively to them, ensuring that they reach still greater peaks of fury—within NATO, for example—and of course to conduct them on one’s own, when that is necessary.

Havel had been a particularly admired commentator on world affairs since 1990, when he addressed a joint session of Congress immediately after his fellow dissidents were brutally murdered in El Salvador (and the United States had invaded Panama, killing and destroying). He received a thunderous standing ovation for lauding the “defender of freedom” that had armed and trained the murderers of the six leading Jesuit intellectuals and tens of thousands of others, praising it for having “understood the responsibility that flowed” from power and urging it to continue to put “morality ahead of politics”—as it had done throughout Reagan’s terrorist wars in Central America, in support for South Africa as it murdered some 1.5 million people in neighboring countries, and many other glorious deeds. The backbone of our actions must be “responsibility,” Havel instructed Congress: “responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success.”

The performance was welcomed with rapture by liberal intellectuals. Capturing the general awe and acclaim, the editors of the Washington Post orated that Havel’s praise for our nobility provided “stunning evidence” that his country is “a prime source” of “the European intellectual tradition” as his “voice of conscience” spoke “compellingly of the responsibilities that large and small powers owe each other.” At the left-liberal extreme, Anthony Lewis wrote that Havel’s words remind us that “we live in a romantic age.” A decade later, still at the outer limits of dissidence, Lewis was moved and persuaded by the argument that Havel had “eloquently stated” on the bombing of Serbia, which he thought eliminated all residual doubts about Washington’s cause and signaled a “landmark in international relations.”

The Party Line has been guarded with vigilance. To cite a few current examples, on the occasion of Kosovo’s independence the Wall Street Journal wrote that Serbian police and troops were “driven from the province by the U.S.-led aerial bombing campaign of [1999], designed to halt dictator Slobodan Milošević’s brutal attempt to drive out the province’s ethnic Albanian majority” (February 25, 2008). Francis Fukuyama urged in the New York Times (February 17, 2008) that “in the wake of the Iraq debacle,” we must not forget the important lesson of the 1990s “that strong countries like the United States should use their power to defend human rights or promote democracy”: crucial evidence is that “ethnic cleansing against the Albanians in Kosovo was stopped only through NATO bombing of Serbia itself.”

The editors of the liberal New Republic wrote that Milošević “set out to pacify [Kosovo] using his favored tools: mass expulsion, systematic rape, and murder,” but fortunately the West would not tolerate the crime “and so, in March 1999, NATO began a bombing campaign” to end the “slaughter and sadism.” The “nightmare has a happy ending for one simple reason: because the West used its military might to save them” (March 12, 2008). The editors added that “You would need to have the heart of a Kremlin functionary to be unmoved by the scene that unfolded in Kosovo’s capital Pristina,” celebrating “a fitting and just epilogue to the last mass crime of the twentieth century.” In less exalted but conventional terms, Samantha Power writes that “Serbia’s atrocities had of course provoked NATO action.”

Citing examples is misleading, because the doctrine is held with virtual unanimity, and considerable passion, or perhaps “desperation” would be a more appropriate word. The reference to “Kremlin functionaries” by the editors of the New Republic is appropriate in ways they did not

intend. The rare efforts to adduce the uncontroversial and well-documented record elicit impressive tantrums, when they are not simply ignored.

The record is unusually rich, and the facts presented in impeccable Western sources are explicit, consistent, and extensively documented. The sources include two major State Department compilations released to justify the bombing and a rich array of documents from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, the UN, and others. They also include a British parliamentary inquiry. And, notably, the very instructive reports of the monitors of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission established at the time of the October cease-fire negotiated by U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. The monitors reported regularly on the ground from a few weeks later until March 19, when they were withdrawn (over Serbian objections) in preparation for the March 24 bombing.

The documentary record is treated with what anthropologists call “ritual avoidance.” And there is a good reason. The evidence, which is unequivocal, leaves the Party Line in tatters. The standard claim that “Serbia’s atrocities had of course provoked NATO action” directly reverses the unequivocal facts: NATO’s action provoked Serbia’s atrocities, exactly as anticipated.¹³

Western documentation reveals that Kosovo was an ugly place prior to the bombing—though not, unfortunately, by international standards. Some 2,000 are reported to have been killed in the year before the NATO bombing. Atrocities were distributed between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) guerrillas attacking from Albania and Federal Republic of Yugoslav (FRY) security forces. An OSCE report accurately summarizes the record: The “cycle of confrontation can be generally described” as KLA attacks on Serb police and civilians, “a disproportionate response by the FRY authorities,” and “renewed KLA activity.”

The British government, the most hawkish element in the alliance, attributes most of the atrocities in the relevant period to the KLA, which in 1998 had been condemned by the United States as a “terrorist organization.” On March 24, as the bombing began, British Defense Minister George Robertson, later NATO secretary-general, informed the House of Commons that until mid-January 1999, “the [Kosovo Liberation Army] were responsible for more deaths in Kosovo than the Serbian authorities had been.” In citing Robertson’s testimony in *A New Generation Draws the Line*, I wrote that he must be mistaken; given the distribution of force, the judgment was simply not credible. The British parliamentary inquiry, however, reveals that his judgment was confirmed by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who told the House on January 18, 1999, that the KLA “has committed more breaches of the ceasefire, and until this weekend was responsible for more deaths than the [Yugoslav] security forces.”¹⁴

Robertson and Cook are referring to the Racak massacre of January 15, in which 45 people were reported killed. Western documentation reveals no notable change in pattern from the Racak massacre until the withdrawal of the Kosovo Verification Mission monitors on March 19. So even factoring that massacre in (and overlooking questions about what happened), the conclusions of Robertson and Cook, if generally valid in mid-January, remained so until the announcement of the NATO bombing. One of the few serious scholarly studies even to consider these matters, a careful and judicious study by Nicholas Wheeler, estimates that Serbs were responsible for 500 of the 2,000 reported killed in the year before the bombing. For comparison, Robert Hayden, a

¹³ *A New Generation Draws the Line*. On what was known at once, see my *New Military Humanism*.

¹⁴ Robertson, *New Generation*, 106–7. Cook, House of Commons Session 1999–2000, Defence Committee Publications, Part II, 35.

specialist on the Balkans who is director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies of the University of Pittsburgh, observes that “the casualties among Serb civilians in the first three weeks of the war are higher than all of the casualties on both sides in Kosovo in the three months that led up to this war, and yet those three months were supposed to be a humanitarian catastrophe.”¹⁵

U.S. intelligence reported that the KLA “intended to draw NATO into its fight for independence by provoking Serb atrocities.” The KLA was arming and “taking very provocative steps in an effort to draw the west into the crisis,” hoping for a brutal Serb reaction, Holbrooke commented. KLA leader Hashim Thaci, now prime minister of Kosovo, informed BBC investigators that when the KLA killed Serb policemen, “We knew we were endangering civilian lives, too, a great number of lives,” but the predictable Serb revenge made the actions worthwhile. The top KLA military commander, Agim Ceku, boasted that the KLA shared in the victory because “after all, the KLA brought NATO to Kosovo” by carrying out attacks in order to elicit violent retaliation.

So matters continued until NATO initiated the bombing, knowing that it was “entirely predictable” that the FRY would respond on the ground with violence, General Wesley Clark informed the press; earlier he had informed the highest U.S. government officials that the bombing would lead to major crimes, and that NATO could do nothing to prevent them. The details conform to Clark’s predictions. The press reported that “The Serbs began attacking Kosovo Liberation Army strongholds on March 19,” when the monitors were withdrawn in preparation for the bombing, “but their attack kicked into high gear on March 24, the night NATO began bombing Yugoslavia.” The number of internally displaced, which had declined, rose again to 200,000 after the monitors were withdrawn. Prior to the bombing, and for two days following its onset, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported no data on refugees. A week after the bombing began, the UNHCR began to tabulate the daily flow.

In brief, it was well understood by the NATO leadership that the bombing was not a response to the huge atrocities in Kosovo, but was their cause, exactly as anticipated. Furthermore, at the time the bombing was initiated, there were two diplomatic options on the table: the proposal of NATO, and the proposal of the FRY (suppressed in the West, virtually without exception). After 78 days of bombing, a compromise was reached between them, suggesting that a peaceful settlement might have been possible, avoiding the terrible crimes that were the anticipated reaction to the NATO bombing.

The Milošević indictment for war crimes in Kosovo, issued during the NATO bombing, makes no pretense to the contrary. The indictment, based on U.S.-UK intelligence, keeps to crimes committed during the NATO bombing. There is only one exception: the Racak massacre in January. “Senior officials in the Clinton administration were revolted and outraged,” Samantha Power writes, repeating the conventional story. It is hardly credible that Clinton officials were revolted or outraged, or even cared. Even putting aside their past support for far worse crimes, it suffices to consider their reaction to the massacres in East Timor shortly after, for example in Liquica, a far worse crime than Racak, which led the same Clinton officials to increase their participation in the ongoing slaughter.

Despite his conclusions on the distribution of killings, Wheeler supports the NATO bombing on the grounds that there would have been even worse atrocities had NATO not bombed. The

¹⁵ Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention and International Society* (Oxford, 2000). Hayden, interview with Doug Henwood, WBAI, New York, reprinted in Henwood, *Left Business Observer* #89, April 27, 1999.

argument is that by bombing with the anticipation that it would lead to atrocities, NATO was preventing atrocities. The fact that these are the strongest arguments that can be contrived by serious analysts tells us a good deal about the decision to bomb, particularly when we recall that there were diplomatic options and that the agreement reached after the bombing was a compromise between them.

Some have tried to support this line of argument by appealing to Operation Horseshoe, an alleged Serbian plan to expel Kosovar Albanians. The plan was unknown to the NATO command, as General Clark attested, and is irrelevant on those grounds alone: the criminal resort to violence cannot be justified by something discovered afterwards. The plan was exposed as a probable intelligence forgery, but that is of no relevance either. It is almost certain Serbia had such contingency plans, just as other states, including the United States, have hair-raising contingency plans even for remote eventualities.

An even more astonishing effort to justify the NATO bombing is that the decision was taken under the shadow of Srebrenica and other atrocities of the early '90s. By that argument, it follows that NATO should have been calling for the bombing of Indonesia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, under the shadow of the vastly worse atrocities they had carried out in East Timor and were escalating again when the decision to bomb Serbia was taken—for the United States and United Kingdom, only a small part of their criminal record. A last desperate effort to grasp at some straw is that Europe could not tolerate the pre-bombing atrocities right near its borders—though NATO not only tolerated, but strongly supported far worse atrocities right within NATO in the same years, as already discussed.

Without running through the rest of the dismal record, it is hard to think of a case where the justification for the resort to criminal violence is so weak. But the pure justice and nobility of the actions has become a doctrine of religious faith, understandably: What else can justify the chorus of self-glorification that brought the millennium to an end? What else can be adduced to support the “emerging norms” that authorize the idealistic New World and its allies to use force where their leaders “believe it to be just”?

Some have speculated on the actual reasons for the NATO bombing. The highly regarded military historian Andrew Bacevich dismisses humanitarian claims and alleges that along with the Bosnia intervention, the bombing of Serbia was undertaken to ensure “the cohesion of NATO and the credibility of American power” and “to sustain American primacy” in Europe. Another respected analyst, Michael Lind, writes that “a major strategic goal of the Kosovo war was reassuring Germany so it would not develop a defense policy independent of the U.S.-dominated NATO alliance.” Neither author presents any basis for the conclusions.¹⁶

Evidence does exist however, from the highest level of the Clinton administration. Strobe Talbott, who was responsible for diplomacy during the war, wrote the foreword to a book on the war by his associate John Norris. Talbott writes that those who want to know “how events looked and felt at the time to those of us who were involved” in the war should turn to Norris’s account, written with the “immediacy that can be provided only by someone who was an eyewitness to much of the action, who interviewed at length and in depth many of the participants while their memories were still fresh, and who has had access to much of the diplomatic record.” Norris states that “it was Yugoslavia’s resistance to the broader trends of political and economic reform—not

¹⁶ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2003); Michael Lind, *National Interest* (May–June 2007).

the plight of Kosovar Albanians—that best explains NATO’s war.” That the motive for the NATO bombing could not have been “the plight of Kosovar Albanians” was already clear from the extensive Western documentary record. But it is interesting to hear from the highest level that the real reason for the bombing was that Yugoslavia was a lone holdout in Europe to the political and economic programs of the Clinton administration and its allies. Needless to say, this important revelation also is excluded from the canon.¹⁷

Though the “new norm of humanitarian intervention” collapses on examination, there is at least one residue: the “responsibility to protect.” Applauding the declaration of independence of Kosovo, liberal commentator Roger Cohen writes that “at a deeper level, the story of little Kosovo is the story of changing notions of sovereignty and the prising open of the world” (*International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2008). The NATO bombing of Kosovo demonstrated that “human rights transcended narrow claims of state sovereignty” (quoting Thomas Weiss).

The achievement, Cohen continues, was ratified by the 2005 World Summit, which adopted the “responsibility to protect,” known as R2P, which “formalized the notion that when a state proves unable or unwilling to protect its people, and crimes against humanity are perpetrated, the international community has an obligation to intervene—if necessary, and as a last resort, with military force.” Accordingly, “an independent Kosovo, recognized by major Western powers, is in effect the first major fruit of the ideas behind R2P.” Cohen concludes: “The prising open of the world is slow work, but from Kosovo to Cuba it continues.” The NATO bombing is vindicated, and the “idealistic new world bent on ending inhumanity” really has reached a “noble phase” in its foreign policy with a “saintly glow.” In the words of international law professor Michael Glennon, “The crisis in Kosovo illustrates...America’s new willingness to do what it thinks right—international law notwithstanding,” though a few years later international law was brought into accord with the stance of the “enlightened states” by adopting R2P.

Again, there is a slight problem: those annoying facts. The UN World Summit of September 2005 explicitly rejected the claim of the NATO powers that they have the right to use force in alleged protection of human rights. Quite the contrary, the Summit reaffirmed “that the relevant provisions of the Charter [which explicitly bar the NATO actions] are sufficient to address the full range of threats to international peace and security.” The Summit also reaffirmed “the authority of the Security Council to mandate coercive action to maintain and restore international peace and security...acting in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter,” and the role of the General Assembly in this regard “in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter.” Without Security Council authorization, then, NATO has no more right to bomb Serbia than Saddam Hussein had to “liberate” Kuwait. The Summit granted no new “right of intervention” to individual states or regional alliances, whether under humanitarian or other professed grounds.

The Summit endorsed the conclusions of a December 2004 high-level UN Panel, which included many prominent Western figures. The Panel reiterated the principles of the Charter concerning the use of force: it can be lawfully deployed only when authorized by the Security Council, or under Article 51, in defense against armed attack until the Security Council acts. Any other resort to force is a war crime, in fact the “supreme international crime” encompassing all the evil that follows, in the words of the Nuremberg Tribunal. The Panel concluded that “Article 51 needs neither extension nor restriction of its long-understood scope,...it should be neither rewritten nor reinterpreted.” Presumably with the Kosovo war in mind, the Panel added that “For those impa-

¹⁷ John Norris, *Collision Course* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005).

tient with such a response, the answer must be that, in a world full of perceived potential threats, the risk to the global order and the norm of nonintervention on which it continues to be based is simply too great for the legality of unilateral preventive action, as distinct from collectively endorsed action, to be accepted. Allowing one to so act is to allow all.”

There could hardly be a more explicit rejection of the stand of the self-declared “enlightened states.”

Both the Panel and the World Summit endorsed the position of the non-Western world, which had firmly rejected “the so-called ‘right’ of humanitarian intervention” in the Declaration of the South Summit in 2000, surely with the recent NATO bombing of Serbia in mind. This was the highest-level meeting ever held by the former non-aligned movement, accounting for 80 percent of the world’s population. It was almost entirely ignored, and the rare and brief references to their conclusions about humanitarian intervention elicited near hysteria. Thus Cambridge University international relations lecturer Brendan Simms, writing in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (May 25, 2001), was infuriated by such “bizarre and uncritical reverence for the pronouncements of the so-called ‘South Summit G-77’—in Havana!—an improvident rabble in whose ranks murderers, torturers and robbers are conspicuously represented”—so different from the civilized folk who have been their benefactors for the past centuries and can scarcely control their fury when there is a brief allusion, without comment, to the perception of the world by the traditional victims, a perception since strongly endorsed by the high-level UN Panel and the UN World Summit in explicit contradiction to the self-serving pronouncements of apologists for Western resort to violence.

We might ask finally whether humanitarian intervention even exists. There is no shortage of evidence that it does. The evidence falls into two categories. The first is declarations of leaders. It is all too easy to demonstrate that virtually every resort to force is justified by elevated rhetoric about noble humanitarian intentions. Japanese counterinsurgency documents eloquently proclaim Japan’s intention to create an “earthly paradise” in independent Manchukuo and North China, where Japan is selflessly sacrificing blood and treasure to defend the population from the “Chinese bandits” who terrorize them.

Since these are internal documents, we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the mass murderers and torturers who produced them. Perhaps we may even entertain the possibility that Japanese emperor Hirohito was sincere in his surrender declaration in August 1945, when he told his people that “We declared war on America and Britain out of Our sincere desire to ensure Japan’s self-preservation and the stabilization of East Asia, it being far from Our thought either to infringe upon the sovereignty of other nations or to embark upon territorial aggrandizement.” Hitler’s pronouncements were no less noble when he dismembered Czechoslovakia, and were accepted at face value by Western leaders. President Roosevelt’s close confidant Sumner Welles informed him that the Munich settlement “presented the opportunity for the establishment by the nations of the world of a new world order based upon justice and upon law,” in which the Nazi “moderates” would play a leading role. It would be hard to find an exception to professions of virtuous intent, even among the worst monsters.

The second category of evidence consists of military intervention that had benign effects, whatever its motives: not quite humanitarian intervention, but at least partially approaching it. Here too there are illustrations. The most significant ones by far during the post-Second World War era are in the 1970s: India’s invasion of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), ending a huge massacre; and Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, driving out the Khmer Rouge just as their

atrocities were peaking. But these two cases are excluded from the canon on principled grounds. The invasions were not carried out by the West, hence do not serve the cause of establishing the West's right to use force in violation of the UN Charter. Even more decisively, both interventions were vigorously opposed by the "idealistic new world bent on ending inhumanity." The United States sent an aircraft carrier to Indian waters to threaten the miscreants. Washington supported a Chinese invasion to punish Vietnam for the crime of ending Pol Pot's atrocities, and along with Britain, immediately turned to diplomatic and military support for the Khmer Rouge.

The State Department even explained to Congress why it was supporting both the remnants of the Pol Pot regime (Democratic Kampuchea) and the Indonesian aggressors who were engaged in crimes in East Timor that were comparable to Pol Pot's. The reason for this remarkable decision was that the "continuity" of Democratic Kampuchea with the Khmer Rouge regime "unquestionably" makes it "more representative of the Cambodian people than the Fretilin [the East Timorese resistance] is of the Timorese people." The explanation was not reported, and has been effaced from properly sanitized history.

Perhaps a few genuine cases of humanitarian intervention can be discovered. There is, however, good reason to take seriously the stand of the "improvident rabble," reaffirmed by the authentic international community at the highest level. The essential insight was articulated by the unanimous vote of the International Court of Justice in one of its earliest rulings, in 1949: "The Court can only regard the alleged right of intervention as the manifestation of a policy of force, such as has, in the past, given rise to most serious abuses and such as cannot, whatever be the defects in international organization, find a place in international law...; from the nature of things, [intervention] would be reserved for the most powerful states, and might easily lead to perverting the administration of justice itself." The judgment does not bar "the responsibility to protect," as long as it is interpreted in the manner of the South, the high-level UN Panel, and the UN World Summit.

Sixty years later, there is little reason to question the court's judgment. The UN system doubtless suffers from severe defects. The most critical defect is the overwhelming role of the leading violators of Security Council resolutions. The most effective way to violate them is to veto them, a privilege of the permanent members. Since the UN fell out of its control forty years ago the United States is far in the lead in vetoing resolutions on a wide range of issues, its British ally is second, and no one else is even close. Nevertheless, despite these and other serious defects of the UN system, the current world order offers no preferable alternative than to vest the "responsibility to protect" in the United Nations. In the real world, the only alternative, as Bricmont eloquently explains, is the "humanitarian imperialism" of the powerful states that claim the right to use force because they "believe it to be just," all too regularly and predictably "perverting the administration of justice itself."

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Noam Chomsky
Humanitarian Imperialism
The New Doctrine of Imperial Right
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