

Just Causes

The Case for Humanitarian Intervention

By Christopher Hitchens

From *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2008

Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention. Gary J. Bass. Knopf, 2008, 528 \$35.00

Summary: Because borders are becoming ever more porous and contingent, everyone has an interest in humanitarian intervention.

Christopher Hitchens is a columnist for Vanity Fair and the author of books on Cyprus, Iraq, the Kurds, the Palestinians, and Anglo-American relations.

Debates and discussions about humanitarian intervention tend (for good reasons) to be about American intervention. They also tend to share the assumption that the United States can afford, or at any rate has the power, to take or leave the option to get involved. On some occasions, there may seem to be overwhelming moral grounds to quit the sidelines and intervene. On others, the imperatives are less clear-cut. In all instances, nothing exceptional should be contemplated unless it has at least some congruence with the national interest. This interest can be interpreted widely: Is it not to the United States' advantage that, say, the charter of the United Nations be generally respected? Or the notion can be interpreted narrowly: If the United States had intervened in 1994 in the Francophone central African context of the genocide in Rwanda, then where would it not be asked to intervene?

In common with all such questions is the unspoken assumption that Washington can make all the difference if it chooses to do so and needs merely to be prudent and thoughtful before embarking on some redemptive project in another country. But, as I read Gary Bass' absorbing, well-researched, and frequently amusing book, I found myself rotating a seldom-asked question in my head: What about the days when the United States was the recipient, not the donor, of humanitarian solidarity?

When one places in context all those sapient presidential remarks about the danger of "entangling alliances" (Thomas Jefferson) or the reluctance to go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy" (John Quincy Adams), as Bass helps readers do, it becomes clear that they belonged to a time when America and Americans were in a poor position to conduct any intervention at all. It was no more than common sense to exercise restraint and concentrate on building up the homeland -- while exploiting the quarrels between the British, French, and Spanish empires to do so. This constraint must have been felt very keenly at least until the closing third of the nineteenth century, after which it was possible to begin thinking of the United States as a global power.

But then remember what most people forget: how much international humanitarian intervention the United States had required in order to get that far. Not all of the aid to the fledgling 13 colonies was entirely disinterested -- the French monarchy's revenge for its earlier defeats in North America being an obvious motive. But the French did not overstay their welcome, and they did supply, in the form of Lafayette in particular, the model of the latter-day "international brigade" volunteer, often symbolized by Lord Byron or, more contentiously perhaps, those English literati who fought in defense of the Spanish republic between 1808 and 1809.

Many also forget that the international campaign in solidarity with the Union under the Lincoln presidency rallied at a time when it was entirely possible that the United Kingdom might have thrown its whole weight behind the Confederacy and even moved troops from Canada to hasten the partition of a country half slave and half free. This is often forgotten, I suggest, because the movement of solidarity was partly led by Karl Marx and his European allies (as was gratefully acknowledged by Henry Adams in his *Education*) and because the boycott of Confederate goods, the blocking of shipbuilding orders for the Confederate fleet, and other such actions were to some degree orchestrated by the founders of the communist movement -- not the sort of thing that is taught in school when Abraham Lincoln is the patriotic subject. Marx and Friedrich Engels hugely admired Lincoln and felt that just as Russia was the great arsenal of backwardness, reaction, and superstition, the United States was the land of potential freedom and equality.

Now that all other examples of political revolution have become obsolete or have been discredited, the issue is whether the United States is indeed a different sort of country or nation, one that has a creed or an ethic that imposes special duties on it. One way I like to answer this question is by pointing out that if the United States had not been its host and patron in 1945, there would have been no United Nations. The original principles of the organization had to do almost entirely with war and peace, law and (through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) finance. But all its new members also found themselves invited to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, originally drafted by Eleanor Roosevelt, and there is no question that U.S. influence lay behind this suggestion. By means of this and a number of other incremental steps, the United States has found itself becoming inexorably committed to upholding a certain standard of what its critics would call idealism.

THE RIGHTS OF MEN

Bass reaches a considerable distance into the past in order to demonstrate that this argument is not at all new and that idealism and realism are not as diametrically opposed as some would have one think; indeed, very often they complement each other. Bass opens by expending a lot of ink on the prototype of the "just cause" and of the Romantic movement: the struggle of the Greeks to be free of the Ottoman Empire. As an old philhellene myself (I have served on two active committees for the liberation of Cyprus and the return of the so-called Elgin Marbles), I thought I knew this subject well, but Bass provides a trove of fresh material, as well as fresh insight, concerning this exciting period of the early 1820s and the neglected topic of the United States' involvement in it. Let me try and do justice to his presentation.

First of all, and not merely judging with the benefit of hindsight, one should consider how likely it was that the Greeks would have continued as subjects of the Ottoman Empire -- in other words, as a bastard form of Christian Turks. Not at all likely, really, which is to say that there was a prima facie case to be made that outsiders had a shrewd interest in supporting a cause that was probably going to be ultimately victorious. Second, if the Greeks did not win, then the Turks would, and this in turn would be a victory for the Turkophile Metternich-Castlereagh-Wellington forces in the rest of Europe. In other words, in this case, as in others, failing to help one side was the same thing, strategically as well as morally, as helping the other. (It is not as if famous American "realists" theoretically opposed to intervention have not also embroiled the United States in some grave foreign quarrels in their time, from Cambodia to Chile to, indeed, Cyprus.) Third, there were some "balance of power" questions that, even though they arose out of what the otherwise philhellenic Jefferson called "the broils of Europe," still had implications for the United States. Only the fear of entanglement in such "broils," Jefferson wrote to a Greek correspondent in 1823, "could restrain our generous youth from taking some part in this holy cause." James Madison was more affirmative, writing that year to President James Monroe and Jefferson that he favored an American declaration, in concert with other countries, such as the United Kingdom, in support of the Greeks. And the ethnologist, American diplomat, and former U.S. treasury secretary Albert Gallatin proposed what Bass writes "would have been the United States' first humanitarian intervention." He did so in distinctly ironic tones, suggesting that Greece be aided by the United States' "naval force in the Mediterranean -- one frigate, one corvette, and one schooner." This was even less of a navy than the Greek rebels could call on, but the point -- not dwelled on by Bass, alas -- is that only a few years previously, Jefferson had sent the navy, as well as the newly created U.S. Marine Corps, to shatter the Ottoman fleets that were both enslaving American crews and passengers and denying free trade through the Strait of Gibraltar. The move had led to a huge increase in American prestige as well as to vastly enhanced maritime commerce. Why should the two thoughts not occur again at the same time in the same minds?

In the end, then Secretary of State Adams carried the day (against that improbable champion of liberty: the slavery apologist John Calhoun, who was then secretary of war), and the United States did not go abroad in search of a chance to destroy the monster of Turkish imperialism. As if in compensation, however, the White House proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, which denounced the "odious and criminal" slave trade, and freely issued warm expressions for the future of Greek statehood.

It is very often by these sorts of crabwise steps and political tradeoffs that the United States finds that it has -- perhaps in a fit of absence of mind -- avoided one humanitarian commitment by implicitly adopting other ones. These days, this happens every time someone who wants to leave, say, a Saddam Hussein alone is rash enough to wonder out loud what should be done about Darfur, Myanmar (also known as Burma), Tibet, or Zimbabwe. History has a way of adopting such taunts or at least of playing them back to their originators. And this, as Bass

shows, is how the international community has gradually moved from double or multiple standards to something like a more intelligible and single one.

SOVEREIGN SOVEREIGNTIES

It is either unfortunate or significant -- and probably both -- that so many of Bass' early examples have to do with confrontations between a Christian (or liberal) West and a Muslim (or imperial) Turkey. In addition to the Greek case, there is the European powers' protracted intervention in Syria between 1841 and 1861 to underwrite and guarantee the lives and freedoms of the Christian minority there, which resulted in the country's partition -- or, if one prefers, the emergence of a quasi-independent Lebanon. This was followed in depressingly swift succession by British Prime Minister William Gladstone's campaign for the cause of the martyred Bulgarians in the 1870s and U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau's extraordinary dispatches in the early months of World War I about what Morgenthau called the "race murder" of the Armenians by the Ottomans. (Even though I do not really believe in the category of "race," I find this term more dramatic and urgent than the legal scholar Raphael Lemkin's "genocide.") At any rate, an amateur reader -- or perhaps a resentful Muslim one -- could be pardoned for taking away the idea that the West's views of human rights and humanitarian intervention were formed in opposition to the manifest cruelties and depredations of "the Turk," or, as he was sometimes called, "the Mussulman." In fact, the fight over Jerusalem and its status seems to have gone on for longer than most people know, the 1853-56 Crimean War that opposed the Russian empire to the British, French, and Ottoman empires being only one of many occasions when Christian states have fought one another for control over the holy sites of Palestine.

The argument over sovereignty and legitimacy, or the argument from the Peace of Westphalia, as it has come to be known by post-Metternichians such as Henry Kissinger, was very familiar in the mid-nineteenth century. In the United Kingdom, which was the fount of most of these claims and their transmitter to the United States, the difference between those who invoked sovereignty and those who scorned it as a cloak for despotism and aggression was very nearly a stand-in for the difference between Tory and Whig. There is not, in most of Europe, any equivalent of the American tradition of right-wing isolationists, from Charles Lindbergh to Pat Buchanan: Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, and British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, who despised the philhellenes as poetry-sodden subversives, were robustly unhypocritical about wanting the Turks to win, and especially enthusiastic about this should it inconvenience the Russians. Not everyone was an Islamophobe.

Bass is most often but not always fair to those who do not share his view. In citing British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's notorious description of events in Czechoslovakia in 1938 as "a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing," Bass argues that Chamberlain "shrugged off" Hitler's invasion of the Sudetenland. In fact, Chamberlain was trying for a tragic note, saying how ghastly it was that Britons should be digging air-raid trenches for such an arcane reason. And this same man was later to issue a military guarantee to Poland that was much more quixotic than any stand taken on the Sudetenland might have been. Neither he nor any other Tory of the 1930s would have hesitated for a second to dispatch British troops to any part of Africa or Asia, however "faraway" or unknown, if doing so would have served the needs of empire. It is mainly the retrospective guilt of the Final Solution, and the shared failure of the Allied powers to do anything to prevent it, that invests arguments such as Bass' with the tension and anxiety that surround them today. I think that many rational people would applaud the defeat of German imperialism in 1945 on grounds more than merely humanitarian.

Yet here is the journalist Robert Kaplan, cited by Bass, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001: "Foreign policy must return to what it traditionally has been: the diplomatic aspect of national security rather than a branch of Holocaust studies." Kaplan was arguing, by means of this rather jarring contrast, that the humanitarian interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo had been "luxuries." But this runs the risk of making a distinction without much, if any, difference. Did the United States not have a national security interest, and NATO an interest of its own, in forcibly repressing the idea that ethnic cleansing, within sight of Hungary and Romania and Greece and Turkey and many other combustible local rivals, could be rewarded and that its perpetrators might go unpunished? Was not some valuable combat experience -- and, indeed, nation-building experience -- thereby gained? Were not some flaws and weaknesses in the post-Cold War international system, most notably those of the United Nations, rather usefully exposed? And then, a few years later, were the United States' hardheaded interests in Afghanistan not to be considered connected to the liberation of the Afghans themselves from medieval tyranny? These and other questions are not novel. They have a long and honorable

pedigree, as Bass' book demonstrates.

Bass rightly points out that interventions are not invariably mere simulacra of, or surrogates for, superpower or imperial rivalries. (Thinking that they are is the mistake currently being made by the vulgar apologists for China, Iran, and Russia, three countries that opportunistically are seeking to ally themselves in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization but that denounce all human rights initiatives taken by others as colonial.) I wish Bass had found more space to debate the pros and cons of smaller-scale, nonsuperpower interventions: Tanzania's invasion of Idi Amin's Uganda, for instance, or the Vietnamese overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, both in 1979. But he does mention what he calls the role of the regional "middleweight" in more modern times, such as the part played by Australia in East Timor's transition to independence.

REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS

Bass has a considerable gift of phrase -- even though one might not rush to adopt his term "atrocitarian" as a nickname for those revolted by acts of genocide. He also has a jaunty flair for recognizing such cynicism in others: it is not without relish that he cites Disraeli's dismissal of "merciless humanitarians." And he is no Mrs. Jellyby, fretting only about the miseries of Borrioboola-Gha while ignoring shrieks for mercy from under his own window. On the whole, he makes a sensible case that everyone has a self-interest in the strivings and sufferings of others because the borders between societies are necessarily porous and contingent and are, when one factors in considerations such as the velocity of modern travel, easy access to weaponry, and the spread of disease, becoming ever more so. Americans may not have known or cared about Rwanda in 1994, for instance, but the effect of its crisis on the Democratic Republic of the Congo could have been even more calamitous. Afghanistan's internal affairs are now the United States' -- in fact, they were already so before Americans understood that. A failed state may not trouble Americans' sleep, but a rogue one can, and the transition from failed to rogue can be alarmingly abrupt.

TAKING A STAND

The lines from which the title of Bass' book is taken are drawn from Byron:

For Freedom's battle once begun,
Bequeathed by bleeding Sire to Son,
Though baffled oft is ever won.

These were posted by a militant of Solidarity in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk in 1980. Could the West's rational interest in defeating Soviet imperialism have been accomplished without the unquantifiable element represented by such gestures?

At the same time, I think that Bass occasionally says the right thing just because it sounds good. "The value of stability is that it saves lives," he writes, and quotes Woodrow Wilson in support: "Social reform can take place only when there is peace." Yet much of the evidence of his book shows that war and conflict are absolutely needful engines for progress and that arguments about human rights, humanitarian intervention, and the evolution of international laws and standards are all, in the last resort, part of a clash over what constitutes civilization, if not invariably a clash between civilizations.

Especially chilling to me, whether it is intentional or not, is the appearance of new foes in old forms. In 1831, after tsarist Russia had crushed an independent Poland, the poet Aleksandr Pushkin wrote a minatory "Hands off!" verse, essentially warning the Western powers to stay out of eastern Europe. This thuggish literary effort was revived in 1999 by Russia's then foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, who loudly cited Pushkin as he cautioned NATO against intervening in Kosovo. Bass argues, I think rather dangerously, that the first occasion was a tragedy and the second one a farce -- in other words, that there are times when despotisms are too strong to be stood up to and others when their bluff can be called. Surely, identifying the situation that is appropriate for intervention is both an art and a science, but history has taught us that tyranny often looks stronger than it really is, that it has unexpected vulnerabilities (very often to do with the blunt fact that tyranny, as such, is incapable of self-analysis), and that taking a stand on principle, even if not immediately rewarded with pragmatic results, can be an excellent dress rehearsal for the real thing.

Copyright 2002--2008 by the Council on Foreign Relations. All rights reserved.