

Foreign Policy: When Is Humanitarian Intervention in our Interest?  
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Most American voters don't care about American foreign policy until something comes to bite them. But every so often, specific groups get involved in seeking intervention for their particular ethnic interests: Armenians wanting condemnation for Turkey who committed a genocide about which, for almost a century now, Turks have refuse to recognize or apologize.

Sometimes groups want to affect American law, such as those with hysterical fear of Chinese immigration, based on a notion of 'yellow peril.' The same applies today to an irrational fear of Mexican immigration. And, of course, the perennial conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians stirs up passions among conflicting American groups. When political activists swear 'solidarity' with Gaza, Jews remember 'never again' and see Israel's existence at stake.

How should we deal with Genocide, for example? After World War II when we finally learned what the Nazi death camps had done, we resolved 'never again,' never more to permit genocide. For all of our good intentions, genocides did continue and the West did not intervene. The carnage in Rwanda was not halted by any outside power, to the shame of us all. The carnage when Yugoslavia disintegrated went unaddressed until Secretary of State Madeline Albright shamed her administration into stopping it. The Europeans, in whose midst this was happening, looked the other way until NATO, with strong American leadership, did what Europeans should have done.

The long Arab oppression of African Blacks, even when they are Muslim, went unnoticed until Christian Missionaries risked their necks getting the goods on Sudan. Many Black refugees from the Sudanese Genocide sought refuge in Israel rather than Arab countries, a comment of sorts on what they could expect from Arab Muslims.

The Vietnamese ended Cambodia's genocide just as Syria ended Lebanon's murderous civil war, and both were roundly condemned by the West and the UN for 'interfering in the sovereignty' of another country. National sovereignty was more important than human rights or genocide, it seems. So what kind of foreign policy should America have in this complex and dangerous world? President Obama has been compelled by events to think very carefully before we go charging in to stop a genocide or remove a murderous leader. We did not think long enough before charging in to Iraq and Afghanistan under President Bush, although he had the good angels on his side in removing Saddam Hussein from Iraq and the Taliban from Afghanistan.

His mistake, despite good intentions, was trying to replace these monstrous regimes with western style democracy. Nation building is not what we do well today. The only reason it succeeded after World War II in Germany and Japan was that these were both modern, literate countries that had experienced democratic institutions in their past, and it worked because they had been totally conquered. We have never since then fought a war ended by 'unconditional surrender,' as is obvious in our Korean and Vietnamese interventions. It is a different world today.

The latest foreign policy conflict has to do with humanitarian intervention. President Obama was asked why was it OK in Libya and not in Syria, and he answered that we intervened in Libya 'because we could.' Both the geography and ethnicities in Libya made it feasible to take out a dictator (Ghadafi) threatening genocide. Libya is a huge desert country with a small and mostly homogeneous population, making military intervention fairly easy. The difficult part will be developing a responsible democracy there, which I think is one more mission impossible. I wish we were not trying.

Syria, however, is geographically difficult land with many mountain fastnesses hosting a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, most of whom hate and fear each other. Dictatorships, nasty as they are, have protected ethnic and religious minorities far better than a future Islamist government would do. Not everybody in Syria wants that government to fall because they know quite well what would follow.

Our good intentions to stop carnage might instead lead to worse. This provides a minefield of issues we must pick through carefully or rue the consequences.

676 words

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