

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Identifying the Limits to Humanitarian Intervention: Echoes from Rwanda

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**Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda.** Romeo Dallaire. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003. 584 pp.

**White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good.** William Easterly. New York: Penguin Press, 2006. 448 pp.

**The Limits to Humanitarian Intervention.** Alan Kuperman. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001. 176 pp.

**A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide.** Samantha Power. New York: Basic Books, 2002. 656 pp.

**At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention.** David Rieff. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005. 288 pp.

**Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire.** Marie Beatrice Umutesi. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 284 pp.

Humanitarianism is now a legitimate goal for nations to pursue. Indeed, it is widely agreed that the international community has a responsibility to intervene in the event of genocide, massive abuse of human rights, and refugee flight. But this is a new ideal which emerged only in the last thirty years following debates about whether sovereignty trumped the responsibility to intervene in places like Biafra, Bangladesh, and especially in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge reign. This debate is now over: humanitarianism can trump sovereignty. Among other things, this means that genocide is a crime which must be responded to and refugees are entitled to assistance. But this leads to the next question: how in a world of sovereign states with their own laws, armies, courts, and police are such ideals achieved? In other words, in the real world, how can these newly sacred ideals be implemented? Given that there is no international police force or military, how will the international community respond when international humanitarian laws are violated?

A number of international humanitarian operations undertaken within this "responsibility to intervene doctrine" can now be used to evaluate how these ideals fare in the real world of international politics. Since 1980, these include the humanitarian airlift to Ethiopia in 1985, the

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v9/v9i3reviews.pdf>

humanitarian and military intervention in Somalia in 1992-3, interventions in the Balkans in the early 1990s, the humanitarian relief operation following the 1994 Rwanda genocide and refugee crisis, the NATO-led military and humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was partly justified on such “humanitarianism trumps sovereignty” grounds. In 2005-06, there are continuing calls for international intervention in the Darfur region of Sudan.

In the process of undertaking humanitarian interventions, the capacity of the international community to respond is revealed. Indeed, the strengths of the new international humanitarian relief regime are now even taken for granted, and include the responsibility of governments to protect human rights, a defined role for independent peace-keepers, and the responsibility of UN, governmental, and non-governmental agencies to safeguard the victims of war, famine, and other catastrophes. But many weaknesses of the international humanitarian system of are also now apparent.

The failure of the United Nations (and the United States) to respond militarily during the 1994 Rwanda genocide is typically cited as a paradigmatic example of what damage humanitarian inaction can cause. But this awareness is tempered by the observation that excessive involvement puts humanitarians themselves at unacceptable risk. Indeed, while the lack of political will is viewed as a problem, so are the dangers implied by “Crossing the Mogadishu Line,” a reference to the 1993 intervention by the US military which resulted in the deaths of 18 American soldiers. In short, there are risks and dangers associated with the new idealistic humanitarian doctrine for intervention. In the real world, policy makers evaluate when lack of action will result in genocide or famine, while at the same time being aware that interventions can also go badly awry. Literature emerging since 2000 wrestles with the difficulties that emerge as this new ethic is established.

### The Urgent Responsibility to Respond

In a *“Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Power examines American responses to genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the title says, this influential book is about American responsibility to respond to genocide, not about the types of societies which commit genocide. Books like this are particularly important for defending the morality of humanitarian intervention. Though passionate in making this case, they are less precise in developing ideas about what practical steps are available in a world where trumping sovereign rights requires prescient analysis, diplomacy, political will, and logistical capabilities.

Power finds that the United States has long verbalized a commitment to control genocide yet beginning with the Armenian genocide in 1914, there is a bureaucratic incapacity to respond in a timely fashion. She observes a pattern wherein idealistic individuals within the American bureaucracy have raised the issue of intervention, mirrored by a reluctance of politicians to respond to incipient genocides which have little political payoff among domestic constituencies. In short, Power writes, politicians in the democratic United States personally lack the “will” to mobilize the resources of the United States government to stop genocide. Power goes on to compare the righteous bureaucrat who points out the abuse with reluctant bureaucracies more in tune with domestic political considerations than human rights

outrages. Power identifies this pattern with respect not only to Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, but also the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust.

Power selectively chooses her examples by focusing on failures to intervene. This is an easy temptation in the field of disaster prevention where successes (i.e. catastrophe prevented and therefore nothing happens), is always less obvious than failures (i.e. no intervention occurs, and a catastrophe occurs). Power does point out that on occasions outside action seems to have stopped at least some atrocity. Her best examples both come from Kurdistan and include the threats of sanctions against Saddam Hussein who committed atrocities against Kurds in the 1980s as well as the establishment of a humanitarian safe-zone in Kurdistan following the 1991 Gulf War. One could add the case of South Africa which teetered on the brink of civil war in 1993-94, and much of Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War. Both were places where genocide did not occur despite rapid social dislocation, but as the example of Yugoslavia points out, easily could have.

There are also two other types of interventions missing in Power's analysis. First, Power does not evaluate cases where the United States military did intervene, ostensibly for "humanitarian" reasons, but the intervention failed to meet the high goals set for it. The current war in Iraq which was partly justified on the grounds of Saddam Hussein's terrible human rights record, comes immediately to mind. Other examples include twentieth century interventions in the Caribbean (e.g. Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and other areas. Second, while Power discusses at length the lack of intervention during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, she is inexplicably silent about outrages which did not attract the attention of western political interests. The forced march of several hundred thousand Hutu refugees across Congo/Zaire in 1996-98 comes most immediately to mind. This attack by the victorious Rwandan army helped precipitate the killing and wars leading to the deaths of some four million since 1996 a humanitarian catastrophe unmatched since World War II.

Also unexamined in Power's book is the actual capability of the United States to respond to genocide. At its best, *A Promise from Hell* is a passionate description of the amoral political and legalistic knots that the United States policy making apparatus ties itself into as genocide emerges. But she avoids specifics about how many troops make a successful intervention force, how are these troops supplied, how nineteen year-old Marines communicate with genocide survivors, or how stable government emerges after intervention. But hers is not a nuts and bolts book. Rather it is a general description of the problem of American political will which she assumes has an almost utopian capacity to project force and command obedience anywhere in the world.

### The Limits of Humanitarian Bureaucracies

Where Power is insistent on the appropriateness of US or UN power to solve humanitarian crises, William Easterly is more skeptical. This has more to do with his understanding of international bureaucracies, rather than the justness of a cause. A veteran economist from the World Bank, Easterly now questions the basic premises of large scale efforts by the West to assist the poor, including humanitarian relief operations. As an economist, he emphasizes that foreign aid programs for which beneficiaries cannot provide feedback through either market

mechanisms (i.e. purchasing relief somewhere else if the proffered source is inadequate) or the ballot box (voting out incompetents) are unlikely to efficiently benefit the poor. Humanitarian operations in which a bureaucracy based in New York or Geneva extends protection is likely to be of this nature. Such bureaucracies are primarily responsive to the domestic constituencies which support them through votes and taxes, rather than the foreign poor or potential victims of genocide. He writes that as a result, to fund foreign aid programs, planners often make utopian promises to domestic constituencies who often want “to do good.” As with the nature of all utopias, the actual program inevitably comes up short.

Nevertheless, in the case of Rwanda, Easterly supports the conventional wisdom that military intervention would have mitigated the genocide. Albeit, he does this grudgingly since his overall thesis is that external bureaucracies are unlikely to be effective in responding to a situation with which they are inherently unfamiliar. Preventing the Rwandan genocide may well have worked, but he also notes that the end result would have been an international protectorate which has worked poorly for dealing with issues of economic and political stability in both the colonial (Dutch Indonesia, British India, Belgian Congo, etc) and post-colonial (Haiti, Dominican Republic, Iraq, Serbia/Kosovo, Vietnam, etc) periods.

#### The Limits of Western Diplomatic and Military Response

Alan Kuperman answers the question of what might have happened in Rwanda had the United States intervened militarily in *The Limits to Humanitarian Intervention*. Kuperman claims that given the actual political, military, and diplomatic resources of the United States, it is unlikely that a large enough military force could have stopped the genocide. Kuperman’s estimate is made by evaluating both military logistics, and the actual course of the genocide. Under a *best case* scenario, 15,000 American soldiers could have secured Kigali and rural areas where the genocide occurred. Given the flow of information and logistical capabilities, Kuperman calculates that the operation could have been in place within 40 days, and that as many as 125,000 victims (i.e. 15-20% of an estimated 600,000-800,000) might have been saved.

Kuperman’s thesis has since been challenged by Samantha Power and others who question the dates he used for when President Clinton “could have known and acted” assuming timely and accurate evaluation of available information. The critics indeed may be right. It is clear that President Clinton and others avoided the issue of intervention by resorting to legalism, rather than confronting a criminal act. But this only moves up Kuperman’s “best case” estimate a few days at best, and his central point that the deaths of over 400,000 would have occurred, more than enough to qualify as a major genocide goes unchallenged. The unanswered question throughout is: was this a result of a character deficit specific to President Clinton, or is it embedded in the nature of foreign and defense policy bureaucracies? Critics like Power lean toward the character flaw argument, by explaining that failure to intervene in places like Rwanda is due to weak-kneed leaders lacking political will. But Kuperman points squarely at the limitations of the bureaucracies themselves. Like Easterly, Kuperman is suspicious of the capabilities of bureaucracies to rapidly analyze complicated field data, assemble a diplomatic and military consensus, and then implement a complex logistical operation.

## The Urgent Need to Response in a Difficult Situation

The Canadian general Romeo Dallaire who wrote *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, was the commander of the UN forces assigned to Rwanda beginning in August 1993. As such, he was well aware of logistic issues. Famously, he requested permission to seize weapons brought in by the Rwandan government in a January 1994 fax, but was refused permission by the then-Assistant Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, Kofi Annan. In April 1994, days after the genocide began, he also requested 5,000 troops in order to quell the killing. This request was also denied by Annan at the behest of the Clinton administration.

Dallaire weaves his personal story with the recent history of Rwanda. He describes well the various personalities involved in the genocide and its aftermath. Revealing are his interactions both with the former government of Rwanda which committed the genocide, and the government established in July 1994 by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) of General Kagame. Dallaire's affection for his multi-national force is obvious, and he relates the sad story of his post-Rwanda emotional breakdown in an engaging fashion which emphasizes how vulnerable we all are to horror.

As with *Power*, Dallaire is a proponent of aggressive military engagement in humanitarian catastrophes like Rwanda. And undoubtedly he is right that if his orders had been changed, and reinforcements arrived when he requested them, many lives, particularly in Kigali, could have been saved. Unlike Kuperman though, Dallaire does not dissect the logistics of stationing and supporting troops on short notice in rural Rwanda where so much of the killing took place. This leaves unanswered the more detailed questions about how much force is needed to curb a genocide? Likewise, how credible were threats from an invading army (in this case the RPF under General Kagame), that any intervention would be viewed as a hostile act?

## Morality, Ambiguity, and More Utopias

Like *Power* and Dallaire (and unlike Kuperman), David Rieff's essays in *At the Point of a Gun* have a strong focus on the morality of humanitarianism and human rights. Rieff describes in detail the emergence of the new humanitarianism, and gives credit to the non-governmental organizations which in the 1980s and 1990s developed the humanitarian imperative to provide aid and comfort to civilian populations. Rieff's complaint is about the success of this idea. As he points out, humanitarianism has been so successful that western governments, particularly the United States, have co-opted humanitarian advocacy groups (e.g., the Red Cross, IRC, CARE, and UN agencies) which developed the concept in the first place, with lucrative contracts to provide humanitarian aid. The U.S. government now even seeks to provide relief services through private contractors they can control, as in the case of the Iraq and Afghanistan.

Indeed, Rieff repeatedly quotes from U. S. Secretary of State's Colin Powell's speech in which he thanked humanitarian NGOs such as CARE for joining the US "combat team" in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Rieff is particularly skeptical about the role of militaries in stopping human rights violations. He views the use of military force as an inherent affront to humanitarian ideals and is critical of NGOs who assume that they can use militaries to protect

relief operations. In fact, he claims that using the terms “military” and “humanitarian” in the same breath is always a contradiction. Whenever soldiers and humanitarians come into contact, it is military logic emphasizing skills at war, security, and violence which dominate. He cites numerous cases from places like the former Yugoslavia, Kurdistan, Somalia and Afghanistan where such cooperation did not work in the manner planned by humanitarians.

Despite acknowledging that military intervention typically makes a situation worse before it gets better, Rieff is not a pacifist. He supported the use of military in places like Kosovo and Afghanistan where long-term humanitarian good is served by deposing odious governments. Nevertheless, he notes that even in these cases, the use of military power always results in the death of innocents. This results in the ironic assertion that it is sometimes necessary to destroy a place in order to save it.

So Rieff’s contention is not so much with military intervention per se, rather it is with the co-optation of humanitarianism by militaries. Because so much funding and policy making originates from the U.S. State Department, no longer do humanitarian agencies critique policy, or more importantly, independently implement programs reflecting abstract humanitarian principles, as opposed to U.S. foreign policy. After all, if relief is about simply delivering services, why not let a food catering services or building contractor do it? Rieff’s fear is that as cooptation occurs, refugees will come to see such agencies not as their protectors, but as representative of foreign policies and even militaries. While undoubtedly refugees would rather be at the mercy of the US foreign policy rather than the Somali, Sudanese, or Rwandan governments, Rieff points out that humanitarian pioneers are nevertheless losing their independence.

### A Ground Level View of the Humanitarian Relief Regime

Rare feedback from the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid is provided by Marie Beatrice Umutesi, a Rwandan NGO organizer. In 1996-7 she walked 2000 km. across Zaire with hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Hutu refugees fleeing the new RPF-dominated government. Umutesi provides a moving account of what it meant to be a Hutu refugee in 1994-97 in a variety of refugee camps, and later on the fly as she and her adopted family of women and children fled. Her story is an account of fear, flight and hope — something of a cross between *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *The Great Escape*. But the focus of this review is on her view of international refugee agencies’ policies towards, her and fellow Rwandan refugees.

Umutesi’s view is important because the Hutu refugee population was stigmatized by the UNHCR, U.S. government, and many NGOs, as being less worthy of assistance because Hutu *genocidaires* genocide lived amongst them. In describing their experience, Umutesi illuminates both the strengths and weaknesses of the humanitarian assistance regime. The refugee relief agencies, convinced that all Hutu refugees were guilty if not of genocide then at least abetting it, extended aid only begrudgingly. Assistance, Umutesi writes, was too little, too late, and distributed with a poor understanding of political conditions. She is also critical of agencies which when faced with security concerns, abandoned refugees during military offensives by Kagame’s Rwandan Army and Congolese rebels. Instead of offering succor, western agencies encouraged forcible repatriation of refugees to Rwanda on flights chartered by the UNHCR. As

reported by Umutesi, encouragement even included offering \$10 bounties to Congolese betraying fleeing refugees.

Umutesi's view of the international humanitarian relief regime is both a hopeful and harsh one. As a refugee, she actively seeks, and sometimes receives assistance from the UN and other agencies. It is clear from her account that she does believe that the assistance provided by CARE, MSF, UNHCR, WFP, and the other agencies are humanitarian entitlements, not charity. Time after time Umutesi's survival depends not on the international refugee relief regime, but on the generosity of local Congolese and other refugees. In the meantime, the children and women with whom she flees die and disappear in the context of violence, hunger, disease, and exhaustion.

But most of Umutesi's book is not about the short-comings of the international humanitarian community. Rather it is about the people who helped her. Many of these people are refugees themselves, and Congolese. There are also Europeans. Her heroes are those who fed them and provided a safe place to sleep despite risks to themselves. Her book is a reminder that no matter how fantastic and far-reaching the reach of the international community may be, it is on the ground when people flee that humanitarian assistance is proffered.

#### An Uneasy Way Forward?

The debate in the humanitarian world today — between the ideals and the real world applications — is an old one. Indeed, classical sociologist Emile Durkheim described it in his essay about the “dual nature of society” as being about the sacred world of shared ideals, and the everyday profane world where people fail to meet their own high standards. Much good advocacy work was done by people like Samantha Power to establish humanitarian ideals, and hold governments accountable at least in the court of public opinion. The success of advocates for human rights like Power and Dallaire is reflected in the range of new agencies and institutions addressing problems previously considered to be internal sovereign matters. Among these are refugee rights, genocide, and mass murder. These ideals are now sacred, and in the very real world of international politics can even sometimes trump state sovereignty.

Ideals, sacred or not, are always idealistic and utopian. But they are important for orienting bureaucratic action, even if perfection is not always achieved. The problem is that single-minded crusaders pursuing sacred ideals have a natural tendency towards hubris and in the process sometimes even miss humanitarian outrages such as the Congo catastrophe. They are above all moral entrepreneurs specializing in establishing new principles, and not focused on the unintended complications of the policies they advocate. The righteousness of the humanitarian cause is now self-evident, yet they still need people like Alan Kuperman, David Rieff, and William Easterly to remind them that organizations are not only made of ideals, but also of policies, programs and constituencies. These are imperfect institutions which, left to their own devices and without checks, tend to become focused on internal bureaucratic and ideological dynamics, rather than the problem they were designed to address.

The most compelling critique of both the successes and weaknesses of the international refugee relief regime is found in Beatrice Umutesi's story. Her goal was to seek the assistance

from the international aid regime to which she was entitled as a refugee. As a refugee, she is aware of the new international norms about her rights against forcible repatriation, and the UNHCR's responsibility to her. This awareness is a success. The victims of Biafra, Bangladesh, and Cambodia did not share her expectation. Instead it was simply assumed that sovereign governments could treat their citizens without any accountability to the outside world. Beatrice Umutesi and the illiterate Rwandan peasants she fled with in 1996-97 were aware that there was a new ethic in the world to which the humanitarian agencies are accountable. Umutesi is of course repeatedly disappointed and the deaths of her family and friends are the result. This happened because she is both an idealist and acutely aware that humanitarian institutions are unable to achieve high ideals in a profane and imperfect world. The appalling costs of such limitations are very apparent in what she writes. But the hope that this new humanitarian consciousness, which extends even into the remote Congolese forests, should also not be forgotten. This is a victory of the world's humanitarian activists like Samantha Power, and they should receive credit for it.

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