

The Fallacy of ‘Humanitarian’ War

The new excuse for U.S. imperial wars is “humanitarian” or “liberal” interventionism with Hillary Clinton and other proponents citing noble motives for destroying foreign societies, as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller discusses.

By Graham E. Fuller

Rajan Menon’s new book, *The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention*, launches a timely argument against a dominant argument lying behind so much of modern American foreign policy – “humanitarian intervention” or “liberal interventionism.”

We are, of course, well familiar with Republican and neocon readiness to go to war, but the reality is that many Democrat Party leaders have been no less seduced into a series of optional foreign military interventions, with increasingly disastrous consequences. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is today one of the leading exponents of the idea, but so are many of the advisors around President Barack Obama.

Menon offers powerful argumentation skewering the concept of “humanitarian intervention,” demonstrating how it operates often as little more than a subtler form of an imperial agenda. Naked imperial ambitions tend to be recognizable for what they are. But when those global ambitions are cloaked in the liberal language of our “right to protect” oppressed peoples, prevent humanitarian outrages, stop genocide, and to topple noxious dictators, then the true motives behind such operations become harder to recognize.

What humanitarian could object to such lofty goals? Yet the seductive character of these “liberal interventionist” policies end up serving – indeed camouflaging – a broad range of military objectives that rarely help and often harm the ostensible objects of our intervention.

Professor Rajan Menon brings a considerable variety of skills to bear in this brief and lucid book. Despite his first-class academic credentials in the field, he also writes in clear and persuasive language for the concerned general reader. Second, Menon is no theoretician: he has worked closely with policy circles for many years and understands the players and operations as well as anyone outside government.

In rejecting the premise of “liberal interventionism,” Menon is not exercising some hard-minded, bloodless vision of policy – quite the opposite. He is deeply concerned for the wellbeing of peoples and societies abroad – who are often among the primary victims of such liberal interventionism. He argues not as an

isolationist but rather as an observer who has watched so many seemingly well-minded interventions turn into horror stories for the citizens involved.

From a humanitarian point of view, can the deaths of half a million Iraqis and the dislocation of a million or so more be considered to have contributed to the wellbeing of “liberated Iraq?” As former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once said, she regretted the death of 500,000 Iraqi children who, in Saddam’s Iraq, had been deprived of medicines under a long U.S. embargo, but, she concluded, “it was worth it.” One wonders to whom it was worth it? Where is the humanitarian vision behind such a comment?

Libya too has been transformed from an unpleasant but quiescent dictatorship under Muammar Gaddafi into a nightmare of raging militias, civil war, anarchy and a breeding ground of ISIS and al-Qa’ida. Afghanistan is still mired in conflict. So Menon is arguing not for a hardening of hearts, but for questioning the real-world outcomes of such seemingly “well-intentioned” wars.

Ultimately the case for “humanitarian intervention” is justified by the quest for international justice, protection of civilians, and the broadening of democratization and human rights. The U.S. has regularly invoked these principles in justifying its ongoing – indeed nonstop – wars over the past several decades.

Yet the sad reality is that the *selective nature* of U.S. interventions raises serious questions about the true motivation behind invoking such “universal” values. U.S. calls for “democratization” more often operate as punishment to its enemies (“regime change”) but rarely as a gift to be bestowed upon friends (“friendly dictators.”)

Menon argues, buttressing his case with striking examples from around the world, that such selective implementation of “universal values” by a global (imperial) power ends up tarnishing and diminishing the very values they are meant to promote; as a result they create broad cynicism around the world among those who perceive them as mere instruments of aggressive U.S. global power projection.

Yet when many genuine humanitarian crises do burst forth, as in Rwanda or in the ongoing agonies of the Congo (five *million* dead and counting) Washington has opted not to intervene because it did not perceive its immediate national interests to be threatened.

In short, the selective and opportunistic character of liberal interventionism ends up giving a bad name to liberalism. And it cruelly deceives many in the West who seek a more “liberal” foreign policy and yet who find that, in the end, they have only supported the projection of greater American geopolitical power –

and usually at considerable human cost to the Iraqs, Afghanistans, Somalias, Libyas, and Columbias of the world.

Any reader of the book is eventually forced to confront a deeper question: when is war in fact “worth it”? Few would respond “never,” but many might respond “rarely.” Yet Menon is not arguing against war as such, so much as forcing us to acknowledge the faulty “liberal” foundation of our relentless quest for enemies to destroy – in the name of making the world a better place.

The title of the book, *The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention*, suggests that at the very least such policies are self-deceiving, in other cases perhaps deliberately meant to obfuscate. Menon here poses the question whether, for whatever motivation, great powers can ever sufficiently master the complexity of foreign societies to truly engineer a better life in the countries we target for remodeling. And whether we can afford an enterprise that might take decades at the least.

In the end we become aware of the unhealthy nature of combining broad ideals married to global power. In the case of the British Empire, and now the American, this combination readily leads to the manipulation and then corruption of those ideals – discrediting U.S. prestige and credibility and damaging the lives of those living in troubled areas.

None of this is to say that there is never room for international intervention in arenas of horrific depredations against civilian populations. But it is only when such intervention is truly international (essentially U.N.-sanctioned and not a mere maneuver to insert NATO into another global hotspot) that it can it take on a measure of credibility and international respect. Otherwise it ends up perceived as a U.S. proxy move against Russia, China, Iran or some other adversary.

Menon’s book constitutes essential reading for anyone troubled by the ugly character of so much of the international scene these days, and yet dismayed by its exploitation by policy-makers who cloak invasion, power projections and military operations in the garb of humanitarian effort.

Here is a cogent critique of the recent decades of U.S. foreign policy misadventures in which our military has become the primary instrument of U.S. policy – and justified in the name of humanitarian goals. We rarely get to hear these arguments so clearly presented.

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