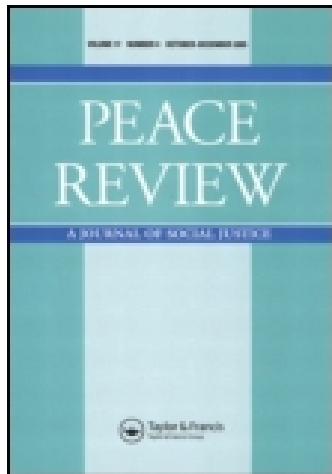


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The Myth of Good Interventions

Michael Parenti

U.S. foreign policy officials claim they have intervened in other countries for worthy causes, such as carrying out humanitarian missions, defending weaker peoples from aggression, and bolstering democratic governments. Let us scrutinize these assertions.

Contrary to popular belief, the U.S.—like most other nations—does not have a particularly impressive humanitarian record. True, many nations, including our own, have sent relief abroad in response to particular crises. But these actions represent no essential foreign policy commitments. They occur sporadically, have a limited scope, and obscure the many occasions when governments do absolutely nothing for other countries in desperate straits.

Most U.S. aid missions serve as pretexts for hidden political goals: namely, to bolster conservative regimes, to build infrastructures for big investors, to lend legitimacy to counterinsurgency programs, and to undermine local agrarian self-sufficiency while promoting U.S. agribusiness products.

On memorable occasions, U.S. officials have showed themselves to be anything but humanitarian. Consider the Holocaust. The Roosevelt administration did virtually nothing to accommodate tens of thousands of Jews who sought to escape Nazi extermination. Washington refused to ease its restrictive immigration quotas, and failed to even fill the limited number of slots allotted to Jews. U.S. officials even persuaded Latin American governments to close their doors to European immigration.

Consider South Africa. For decades Washington did nothing to discourage the White racist-dominated country from inflicting misery and death upon its African population. Instead, U.S. leaders maintained trade and investment relations with the apartheid regime. Likewise, the U.S. lifted not a single humanitarian finger to stop the West Pakistani massacre of East Pakistan (later renamed Bangladesh). It was more concerned with preventing India and the Soviet Union from extending their influence in the region. And in the 1980s, the U.S. national security state quietly assisted the Khmer Rouge in their campaigns of mayhem and murder, using them as a destabilizing force against the socialist government in Cambodia.

Be it the indigenous rain forest peoples of South America and Southeast Asia, or the Kurds, Biafrans, or Palestinians, be it overseas Chinese in Indonesia, East Timorese, Angolans, Mozambiquans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, or dozens of other peoples, the U.S. has done little to help rescue them from their terrible plights, and in most instances much to assist their oppressors.

Afghanistan has been posed as an example of a good intervention: the rescuing of an embattled people from Soviet aggression. In fact, the destabilizer in Afghanistan was not Moscow but the U.S. national security state. Years before Soviet troops entered the country, the Carter administration was assisting Afghan tribes rebelling against the Kabul government. Kabul had a nonaggression pact with Moscow and received Soviet military and economic aid. In the late 1970s, the Afghan military launched a social revolution that included programs in literacy, housing, land reform, and public health.

The privileged landowners and *mujahideen* tribesmen—based mostly in Iran and Pakistan—accelerated their rebellion, assisted by billions of aid dollars from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. For the feudal landowners, the insufferable feature of the revolutionary government was its land reform program for tenant farmers. For the tribesmen, it was the government's dedication to gender equality and the education of women and children, and its campaign to abolish opium cultivation. The Soviets entered the war after repeated requests from the besieged Kabul government. By 1988, Moscow sought to withdraw its troops and called for a non-socialist, multiparty, coalition government that included a major role for the rebels.

The U.S. intervened in Afghanistan on the side of ousted feudal lords, reactionary tribal chieftains, and opium traffickers. If this was a worthy cause, what could be an unworthy one? Among the most vicious *mujahideen* leaders was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who invaded Afghanistan in 1975 with a force created largely by the Pakistani military and the CIA. A major recipient of U.S. military assistance, he was Afghanistan's prime heroin trafficker. By the mid-1980s, the Afghan *mujahideen* supplied about half the heroin consumed in the U.S. and were the world's biggest exporters of opium.

In their independent investigation of the Afghan war, Steven Galster and John Fullerton found that the *mujahideen* committed widespread looting, raping, killing of civilians, and the torture and execution of prisoners. These atrocities went unnoticed in the U.S. press. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988. The Kabul government lasted until 1992 when it was forced from power by the rebels. The triumphant *mujahideen* immediately began waging war on each other, laying waste to cities, terrorizing civilian populations, and staging mass executions.

U.S. intervention in Afghanistan proved little different from U.S. intervention in Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and elsewhere. It had the same intent of preventing egalitarian social change, and the same effect of overthrowing an economically reformist government. In all these instances, the intervention brought retrograde elements into ascendance, left the economy in ruins, and pitilessly laid waste to hundreds of thousands of lives.

Just days before he left office in January 1993, President Bush sent troops to Somalia supposedly to safeguard food distribution to its hungry people. Here seemed to be another worthy humanitarian cause. But why would Bush, who spent his entire public career untroubled by poverty and hunger at home and abroad, suddenly be so moved to fight famine in Somalia? Why not in any of the other African countries where famine has raged? And why such an elaborate military undertaking for humanitarian "famine relief"?

The truth slipped out when the *Los Angeles Times* (January 18, 1993) reported that “Four major U.S. oil companies are quietly sitting on a prospective fortune in exclusive concessions to explore and exploit tens of millions of acres of the Somali countryside.” The story notes that “nearly two-thirds of Somalia” was allocated to “the American oil giants Conoco, Amoco, Chevron and Phillips in the final years before Somalia’s pro-U.S. President Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown.” The companies are “well positioned to pursue Somalia’s most promising potential oil reserve the moment the nation is pacified.” The article reports that “aid experts, veteran East Africa analysts, and several prominent Somalis” believed that “President Bush, a former Texas oilman, was moved to act in Somalia, at least in part,” to protect corporate oil’s investments there.

The *Times* article notes that many Somalis and foreign development experts were “deeply troubled by the blurry line” between the U.S. government and the large oil companies. As one expert remarked: “It’s left everyone thinking the big question here isn’t famine relief but oil.” The story reports that geologists, petroleum experts, and Bush himself—when he was Vice-President—had publicly noted the region’s rich reserves. “But since the U.S. intervention began, neither the Bush Administration nor any of the oil companies ... have commented publicly on Somalia’s potential for oil and natural gas production.”

Perhaps they became so preoccupied with the mission’s humanitarian aspects that they just honestly forgot about the billion-dollar oil concessions. More likely, they preferred not to alert the public about the possibility that American troops were once again providing muscle for big business.

The intervention was treated as humanitarian, and then as a nation-building operation. In fact, U.S. and U.N. troops fought pitched battles with local forces, killing several thousand Somalis, attempting to hunt down a “warlord” deemed too independent-minded. When 18 U.S. troops were killed, public pressure against the intervention began to mount in the U.S. Eventually the U.S. contingent left Somalia but 19,000 U.N. troops remained to continue constructing a nation-state that would be serviceable for transnational corporations.

In many areas in Somalia without U.N. presence, the tribal strife subsided and students, community leaders, local businesspeople, and various factional representatives generated lasting peace accords. In areas where U.N. forces remained, factional fighting continued, as the clans competed for U.N. jobs, contracts, and millions of dollars in payments for various services (Op-ed *New York Times*, July 6, 1994).

Haiti provides another example. U.S. forces apparently intervened to reinstate a democratically elected president. Surely here was a “good intervention.” But let’s take a closer look.

In 1990, a populist priest, Father Jean Bertrand Aristide—labeled a leftist because he sided with the poor against the rich—won an overwhelming 70% vote to become Haiti’s first freely elected president. During his brief tenure, Aristide fought against government corruption and for more efficient public services. He tried to double the minimum wage from \$2 to \$4 per day (not per hour). He promoted social security and land reform projects that were opposed by the banks and the U.S. embassy. He supported cooperative farms begun by peasants in the countryside.

Nine months of these democratic initiatives were too much for Haiti's military. U.S.-trained General Raoul Cedras and his army seized power and killed several thousand Aristide supporters, beating and torturing many others. The military coup won the support of rich Haitians, foreign investors, and the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Under Vatican pressure, Father Aristide's Salesian Order expelled him for "incitation to violence, exaltation of class struggle" and for having "destabilized the faithful" (*San Francisco Bay Guardian*, September 21, 1994).

In its ensuing terror campaign, the military was assisted by a special police force, FRAPH—Haiti's answer to the Gestapo—which the CIA created, funded, trained, and supervised. FRAPH worked as the CIA's eyes and ears, while also engaged in Haiti's billion-dollar-plus drug trafficking network.

For over three years Washington did next to nothing to restore Aristide to power. Instead, the CIA claimed he was mentally unbalanced. President Clinton eventually imposed economic sanctions on Haiti, and in September 1994 invaded the country with the purported goal of reviving democracy and restoring Aristide to office.

On the occupation's first day, however, it was announced that American troops were there to cooperate with the Haitian military. General Cedras would remain in office for another month, and neither he nor his cohorts would need to leave the country. The Haitian military would not be disbanded and reconstructed with popular forces loyal to Aristide and dedicated to democracy. Full amnesty was granted to the entire military for a series of horrific crimes. The U.S. also announced that the junta's assets in U.S. banks—amounting to millions of dollars looted from the Haitian people—would be unfrozen and released to the generals.

Aristide would be allowed to finish his term—but at a substantial price. He was strong-armed into accepting a World Bank agreement that would, among other things, shift some presidential powers to the conservative parliament, massively privatize the public sector, cut Haitian public employment in half, reduce taxes and regulations on U.S. corporations in Haiti, increase subsidies for exports and private corporations, and lower import duties. World Bank representatives admitted these measures would hurt the Haitian poor but benefit the "enlightened business investors."

At the same time, Aristide supporters were forbidden to demonstrate. U.S. military intelligence, working closely with Haitian intelligence, prepared to round up popular forces and impose massive detentions if necessary. Former national security adviser James Schlesinger noted (ABC-TV, September 16, 1994) that U.S. forces would have to prevent "the Aristide people from making reprisals." Many of them are poor, he said, and may want to loot the houses of the rich. "We will find it hard, and Aristide will find it hard, to control his people. The risk is we will have looting, rioting, and a large number of deaths with which we will be associated." Clearly, the U.S. was in Haiti to protect the rich from the poor and the military from the people, not the other way around. One would think the people were the economic oppressors and armed killers rather than the victims.

During the occupation, U.S. firms in Haiti continued to fire people who tried to unionize and continued to pay workers ten cents an hour for a ten-hour-day. Very little of these companies' profits remains in Haiti to promote that country's

development. Meanwhile, conditions in Haiti go from bad to worse. According to the World Bank itself, the number of Haitians who live in absolute poverty rose from 48% in 1976 to 81% in 1985, indicating a serious spread of disease, illiteracy, and malnutrition.

While ballyhooed by the White House and the media as a rescue operation for democracy, the U.S. intervention in Haiti was no different from interventions in numerous other countries: It occurred to bolster the existing class system, to suppress or marginalize popular organizations and disempower their leaders, and to provide a mild police and military facelift—purging some notorious actors while keeping the repressive system intact. The interventionist force—now in the form of a U.N. contingent—remains in Haiti to carry out what former national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, called a “complicated pacification” and “hazardous nation-building.”

In 1915, the last time U.S. troops invaded Haiti, it was under the pretext of “restoring stability.” They implemented a “pacification” program that killed 15,000 Haitians. They did not leave until 1934, after setting up an autocratic military apparatus that has remained in place to this day.

In sum, we should pay less attention to what U.S. policymakers profess as their motives—for anyone can avow dedication to noble causes—and give more attention to what they actually do. On most occasions they hide from the American people their real intentions. If this sounds like what some people call a “conspiracy theory,” then so be it. In fact, the policymakers themselves admit their secretiveness, regularly emphasizing the need to keep both the public and Congress uninformed.

Occasionally, however, policymakers let the truth slip out. In 1947, presidential aide Clark Clifford justified intervention in Greece and Turkey by noting that “the disappearance of free enterprise in other nations would threaten our economy and our democracy.” In his 1953 State of the Union message President Eisenhower observed, “A serious and explicit purpose of our foreign policy [is] the encouragement of a hospitable climate for investment in foreign nations.” In 1982, Vice President Bush said, “We want to maintain a favorable climate for foreign investment in the Caribbean region, not merely to protect the existing U.S. investment there, but to encourage new investment opportunities in stable, democratic, free-market-oriented countries close to our shores.”

With the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe, U.S. leaders and news media began intimating something more on their agenda for the former “captive nations” than merely free elections. Of what use was political democracy, they seemed to be saying, if it allowed an economy that was socialistic or even social democratic? They suggested a country could not be truly democratic if it were still socialist. Publicly, they began to acknowledge that installing capitalism in the former communist nations was the U.S. policy goal, even if those nations had already adopted Western democratic political systems.

The propaganda task of U.S. leaders and opinion makers was to couple capitalism with democracy, sometimes even treating them as one and the same thing. Of course, they would ignore the many undemocratic capitalist regimes from Guatemala to Indonesia to Zaire. But “capitalism” still sounded, well, too capitalistic. The preferred terms were “free market,” “market economy,” and

“market reforms,” concepts that appeared to include more of us than just the Fortune 500.

In 1994, Representative Lee Hamilton, then the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair, wrote me that “we must put Cuba in contact with ... the economic benefits of a free market system.” The embargo on that nation was put in place to “promote democratic change in Cuba and retaliate for the large-scale seizure of American assets by the Castro regime.”

Needless to say, Hamilton did not explain why his own government—which had supported a Cuban dictatorship for generations before Castro—was now so concerned about installing democracy on the island. But he did acknowledge, revealingly, that U.S. policy was dedicated to advancing the cause of the “free market system” and to retaliating for the “large-scale seizure of American assets.” In so many words, he was telling us that the fundamental commitment of U.S. policy was to make the world safe for corporate investment abroad.

Once elected, Clinton himself began to link democracy and free markets. In a speech before the U.N. (September 27, 1993), he said: “Our overriding purpose is to expand and strengthen the world’s community of market-based democracies.” But as demonstrated in numerous countries, when forced to choose between democracy without capitalism or capitalism without democracy, Western elites unhesitatingly embrace the latter.

Those who doubt U.S. policymakers conscious dedication to propagating capitalism should note how “free market reforms” are demanded in one country after another. We no longer have to impute such intentions. Almost all their actions, and now—increasingly—even their own words, testify to what they have been doing.