

## The Establishment Eyes Central Africa for More Mission Creep

Ted Galen Carpenter

March 12, 2019

As if the United States wasn't already pursuing enough murky and dubious military missions in such places as Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, a push appears to be underway to expand Washington's involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa.

U.S. troops are more deeply engaged in "anti-terror" in Niger, Somalia, and other countries than most Americans realize. When four American Special Forces personnel died in Niger in 2017, even members of Congress were surprised.

A lobbying effort now seems to be taking place for U.S. intervention to alleviate suffering in the Central African Republic (CAR), because of that country's ongoing civil war. NBC News took the lead with a story on the March 6 *Today* show and followed it up with a more detailed segment on the *Nightly News* that same evening. Cynthia McFadden was the lead journalist for the report that included searing footage of suffering in one UN-run refugee camp.

The media treatment would be familiar to anyone who recalls the preludes to U.S. military interventions in such places as Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya, and Syria. There is extensive video of starving, disease-afflicted children and their anguished parents. International aid workers emphasize that the suffering was certain to get worse unless the "international community" (led, of course, by the United States) took immediate action. A U.S. diplomat on the scene or in Washington proceeds to echo that argument. The armed conflict causing the suffering is mentioned, but the treatment is brief and superficial, or it becomes a simplistic melodrama in which a designated villain is causing all the trouble: Think Slobodan Milosevic, Muammar Qaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad.

The NBC report followed that template to perfection—including the focus on child victims. In an on-camera interview, Caryl Stern, the CEO of UNICEF USA, stated flatly: "This is the most dangerous place in the world for children." As with earlier media accounts that sought to generate public support for U.S. intervention in the Balkans, Libya, and other chaotic arenas, the report also highlighted the sense of urgency and the assertion that the United States has both a moral obligation and a strategic interest in taking action. One passage asserted that the situation already in the CAR was dire and becoming more so:

The Central African Republic has descended into chaos in recent years. A sectarian civil war pitting Muslim rebels against Christian militias has ravaged large swaths of the country, displaced more than 1 million people and claimed the lives of tens of thousands.

Adding to its woes, this landlocked nation of 4.6 million people is now teetering on the brink of famine. An estimated 1.5 million children are at risk of starvation, aid groups say. And the lack

of government institutions coupled with the tangled mass of warring factions have prompted fears that extremist organizations aligned with the Islamic State group could gain a foothold.

The last point aimed at making the case that the situation in the CAR was not just a humanitarian crisis but also a matter of U.S. national security. David Brownstein, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in the Central African Republic, did not hesitate to invoke the specter of ISIS. He stated that “the United States is particularly concerned about the potential of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, capitalizing on the instability to establish a presence in the region.” Brownstein emphasized that “ISIS takes advantage of vacuums. Literal vacuums, security vacuums, governance vacuums, perceived moral vacuums.”

If the ISIS menace was not enough to alarm viewers, NBC cited two other bogeymen: the Russians and the Chinese. “Other nations have developed an interest in the resource-rich African country, including Russia and China. The soil underneath the razed villages and scorched fields holds a wealth of gold, diamonds, uranium and oil. Close observers of the region say Russia in particular has gained a stunning level of clout inside the former French colony in just the past 13 months—supplying arms and soldiers, and seeing one of its own nationals installed as a special security adviser to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.” Other media outlets have warned about Russian arms sales as well.

Habitual hawks likewise are stressing that the Kremlin is exploiting the situation in the CAR for geopolitical advantage. Heritage Foundation senior fellow and former deputy secretary of defense Peter Brookes argues that Moscow is forging worrisome security ties with numerous African countries, including possibly seeking bases in both Sudan and Eritrea. The CAR is definitely on that list as well, Brookes contends. “Russia has sold arms to, and trained, the security services of African states for many years, perhaps most notably of late in the Central African Republic.”

Americans need to resist the siren call for U.S. intervention in the CAR or any other country where vital American interests are not at stake. Financial aid to help alleviate human suffering is appropriate, and the U.S. government already is the largest donor for that cause in the CAR, sending \$120 million in 2018. If reports like the NBC story generate a surge in private donations, that outcome is even better. No one denies that there is great humanitarian suffering in the CAR, but America cannot take action in every arena where such a tragedy occurs.

Moreover, previous U.S.-led humanitarian interventions have not turned out well. Especially where there are complex, multi-sided civil wars, Washington’s meddling typically makes matters worse. The Obama administration’s campaign to overthrow Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi to prevent a supposed impending genocide instead brought unprecedented chaos to that country. The suffering in Syria today was exacerbated by the agenda that the United States and its allies pursued to unseat Bashar al-Assad. Even in cases where Washington’s motive seemed genuinely humanitarian and not just a façade for geopolitical advantage, as in Somalia during George H.W. Bush’s administration, the outcome was bruising. American troops arrived to distribute aid and restore some semblance of order. They ended up battling one of the Somali armed factions, culminating in the Black Hawk down fiasco.

In light of that dismal track record, the United States should stay aloof from the tragic situation in the Central African Republic. U.S. foreign policy over the past several decades has confirmed the point that the road to hell is often paved with good intentions. Hyped, simplistic, and one-

sided media accounts have helped push America into unwise interventions, and a similar campaign may be underway regarding the CAR. We must not let that siren call succeed again.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor to The American Conservative, is the author of 12 books and more than 750 articles on international affairs. His latest book is Gullible Superpower: U.S. Support for Bogus Foreign Democratic Movements (2019).*