

The American Conservative

Humanitarian Interventionists' Bad Judgment

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On March 28, 2011 @ 8:29 am In

What unites these arguments is a belief that foreign policy must be Hippocratic: First, do no harm. But the advocates of moral consistency cannot stomach this moral minimalism so they cloak it in moral maximalism: Rather than arguing against humanitarian war anywhere, they argue for it everywhere, which is a less honest way of saying the same thing. ~[Peter Beinart](#)^[1]

As one of Beinart's "moral minimalists," I have to say that he gets this wrong. Beinart describes the minimalist view fairly well:

Terrible things happen in distant societies but we do not really understand them, and so our efforts at amelioration either prove futile or actually make things worse. We think that because our motives are pure we can violate the norms of sovereignty that we guard jealously when it comes to our own affairs, but in so doing we open—or reopen—the door to a predatory imperialism that can do even greater harm.

I have made some version of all of these arguments in the past, and this sums up many of my main objections to humanitarian intervention. These are much stronger arguments than charging interventionists with inconsistency, and it is telling that Beinart spends the rest of his column carefully ignoring them. He cites Kosovo as a success, but it was a perfect example of how intervention made things worse for the civilian population, led to the creation of a statelet run by criminals, and provided a model for another major power to support separatists in a smaller, neighboring state and eventually impose a *de facto* partition on the smaller state. The Kosovo war had largely negative consequences for virtually all parties on the ground, it didn't avert a disaster, and it actually created one, but Beinart is counting on most people not remembering that.

Beinart knows that the consistency argument is weaker, which is why he focuses all of his attention on refuting it. While it is weaker, the consistency argument is perfectly appropriate to use against humanitarian interventionists when they are saying that the Libyan war is supposed to serve as a precedent and a warning for other regimes. Humanitarian interventionists claim that they are enforcing a norm, and so it is a legitimate question why they have chosen to act in one internal conflict and have refused to do so elsewhere. Critics of the Libyan war aren't demanding military intervention in Ivory Coast at all, much less for consistency's sake, but we are questioning the priorities and judgment of humanitarian interventionists when they decide that a small-scale civil war in Libya takes precedence over an Ivorian crisis that displaces a million people and has far more worrying warning signs of the potential for mass killings fueled by ethnic hostilities. Libya interventionists are anxious to prevent another Rwanda, so it is worth pointing out that something much more like another Rwanda may be unfolding in West Africa while they are fixated on a much smaller crisis in Libya.

It's true that Western governments can't and won't intervene everywhere, which means that the effectiveness of intervention will depend to a large degree on the wisdom and judgment of the interventionists. They have to be able to convince the rest of us that they know how to select the right crisis and that they have come up with the right response. The arbitrary selection of Libya justified with a lot of weak rationalizations after the fact and the quick resort to escalating the military conflict with air power suggests that humanitarian interventionists aren't very good at this and haven't become any better since 1999. More than most, they are susceptible to the CNN Effect and they seem to set their priorities on the basis of whatever happens to be receiving the most coverage. If interventionists are applying their own standards so arbitrarily and mistakenly, why should skeptics take their justifications seriously?

The credibility of humanitarian interventionists rests heavily on their claim that they do understand enough about the conflict into which they are inserting the U.S. and allied forces. They also must have generally good judgment to weigh correctly the relative importance of different foreign crises, and the public would need to have confidence that they are able to recognize when there is "demonstrable need" for constructive outside

intervention and when that intervention would make things worse. Simply saying “where we can, we must,” which is the heart of Beinart’s argument, shows that humanitarian interventionists fall short on all three. The Libyan war shows humanitarian interventionists are treating the “responsibility to protect” as a loophole rather than a standard designed to require action to avert genuinely dire humanitarian crises. If their knowledge, judgment, and discernment can’t be trusted, that makes humanitarian interventions as dangerous and misguided as preventive wars based on shoddy and manipulated intelligence.

The humanitarian case for the Libyan war gets weaker the more one thinks about it. As Benjamin Friedman [put it](#) ^[2] the other day:

Nor is it clear that bombing Libya serves humanitarian ends. True, absent outside intervention, the Libyan government would likely have reasserted its authority in the east, killing rebellious civilians. But the civil war that intervention prolonged will probably kill more. In his March 18 speech justifying war on humanitarian grounds, Obama quoted Qaddafi’s promise to show “no mercy and no pity,” but failed to note that the dictator was threatening rebel fighters, not civilians, and explicitly excluded rebels that surrendered. The point is not that we should bank on such promises but that the path to minimizing violence is uncertain.

If the Libyan war is justified under the authority of a “responsibility to protect” doctrine, as the supporters of the war claim it is, it is up to them to explain why the Libyan intervention qualifies despite the relatively small scale of the humanitarian crisis. If Friedman is right, the catastrophe that the administration claims was averted may not have happened at all, or at least nowhere on the scale that required emergency intervention by outside forces. It is for the advocates of this intervention to explain why concentrating international efforts and attention on escalating and intensifying an internal conflict with outside forces improves rather than worsens the situation for the civilian population in Libya, and it is then for them to explain why those efforts wouldn’t have been much better directed at conflict *prevention* and protection of the civilian population in Ivory Coast.

Political capital, international support, time, military resources, and attention are all limited. Humanitarian interventionists insist that their cause should receive a large amount of all of these at a time when our government is already overburdened with commitments, but in practice they seem inclined to fritter them all away on the crisis du jour rather than conserve them and apply them to avert genuine, large-scale loss of life. If we were talking about any other area of policy, this indiscriminate and wasteful approach would badly damage interventionists’ credibility, but because it involves the exercise of American power abroad they are allowed to be as careless and wasteful as they please. The problem isn’t that humanitarian interventionists are being inconsistent. It is that they are proving to be incompetent according to their own standards.

URL to article: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison/2011/03/28/humanitarian-interventionists-bad-judgment/>

Enjoy The American Conservative delivered to your mailbox every month -- visit www.amconmag.com/subscribe/ today!

Article printed from Eunomia: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison>

URLs in this post:

[1] Peter Beinart: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2011-03-28/obamas-libya-speech-why-consistency-in-foreign-policy-is-overrated/>

[2] put it: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/three-phoney-reasons-bomb-libya-5073>

Copyright © 2011 Eunomia. All rights reserved.