



Perriellian Wars

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Virginia's Fifth Congressional District had been long disgraced by the racist buffoon Democrat turned Republican Virgil Goode when Tom Perriello was elected as a non-racist buffoon Democrat in 2008. For partisans, just getting elected and doing what President Obama told him was all Perriello needed to do. For national "progressives" he was a star, which was usually explained to me in terms of how awful his district was relative to how limitedly awful he was.

But peace activists had a problem with Perriello. We'd always rallied and lobbied against war funding when Goode was around. Even the partisan groups like MoveOn.org had pretended to dislike wars and promoted activism, albeit exclusively in Republican districts like Goode's. With the peace movement's partisan operations shut down by 2008, Perriello voted for every war dollar he could get his hands on. We met with him, and he told us that he thought the war in Afghanistan was doing a lot of good.

With actual war opponents denouncing him, Perriello was defeated by Republican Robert Hurt in 2010. Now, the Fifth District Democrats are holding a primary between a General and a Colonel, neither of them having apparently any other qualifications, to see who will challenge Hurt this year.

Perriello is not gone from the scene, however. He's a founder of Avaaz and the new President of the Center for American Progress Action Fund. Perriello is educated and can convey the sort of superficial impression of intelligence that can happily coexist with the belief that things are going well in Afghanistan. Perriello is not just a partisan player who chose to vote for bills his party told him to vote for. Perriello is a believer in war. He believes in just wars and humanitarian wars. He holds up the Persian Gulf War, Kosovo, and Libya as good wars, and he wants more of them. Avaaz is working hard to get the United States military into Syria.

This is your Democratic Party with Kucinich removed. This is your Democratic Party on Obama. This is "progressive" activism with Perriellian wars. Perriello [explains his position](#):

"The use of force always entails grave dangers and human costs, and progressives have been leery particularly since the Vietnam era of supporting it, even to prevent or end mass atrocities, repression, and other systematic human suffering. Wise leaders will always remain wary of war. But wisdom also requires us to acknowledge two dramatic changes in our ability to use force for good. First, in a single generation, our ability to intervene without heavy casualties has improved dramatically. Second, the range of diplomatic and legal tools for legitimizing such interventions has likewise expanded."

I take the second point to be worse than worthless. If something is immoral, the fact that lawyers have figured out ways to legitimize it doesn't make it more moral. If something is already moral, then yes, legalizing it would be a help. But an operation of mass murder that violates nations' sovereignty can be and has been "legitimized" through the shoddiest of lawyering, just as have torture and indefinite detention. The Kellogg-Briand Pact, the U.N. Charter, the U.S. Constitution, the War Powers Act, and the Geneva Conventions do not step aside because someone declares that bombing Baghdad or Kosovo or Libya would be philanthropic. The reference to diplomatic tools is even more insidious than that to legal tools. The proper function of diplomacy is in fact not to legitimize wars but to avoid them.

Perriello's first point is more interesting. Just as we can theorize an imaginary situation in which the moral choice would be to torture someone, we can imagine a situation in which the moral choice is to bomb a city. But how closely has reality approached that fantasy? Perriello says that the United States (or its U.S.-dominated coalitions, whoever he means by "we") can "intervene" without heavy casualties. Of course it appears that way in the U.S. where only U.S. casualties are heavily reported, and where later blowback is never connected to earlier acts of humanitarian war. But where is the case in which the United States has prevented a large number of deaths and injuries by producing a small number, and left behind a safe and just society not made worse by the "intervention"? In other words, let's ignore the damage that war making does to the natural environment, our economy, our civil liberties, the proliferation of U.S.-made weapons around the globe, the provocation of terrorism, the concentration of wealth, etc. Let's ignore the obvious fact that the U.S. government is not actually motivated by humanitarianism, that we hear about human rights abuses in Syria and not Bahrain, not because one is worse than the other, but because the U.S. government wants to overthrow the government of one and not the other, and the resistance in one has been turned to violence while in the other nonviolent tools are being employed with the consequently greater chance of lasting success. Let's pretend that the United States or the United Nations is actually an independent principled force for humanitarianism. Let's just grant all of that. Even so, where is the example of a successful humanitarian war? Because, if there isn't one, then there's nothing at all to weigh against all the damage done by the military industrial complex and by the wars that nobody tries with a straight face to depict as humanitarian.

Perriello doesn't think such a calculation is appropriate, because he sees our choices as war or nothing, and condemns nothing:

"During this same period, we have been reminded tragically of the real and staggering human cost of inaction, most notably in the 800,000 lives lost in Rwanda. The tendency to feel less moral responsibility for the results of inaction and to overvalue the risks of acting in difficult situations is natural, but it is ultimately indefensible."

What was needed in Rwanda once the crisis had been allowed to develop, once we ignore all the clearly identifiable steps that should have been taken to avert the crisis there and then, and similarly in many places now, was not bombers. What was needed was policing. A small percentage of the population was given license to commit the worst of crimes without consequence. A truly credible and serious and humanitarian police force could have stepped in. But cluster bombs would not have helped. Depleted uranium was not needed. Demolishing buildings would have served no purpose. Installing foreign military bases was not going to save any lives.

But why must we always ignore the endless sins of commission and omission that created a crisis? What would be wrong with investing now in economic aid and support for civil society, nonviolent activism, and democratic self-governance in many parts of the world? Why not stop arming dictators? The Persian Gulf War, Kosovo, and Libya saw U.S.-made weapons on the non-humanitarian sides of those wars. Is failing to act to stop the sales (and gifts) of those weapons to other nations now a failure worth questioning? Why not eliminate global poverty with some of the money we spend on militarism? Might the good will produced by such a different approach to the world result in a different sort of blow back? Perriello has something else in mind. He sees a new opportunity for war making:

"These new conditions present progressives today with a historic opportunity—to embrace a slight tipping of the scales toward action in the age-old balance between the horrors of the world and the horrors resulting from the military actions that might prevent them. This shift should be seen more as a marginal adjustment than as a dramatic ideological recalibration, but this new-generation understanding can mean the difference between paralysis and action.

"Consider the post-Cold War era in American foreign policy. Putting aside for a moment the responses by George W. Bush's Administration to September 11, this era offers three major examples of the use of American hard power since the fall of the Berlin Wall: under George H.W. Bush, the Persian Gulf War in response to a dictatorial invasion of a sovereign nation; under Bill Clinton, the Kosovo air campaign to stop ethnic cleansing; and under Barack Obama, the international campaign to oust Moammar Gadhafi from power and prevent attacks on civilians in Libya.

"Whether or not one agrees with any or all of these missions, they share significant characteristics: a *casus belli* that mingled idealistic and realpolitik concerns; a cool (rather than hot) decision to proceed to war; the careful employment of regional and allied support; and the use of targeted, decisive force. It is not surprising in retrospect that Barack Obama claims a strong affinity for the foreign policy of the first President Bush. Seen as a continuum, these interventions represent the arrival of a new era of decisive

pragmatism in the threat and use of American force, one in which the U.S. government has greater technological and normative capacity to act, and a growing body of case studies from which to refine its operational decisions to maximize its effectiveness."

This is how many of Obama's key supporters view him, as returning us to the wisdom of the first Bush rather than the stupidity of the second. It's not that they've lowered their expectations to that level. Not at all. They actually admire Bush the First and think very highly of Obama for any resemblance. Of course, Bush the First asked the United Nations and Congress to legitimize his war crimes, whereas Obama intentionally avoids any Congressional authorizations and relies on the flimsiest of U.N. cover.

Perriello wants to seize new opportunities, not for diplomacy and not for policing, but for bombing nations from the sky:

"Today, we have the ability to conduct missions from the air that historically would have required ground troops. And we possess an admittedly imperfect but highly improved ability to limit collateral damage, including civilian casualties. Among other things, this means fewer bombs can accomplish the same objectives, with early estimates suggesting that the Libyan air campaign required one-third the number of sorties as earlier air wars."

Measuring wars against other wars does not a moral case for war make, not when you have the alternative of abolishing war available. The question is whether war was the best option, not whether the war could have been even more deadly than it was.

The Kellogg-Briand Pact banned war. The U.N. Charter brought it back in cases of "defense" and of wars desired by the U.N. That isn't good enough for Perriello, who wants wars to be launched without U.N. approval or any pretense of defensiveness:

"While the UN Security Council remains the most formal standard for international legitimacy, many nations consider it less representative than regional bodies and less responsive than reality sometimes demands. Today, the United States has a range of options to validate such uses of military might for humanitarian concerns."

Perriello sees the 1999 Kosovo war as a good example of evading the U.N., not to mention Congressional opposition and the U.S. Constitution, for the good of humanity:

"In many ways, the 1999 Kosovo War represents the meeting place of nimble force and modern multilateral engagement. Technologically, the NATO air campaign demonstrated a dramatic improvement in the accuracy and concentration of smart bombs, more precise systems intelligence, and greater transparency of hits and misses. The improvement in accuracy was due in part to the internal campaign at the Pentagon for greater precision, based on an understanding of the moral and operational costs of higher civilian casualties, and possibly on an awareness that the ability to conduct lower-casualty wars could reduce the barriers to using force in the first place.

"The air campaign included targeting of key installations -- military and infrastructure -- that crippled the Serbs' efforts to complete the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians. The campaign was stunningly successful in stopping the atrocities on the ground through air power, producing no U.S. casualties and civilian casualty estimates ranging from 20 to 500 deaths. Not just the volume but the ratio changed -- civilian casualties have generally, and often dramatically, outnumbered combatant casualties in modern warfare, but that flipped decisively in the case of Kosovo. While the war left in its wake reprisal killings and hundreds of thousands of displaced people, most humanitarian experts have acknowledged that it was a solid example of rapid, decisive, multilateral action to stop widespread and systematic crimes against humanity."

You don't have to be an Obama-supporting Democratic operative to believe this. Chris Hedges, with some of the same Christian "just war" theoretical background as Perriello, believes the same thing. This passage from [War Is A Lie](#) is relevant here:

"When, in 1995, Croatia had slaughtered or 'ethnically cleansed' Serbs with Washington's blessing, driving 150,000 people from their homes, we weren't supposed to notice, much less drop bombs to prevent it. The bombing was saved for Milosevic, who — we were told in 1999 — refused to negotiate peace and therefore had to be bombed. We were not told that the United States was insisting on an agreement that no nation in the world would voluntarily agree to, one giving NATO complete freedom to occupy all of Yugoslavia with absolute immunity from laws for all of its personnel. In the June 14, 1999, issue of *The Nation*, George Kenney, a former State Department Yugoslavia desk officer, reported: 'An unimpeachable press source who regularly travels with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told this [writer] that, swearing reporters to deep-background confidentiality at the Rambouillet talks, a senior State Department official had bragged that the United States 'deliberately set the bar higher than the Serbs could accept.' The Serbs needed, according to the official, a little bombing to see reason.' Jim Jatras, a foreign policy aide to Senate Republicans, reported in a May 18, 1999, speech at the Cato Institute in Washington that he had it 'on good authority' that a 'senior Administration official told media at Rambouillet, under embargo' the following: 'We intentionally set the bar too high for the Serbs to comply. They need some bombing, and that's what they are going to get.' In interviews with FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), both Kenney and Jatras asserted that these were actual quotes transcribed by reporters who spoke with a U.S. official."

What happens when the search for opportunities for humanitarian wars lead us to avoid opportunities for humanitarian peace? In the case of the 1999 bombing, what happened was a solution to small-scale killing that constituted and predictably led to large-scale killing and creation of refugees. While the sequence of events is often inverted in the telling, this was a humanitarian catastrophe in the guise of a humanitarian rescue. Noam Chomsky [describes it well](#).

Perriello has another bogus example of a successful humanitarian war: Libya.

"The fledgling legitimacy innovations of the Kosovo campaign proved to be fully grown by the time Moammar Gadhafi moved to brutally crush popular uprisings earlier this year. In a rare convergence of international condemnation and an even rarer willingness to back that up with action, the Arab League, NATO, and UN Security Council demanded that Gadhafi relinquish power to prevent the slaughter of civilians."

The U.N. Security Council demanded nothing of the sort. It demanded a no-fly zone and an arms embargo, not the overthrow of Gadhafi, much less the murder of him. The supposed prevention of an atrocity was used to create a U.N. resolution that did not include overthrowing the government, but that resolution was used to overthrow the government. Don't let facts stand in Perriello's way:

"Today, Gadhafi is dead, and the Libyan people have their first chance for democratic, accountable governance in decades."

Any time you overthrow a dictator, including one that the United States had been arming and supporting like Gadhafi, you can declare a "chance" at democracy. But when the overthrow has been violent and accomplished by backing groups with little interest in democracy, the chance is very slim. Even setting aside the tool you've provided for people like Perriello to prop up a trillion-dollar U.S. military complex, even setting aside the destruction of international law that Perriello celebrates, and even setting aside the chaos and killing yet to come, what is it that you've accomplished? You've turned a relatively minor but much exaggerated crisis that your long-standing policies helped to create, into an excuse to bomb a nation and overthrow its government. But why set all the larger results aside? You've diverted resources from nonviolent activism, actual humanitarian aid, and diplomacy to force as if force were all there is. Perriello tells us so:

"Progressives often demand action in the face of abject human suffering, but we know from recent history that in some situations moral condemnation, economic sanctions, or ex-post tribunals don't save lives. Only force does."

Only force saves lives. Apartheid should not have been allowed to end in South Africa without a civil war. India should never have been permitted to throw out Britain without more bloodshed. Oh, but Perriello doesn't mean that. Doesn't he? Why is his organization pushing for war in Syria but maintaining strict silence on the nonviolent resistance in Bahrain? Either because the U.S. government's position makes Syrians worthy victims and Bahrainis unworthy, or because nonviolent action does not exist. Only moral condemnation, sanctions, tribunals, and force exist as possible options. Gone is diplomacy. Gone is non-war humanitarianism. Gone is nonviolent action, even in the face of recent developments in Tunisia and Egypt. Only force saves lives. War is peace. Ignorance is strength.

But, warns Perriello, in pushing the Libya model for war, we shouldn't fall under the false impression that he wants to bomb nations and leave without occupying them. Something closer to the Iraq model is called for, Perriello says:

"Even in the most successful and surgical interventions, we must be ready to play a role in filling the power vacuum and easing the sectarian tensions produced. We must, for example, develop the conflict and post-conflict 'civilian corps' that was meant to accompany the Iraq surge and was a top priority in the recent Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review by the State Department."

Another passage from [War Is A Lie](#) may put this into context:

"U.S. commander Stanley McChrystal described a planned but failed attempt to create a government in Marja, Afghanistan, in 2010; he said he would bring in a hand-picked puppet and a set of foreign handlers as 'a government in a box.' Wouldn't you want a foreign army to bring one of those to your town? With 86 percent of Americans in a February 2010 CNN poll saying our own government is broken, do we have the know-how, never mind the authority, to impose a model of government on someone else? And if we did, would the military be the tool with which to do it? Judging from past experience, creating a new nation by force usually fails. We generally call this activity 'nation-building' even though it usually does not build a nation. In May 2003, two scholars at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace released a study of past U.S. attempts at nation building, examining -- in chronological order -- Cuba, Panama, Cuba again, Nicaragua, Haiti, Cuba yet again, the Dominican Republic, West Germany, Japan, the Dominican Republic again, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Panama again, Haiti again, and Afghanistan. Of these 16 attempts at nation building, in only four, the authors concluded, was a democracy sustained as long as 10 years after the departure of U.S. forces. By 'departure' of U.S. forces, the authors of the above study clearly meant reduction, since U.S. forces have never actually departed. Two of the four countries were the completely destroyed and defeated Japan and Germany. The other two were U.S. neighbors -- tiny Grenada and Panama. The so-called nation building in Panama is considered to have taken 23 years. That same length of time would carry the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq to 2024 and 2026 respectively. Never, the authors found, has a surrogate regime supported by the United States, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq, made the transition to democracy. The authors of this study, Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper, also found that creating lasting democracies had never been the primary goal: 'The primary goal of early U.S. nation-building efforts was in most cases strategic. In its first efforts, Washington decided to replace or support a regime in a foreign land to defend its core security and economic interests, not to build a democracy. Only later did America's political ideals and its need to sustain domestic support for nation building impel it to try to establish democratic rule in target nations.' Do you think an endowment for peace might be biased against war? Surely the Pentagon-created RAND Corporation must be biased in favor of war. And yet a RAND study of occupations and insurgencies in 2010, a study produced for the U.S. Marine Corps, found that 90 percent of insurgencies against weak governments, like Afghanistan's, succeed. In other words, the nation-building, whether or not imposed from abroad, fails."

This doesn't change because our airplanes cost more or fly themselves. Perriello wants the existence of new war making technology (he doesn't specify what technology) to justify setting aside history and giving war a brand new chance. Sadly nobody can do

that for war's victims. Nor would we stand for humanitarian war interventions into our own nation or a nation of people who look like us. Maybe Virginia's Fifth District should be reconsidering what it takes to be a racist buffoon.