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# BOOKS: 'First Do No Harm'

[Doug Bandow](#)

## FIRST DO NO HARM: HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AND THE DESTRUCTION OF YUGOSLAVIA

By David N. Gibbs

Vanderbilt University Press, \$27.95, 327 pages

### REVIEWED BY DOUG BANDOW

Even as they criticized the George W. Bush administration for invading Iraq, leading liberals defended Clinton administration war-making in the Balkans. Sharply challenging this positive

assessment is David Gibbs of the University of Arizona. A man of the left, Mr. Gibbs nonetheless disputes the nostrums of so-called humanitarian intervention. His assertions are contentious but well-supported. Attacking Serbia turned out to be neither humanitarian nor prudent.

Perhaps Mr. Gibbs' most controversial assertion is that "the containment of allies remained a major US objective" behind Washington's Balkan policy. Mr. Gibbs too quickly dismisses the professed humanitarian objectives of allied officials — Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright may really have seen Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic as Hitler reincarnated. Nevertheless, Mr. Gibbs offers an important antidote to the self-serving propaganda emanating from Washington and allied capitals.

Mr. Gibbs' most important success is demonstrating the enormous complexity of the multiple Balkan conflicts. The bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia involved a catastrophic mix of murderous local factions, brutal regional players and foolish Western decisions. Shamefully and



tragically, U.S. policy consistently delayed peace and intensified conflict.

"First Do No Harm" highlights the many inconvenient truths of the Balkan imbroglio. For instance, Berlin lit the fuse for the Yugoslav explosion by backing Croatian and Slovenian independence without insisting upon protections for ethnic minorities — most importantly Croatian Serbs. Writes Mr. Gibbs: "In retrospect, Germany's actions contained a heavy element of miscalculation and showed a tendency to underestimate the destructive consequences that the intervention might have."

Even more shocking was Washington's coldblooded and counterproductive Realpolitik strategy of targeting only the Serbs. Notes Mr. Gibbs: "Franjo Tudjman was just as racist and aggressive as Milosevic; the persecution of ethnic Serbs in Croatia was just as morally objectionable as the Serb-perpetrated atrocities in Kosovo." Little better were the Bosnian Muslims. Mr. Gibbs explains: "It is true that the Muslim soldiers engaged in significantly fewer atrocities than did their Serb counterparts, but this was because the Muslims had inferior weapons, not because of any basic moral difference between the two sides."

Whether operating from a cynical desire to ensure America's dominant role or a naive hope to forge a better settlement, Washington torpedoed proposed settlements. In early-1992, European mediation led to the Lisbon agreement, an untidy compromise among Croats, Muslims and Serbs in Bosnia. At Washington's instigation, the Croats and Muslims reneged "and full-scale war commenced within two weeks," Mr. Gibbs writes. Peaceful implementation was never assured, but had the agreement held, years of conflict — and tens of thousands of deaths — would have been avoided.

The Clinton administration followed suit when it blocked the so-called Vance-Owen plan. Notes Mr. Gibbs: "The US role was especially unfortunate, since a full peace accord might have been feasible at this point."

Clinton officials also encouraged Operation Storm, Croatia's brutal assault on the Krajina Serbs. Promoting ethnic cleansing made a mockery of the Clinton administration's humanitarian pretensions. Notes Mr. Gibbs: "The Croatian atrocities embarrassed the United States, and some figures sought to distance themselves from the whole operation, at least in public." Others, however, rationalized Croatian atrocities.

Mr. Gibbs never sugarcoats Serbian misbehavior. But here, too, there was "an element of moral complexity," he explains. Regarding Kosovo, the tendency was to emphasize Serbian brutality, but "such perspectives ignore the history of Albanian provocations against Serbs that preceded

the repression of 1989. The imposition of martial law followed years of oppression orchestrated primarily by the Albanians, with Serbs as victims," he explains.

Moreover, the Kosovo Liberation Army engaged in brutal attacks designed to provoke Serbian retaliation. U.S. and European officials even termed the KLA a "terrorist organization" — until the Clinton administration decided to dismember Serbia. As part of its strategy, Washington attempted to impose an agreement at the conference in Rambouillet, France, which would have treated all of Serbia as a conquered nation. Europeans admitted that the agreement was designed for failure; Henry Kissinger called it "a terrible diplomatic document that should never have been presented in that form."

Did Rambouillet result from incompetence or the desire to create a pretext for war? Mr. Gibbs leans toward the latter. In either case, Washington again hindered the peaceful resolution of a Balkan conflict.

The Clinton administration assumed that a short bombing campaign would force Serbian acquiescence. The Milosevic government instead responded by expelling hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians — a war crime, but one for which the administration shared responsibility. Once the fighting concluded, allied forces did little to stop ethnic Albanian brutality, which resulted in hundreds of deaths and the expulsion of a quarter million Serbs and other religious and ethnic minorities.

Mr. Gibbs' conclusions undoubtedly will provoke sharp disagreement, but "First Do No Harm" is a tour de force. He convincingly debunks Washington's claim of humanitarian intervention:

"It ignores the fact that the Western states helped provoke the war in 1991. And the US role in repeatedly blocking peace agreements that might have ended atrocities without military intervention seems inconsistent with any humanitarian motivation. These actions were certainly helpful in affirming the hegemonic role of the United States, and thus in advancing US interests. But they cannot be defended on moral grounds."

Mr. Gibbs concludes his invaluable book with a pessimistic assessment of humanitarian intervention more broadly. Look at Afghanistan, Haiti, Iraq, Somalia and the Balkans. "On what grounds should we assume that intervention will improve humanitarian conditions in the target country, rather than exacerbate them?" he asks. Washington needs to answer that question before undertaking another war allegedly on humanitarian grounds.

- *Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire"*

(Xulon Press).

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