

Haiti: Dangerous Muddle

By Conn Hallinan | March 1, 2004

In 1994, when President Bill Clinton sent 20,000 American troops into Haiti to restore Jean-Bernard Aristide to the presidency, there was widespread support for a mission aimed at restoring democracy and relieving the misery of the Haitian people. It also seemed to herald a new day in the post-cold war world, when American invasions were not automatically synonymous with supporting some Latin American caudillo or South East Asian despot.

With the exception of the isolationist Right, virtually every voice in the political spectrum cheered the policy of “liberal intervention.” The use of American power to make good things happen was a heady drug.

Unfortunately, an addictive one.

Although there is no question that the 1994 intervention was good for Haiti, military intervention has turned out to be fraught with problems, particularly when it is wielded by one country.

Liberal Interventionism Ran Off the Rails

It is tempting to pin the problematical aspects of the policy on the Bush administration and its coterie of aggressive, neocon policymakers. But the fissures in “liberal intervention” began showing up long before the Republicans took control of the White House.

The Yugoslav war is a case in point.

On the surface the rationale for an intervention seemed straightforward. Serbia’s President, Slobodan Milosevic was a thug who was oppressing Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Or at least that was how the war was sold. On the ground things were a little more complex, as they often are in the Balkans.

Milosevic was certainly a thug, but so was Croatia’s President, Franjo Tudjman, and we were fine with him. Milosevic did, indeed, oppress Albanians in Kosovo, but the Kosovo Liberation Army was hardly representative of goodness and democracy. Many KLA members—including most the leaders—were no less thuggish than Milosevic, and according to Interpol, deeply engaged in Europe’s largest drug ring.

Was there cause for military intervention? Could there have been a resolution short of war? We will never know, because the Serbs were presented with an ultimatum at Rambouillet designed to start a war.

The Americans demanded that Serbia surrender its sovereignty, exactly what the Austro-Hungarian Empire demanded of Serbia following the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in 1914. Back then the Serbs said no and the Austrians launched World War I.

“Rambouillet,” argues Dan Goure of the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies, “was not a negotiation, it was a setup, a lynch party.”

Was Yugoslavia “liberal intervention” like Haiti? Questionable. There was a human rights crisis in Kosovo, but it was the war that kicked off the worst aspect of it, the forced expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo. And unlike Haiti, in Yugoslavia the U.S. and NATO went for the jugular. Power plants and water pumping stations were bombed. The electrical grid and energy systems were flattened, and transportation networks were systematically destroyed. The bombing campaign was a direct violation of articles 48, 51, and 54 of Protocol I, Part IV, of the Geneva Conventions. In short, a war crime.

The allies also saturated the country with depleted uranium and cluster bombs. Needless to say, the victims of the war were primarily Serbian civilians.

The Yugoslav war was where “liberal intervention” ran off the rails. The first sign of that was when the Clinton administration sidelined the United Nations and used the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) instead. The U.S. dominates NATO in a way that it could never hope to dominate the UN, and that fact allowed the U.S. military to carry out the kind of war it wanted, a war the UN might well have put the brakes on.

Not a NATO or UN War, But Another U.S. Affair

In the end it was hardly even a NATO war. The U.S. picked all the targets, carried out upwards of 90% of the air attacks, and excluded its allies from the operational



Key Points

- *There is no question that the 1994 intervention was good for Haiti, but military intervention has turned out to be fraught with problems, particularly when it is wielded by one country.*
- *Liberal intervention ran off the rails in Yugoslavia when the Clinton administration sidelined the United Nations and used the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) instead.*
- *Modern wars are not won or lost on battlefields, they are won or lost in the streets and byways of everyday life.*

aspects of the war. It was, pure and simple, a U.S. affair. It was also a dry run for a new kind of war, one that maximized destruction and minimized casualties.

Was it successful? Well, the Albanians have largely cleansed Kosovo of the Serb and Roma minority populations. NATO still occupies Kosovo. The humiliation of the war, and its painful aftermath, continues to stoke the fires of Serbian nationalism. Serbia refuses to give up its war criminals. Success? War has never produced “success” in the Balkans before, why anyone thought it would this time is a mystery.

The most troubling aspect of the Yugoslav war was the exclusion of the UN. It has been downhill ever since. Afghanistan is a case in point. Yes, it was very nice to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban (although we nursed the pinion that impelled that steel), and it certainly struck a blow at al Qaeda, the organization which carried out the 9/11 attacks.

But again, it was a U.S. operation. The UN was sidelined, and even NATO was brought in after the fact. Our ally in Afghanistan was the homicidal Northern Alliance, steeped in violence and drug dealing. And as in Yugoslavia, the war was a high tech, slice-and-dice air operation that killed lots of civilians. There was an uncomfortable feeling that the war might be about Central Asian oil and gas, but it was hard to protest freeing Afghan women and ending the rule of the Mad Mullahs.

Yet Afghanistan reflects the dangers of “liberal intervention” by one country. The U.S. certainly “won” the war, although the outcome was hardly in doubt. But the war is not over. Indeed, it appears to be getting worse, in part because the Bush administration spent tens of billions busting up the place, but not a whole lot putting it back together. Modern wars are not won or lost on the battlefields, they are won or lost in the streets and byways of everyday life. Fix what you break or the bill gets dear.

This is hardly a new observation. For 800-plus years the English won every major “battle” in Ireland. In the end

they lost the war. It is a lesson the Israelis should pay some attention to.

Haiti Illustrates Failures of Single-Power Intervention

The 1994 Haiti intervention illustrates the problem of single power intervention even when authorized by the United Nations.

Seven weeks after the invasion, the Republicans took control of Congress and systematically dismantled aid to the impoverished, war-torn country.

The cuts meant there was no effort to rebuild roads, ports, airports, or infrastructure. When Aristide’s opposition cried foul over eight contested seats in the 2000 election, the U.S. froze the final \$500 million in aid.

The aid was never very substantial. Per capita, the U.S. was giving Haiti one fifth what it was spending in Bosnia, and one tenth what it was distributing in Kosovo. After 1996, U.S. aid to Haiti was the same as what it had given the dictatorship that deposed Aristide. Aid did flow, but not to Aristide. Instead, U.S. organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to the opposition.

Shortly after the demonstrations and attacks on Aristide began, the U.S. State Department made it clear it would do nothing to impede his overthrow. In early February, an anonymous State Department official told the *New York Times* that the U.S. was not adverse to replacing Aristide, “When we talk about undergoing change in the way Haiti is governed, I think that could indeed involve changes in Aristide’s position,” the official said. This past week, shortly before Aristide was driven out, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, and President George W. Bush, essentially called for him to step down.

There is no question that the Aristide government was a troubled one, and some of the opposition was composed of former supporters alienated by corruption, violent pro-Aristide gangs, and the contested 2000 election. Most of this group was non-violent, and based mainly among Haiti’s elites and the business community. But the forces that converged on Port au Prince are the very thugs and murderers the U.S. invaded to get rid of in 1994.

Louis-Jodel Chamblain, one of the principal leaders of the armed opposition, is a former death-squad leader and one of the founders of the brutal Front for the Advancement of Progress in Haiti (FRAPH) that killed thousands of people between 1991 and 1994.

The shady nature of people like Chamblain and Andre Apaid of Group 184, has deeply worried human rights groups, and generated some anger in Washington. U.S. Representatives Barbara Lee (D-Ca) and Maxine Waters (D-Ca) have both challenged the “neutrality” of the U.S. State Department. In a recent letter to Powell, Lee wrote, “with all due respect, this looks like regime change.” It would appear that Lee was right on target.

There is certainly reason to suspect the two men in charge of diplomacy in the region. Otto Reich, U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), played an important role in the coup attempt against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Robert Noriega, has been a long-time critic of Aristide.

Whether through enmity or indifference, U.S. fingerprints are all over the overthrow of Aristide.

Single-Power Intervention Responds to Single-Power Interests

If one could turn back the clock, and transform the 20,000 American troops into a UN peacekeeping force, working from the beginning in close conjunction with the OAS and the Caribbean Community (Caricom), the outcome might have been different. The Republicans would still have sabotaged the U.S. part of the aid package, but international aid would have kept flowing since there would have been a real regional and international commitment to the liberal intervention. As it was, the U.S. insisted from the beginning on total control of the peacekeeping venture. When U.S. political will for the peacekeeping and nation-building missions waned, there was no multilateral commitment to ensure that the democratic transition was consolidated.

Which brings us back to the initial problem with “liberal intervention.” It may be a good idea at times, but there are caveats.

First, intervention by one country, or even a group of countries dominated by one country—NATO in Yugoslavia—is a bad idea. Individual nations have their own interests. Take the recent Iraq War. Maybe some people invaded Iraq to get rid of Saddam Hussein. Others might have deluded themselves into thinking there were weapons of mass destruction, but anyone who thinks it had nothing to do with Middle East oil simply needs to do the math.

In 2001, Vice-President Dick Cheney’s National Energy Policy Development Group recommended that the U.S.

Key Problems

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“make energy security a priority of our trade and foreign policy.” It is hardly a surprising conclusion. U.S. oil demands will increase by one third over the next 20 years, and two thirds of that will be imported. Since 65% of the world’s oil reserves lie in the Middle East, one doesn’t need a crystal ball to predict American policy in the region.

So was Iraq just about oil? No. Was it about oil? Of course.

Second, an intervention that isn’t willing to invest in raising living standards will fail. No single country has the resources. Only international organizations can spread out the costs necessary for the long-term work needed to rebuild a country and to deflect the very natural suspicion that “liberal intervention” is really “occupation” by another name.

The Republicans call this “nation-building,” and everywhere but in Iraq the Republicans hate it.

But it isn’t nation-building, it’s payback.

Afghanistan is indeed poor and backward, but it would have been less so if the colonial powers (and then the cold war) had not played the “great game” at the expense of its people.

Haiti is unquestionably a basket case. And don’t the French who colonized it and the Americans who occupied it and exploited it bear some responsibility for that condition?

Colonialism smashed up the world, deliberately squelched economic progress by the colonized, drew arbitrary lines on maps, and sowed the dragon’s teeth of ethnic division and uneven development. Do we now get to shake our heads over “failed states,” wash out hands, and walk away?

From the Caribbean to Africa, the great imperial powers loaded the dice for nations, and the world can ill afford to let the consequences of this rigged game go on. Does this mean military intervention on occasion? Yes. But not under one flag, only under the auspices of international organizations like the UN.

Key Solutions

- *"Unilateral liberal intervention" is not only a bad idea politically, it doesn't work. International intervention isn't successful all the time either, but its chances are better.*
- *Necon historian Max Boot describes the UN as a bunch of "Lilliputians," which is exactly what is needed: power restrained by laws, rules, and treaties.*
- *The U.S. should immediately take the crisis in Haiti to the UN Security Council, with a parallel effort in the OAS and Caricom.*

This strategy will have to confront the heart of the Bush administration and its Praetorian Guard of think tanks: the Heritage Foundation, the National Institute for Policy Study, the American Enterprise Institute, the Project for New American Century, and the Center for Security Policy.

For these ideologues, international organizations—and particularly the UN—are the anti-Christ. Last March, neo-conservative guru Richard Perle hailed the Iraq war as an opportunity "to take the UN down."

It is interesting to note, however, that obituaries about the UN's imminent demise fall off in direct relationship to the number of American casualties and roadside bombs in Iraq. Back in February of last year, President Bush warned the UN General Assembly that its "last chance" to prove "its relevance" was to adopt a war resolution against Iraq. For the past two months the administration has literally begged the UN to bail it out from the morass in which it is now entrapped.

A cynic might point out that the mills of God grind slowly, but they do grind most exceedingly fine.

Not only is unilateral "liberal intervention" a bad idea politically, it doesn't work. International intervention isn't successful all the time either, but its chances are better. Necon historian Max Boot describes the UN as a bunch of "Lilliputians," which, suggests Jorge Castenada, Mexico's former foreign minister, is exactly what is needed: power restrained by laws, rules, and treaties. Successful intervention doesn't demand centralized command control, it requires legions of doubting Thomases. In the case of Haiti, the U.S. should immediately

take the matter to the UN Security Council, with a parallel effort in the OAS and Caricom. The Haitian opposition members—both nonviolent and violent—should understand that they have no automatic claim to political legitimacy. The hasty departure of the country's duly elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was the sad result of the threat of massive political violence by feared former members of Haiti's security forces and intense strong-arming and political pressure by the U.S. government. If President Aristide did resign as has been widely reported, then Haiti's interim government should call quickly for new elections under multilateral supervision. What's more, all U.S. aid should be released immediately, and the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank should back off from their austerity prescriptions, which would only serve to further impoverish the poorest country in the hemisphere.

There are some who dismiss the OAS, and even the UN, as little more than cat's paws for U.S. policy, and certainly both organizations have served as its hand maidens in the past. Supporting the criminal sanctions against Iraq was a shameful blot on the UN's history, and the OAS should have suspended the U.S. for supporting the military coup in Venezuela.

But both organizations have independent streaks that appear to be strengthening. In any case, they are the only game in town, and the UN has scored some notable successes. It helped end the Iran-Iraq war, facilitated the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and has overseen elections in El Salvador, East Timor, and Eritrea. It also had disastrous failures in Rwanda and Bosnia. In the long run, however, it is the only serious solution to international crises.

Sir Brian Urquhart, author of *A Life in Peace and War*, and a longtime UN diplomat who has served from the Congo to the Middle East, recently put his finger on why the UN still represents the best hope for the world: "The world is a dangerous place," he says, "and when governments find themselves into another dangerous muddle, they will come back."

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