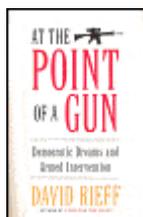




## **At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention**

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## Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you for joining us as we welcome David Rieff to our Author in the Afternoon. His book, [At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention](#), will be available for you to purchase at the end of the program today.

For quite a while now, humanitarian intervention has been a hotly debated topic. In fact, many would argue that it is one of the most complex challenges facing American foreign policy today, especially when it is used as a cover to promote Western values, such as democracy, human rights, and humanitarian needs.

As our speaker points out, in recent times this idea has become so popular that it even unites both liberals and conservatives, and has become a joint rallying cry for many of America's military adventures. Even so, the use of military force to protect human rights or to alleviate human suffering in the post-Cold War world has largely failed.

Our speaker this afternoon is unusual, not only because of the intensity with which he initially espoused the philosophy of armed intervention in the name of democracy and human rights, but more so because of his critical self-examination, which finds him now disillusioned with his earlier stance. In *At the Point of a Gun*, David persuasively dissects his earlier arguments, making a case about the limits of American power and his concern for the Bush Administration's misplaced idealism. He writes that his experience of spending more than six months in Iraq convinced him that the endless wars of altruism called for by human-rights activists or the string of wars of liberation proposed by American neoconservatives can only lead to catastrophe. At this stage, I believe our guest would not be opposed to all interventions, but would rather pick and choose when and where to intervene.

The essays found in *At the Point of a Gun* are David's assessment of the state of humanitarian intervention and are based on his direct observation in a number of disaster areas. He draws on over ten years of reporting from the frontlines of crises around the globe and analyzes the doctrine of interventionism from his origins in the human-rights movement and his outrage over the Bosnian and Rwanda genocides, to its reluctant deployment by the Clinton Administration in Kosovo and its embrace by Bush Administration neocons for the war in Iraq. We see how his misgivings grew as he ponders what he sees as a cynicism of Western powers, the appalling ease with which victims become poster-intervention-victimizers, especially in Iraq, where the military intervention failed to deliver on its promises.

I know that David is no stranger to many of you gathered here this afternoon, but for those of you who are not as familiar with some of his earlier work, let me just call to your attention a few details. He is the author of over six books, two of which impact on this topic, [Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West](#) and [A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis](#), which was named one of the ten best books by the *Los Angeles Times* Book Review, and was also a finalist for the Helen Bernstein Award.

Our guest is also a contributing editor to *The New Republic* and has also seen his articles in journals and newspapers, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to one of our favorite speakers on this topic, David Rieff.

## Remarks

**DAVID RIEFF:** Thank you very much indeed. It is very nice to be here. It is very nice to be in this room, which is usually the scene of me being extremely cranky in seminars towards other presenters. So you certainly should feel free to be the same.

I am grateful for the introduction, and I will talk about at least some of those things, although I will try to keep my own remarks as brief as possible. I will try to give you time as much time as possible to tell me how wrong I am.

I do want to say one thing about the book, just in self-defense. While it does chronicle, both in the interest of full disclosure and in its framing, my own trajectory, it is obviously not an autobiography of a chastened realist or

quite that navel-gazing, I hope.

I have spent fifteen years of my one and only life in a lot of what we call, for lack of a better word, humanitarian emergencies, humanitarian interventions, relief emergencies. All these words are very unsatisfactory and, by definition, distort the reality. All words do that, but these words do that in particular. They do it partly because we are talking about euphemisms. "Humanitarian intervention" actually means "war." We used to call it a "police action." That also meant "war." The others are curious—"humanitarian emergency." Well, wait a minute. That also often means "war" or "slaughter." Why are the humanitarians the ones being focused upon rather than the people who are, say, suffering?

Then, of course, there are these words with these astonishing endings—"democracy." If you don't look too closely at that, that might be all right. But then "democracy building"—what exactly are we talking about? Are we talking about [Jerry Bremer's vice-royalty in Baghdad](#)? Are we talking about [Sergio Vieira de Mello's vice-royalty in Timor](#) or [Bernard Kouchner's vice-royalty in Kosovo in 1999](#)?

Or are we talking about NGOs, what—again, for lack of a better word—we call "civil society?" This is a phrase I have tapped on fairly heavily in *The Nation* from time to time, basically asking the question of why [Human Rights Watch](#), which is sponsored by [George Soros](#) and the [Tetra Pak heiress](#), is part of civil society and the [NRA \[National Rifle Association\]](#), with 4 million members paying dues, is not. There is a question to be asked about why people think that. And they do, I assure you—maybe not everyone in this room, but lots of folks do, as the opposition to letting the NRA into the UN NGO group demonstrates.

But what I want to talk about is less the question about the concepts and more about the extent to which these concepts, however simple, however reductionist, however much one might wish for other words—how much these ideas are still viable in the aftermath of Iraq and the so-called global war on terror, on the one hand, and the series of recent UN reports on the other, probably starting with the [Brahimi report on peacekeeping](#). I suppose theoretically you could go all the way back to [Boutros-Ghali's Agenda for Peace](#), though I think it would be unwise—but certainly from the Brahimi report through the ["wise man's" report](#) that the Secretary-General issued recently, the one about UN reform, but also the one talking about trying to structure, as it were, principles for intervening in what we call "failed states". This is another term that certainly those of you who had any experience in Somalia might find less persuasive from the ground than from the way Somalia was described in the speeches of politicians, the reporting of newspapers, like the one I mostly work for, *The New York Times*.

I am not trying to single out every group but my own. On the contrary, the press contributes to these mystifications, and we do it sometimes because we are going too fast, sometimes because we fall into the jargon of the time, and sometimes because we don't understand what we are saying.

The ITN journalist Lindsey Hilsum once said, "If you go to a country in the middle of a war and you think what you're seeing is chaos, you don't know what you're looking at." I think that is a fairly good account. The outsider sees chaos, whereas the participant often sees an order. It could be a very malign order, it could be a very destructive order, but order nonetheless, and certainly meaning.

We call the wars in West Africa nihilistic wars. I would not, knowing West Africa a bit, describe them in that way, which doesn't mean that some of the people who participate in those wars haven't been people of really manifest wickedness and malignity. Nonetheless, it didn't mean there was no politics involved; it didn't mean there were no conflicts between interests involved. It didn't mean that, in effect, it was of some Hobbesian fantasy, "the war of all against all," whatever that means—because, of course, even in the war of all against all, who is "all"? The minute you start to disaggregate these things, it actually looks very different in close-up.

But the question that I wrestle with in this book and am continuing to try to think through, is what is the relation between these projects and ambitions for the betterment of the world to our means?

I am talking largely not about our practical means, because that is the standard critique. The standard critique is, we need better coordination. As the [ICRC \[International Committee of the Red Cross\]](#) always says, states need to live up to their obligations. The U.N. Secretary-General often—not just this one, but his predecessor—would say, "Give us the means to do things, and we'll show you what we can do." In other words, there is a whole rhetoric now—to be found, perhaps, most picturesquely, in UN reform and in the sort of management-guru utterances of [Mark Malloch Brown](#)—that we have the first principles; now we just need to get the details of how to do them and figure out a way to mobilize political will among powerful countries and other stakeholders in these activities.

My own view is that, actually, we don't know as much about what we are doing as we claim. In fact, all of these ideas—above all, humanitarian intervention—rest on some pretty thin ideas. First of all, I think they fetishize a kind of legalism. They say, in effect, that because nations have signed on to various international protocols and treaties, this is enough of a moral warrant to give intervening states the right to do things. It is my experience that this isn't the way it is perceived on the ground a lot of the time, first of all, because law and morality are not

the same things, as pretty much any schoolboy knows—or at least not always the same thing—and second, and perhaps more importantly, because the problem with international law is that the distance between the signatories and the people actually affected.

For example this is what creates the intermittent [Poujadist](#) opposition to the European Union: it's because of how Brussels is seen. It may be legal, what they do in Brussels, but the relation between the Commission's actions and ordinary voting citizens in Europe is perceived by many Europeans as being quite far away. I think this is a problem that at least some people in the European Union are aware of, but I am not sure there is an answer for it in what will be a polity of close to 400 million people.

But I think in international law, it is almost worse. At least Europe gives benefits, and people in many, many countries profit from the decisions of the Commission, whereas it is not clear exactly who profits from what in international law, apart from international lawyers. More importantly, the European Union's activities are not principally ones involved with life and death, whereas, if you like, the distant democracy of humanitarian intervention is basically about making war and occupying people. That is very different from saying, "You, Mr. Brewer in Wurzburg, can't restrict beermaking anymore to these four ingredients that the medieval guilds used." That may annoy some German voters, but it isn't, when all is said and done, a matter of life and death.

Let's take my late friend, Sergio Vieira de Mello. By what legitimacy did he govern Timor? He had a Security Council mandate. He had a legal piece of paper. But what was the legitimacy?

Perhaps a better example would be Mr. Kouchner in Kosovo, because in Timor most of the people who had opposed de Mello as a matter of principle had fled to the other side of the international border. But in all of northern Kosovo, from the northern side of the town of Mitrovica to the Serbian border, nobody thought the UN was legitimate. They thought they were the occupying army that had restored the Kosovars to power and disenfranchised them. That was the reality on the ground. You can say that the UN was right. You can say that the Kosovars were right. But you can't say that it had the same kind of legitimacy, I think. I would still insist that international law is way out there in the marshland of law and that it is important to remember that, if that is going to be your basis.

The second basis would be common-sense morality. We don't want to see people massacred and we want to do something about that. This "we" is this completely fictive thing, "the international community," which doesn't exist. If what you mean by "community" is a community of values, you can't seriously tell me that the values of the people who run the People's Republic of China are the same as the values of the people who run the Kingdom of Sweden. I'm sorry, but that is taking political correctness a bit too far.

There is an international order, of course, dominated by the United States and administered largely through the [Bretton Woods](#) institutions. But that is very different from saying "international community."

People of Darfur are being killed—well, some people in Darfur are being killed by other people in Darfur, to be precise, and by their masters in the capital. So the powerful states find massacres like this unacceptable. Is that the way it is looked at in the rest of the world? No.

This is a particular price that we are paying—and particularly human-rights activists are paying—for Iraq: The appropriation of human-rights language by the Bush Administration—although I happen to believe, in [Wolfowitz's](#) case, who is the only person among these people I actually know, that he is quite sincere about it. And I don't claim to know what constellation of force was responsible for the war and whether it was the Vice President's office or whether it was a "perfect storm," as some people say. You can take your choice.

But Wolfowitz is quite sincere. He considers himself a human-rights worker, and I think he means it, from the conversations I have had with him, particularly the off-the-record conversations—not many, but enough.

But in the rest of the world—something that people in Washington find hard to credit—this commitment to human rights looks an awful lot like American imperialism, and the UN, far from looking like this subversive, difficult, sort of Communist-led institution of Fox News' imagining, looks rather like the constabulary that cleans up after the Americans, after all is finished. That is the way it looks in a lot of parts of the world. Personally I think that is a closer account of the problem we have on the East River than the one championed by [Claudia Rosette](#) and other such people at the *Wall Street Journal*. But the problem is that what seems like straightforward intervening on the part of the interveners here looks astonishingly like recolonization there.

I give you Darfur. I have been going to a lot of Muslim countries in the last couple of years and talking about Darfur. My experience at university campuses, among journalists, is that they say, "Oh, another Christian army is going to invade another Muslim country." And these are people who probably wouldn't deny the crimes of the government of Sudan. They are real. I hasten to add that.

Joanne was very kind to say that I generally don't approve of all interventions. I certainly don't. But it seems to me, if there is one that works, on strict human-rights and moral grounds, it is Darfur, because the slaughter is ongoing. You can always use the sort of Philosophy 101 limiting-case argument and say, even if you oppose intervention, surely intervening to stop killing as it is happening is something that, at least in principle, is going to give you a stronger argument than democracy building—intervening even after the fact.

I was a very bitter opponent of the Iraq War, but it seems to me I would have had a much harder time with my own conscience if [Saddam Hussein](#) had been in the middle of the [Anfal campaign](#), than I do feeling that, in fact, the government in Baghdad—violent and despicable though it was—was not killing large numbers of people. It was a murderous little regime, a family business. But there are a number of other countries—notably, the government of Sudan—that were much more engaged in mass murder, at the time we—"we," the British and Americans—invaded Iraq.

One more word, perhaps, on the question of reputation. You have a situation now where the bona fides of the human-rights movement, I think, are widely questioned in the global south. I don't actually believe people think that what we say is what we mean. I think what human rights has increasingly become is a moral warrant for recolonization and the exercise, particularly, of American hegemony. I think that is the way it is perceived.

We could talk about whether that is a correct perception or not. I, in fact, think, unfortunately, that it is a correct perception. But even if I am wrong, and for those of you who think it is an incorrect perception, I would submit to you that it is a very, very wide perception.

The other point that I would like to make is this congruence of an idea that democracy can be "built"—in very large inverted commas—by outside forces working with local opposite numbers, which seems, in this instance, whatever the differences between them on the use of force, to actually be just as ubiquitous a way of thinking in the foreign policy arms of the European Union or the UN as it is in Washington. The idea that we know how to build democracies, that the problem is just doing it—as the Nike ad goes—seems to me very questionable.

However, I still believe that Bosnia, for example, was worth supporting, because for all its flaws, it was a democracy, which stood for a citizenship of nationality rather than a citizenship of blood. But by the time we did get around to intervening, that Bosnia had been murdered and no longer existed. We intervened, effectively, on the side of one of the three belligerents who, in terms of democracy, didn't have a great deal to recommend one from the other.

But the Bosnia I found in the summer of 1992, was a very different place and represents a very different ideal. You can defend a democracy. In less euphemistic times, we used to call that "just war." You can't build democracy by bayonets—not unless the circumstances are very, very special. The only one that comes to my mind is Timor, and I think the only reason Timor is special is because, in fact, Timor is not like the crises of the 1990s. It is a misplaced bit of the decolonization agenda, which got deferred because of the Indonesian invasion.

Just to end where I began, we—by which I mean citizens in rich countries—have an awfully sanguine view about what we know—not just about what we can do, but about what we know. I think if Iraq teaches us anything, it is that that view should be reconsidered, at the very least.

I will stop there, hoping I have provoked you sufficiently. Thank you.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I would like to open the floor to questions.

### Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** Thank you for the interesting presentation. Who in the future, in your opinion, should decide what is a so-called "just war"? You mentioned there may be a case made for Darfur. Who makes the case for Darfur? Does the United Nations make the case? Does the United States?

**DAVID RIEFF:** The problem with Darfur is a problem of time. The reason that I did not fall all the way back into complete anti-interventionism is because, in the case of Darfur, by the time we get our deliberations perfect, we will have another 100,000 dead on our hands. 800,000 people were killed in between six and eight weeks, depending on the figure you want. So we can't be that refined. In the case of a Darfur or a Rwanda, to be candid with you, I will take anybody. My principles go out the window.

I know Sudan, as I have been there a lot. But I do not know the West, so I want to be very careful about what I say in practical terms. The French have planes in neighboring countries and could easily stop those ridiculous little Antonovs, which those of us who were in the south know well. They practically kick the bombs out the bay door. One French Jaguar could put an end to that nonsense in no time flat. In the case of an ongoing massacre, I wouldn't be that concerned, myself, with who intervened.

To come back, though, to the deeper, important part of your question, "just war" is something that every state and polity has the right to claim. I would hope it wouldn't be Washington. Obviously, those of us who would like to see interventions in Darfur would prefer to see a robust African Union force do it. There are many people who know a lot more about Darfur than I do, who have moved away from that idea, but it is not because they don't think it is the better option; it is because they don't think the "robust" part can ever get going.

But regional interventions usually aren't subject to the same kinds of misinterpretations, or simply interpretations. And to come back to your question, from my perspective, regional interventions, if they are done properly, are much less of a threat to world order than, say a Washington or a Brussels doing it. An intervention from Nigeria in Darfur does not resonate in Islamabad. An intervention of the 82nd Airborne resonates in every corner of the earth.

So I think, as a practical matter, obviously, the less the United States can do, the better. The problem we have is that European countries increasingly are unwilling to spend money on military deployment.

And take Canada, a country I know reasonably well, a country that has taken the lead, often very admirably, in calling for things to be done about massacres: Canada basically doesn't have an army anymore. It is all very well for [Jean Chrétien](#), the previous premier, to say these lovely things about Rwanda. They didn't have an army. In Bosnia we would go up north and we would see their 1957 APCs broken down by the side of the road. It was calamitous.

So you have this mismatch between the countries that actually have quite serious and, I think, interesting moral principles, and then the country that can actually do it, which is committed to very different kinds of principles. Because of that, if an American military campaign were launched in Darfur, the repercussions in a lot of places in the world would be truly terrible. I am not smart enough to be able to figure out what the moral calculus is in that.

But I know, on the one hand, a lot of Darfuris would live, although I know the world would be even more unstable and the jihadists would have even more converts.

If I were a European security official, in particular, given the problems that have been uncovered particularly in France and Spain, I think I would be very worried about such a thing. That is a partial answer.

**QUESTION:** Could you comment a little bit more on the issue of absolute morality? Specifically, you mentioned that China and Sweden wouldn't agree on international norms. Does that mean that they are both equally valid?

To state the question a different way: Does the fact that the world would complain if we intervened in Darfur say something bad about us or does it say something bad about the world? Would we actually be doing something bad or do we just have bad global PR? Or does just being on top mean you are always doomed to be hated?

**DAVID RIEFF:** I don't think I would have put those as the three possibilities, I have to confess. The fact that American intervention in Darfur would be viewed badly doesn't condemn it, of itself. That is implicit in what you said, and I agree with you. Just because the United States does something doesn't necessarily mean its essence is ill-intended.

But the fact is, I think there is plenty to lay at the door of the United States. I think the United States has behaved in a number of parts of the world—notably in Iraq—in ways that are indefensible. I think a regime in which all this blood and treasure is expended so that an Iranian agent and a Shia fanatic—to wit, [Mr. Chalabi](#) and the [Ayatollah Sistani](#)—who, I am afraid, is not more of a democrat than some of the people we overthrew. I don't consider that an example of sort of American virtue and the world's incompetence.

At the root, I have always been, probably, closer to the realist position than any other. The realist position is one that challenges this idea of American exceptionalism. I do not believe, as [Benjamin Franklin](#) famously said—a phrase [Robert Kagan](#) likes a lot—that the cause of humanity is the cause of the United States. That seems like vanity. It is more sort of "Chosen People"-mongering, as far as I'm concerned.

The United States does a lot of good things and a lot of bad things in the world, as all great powers always have and always will. That is my view. I think it both impertinent and incautious of policymakers in Washington to believe that we can impose our will on the Islamic world. As for this metaphor that is often used in policy circles in Washington of "draining the swamp," by mostly creating democracy or fostering democracy, and, secondarily, waging wars or antiterrorist campaigns—I think this is self-destructive folly.

But, of course, great powers are also hated. Having said that, again from the realist's point of view, a country's reputation is a strategic asset. I think it is very, very foolish of Washington policymakers to squander that strategic asset, notably in its relations with Europe. For me, what has happened, which is in effect trading Western

Europe for Uzbekistan, seems, as [Talleyrand](#) was supposed to have remarked of the execution of the [Duc d'Enghien](#), "It's worse than a crime; it's a blunder."

As a question of policy — forget about the question of morality — I don't share the idea that the United States is this sort of misunderstood Lady Bountiful. I also have no sympathy for the flip side of that view, which is the [Chomskian](#) leftist view, which is that everything would be great, more or less, if the Americans were put in their place. That just seems to me to be American exceptionalism turned on its head. It is the same idea; it just changes malign categorizing for a benign one.

**QUESTION:** What would you do if you were in government and [Samantha Power](#) were to come to Washington and say, "President Rieff, we think that the United States has not acted well by not intervening in Africa," or [General Dallaire](#) says, "Maybe some lives are worth more than others, and therefore the United States and Western Europe are to blame for all the bloodbaths in Rwanda and everywhere else."

How do you resist that kind of pressure for intervention, if, in fact, you feel that these interventions are not really what they should be?

**DAVID RIEFF:** I know Samantha very well. We have lot of arguments. Indeed, there is an essay in that book that is, largely speaking, an attack on her. Obviously, I know her position well, and I respect it. She is a serious person and writes out of a good deal of thought, as well as a good deal of information. And the general is a man whom one cannot help but admire.

For me, Rwanda is a fairly special case. A killing taking place on this level, in a situation where various important international actors had been involved in peace negotiations and had at least allowed the impression to go around that they were guarantors of the peace—whether or not the fine print of the document actually made them guarantors of [Arusha](#)—in that case one has a special responsibility.

When the United States was considering going into Iraq or was about to go into Iraq, [Colin Powell](#) is reported to have told the President, "You break it, you own it." I think you could put at least some useful corollary in Africa, which is, "You broke it before, you have some responsibility for it."

That is why I, myself, even though largely skeptical of the use of the Marines in these contexts, thought the Liberian case was special. I thought, having ruined that country fairly comprehensively during the Cold War, it did behoove the United States to do a few things right, for a change, in Liberia.

But as a general rule, I am afraid I don't see how the problem of fetishizing the use of force can be avoided quite so easily as people like Samantha Power and [Michael Ignatieff](#) and others keep suggesting. I think what is remarkable about Power's argument is the extent to which she moves, in my view, far too quickly to the notion that force should be one of the first responses. I do feel that her book [*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*], for all its admirable qualities, is an argument for endless wars of altruism.

To answer your specific question, I couldn't get elected dogcatcher, obviously, and rightly so. I have, perhaps a decent intelligence, but a fifteenth-rate temperament for the job, to paraphrase the famous remark about [FDR](#). I think the idea that activists are now, in effect, coming to policymakers with two demands — more fighting and a [Marshall Plan](#)—is simply a nonstarter. Maybe we have to talk more candidly.

It was very interesting to me in Bosnia. Pro-Bosnian though I was, let's not get carried away; Milosevic was not Hitler. Anyone who saw Muslims in Belgrade knows perfectly well that it was a more complicated situation, and it certainly wasn't a case of absolute evil. You could argue that [General Mladic](#) was a case of absolute evil, but that's another conversation.

In 1938, [Chamberlain](#) came back from Munich and said that the Czechs were "a far-away people of whom we know little." Nowadays, you could no more say that and get away with it than you could draw and quarter someone in the public square here. Yet, in fact, in private, policymakers say what Chamberlain said every second minute.

I think people like [Jurgen Habermas](#) are just dead wrong. His argument is that these norms are useful because eventually realities will migrate toward them. I think what you actually have is a situation which is much more like the early Church. You have an esoteric and an exoteric language. So in public, there is this exoteric language, which is we say we care about everybody; our hearts are full; we are going to redeem the world. Then in private people talk exactly like Chamberlain.

It is like laws that are universally abused. For example, if everyone smoking pot in spite of laws against pot, there is a problem. Unless you enforce them a little bit, you have a real problem with the disconnect.

I think we have that problem now in our political discourse. A Samantha Power comes and everyone says, "Oh, Samantha, we're really concerned." Then in the back room there is [Karl Rove](#) or [Sid Blumenthal](#)—pick your administration—saying, "Come on. What about [Hillary's health-care plan?](#)"

[Tim Wirth](#) has written that we didn't do anything in Bosnia because, as he put it, "We weren't going to mess up the greatest liberal hope in a generation." That is an actual quote from Tim Wirth. That's not me affixing some fantasy of what I think was going on.

**QUESTION:** I had the recent pleasure of reading *A Bed for the Night*. I have to say that I thought the introduction to that book was the strongest part. It was really a powerful and almost poetic viewpoint. Earlier, you said something about navel-gazing. But what most impressed me in the introduction was that you did a lot of navel-gazing. You looked at situations and you sincerely questioned them and reacted to them.

I thought the conclusion that was drawn from that book, at least to my mind, was that you seemed to feel as if the world is enacting something that is really not clear to everyone—that the politics of intervention is nothing more than undisguised war and that we are not being authentic in how we are really defining what we are doing and our motives. Talking about the process of government or the process of the United Nations, everyone has such agendas that I am wondering how we could achieve a more authentic world that functions on some psychological basis of real, true wisdom or real, true reality.

**DAVID RIEFF:** Thank you for the question. I wish I thought that things could get better, but I don't. I call the book I wrote about Bosnia *Slaughterhouse*, from that famous quote of [Hegel's](#) that "history is a slaughterhouse." That is what I think about the world. I think all my work has been about a profound skepticism about how much better the world can be made.

I am, however, interested in calling things by their right names. I don't know if that's authenticity. I have to go back to my [Lionel Trilling](#).

But what I mean to say about humanitarian intervention is that by not calling it by its right name, by not calling it war, we do a disservice to both the interveners and the people who hope for, or even just the people who want to understand, the intervention.

For example, real war is about innocent children being blown to bits. I am talking about just wars. Forget about wars we wish had never happened or wars that we would like to see brought to a close as quickly as possible. There are plenty of those wars, too—Iran-Iraq being one, I think—to remember. Not all conventional wars are so clean either.

But when you say humanitarian intervention, it all sounds very neat. I will give you an example from the Democratic Republic of Congo. When the UN peacekeeping troops were ambushed a couple of months ago, they replied with tremendous force. On one level, that sounds very good. They replied. They taught these militias, who are, largely speaking, a bunch of murderous thugs, not to mess about with them.

On the other hand, there are press reports—and by no means press reports just from some militia Web site—that a lot of children and noncombatants were killed.

I wasn't there. I only know what I read about this particular incident. But I know that that is what war is like, and that anybody who starts to call this stuff some other name is doing a disservice to what we really need to think about when we authorize these things. And we all do it. When I'm wearing my policy-analyst-adviser-Soros Foundation hat, and not my writer-and-polemicist hat, I can bandy the acronyms as well as the next fellow.

It sounds fine to say "Chapter 7." But what does Chapter 7 mean? Chapter 7 means the force commander has a right to send four attack helicopters to drop white phosphorus on villages. That's what Chapter 7 means. The sooner that we realize that and start talking in those terms, the better off we'll be.

Again, I'm not speaking, necessarily, as someone who is always against interventions, because even though I haven't been there—and that is against my first principle in my middle age, which is never to talk about places I've not been—enough smart people have convinced me that the figures in Darfur are close enough to what you read in the papers to make me feel, in that case, we should go in.

But I want to do it knowing that there are peasants on the Janjaweed side also. There are people who are going to get killed who had nothing to do with murdering people and dropping them in wells. That's what Chapter 7 really is. I just think, again, it is part what I consider that well-intended but very destructive recourse to euphemism.

**QUESTION:** From your experience, can you put some coefficients in front of all the actors involved in setting up

some of these things—governments, culture, local politicians? I think maybe the United States gets into trouble because they think that they are more powerful than they really are.

**DAVID RIEFF:** Do you mean NGOs?

**QUESTIONER:** Just broadly speaking. People talk about various actors on the global stage. They don't often address how much power they really have to change things. Whether it is NGOs, whether it is writers like yourself, whether it is foreign interveners, whether it is local governments — who really controls what ultimately happens?

**DAVID RIEFF:** In Texas, the definition of the golden rule is, "The man with the gold makes the rules." I think powerful states are always powerful, at least regionally, and sometimes internationally. It doesn't mean they're all-powerful. You look at the bloody nose the Indian army got in Jaffna [Sri Lanka] some years ago, and it will tell you something about what happens to a powerful state when it doesn't think through its policy correctly and doesn't really know what it wants, even though, obviously, the Indian army could have done anything they wanted to the [LTTE \[Tamil Tigers\]](#).

But they didn't know what their policy was. They couldn't get the various elements of their policy together. So a great state was humbled by an efficient but hardly overwhelming army. But normally speaking, powerful states are powerful.

About the sort of marginal actors—I don't know about coefficients. I would be hesitant about that, because it's too fixed for me.

But about the sort of groups on the margins—NGOs, journalists from major outlets, major civil society actors from the countries in question, churches most of all—sometimes those groups are really powerful, like the Catholic Church in the El Salvador peace negotiations, for example, which wouldn't have been possible without the Church; sometimes less so. There, I think, it is completely situational.

I would say that the more a great power is involved, the less powerful these marginal groups, and indeed UN specialized agencies, are likely to be. I will give you an example. I started going to Tajikistan in 1993. For the first four or five years, the [UNHCR](#) representative, the [UNDP](#) person, the heads of the major relief NGOs, the ICRC, notably, were incredibly influential. Obviously, once the Afghan War started and you had a situation where Tajikistan was part of the strategic ambit of the Defense Department, and issues to do with Tajikistan were actually going up to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, these actors became less significant.

As far as the press goes, I think the press is influential when there is a correlate in elite opinion. I think we can talk ourselves blue in the face when elite opinion is united against what the press wants to do. But I think when there's a division in elite opinion, as there was over Bosnia, then the press can be extremely influential.

But I think their influence can be overestimated, as [Bhoutros-Ghali](#) famously did when he called CNN the sixteenth member of the Security Council. It didn't help the people of Rwanda.

I suppose one of the things I would like to propose to you is that the decline of state sovereignty is greatly exaggerated. Perhaps that's also implicit in your question about UN actors.

To take a completely different version, look at the appointment of that poor man who used to run UNHCR. He was appointed because the Netherlands needed an important post. The fact that (a) he had a little bit of a gamey reputation, but (b) more importantly, he knew literally zero, by his own admission, about refugee policy, didn't seem to affect it, because the Americans had blocked [Jan Pronk](#) for something, and the Dutch needed a representative.

That's the real world: The man with the gold makes the rules. The more interesting question for me—and it's obviously what friends of mine in the human-rights movement and in the relief community are working with—is, how, if at all, do you work within those realities to do something that is okay? There is a lot of debate about that. But none of us know the answer. That is the question, it seems to me, rather than imagining something that is very far off.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I would just like to end by paraphrasing David Rieff paraphrasing FDR: Maybe not a fifteenth-rate intellect, but maybe a first-rate one. I thank you very much for joining us.

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