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A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL OREN

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ALSO: ROBERT KAUFMAN BACKS THOMISTIC OFFENSE • CHRISTOPHER KOLAKOWSKI REMEMBERS BATAAN • C.S. LEWIS CELEBRATES THE 1ST SERVANT • ALAN DOWD INTERROGATES AMERICAN INTERVENTION • MARK TOOLEY ON AMERICAN INTERESTS • GENERAL MACARTHUR CONSTRUCTS A MAN • MARK COPPENGER OFFERS AIDE TO THOSE SNOWED-IN • GEORGE ELIOT LAUDS A SPOT OF NATIVE LAND & ROBERT NICHOLSON PUTS SIX DAYS IN PROPER CONTEXT

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Army Chief Chaplain Rabbi Shlomo Goren, surrounded by Israeli Defense Force soldiers of the Paratroop Brigade, blows the shofar in front of the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi, or Western Wall, during the Six-Day War, June 7, 1967. Built by Herod the Great, the Kotel is a segment of a much longer, ancient, limestone retaining wall that encased the hill known as the Temple Mount. Under the British Mandate of Palestine, the blowing of the shofar at the Kotel was criminalized, and from 1948-1967, when the Old City of Jerusalem was controlled by Jordan, Jews were denied access to the Wall entirely. Today, in accordance to agreements with Muslim authorities, the Kotel is the holiest place on earth where Jews are allowed to pray. Photo Credit: David Rubinger, Government Press Office.

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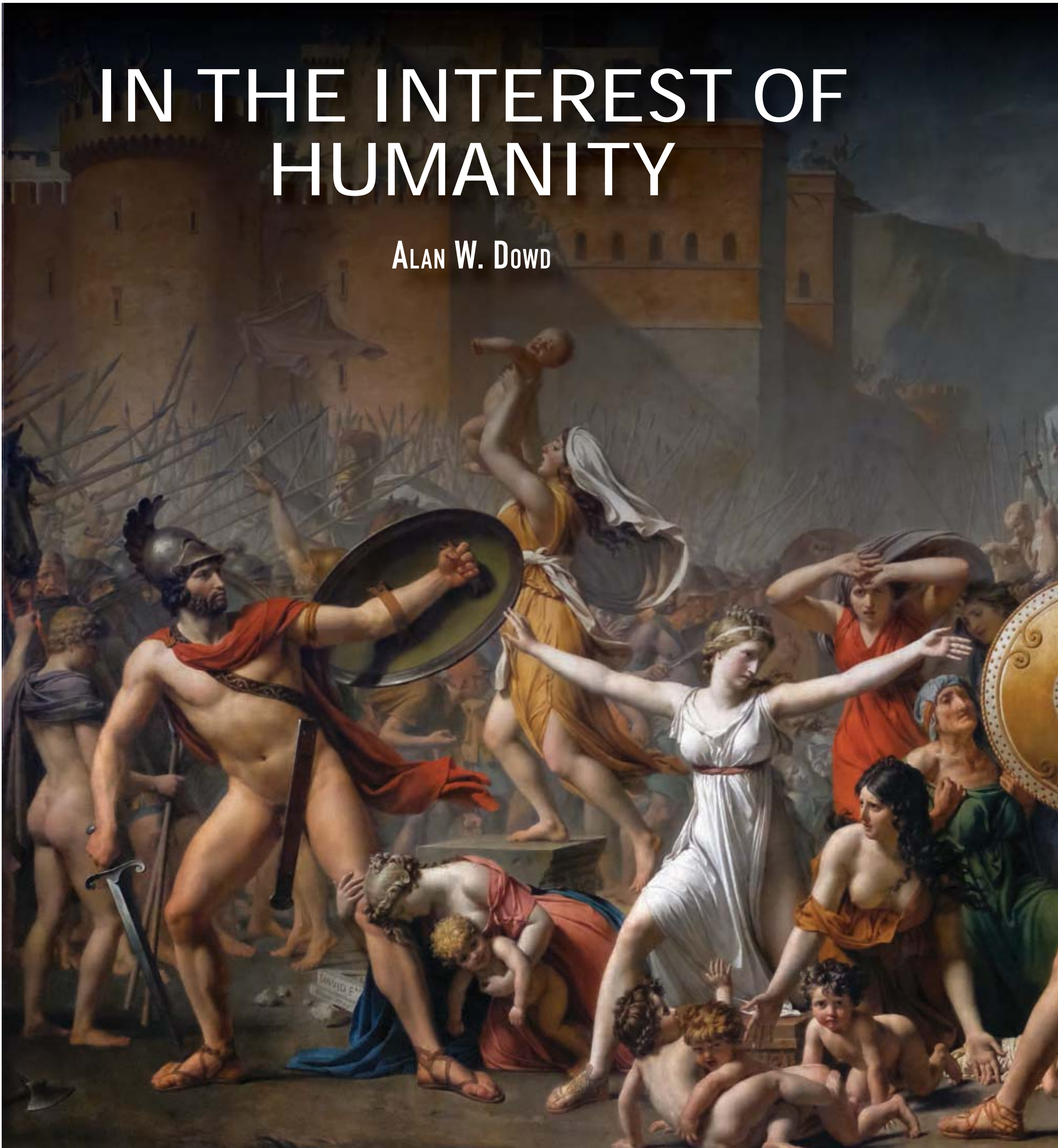
IN THE INTEREST OF HUMANITY

Alan W. Dowd



The Intervention of the Sabine Women, *by Jacques-Louis David, 1799. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Before leaving his post as UN secretary general in late 2016, Ban Ki-moon called Syria "a gaping hole in the global conscience."[1]

His words, while sobering, are an understatement: More than 480,000 people (including 50,000 children) have been killed in Syria's brutal civil war; 11 million Syrians have been displaced; 13.5 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance; 70 percent of Syria is without access to drinking water; the Pandora's Box of chemical warfare has been reopened. And a watching world did little, if anything, to stop the butchery.

Why did the world fail to intervene in this manmade humanitarian disaster? There are many culprits and causes. Some blame Russia's intransigence at the UN Security Council. Others blame Europe's failure to step up. However, expecting Vladimir Putin to stand aside and allow Western warplanes

to dismantle Bashar Assad's murder machine—especially after NATO's intervention in Libya, which Moscow saw as duplicitous—was a pipedream. And expecting the Europeans, with their bloated bureaucracies and atrophied militaries, to lead the charge into Syria was equally unlikely—again, especially after NATO's intervention in Libya, where President Barack Obama's "lead from behind" experiment was tested and failed.

That brings us, uncomfortably, to the United States. Some blame the international community's failure on Washington's failure to lead. Given America's reach, resources, and record, there is some merit to this. As President George H.W. Bush observed during Somalia's man-made famine, "Some crises in the world cannot be resolved without American involvement... American involvement is often the catalyst for broader involvement in the community of nations."[2] Bush 41 understood that leading a superpower with a conscience is a thankless, endless, but necessary task.

Obama seemed to understand this as well. "The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world is a better place because we have borne them," he explained. "Sometimes resolutions and statements of condemnation are simply not enough."[3] If only he had heeded his own counsel as Syria began its descent. But he didn't. After 15 years of war, the American people had no stomach for another military intervention—especially one with tenuous links to the national interest. So Obama allowed—even encouraged—America to avert her gaze. Assad barrel-bombed and gassed his countrymen into submission. And Syria took its place alongside Bosnia, Rwanda, and all the other lands that shamed the world into saying "Never again."

What can U.S. policymakers and citizens do to prevent that list from growing larger, and what are we called to do when America's collective conscience is assaulted but her interests are not?

THE HONORABLE COURSE

We tend to think of humanitarian military intervention as a modern phenomenon. Yet in 1897, a young Navy official passionately argued against "cold-blooded indifference

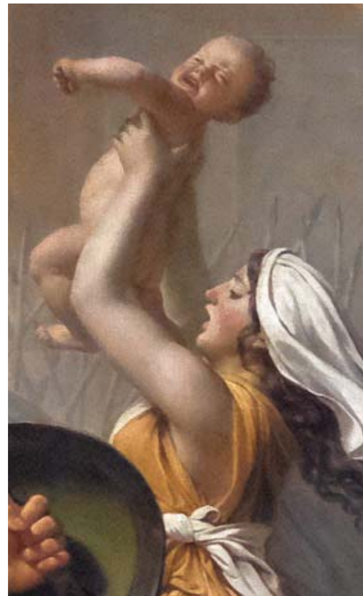
to the misery of the oppressed."[4] Even when "our own interests are not greatly involved," he declared in 1904, there are times to act "in the interest of humanity at large."[5]

President Theodore Roosevelt recognized something that many Americans to this day fail to grasp: The national interest and the interest of humanity are not necessarily separate spheres; the two can overlap.

Roosevelt explained it this way. A "stable, orderly and prosperous" Western Hemisphere—and world—are in America's interests. He understood that stability, order, and prosperity—and instability, disorder, and poverty, for that matter—are not fated upon nations. Rather, they are a function of government policies, which are, by definition, a function of governments. Thus, Roosevelt argued, "[c]hronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society" may sometimes "require intervention by some civilized nation." He added that in "flagrant cases" the United States may even be called upon to "the exercise of an international police power."

To be sure, given that he was defending his actions in Venezuela, Roosevelt spoke in terms of the Western Hemisphere. However, given his expansion of America's role in the world and explicit mention in this very speech of "the massacre of the Jews in Kishenef" (in Russia) and "systematic and long-extended cruelty and oppression" of Armenians, it's fair to conclude that he was thinking globally.

There are "occasional crimes committed on so vast a scale and of such peculiar horror," he declared, that "action may be justifiable and proper. What form the action shall take must depend upon the circumstances of the case; that is, upon the degree of the atrocity and upon our power to remedy it."



The American people took such action a few years earlier "to put a stop to intolerable conditions in Cuba," in Roosevelt's words. After the Cuban people revolted against Spanish rule, Spanish troops herded thousands of Cubans into "barbed-wire concentration camps."[6] Spain's brutal treatment of Cuba sparked outrage from the American people and helped pave the way for America's first humanitarian war. As Robert Kagan observes, "The fact that many believed they could do something...helped convince them they should do something, that intervention was the only honorable course."[7]

Of course, the Spanish-American War had strategic as well as humanitarian implications, which has been true of many U.S. military interventions.

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) maintains a running list of "instances of use of United States armed forces abroad." Of the 300-plus U.S. interventions since 1798 tallied by CRS, 34 fall under the umbrella of humanitarian intervention—14 of which occurred before U.S. entry into World War II. These include naval deployments in the Mediterranean in response to massacres in the Ottoman Empire; "operations to protect foreign lives" in China and to "protect foreigners" in Cuba; lengthy and repeated interventions to restore order in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and China; and the deployment of U.S. forces to "police order between the Italians and Serbs" in Dalmatia, protect "foreigners" in Honduras, and "keep order" in Panama.[8]

Many of these had little to do with threats to the national interest, but instead were a function of the American people's sense of justice. Consider the 1892 Democratic Party platform, which declared that the U.S. should "in the interest of justice and humanity...use its prompt and best efforts" to stop the "cruel persecutions in the dominions of the Czar and to secure to the oppressed equal rights."[9]

In other words, the notion that America was, once upon a time, content to focus solely on self-interest is fiction. America's humanitarian impulse is perhaps as old as America.

Consider that American relief ships, merchant ships, and warships were sent to feed the starving people of the Cape Verde Islands in the 1830s as well as famine-ravaged Ireland in the 1840s.[10] When an earthquake and tsunami devastated Japan, President Calvin Coolidge deployed the U.S. Pacific Fleet to lead recovery and rescue efforts. When Stalin tried to starve Berlin into submission, President Harry Truman

launched Operation Vittles (better known as the Berlin Airlift). When Vietnamese children were abandoned, President Gerald Ford launched Operation Babylift. When Saddam Hussein tried to strangle the Kurds, and when warlords created a man-made famine in Somalia, Bush 41 dispatched U.S. troops to protect the Kurds and feed Somalia. When Slobodan Milosevic waged a war of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, President Bill Clinton used air power to stop him. When terrorists and tyrants turned large swaths of Southwest Asia into a torture chamber, President George W. Bush used American might to build a bridge back to civilization for Iraqis and Afghans, making the case for intervention on both humanitarian and national-interest grounds. And although he did not act in Syria (except to target Islamic State, also known as ISIS, and its affiliates, which was not a humanitarian mission), Obama did intervene in Libya on humanitarian grounds.

Obama's intervention in Libya and his non-intervention in Syria underscore that U.S. presidents often choose not to engage in humanitarian military interventions. Indeed, in a mirror image of the above paragraph, it's worth noting that Bush 43 didn't intervene in Darfur; Clinton didn't intervene in Rwanda; Bush 41 didn't intervene in Bosnia; President Ronald Reagan didn't intervene to stop or punish Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons; President Jimmy Carter didn't intervene to stop the "Red Terror" massacres in Ethiopia; Ford didn't intervene in Cambodia's campaign of self-genocide; President Franklin Roosevelt didn't intervene in Nanking. The list of non-interventions is longer than the list of interventions.

As Theodore Roosevelt put it, "The cases in which we could interfere by force of arms...are necessarily very few."[11] Why would he say that? One reason surely is that the United States of Roosevelt's day was just coming into its own as a global power, having only recently acquired territories outside its hemisphere and having just begun constructing the infrastructure to support a power-projecting military. Another likely reason: In this fallen, broken world, there will always be evil men, willful acts of brutality, and benign neglect that will shock the conscience of the American people—too much evil, too many brutalities, and too much neglect even for a good and great nation to address in every instance.

RESPONSIBILITY

The need for humanitarian intervention is arguably not greater today than in the past. However, our awareness of humanitarian crises and our ability to address them are. That's because the ingredients for humanitarian intervention—mass suffering and mass communications—are constantly being stirred around the globe. This networked world makes averting our gaze from the "misery of the oppressed" nearly impossible.

These factors have led to development of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine—"R2P" in the UN's abbreviation-laden lexicon. As Ban explained in 2008, R2P holds that states have an obligation "to protect their populations—whether citizens or not—from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and from their incitement." R2P also aims "to help states succeed" and "meet one of their core responsibilities," namely protecting their citizens.[12]

All of that sounds eminently reasonable. Protecting one's population from crimes against humanity seems like the minimum requirement for a government, and helping weak states live up to the obligations of nationhood is time (and money) well spent by the international community.[13]

However, according to Ban, all UN members have a "responsibility to respond in a timely and decisive manner...to help protect populations from the four listed crimes and violations." In other words, R2P would oblige outside powers to intervene to prevent or stop those violations. As Ban conceded, understatedly, R2P "could have profound implications."[14]

R2P grew out of the international community's slow-motion response to the ethno-religious war in Bosnia (which claimed some 250,000 lives between 1992 and 1995, out of a population of 4.4 million in 1991) and failure to respond to the machete massacre in Rwanda

(which claimed 800,000 lives in 1994, out of a population of 6 million in 1993). In the wake of those conflicts, then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan argued for "timely intervention by the international community when death and suffering are being inflicted on large numbers of people."[15]

Many observers saw Libya as a test case for R2P. As the Arab Spring swept into Libya, Qaddafi called the demonstrators "rats," "cockroaches," and "germs." He vowed to show them "no mercy." The UN Security Council took him at his word and authorized a no-fly zone to protect Libya's civilians. NATO then used that authorization as a pretext to target and topple the Qaddafi regime. (That decision carried considerable fallout: Moscow argued the UNSC resolution for Libya did not authorize what the NATO-led coalition ultimately did—remove Qaddafi—and cited what happened in Libya to justify its opposition to any similar resolution for Syria. Meanwhile, the fact that Obama and his counterparts in Paris and other NATO capitals waged in Libya a preemptive war of regime change—exactly what they pilloried Bush 43 for—was an irony overlooked or missed by many.)

Obama defended U.S. participation in Libya by echoing the language of R2P: He cited "our responsibilities to our fellow human beings," adding, "When our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act."[16]

R2P advocates expected NATO to round up another posse when the Arab Spring revolt turned deadly in Syria. As Obama's UN ambassador, Samantha Power, said of Syria, R2P "should have compelled...the international community to step in earlier, lend advice and assistance and prevent the situation from reaching its current metastatic proportions."[17] However, the humanitarian cavalry never materialized, which is difficult to understand given that Assad did far worse to his people than Qaddafi did to his. This inconsistency of application is one of the many problems with the well-intentioned R2P doctrine: If the people of Benghazi and Pristina are worthy of protection, why aren't the people of Aleppo and Kigali?

Beyond inconsistency of application, expecting—let alone requiring—members of the UN Security Council to intervene whenever a government fails to live up to the murky definition of "protecting" its population is problematic.

First, R2P taken to its logical conclusion would increase the heavy burdens on a shrinking U.S. military, while decreasing America's freedom of action. The U.S. military is already civilization's last line of defense. Playing this role in pursuit of an enlightened self-interest that is guided by U.S. policymakers, promotes U.S. goals, and helps the world's unfortunates along the way is one thing. Doing it as handmaiden to the UN and International Criminal Court (ICC)—or just because CNN decides "Washington must do something"—is quite another.

Second, when it comes to the trigger for intervention, who at the UN, ICC, or CNN decides what justifies an R2P intervention?

R2P advocates are quick to answer that an R2P intervention can be triggered only by genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, or inciting such actions. Yet as horrible as they are, all of these terms can be subjective. Just ask the Syrian government and Syria's various rebel groups; Qaddafi's henchmen and their opponents; the Taliban and NATO; Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia; Rwanda's Hutus and Tutsis; Russia and Chechnya; Saddam Hussein's generals and their former subjects. Indeed, everyone from Prime Minister Tony Blair to Gen. Tommy Franks was accused of war crimes during the Iraq War. After NATO intervened in Libya, Russia called on the ICC to investigate "all cases of NATO bombing that caused civilian casualties."[18] The ICC has conducted investigations of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan "to check if crimes against humanity, war crimes or genocide have been committed."[19]

The purpose here is not to toss every use of military force into a soup of moral relativism. For most Americans, it's easy to decipher the good guys from the bad guys, the use of force to stop a wrong from the use of force to commit a wrong, a legitimate military operation from a war crime. But that sort of common sense is not so common in the halls of the UN.

Nor is the purpose here to argue that the United States should never engage in humanitarian interventions. Americans have a proud history of helping the helpless, as discussed above. However, the trigger for U.S. military intervention in a humanitarian crisis—a shock to the conscience, a tug on the heartstrings, a risk to the national interest, or some combination of these—should be determined by the president and Congress, not some malleable UN mandate.

TENSIONS

So, when should the United States respond to humanitarian crises?

That question is easy to answer for those who believe the conduct of U.S. foreign and defense policy should be based solely on interests. But it's much harder to justify taking a Pilate-like approach for those of us who wrestle with the headlines and believe the civilized world is called to defend more than narrow interests.

For me, this tension has at least three sources.

First, there's Luke 12, where Jesus explains, "From the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Given how much we Americans have been entrusted and blessed with, why would heaven not expect us to answer when the innocent cry out for help?

Second, there's Proverbs 3, which commands, "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act," and the timeless lesson of the Good Samaritan. Given the reach and resources of the United States, it's virtually always within our power to act, which is to say, the U.S. can always "do something." And Christ's story of the Good Samaritan who helped the wounded traveler—and the people who failed to help because they were busy, apathetic, or distracted—reminds us that all people of goodwill are neighbors and that actions make a difference.

That leads to a third source of tension—one that has less to do with enduring biblical principles than with today's public-policy

realities: A president must balance America's ideals and America's interests—a sense of justice with a recognition that the U.S. is not omnipotent and hence cannot fix everything. Even though it is richer, more powerful, and indeed more global than any nation the world has ever known, there are limits to its wealth, strength, and reach. Even a superpower must husband its economic, political, and military resources. As Theodore Roosevelt understood, answering every 9-1-1 call would drain America's capacity to serve as civilization's last line of defense, undermine domestic support for international engagement, and erode the U.S. military's ability to carry out its primary mission: defending and protecting the people, territory, and interests of the United States.

Perhaps the way out of this dilemma is to cling to the notion that those biblical admonitions from Luke and Proverbs are intended for individuals, not governments. Governments, after all, are not expected do everything individuals are called to do in scripture, and governments are expected to do certain things individuals are not supposed to do. For example, a government that turned the other cheek or put away the sword could be conquered, leaving countless innocents defenseless.

Yet as citizens of a democratic republic, we cannot put our heads in the sand and pretend we know nothing about what our government does (or doesn't do) to address the brokenness of the world. And as followers of Christ, we cannot keep our heads in the clouds and declare ourselves above the brokenness of the world. A great and good nation like the United States does not just "bear witness," as Obama so often said.[20] It acts, or it bears responsibility. "Those who have the greatest power and influence," Václav Havel reminded the American people, "also bear the greatest responsibility."

Part of being a great power is coping with that responsibility—and coming to grips with the consequences of action and of inaction.

QUESTIONS

Deciding when and where to intervene on humanitarian grounds—and when and where not to intervene—requires wisdom in the executive branch, collaboration between the executive and legislative branches, and communication between the president and the American people.

Wisdom is necessary because there are no easy answers when it comes to humanitarian intervention. Every question of humanitarian intervention requires a president to choose and defend the least-bad option. Collaboration between Congress and the president—and buy-in from Congress—is necessary precisely because most humanitarian interventions lack a clear link to the

national interest. And dialogue between the president and the American people is necessary because only the president represents all of the American people, because the sentiments of the American people fluctuate, because what arouses the nation's conscience in one decade may not in another.

With that as a starting point, and with the caveat that it's far easier to critique a foreign policy than it is to fashion and conduct one (take it from someone who does his share of critiquing), here are some guiding questions to help Americans determine whether to intervene in humanitarian crises.

First, can we make a difference? Policymakers must assess if U.S. intervention will likely make a positive impact. If that impact is only temporary, they must consider follow-on courses of action that can sustain positive outcomes and prevent a return to the situation that triggered intervention in the first place.

For instance, the U.S.-led UN intervention in Somalia in 1992 ended the famine, but the follow-on plans proved too ambitious (a wholesale rebuilding of the state) and inadequately resourced (UN effectiveness is a function of its members' commitment, which was half-hearted). The result was a return to anarchy and privation. Similarly, NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya stopped Qaddafi from turning Benghazi into Srebrenica, but there was no plan for the day after. The result, again, was anarchy.

On the other hand, the U.S.-led NATO intervention in the Balkans not only made a positive immediate impact by stopping Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing; it also, by making a long-term commitment to stabilizing the region, prevented the former Yugoslavia from backsliding into further ethnic warfare. The parable of the Good Samaritan is instructive here: Recall that the Samaritan not only provided the "half dead" traveler immediate help; he also provided long-term assistance. He "brought him to an inn and took care of him," gave the innkeeper resources to help the traveler's recovery, and returned to ensure that the recovery was complete.

NATO's peacekeeping force was in Bosnia for nine years, at which time NATO handed off its mission to an EU peacekeeping force, which remains in Bosnia today—21 years after the peacekeeping operation began. U.S. and NATO peacekeepers are still in Kosovo today—18 years after they arrived. The reason the U.S. and its allies made this long-term commitment underscores why the Balkans is a success story, why Somalia and Libya are not, and perhaps why humanitarian interventions seldom do much more than triage: The U.S. and the rest of NATO concluded that their interests—not just their collective conscience—were impacted by what was happening in southeastern Europe.

Second, are U.S. interests in jeopardy? When U.S. interests will likely be impacted by the continuation of a humanitarian crisis, intervention is not only sensible; it's arguably necessary. Clinton made such a case to the American people in defending humanitarian interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo.

In Bosnia, he connected humanitarian concerns and national interests by noting that, yes, "hearts are broken by the suffering and the slaughter," but also that Sarajevo "is where World War I began. World War II and the Holocaust engulfed this region," he explained. "Just imagine if leaders back then had acted wisely and early enough, how many lives could have been saved, how many Americans would not have had to die."[21]

In Kosovo, too, he appealed to America's heart *and* head by explaining, "We act to protect thousands of innocent people in Kosovo from a mounting military offensive," and then warning, "We act to prevent a wider war, to defuse a powder keg at the heart of Europe that has exploded twice before in this century with catastrophic results."[22]

Syria was another instance where humanitarian ideals and national interests overlapped. The war in Syria threatened Turkey, Jordan, and Israel (U.S. allies all), served as a magnet for Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah (U.S. adversaries all), fueled jihadist groups in Iraq, and destabilized the region. In addition to sparing tens of thousands Syrian and Iraqi innocents (a humanitarian motivation), using airpower early on to constrain the Assad regime might have checked Iran, blocked Russia's return to the region, prevented Assad from reopening the Pandora's Box of chemical warfare, protected Europe from a tidal wave of refugees, and prevented the birth of ISIS (all national-security interests).

Syria and the Balkans are instructive in that in both cases the U.S. resisted intervening because, the realists assured us, "U.S. interests are not threatened." But as these wars continued, Washington reversed course. Why? Because U.S. interests are, in fact, threatened by tidal waves of refugees,

radicalization of victim populations, and actions that undermine international order and the security of allies.

Third, can anyone else help? This is where Obama's "leading from behind" concept was theoretically sound, albeit poorly executed and improperly applied. If, to borrow Bush 41's phrase, the U.S. can serve as a catalyst or enabler for broader international action to stop a humanitarian crisis, intervention is sensible. If not, the president should consider the costs—in political capital, national treasure, and U.S. military personnel—of taking on a long-term humanitarian operation.

last is an entirely different matter, but obtaining it is helpful.)

The Military Humanitarian Operations Act (MHOA), which was introduced in 2012 and has been reintroduced in the new Congress, offers parameters for wrestling with humanitarian military intervention and ensuring Congress is involved in the process. The original bill was an outgrowth of congressional frustration over U.S. intervention in Libya. As one Democratic lawmaker said during the Libya operation, administration officials "consulted the United Nations. They did not consult the United States Congress."[23] That seems precisely backwards.

Fourth, how bad is it? This is a threshold question each president should ask about each humanitarian crisis that comes before his desk. The harsh reality is that certain atrocities on the international stage, just like certain crimes on a local scale, are worse than others and demand more action than others. With 100,000 dead and the repeated use of chemical weapons, Syria by 2013 was arguably such a case.

Fifth, are the American people on board? In cases of intervention that are not in defense of the national interest, it is prudent to seek public support through Congress. (Whether and how long that support will

To be sure, presidents must have the flexibility to act swiftly in defense of American interests. Hence, the MHOA defines military humanitarian operations as those "where hostile activities are reasonably anticipated" and where the aim is "preventing or responding to a humanitarian catastrophe." It would not impact retaliatory operations, operations aimed at preventing or repelling attacks on the United States or U.S. interests, operations related to collective self-defense, operations to protect or rescue U.S. citizens or personnel, operations conducted to fulfill treaty commitments, or operations in response to natural disasters.[24]

When it comes to launching military operations to support humanitarian aims—operations where no national interests are at stake and where there is no immediate threat to the U.S., as in Somalia in 1992, Kosovo in 1999, and Libya in 2011—seeking congressional authorization should not be seen as a hindrance. In fact, Congress can help the president by conferring legitimacy onto a humanitarian operation (thereby sharing the burden and responsibility of intervention) or by rejecting plans for intervention (thereby preventing the president from committing to an effort lacking popular support).

Sixth, will words help or hinder? Presidents need to weigh their words carefully when it comes to getting in or staying out of humanitarian crises. The current president and his immediate predecessor offer contrasting examples of what not to say.

President Donald Trump was initially blunt and unfeeling about Syria: "Why do we care?" he asked as a candidate.[25] Before his election, he declared, "My rules of engagement are pretty simple: If we are going to intervene in a conflict it had better pose a direct threat to our interest."[26] This could be seen as a green light for mass murderers. Yet when Trump decided to launch missile strikes against the Syrian air force in response to Assad's chemical attacks, the president used the language of humanitarian intervention, describing the deaths of "innocent children" as "an affront to humanity."[27] Then again, he said, the operation was conducted in the "vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons." Defense Secretary James Mattis added, "Our military policy in Syria has not

changed," signaling there were no plans to mount a humanitarian operation to end Assad's butchery.[28] In short, the Trump administration's words and actions have been less than clear.

Obama, on the other hand, said things like this: "We cannot stand idly by when a tyrant tells his people that there will be no mercy...where innocent men and women face brutality and death at the hands of their own government."[29] (That was his description of Libya, a year before Assad turned Syria into a mass grave.) And this: "When dictators commit atrocities, they depend upon the world to look the other way until those horrifying pictures fade from memory...sometimes resolutions and statements of condemnation are simply not enough."[30] (That was after Assad's gassing of Ghouta.) And this: "Awareness without action changes nothing...'Never again' is a challenge to us all... Too often, the world has failed to prevent the killing of innocents on a massive scale. And we are haunted by the atrocities that we did not stop and the lives we did not save."[31] (That was after a year of butchery in Syria.)

Words like this raise the expectation for intervention, while lowering the threshold for intervention. That's a dangerous mix.

Worse, Obama talked like Havel and then acted like Kissinger. Theodore Roosevelt worried about this very possibility: "It is not merely unwise, it is contemptible, for a nation, as for an individual, to use high-sounding language to proclaim its purposes, or to take positions which are ridiculous if unsupported by potential force, and then to refuse to provide this force," he warned. "If there is no intention of providing and keeping the force necessary to back up a strong attitude, then it is far better not to assume such an attitude."[32]

To make the threshold for U.S. military intervention "a direct threat to our interest," as Trump puts it, is to ignore more than 180 years of U.S. history—and to attempt to numb America's conscience. America's humanitarian impulse must be a factor when determining whether to intervene.

However, to declare that "awareness without action changes nothing" and then to do nothing, to say "never again" and then, in effect, to say "never mind," as Obama did, is equally problematic because it highlights our hypocrisy as well as our inaction.

These guiding questions may be unsatisfying; they are surely imperfect and incomplete. But the exercise is a reminder that determining when and where to serve "the interest of humanity" is not a science. In a broken world, American policymakers must seek the counsel of the heart *and* the head, aim for the achievable, and choose the least-bad option. P

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(Endnotes)

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