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Will You Save the Women of France? Save Wheat, by Edward Penfield, circa 1917. Poster created for the US Food Administration, precursor to the American Relief Administration. Source: National Archives.

A Christian Case for Humanitarian Intervention

Joseph Loconte

Adapted from remarks given at King's College Debate.

Beginning in 1921, a mostly man-made famine ravaged the Soviet Union and quickly became one of the greatest humanitarian disasters in Europe since the Black Death. Roughly three million people perished during the early winter months of 1922.

In desperation, the communist government of Vladimir Lenin turned to the United States for help.

America responded. Nineteen thousand American relief stations were set up from the Ukraine to Siberia. By horse, camel, truck, and railcar, the American Relief Administration delivered more than half a million tons of food, clothing, and medicine. It employed about 120,000 Russians.

At its peak, the program fed 10.5 million Russians a day. It is estimated that the United States

rescued at least 10 million people from certain death by starvation.

This historic episode in international relations raises a number of questions concerning US patterns of global engagement. Why, for example, did the United States intervene in this way on behalf of a political enemy?

The most important reason goes back to the concept of American exceptionalism. It is the idea that the United States has a unique role in promoting and defending human rights and democratic freedom around the globe.

American exceptionalism is the belief that America's political ideals and institutions owe a great intellectual debt to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that we must conduct our foreign policy in light of our moral obligations.

Herbert Hoover, who oversaw the rescue operation in the Soviet Union, reflected on the impact of US engagement on the world stage:

I have seen America in contrast with many nations and races. My profession took me into many foreign lands under many kinds of government. I have worked with their great spiritual leaders and their great statesmen. I have worked in governments of free men, of tyrannies, of Socialists and of Communists. I have met with princes, kings, despots, and desperadoes. I have seen the squalor of Asia, the frozen class barriers of Europe. And I was not a tourist. I was associated in their working lives and problems. I had to deal with their governments. And outstanding everywhere to these great masses of people there was a hallowed word—America. To them, it was the hope of the world.¹

America: the hope of the world.

THE AMERICAN CREED IN ACTION

Like no other nation on earth, the United States has established its global leadership in the defense of human rights. It was the United States that took the lead, 74 years ago, in creating the United Nations, whose charter was to “reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women.”

It was the United States that insisted upon an international tribunal, the Nuremberg trials, to judge the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. America rejected the call for mass executions or show trials.

Indeed, the United States set a new standard for punishing crimes against humanity. Robert Jackson, the lead prosecutor for the United States at the Nuremberg trials, said this in his opening statement: “The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.”

It was the United States which led the effort to establish an international bill of rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that has become the Bible for the modern human rights movement. Consider the observations of Charles Malik, the Lebanese ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights who helped draft the Universal Declaration:

The American spirit of freedom, tolerance, largeness of heart, and profound respect for

individual human beings permeated and suffused our atmosphere all around... We imbibed this spirit in restaurants, in the streets...but above all in dealing with and talking to American men and women of every stripe and on every social level. I cannot imagine a document on human rights and fundamental freedoms of the importance and breadth of our declaration arising in our age without the sustaining support of this spiritual background. I cannot imagine the declaration coming to birth under the aegis of any other culture emerging dominant after the Second World War.

America as the indispensable nation in the defense of human rights: this is part of our political DNA.

THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

Thus, it was not surprising that in 2005—in response to the acts of genocide committed in places like Rwanda—the United States embraced a new principle of intervention to defend human dignity. It became known as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

As described in the UN’s “World Summit Outcome” document, member states of the United Nations have a “collective responsibility to protect” people from genocide and other human rights abuses.² It is the proposition that there is a collective responsibility to protect people from genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity—even if it means military intervention.

Overwhelmingly approved by the UN General Assembly in 2005, R2P insists that nations cannot hide behind the UN Charter and “national sovereignty” in order to wage war against their civilian populations. The signatories to the doctrine agree to take “collective action...should peaceful means be inadequate” to protect populations at risk of gross human rights abuses.

Here is a universal norm, morally binding on all member states. And it draws its intellectual strength from the Christian just war tradition. That tradition begins with the God-given worth of every human life, and then insists on the state’s obligation to defend that life against harm—using force if necessary. Indeed, the UN’s criteria for military engagement follow precisely those articulated by Christian theologians beginning with Augustine: the motive must be to prevent human suffering (right in-



A Peshmerga soldier covering his sector of fire during urban operations training near Erbil, Iraq, on April 4, 2017. This training was an integral part of the Combined Joint Task Force – Inherent Resolve, the global coalition to defeat Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. By Sgt. Josephine Carlson. Source: US Army.

tention); means short of force must be judged as unlikely to stop the aggressor (last resort); the military option must be proportional to the threat (proportionality); and the consequences of action must not be worse than inaction (reasonable prospects).³

This is classic Christian just war theory.

What possible reason would the United States—given its unique political history—reject a principle for military intervention based on one of most transformative Christian ideas in the history of the planet?

If you don't like Augustine or Aquinas as advisors to US foreign policy, then you are left with Machiavelli.

A FECKLESS UNITED NATIONS

Nevertheless, the question remains, why should the United States take upon itself a unique role in implementing the R2P doctrine? First of all, this responsibility cannot be left to the United Nations. Second, we have a national interest in punishing human rights violators.

Let's first consider the United Nations. It was the abject failure of the United Nations to prevent genocide and ethnic cleansing throughout the 1980s and 1990s that produced the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

Liberals claim that the UN Security Council is the only legitimate authority to implement the doctrine. This is manifestly absurd. The just war doctrine depends upon a legitimate political authority to implement it. Protestant thinker James Turner Johnson, a leading just war theorist and *Providence* contributing editor, says the United Nations has a history of dysfunction in this regard. "The structure of the UN is such," he writes, "that clear purpose and effective command and control are virtually unimaginable."⁴

Think about it: The 15-nation UN Security Council is a mix of democracies and dictatorships. It grants veto power to thuggish, autocratic regimes that, by definition, have little regard for the basic human rights of their citizens, including Russia and China.

US NATIONAL INTERESTS

Even if the UN cannot be relied upon to inter-



Tech. Sgt. Traci Keller with a child after during the delivery of emergency response vehicles through the Denton Program at La Aurora International Airport, Guatemala City, Guatemala, April 20, 2018. The Denton Program was a Department of Defense transportation program that moved humanitarian cargo, donated by US-based non-governmental organizations to developing nations to ease human suffering. By Master Sgt. Joey Swafford. Source: US Air Force

vene to prevent gross human-rights abuses, why should the burden fall to the United States? Because it is in our national security interests to take on this responsibility.

When President Trump in 2017 ordered airstrikes to punish Syria for a chemical weapons attack that killed and injured scores of civilians, he was criticized by conservatives such as Andrew McCarthy. McCarthy argued that Bashar al-Assad’s use of a weapon of mass destruction—which targeted innocent men, women, and children—involved “no vital American interests.”

No vital American interests? Amid the brutally destructive Wars of Religion during the seventeenth century, Protestant thinker Hugo Grotius wrote *On Laws of War and Peace* (1625). “Though there may be circumstances, in which absolute justice will not condemn the sacrifice of lives in war,” he argued, “yet humanity will require that the greatest precaution should be used against involving the innocent in danger, except in cases of extreme urgency and utility.” Here is a political principle, based on Ju-

deo-Christian ethics, which has helped to protect countless civilians from the savagery of war.

When did conservatism decide that the United States has no interest in upholding a universal moral norm that has helped to prevent the West from descending into a permanent state of barbarism? When, exactly, did the humanitarian ideals of the Western tradition become irrelevant to the conduct of American foreign policy? What happens when atrocities against civilian populations are ignored by the civilized world? History provides the answer: we get more atrocities, more international aggression.

Just ask the Jews living in Germany in the 1930s, the Cambodians under Pol Pot in the 1970s, the Iraqi Kurds under Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.

In the case of Syria under Assad, what have we seen since he first launched his campaign of terror against his own people—without any meaningful consequences? We have seen continued attacks on civilian populations, with chemical

weapons and barrel bombs, the targeting of hospitals and humanitarian aid workers, the widening of the civil war, a refugee crisis not witnessed since the end of the Second World War.

Allow genocide to go unchecked, and you will get more of it: you will get the collapse of a universal moral principle and a threat to the entire international order.

And there are no vital American interests at stake?

WHEN INTERVENTION SAVES LIVES & RESTORES ORDER

Nikki Haley, former US ambassador to the United Nations, summarized the issue this way: “When the United Nations consistently fails in its duty to act collectively, there are times in the life of states that we are compelled to take our own action.”

Critics of US humanitarian intervention claim that it will only make matters worse, as the intervention in Libya did under the Obama administration. But Ambassador Haley has a good deal of US diplomatic history on her side.

Take, for example, the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo: the US-led bombing campaign that brought an end to the ethnic cleansing of the Yugoslav Wars. It lacked UN approval. Political realists saw no important US interests at stake—not even naked aggression and a humanitarian disaster within Europe’s borders could stir them. Well, the realists looked morally bankrupt once peace and security were restored to the region.

Consider also the American and British intervention on behalf of Iraqi Kurds after the First Gulf War. The Kurds of northern Iraq rebelled against Saddam Hussein in 1991, after his army was defeated and kicked out of Kuwait by the US-led coalition. But the Iraqi army cracked down on the rebels and was prepared to exterminate the entire population—having used chemical weapons against them with impunity during the Iran-Iraq War.

Within weeks, a million Kurds fled the region, with nearly one thousand people dying each day.

The UN Security Council approved humanitarian assistance for the Kurds, but it never

authorized the no-fly zones established under President George H.W. Bush. From April to September 1991, Operation Provide Comfort flew over 40,000 sorties, relocated 700,000 refugees, and restored many Kurdish villages destroyed by the Iraqi military. Over the next decade, US and British pilots took anti-aircraft fire from Iraqi forces, shot down Iraqi planes, and successfully defended the no-fly zones

Today the Iraqi Kurds are among the most pro-Western allies in the Middle East, and arguably the most effective fighting force against the Islamic State. Their survival and contribution to stability in the region was the result of a humanitarian mission that, according to the realists, involved no vital American interests.

The United States prevented the mass slaughter of an entire ethnic population. Why? Because it drew upon insights embedded in centuries of moral and political philosophy—and was true to its creed.

NO HOLIDAY FROM HISTORY

The United States has the power, like no other force on earth, to protect the innocent from great evil. It has the capacity to send a message to lawless regimes. The message: they cannot always evade the moral laws that govern civilized nations.

It is a message that is consistent with America’s vital national interests—and with its most cherished political and religious ideals.

Conservatives, and Christians, ought to know and care about these ideals, which have done so much to promote international peace and security. Remember the American Creed, those self-evident truths expressed by thinkers from John Locke to James Madison: a belief in the God-given worth and equality of every human being, in natural rights, in the right to live in freedom, in liberty of conscience, government by consent of the governed.

In 1793, when Thomas Jefferson was serving as secretary of state, he said that US foreign policy should be guided by “the moral law of our nature,” meaning our moral obligations, under God, to act with justice and equity toward our neighbors.

Here is a political philosophy, rooted in the Bi-

ble, that serves a purpose larger than that of the United States. In the ceaseless struggle between civilization and barbarism, America has tipped the scales toward civilization, toward freedom and justice. In many ways, it has organized its national life—its economic, military, and moral resources—toward this end.

Are we still up to the task?

The United States is not without its many sins and shortcomings. But it is not without virtue. What happens when a society lacks any capacity for empathy or willingness to sacrifice to save others from a great evil? It not only betrays the moral ideals of its political creed. It ceases to qualify as a civilized society.

What are we prepared to do?

We need a revival of something like the Christian realism that emerged in the 1940s with Protestant thinker Reinhold Niebuhr. Modern liberalism, Niebuhr complained, has “little understanding of the depth to which human malevolence may sink and the heights to which malignant power may rise.” He wrote, “Some easy and vapid escape is sought from the terrors and

woes of a tragic era.”

But there is no easy escape from the terrors of our age. There is no holiday from history. There is no “global community” prepared to defend the innocent against the ravages of dictators and butchers and jihadists. But there remains a United States: the most powerful force for democracy and human rights in the history of our civilization. Here is a global power created out of the ashes of two world wars, framed by a political system grounded in natural rights, a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

America remains, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “the last best hope of earth.” ■

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