

Liberal Interventionism and the Right to Self Defense:

Doctrines of Convenience or Nobility?

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As a grade school student in the mid 1960s, I remember there being great admiration and a certain amount of reverence for transnational institutions such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States. I remember touring the UN building in New York and learning about the many different cultures throughout the world that comprised the organization. In school, we learned to appreciate the sense of unity that the United Nations promoted throughout the world and to respect other cultures much different from our own. Television fiction of the time also promoted multicultural awareness and respect. Series like the *Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek* often used the metaphor of contact with extraterrestrial beings to provide lessons of open mindedness and promote the value of diplomacy and transcultural understanding. Gene Roddenbury's vision of a united, transplanetary organization, called the United Federation of Planets was inspired by the UN and even borrowed their logo. As the fictional crew of the USS Enterprise traveled the far reaches of the galaxy, they were governed by a "Prime Directive," which stated that cultures they encountered should be respected and left to evolve on their own, with no interference from the "outside."

As I grew up, I considered respect for other cultures as sacred a concept as the Golden Rule. Apparently, I was not alone. National Geographic documentaries featured "dying cultures" from deep in the tropical rain forests and lamented the fading of a simpler way of life. It was around that time that the destruction of Native American civilization was viewed as an unjust and tragic event and that view became part of the popular culture with

movies like *Little Big Man* and books like Michener's *Centennial*. Interfering with another culture, influencing the social and cultural evolution of a society, or judging the customs of a foreign people was simply wrong. It showed an insensitivity and ignorance unbecoming of an enlightened society such as modern America.

The earthly equivalent of Roddenbury's Prime Directive may be what Alan Bloom (2002) describes in *The Closing of the American Mind* as "cultural relativism," which teaches that truth is dependent upon a cultural perspective and that right and wrong are subjective concepts. Bloom asserts that our society and schools have indoctrinated our children at an early age to believe in this "Prime Directive" and that it governs our relationships with other cultures and societies. Bloom strongly disagrees with the concept. To make his point, he recalls posing a hypothetical question to his students: "If you had been a British administrator in India, would you have let the natives under your governance burn the widow at a funeral of a man who died?" (p. 26). Captain Kirk could not stand by while the widow of a dead man was burned. He was a liberal interventionist, and as such, he realized that the injustices and abuses inflicted on a people by their government should not stand, and he believed, contrary to the Prime Directive, that it was his role, as a member of an enlightened and morally and technologically advanced society to intervene.

In Alan Bloom's opinion, there is no question as to the right response. In such a case, intervention is not only warranted, but inaction would be a crime. This conviction is the foundation of the doctrine of liberal interventionism. It states that liberal democracies have a responsibility to humanity to promote human rights and protect the oppressed. In an article by Katerina Dalacoura (1998), from the London School of Economics and

Political Science, she states that “liberals who begin with the general injunctions in favour of making human rights part of foreign policy tend to see humanitarian intervention as their natural culmination” (p. 2). It may also be a convenient excuse for an imperialist state to impose its influence on a target regime. How can we judge the validity of the liberal interventionist doctrine? With what litmus test do we determine whether its use is legitimate or a cynical cover for more diabolical objectives? Perhaps the best method of evaluation is based on consistency.

Throughout the last century, various American administrations have employed the doctrine of liberal interventionism with varying levels of sincerity and enthusiasm. In the 1930s, for instance, while the popularly elected government of Republican Spain was threatened by fascism, the American administration turned a deaf ear to the pleas of the Spanish loyalists for help. The Republic had adopted a socialist agenda— including the redistribution of land and the nationalization of various industries (many, U.S.-held)— and, therefore, the brutality of Franco’s forces against the people of Spain did not, in the American administration’s point of view, warrant intervention. Threats to American interests and the impedance of the spread of socialism and communism negated liberal interventionist action. According to the Cromwell Productions’ *History of Warfare* video collection, in it’s documentary *The Spanish Civil War* (1999), Franco’s brutal dictatorship was responsible for a reign of terror that continued for years. Upwards of 200,000 Spaniards were executed by the Fascists through 1944 in their effort to gain control of Spain. It wasn’t until the fall of the Fascists in Germany and Italy and the public outcry against their brutality that Franco tempered his. He ruled as a totalitarian dictator, with strong ties to the United States, until his death in 1975.

During the Cold War, the United States adopted a covert strategy to “preempt” the encroachment of communism in countries like Guatemala in 1953, Chile in the 1970s, and Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 80s. Making the world “safe for democracy” was presented to the American public as a just and noble cause. The argument was balanced between America’s right to self preservation and our moral responsibility to make sure that our neighbors could enjoy the same freedoms that we, as Americans enjoy. Communism, according to the official point of view, was a direct threat to the future of America. And those who were forced to live under it would be subjected to hardships and abuses on the level of Stalinist Russia. These two premises: the right of self-defense, and a moral responsibility to defend and liberate abused peoples throughout the world, justified the need for intervention.

The simple fact is that, in many cases, the deterrence of communism as a result of American intervention has not always lead to democracy. It may also be argued that the hardships endured by a people being exploited by a colonial power have often been as significant as those imposed by totalitarian regimes. And by applying a label of socialism or communism, one cannot immediately assume a population is being abused. Focusing for a moment on one example in particular: Salvador Allende’s administration in Chile in 1973 was, in fact a democratically elected government, which was overthrown, with the assistance of the American government (Kornbluh, 2000) and replaced with a repressive and brutal dictatorial regime lead by Augusto Pinochet. According to William Blum (1995) in *Killing Hope. U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, “The CIA underwrote more than half the [opposition] party's total campaign costs, one of the reasons that the Agency's overall electoral operation reduced the U.S. Treasury by an estimated \$20

million— much more per voter than that spent by the Johnson and Goldwater campaigns combined in the same year in the United States” (p. 206). CIA propaganda campaigns equated Allende’s ideas with Stalinism and predicted violence and repression in the event of his successful ascendance to power. Even so, the Allende government prevailed. The South American nation of Chile had, through a democratic process, decided to allow a socialist experiment in hopes of bettering the lives of its people.

The United States had other ideas. Blum quotes Henry Kissinger as saying, “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people” (p. 209). Apparently, democracy is only desirable when the outcome is in agreement with the United States’ point of view. The Nixon administration directed the CIA to coordinate Chilean opposition to the Allende government while they used their influence with the World Bank and other economic institutions to create a virtual blockade against the Allende regime. The resulting shortages and inconveniences were attributed, according to CIA-sponsored propaganda, to the effects of a flawed Marxist system. Still, the Allende regime prevailed until the CIA recruited factions of the military and helped them to stage a coup. The resulting Chilean government was not more democratic, just more sympathetic to American capitalism. And the feared “Stalinist violence and repression,” which never materialized, was replaced with the very real neo-fascist violence and repression of the Pinochet dictatorship. Although countless atrocities and abuses have been attributed to the Pinochet regime, and in spite of the fact that Pinochet was apprehended in England in the Fall of 1998 on a Spanish warrant citing crimes against humanity, the United States never wavered in support of his authority, even

in the absence of the democratic values for which we were supposedly making the world safe.

Covert actions such as those described above are mere blips on the interventionist's radar screen compared to the overt policy of aggression toward the Communist movement to unify Vietnam under one centralized government. According to Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (2002) in *Manufacturing Consent*, the U.S. government engaged in a twenty-one-year campaign to "impose a government in the southern half of Vietnam that U.S. officials and analysts consistently recognized as lacking any substantial indigenous support, and in opposition to local nationalist— though Communist— forces that were understood to have a mass base" (p. xxix). This liberal intervention— to liberate the Vietnamese people from a government that the U.S. acknowledged was desirable by a majority of its people— cost the United States and Vietnam greatly. But as Chomsky and Herman compare the price paid by the Americans to that of the Vietnamese, they find that in casualties, Americans lost less than one tenth of one percent of its population compared to 17 percent of Vietnam's. In fact, the government that the United States supported as a more preferable option for the people of South Vietnam was not democratic. It was an appointed dictatorship that owed its existence to the United States and therefore would bend to its wishes. Again, one finds a discrepancy between the objective of making the world safe for democracy and the actual result.

As for America's right of self-defense, the notion was that if Vietnam fell to communism, it would start a "domino effect." Would this effect somehow lead countries to fall into the evil clutches of Marxism all the way across the Pacific to ultimately include the United States? Was (or is) democracy in America so fragile as to be so easily threatened by

Marxism? Joseph S. Nye (2003) speculates in *Understanding International Conflicts* that, “a policy based on balance of power would have predicted that those communist states [resulting from the domino effect] would have balanced each other (as they eventually did), which would have been a less expensive way to pursue stability in the East Asian region” (p. 64). In other words, the natural evolution and competition between neighboring countries would have assured that enough differences existed to prevent a united bloc of Stalinist or Maoist regimes to develop. The United States was unable to appreciate significant differences between the competing philosophies of China and the Soviet Union and failed to see the neutralizing effect that this division offered. Or, perhaps it wasn't the stability of the region or the welfare of its people that was of concern, but rather, that whether or not these Marxist regimes were aligned, the nationalization and appropriation of U.S. interests was a probability, thus making the region “unsafe” for American capitalism.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, and the implosion of Communism throughout its sphere of influence, one would assume that the United State's paranoid obsession with all things Marxist would have subsided. But events in twenty-first century Venezuela seem to indicate the contrary. The difficulties experienced by the popularly elected Hugo Chavez government, which promotes a decidedly socialist agenda, are reminiscent of those that plagued the Allende government of Chile. Strikes have been called by the opposition, who have demanded Chavez' immediate resignation, even though the constitution allows for a national referendum within the year. In a Washington Post article, which is reprinted on the Web site of the Center for Economic Policy and Research, Mark Weisbrot (2003) asserts that the United States has provided financial

support to the opposition and was the only official government in the western hemisphere that condoned the unsuccessful coup attempted in 2001. Weisbrot writes,

“If any leaders have a penchant for dictatorship in Venezuela, it is the opposition’s. On April 12 they carried out a military coup against the elected government. They installed the head of the business federation as president and dissolved the legislature and the supreme court, until mass protests and military officers reversed the coup two days later.”

Yet despite popular support, the Bush administration still encourages the destabilization of the democratically elected government through boycott and virtual embargo.

Today, these pathological contradictions between rhetoric and action makes it difficult for many around the world to accept the Bush administration’s concern with Saddam Hussein’s human rights abuses and dictatorial policies as genuine. They see the U.S. policy of intervention as inconsistent and self-serving. One must ask that if there were open and fair elections in Iraq, and Saddam was the popular choice, would it change the Bush administration’s resolve for regime change? If, in an open referendum the Iraqi people voted to develop weapons of mass destruction, would the Bush administration support their right to self-determination? Many suspect that the United States’ appetite for cheap and abundant oil plays a predominant role in its foreign policy. In fact, in a recent Brookings Institute survey of five middle-eastern countries, Shibley Telhami (2003) summarizes the findings by stating:

“an overwhelming percentage feel that American policy [toward Iraq] is motivated mainly by oil and secondarily by U.S. support for Israel. Specifically, 97% of Saudis, 91% of Lebanese, 87% of Jordanians, 93% of Moroccans and

77% of Egyptians feel that oil is an extremely important issue in motivating U.S. policy toward Iraq.”

Meanwhile, Jonathan Shell (2003) points out in an article in the March 3rd issue of *The Nation* that the Bush administration’s refusal to even discuss the issue of oil “suggests that the influence of oil is moving powerfully in the background” (p. 16). Perhaps the Administration’s motives are not so cynical, but American history provides plenty of circumstantial evidence to the contrary.

It seems no essay addressing U.S. foreign policy written after September 11th, 2001 is complete without acknowledging the profound affects that those terrorist attacks have had on the psyche of the American people and, on the world at large. The events of that day may have been the greatest catalyst responsible for diverting the attention of the American public from a self-absorbed, erotic obsession with domestic sex scandals and unsolved murders to an equally self-absorbed, almost paranoid obsession with potential threats from abroad. It is within this context that a population, the majority of whom, before that day, would be unable to locate Afghanistan on a map, have become aware that they are not alone on the planet, and that there are others with differing, and opposing points of view from that of “mainstream America.” Not since Pearl Harbor has the United States received such a harsh reality check. And while America was coming to grips with its new and dangerous reality, the year-old Bush administration— still attempting to overcome the divisive effects of a contested election—was scrambling to formulate a strategy to address this emerging threat.

As the world watched in horror while the two towers crumbled, the term “international community” took on a special, more literal meaning. While terrorism has

been a common and tragic occurrence in many other parts of the world, the migration of such violence to the shores of the United States was an indication that the situation had deteriorated even further. The international community understood America's demand for justice and nations, some of which were until that moment our adversaries, offered their condolences and their help. George Bush's challenge for the nations of the world to take a definitive stance either for or against terrorism was met with overwhelming support. And with that political capital, the United States routed out the "evil doers" and ejected Al Quaida and the allied Taliban regime from the cities and villages of Afghanistan.

In this new reality, those who disagree with the United States throughout the world are no longer simply on the other side of a philosophical divide; they are now officially perceived as a threat to our very existence. In a resurrection of the paranoia and xenophobia of the Cold War, we find ourselves taking a reactionary stance, questioning the motives of any state, religion or ethnic group whose values are foreign to us. Islam has become the Communism of the new millennium. We have also created a new classification of countries that present a threat. These are the "failed" and "failing states." In a Brookings Institute policy brief, Susan Rice (2003) defines failed states as "countries in which the central government does not exert effective control over, nor is it able to deliver vital services to, significant parts of its own territory due to conflict, ineffective governance, or state collapse" (p. 2). Failed states provide a safe haven in which terrorist organizations can flourish. But rather than looking inward in an effort to determine what in our foreign policy and international character may be responsible for the level of animosity that lead to such horrific attacks, we have adopted a posture of aggression and belligerence. Rather than

strive for peaceful coexistence with those states with which we have differences, we are embarking on a crusade of conversion.

The justification to the public for such a doctrine is based on the classic liberal philosophy, as delineated by Nye (2003), which argues that democracies, as a rule, do not fight against each other, therefore, the more democratic societies there are, the fewer the wars. In addition, the liberal position states that it is logical to assume that more economic interdependence between nation states will raise the stakes of war for everyone, thus discouraging potential conflicts. The classic liberal firmly supports the establishment of organizations to promote such international cooperation. He sees the quest to convert the world to democracy, and to promote capitalism, as noble and just. It will not only assure our security, it will also improve the lives of those whose governments are converted to democracy and whose economies are transformed to free-market capitalism.

In the latter half of the 20th Century, the liberals' vision of self-imposed order to the anarchy of the world was somewhat realized. The establishment and promotion of transnational organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union are supposed to act as a safeguard against conflict and as a way to enhance security between members. Rules of behavior have been developed and adopted, though not always obeyed, and mechanisms of enforcement have been difficult to establish, as the past twelve years of resolutions against Iraq would indicate. The underlying premise providing the foundation for all international relations is an acknowledged respect for state sovereignty and the recognition of nonintervention as "a basic norm of international law" (Nye 2003, p. 153). The sanctity of sovereignty has been essential for the

maintenance of order in an anarchic world and the concept has been generally accepted by most states.

Of course, even with the existence of these transnational organizations, intervention and conflict between nations still takes place. Within the norm of nonintervention a series of caveats by which the violation of sovereignty may be rationalized have evolved. Nye lists a number of situations in which intervention has been defended. The creation or maintenance of a balance of power, the promotion of justice, and the protection of an abused population have all been argued as justifying intervention (p. 156). Robert Cooper (2002), a close adviser to Tony Blair and a senior British diplomat writes in an essay entitled, *The Post Modern State*,

“In the postmodern world, *raison d’etat* and the amorality of Machiavelli’s theories of statecraft, which defines international relations in the modern era, have been replaced by a moral consciousness that applies to international relations as well as domestic affairs hence the renewed interest in what constitutes a just war” (p. 13).

He goes on to say,

“The challenge of the postmodern world is to get used to the idea of double standards. Among ourselves, we operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative security. But when dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of states outside the postmodern continent of Europe, we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era— force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the 19th century world of “every state

for itself.” Among ourselves, we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle” (p. 15).

Not many states would wish to define themselves as failed, or failing, nor would they consider themselves “jungle dwellers.” In fact, by the definition stated in the Brookings Institute brief cited earlier, one could define Israel as failed. The United States would certainly veto any resolution calling for preemptive intervention in Israel, even though a case might be made to alleviate the suffering of a significant segment of their population and restore stability in the region. The arbitrary nature of right versus wrong, just versus unjust, and abuse versus control creates enough ambiguity to allow practically any government to rationalize any aggression as justifiable.

The converse view of liberalism is that of the realists, who, according to Nye, seek to “maximize [their] power and to minimize the ability of other states to jeopardize [their] security” (p. 5). For the realist, the world is always on the brink of war and the only true deterrent, other than a strong defense is a weak enemy. The realist subscribes to the Hobbesian ideal of a dog-eat-dog world in which, as the Athenians told the Melians, “the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (Nye 2003, p. 21). The realist, therefore, approaches the world from a guarded and cynical position ready to respond to (or, in the case of the neo-realists, preempt) the threats— real or perceived— of hostile nations and non-government organizations alike. For the realist, survival *is* the Prime Directive and any means available is acceptable. This includes intervention and preemption, either covert or overt. And while for the realist, the promotion of democracy and capitalism is as desirable as it is to the classic liberal, the goal is not so much to achieve mutual security through the advancement of the well being

of another people as it is to attain and maintain its own security at whatever cost. The realist has no problem replacing a democratically elected socialist government with a neo-fascist dictatorship if doing so allows them the perception of a higher level of security at home.

Bush's challenge put forth to the world after September 11th epitomizes the realist approach by which most administrations throughout the last century have used in establishing relations with foreign governments: "Either you are with us or against us." In the case of terrorism, such delineation would seem fairly easy to make. But while the United States has defined terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence against noncombatant targets by subnational groups," (Nye 2003, p. 226) many others argue that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. By our own definition, many of the regimes supported in South and Central America over the past fifty years have actively engaged in terrorism. A concise, universal definition has eluded us. To the realist, however, there is only black and white; there are no subtle tones of gray found in hybrid philosophies or practical social experiments.

Aside from supporting of U.S.-defined terrorism, what other qualifiers define states who are with or against us? Communism would certainly fall in the "against" column, but socialism is less definite. Dictatorships would seem contradictory to American values, but that has certainly not been a consistent benchmark. Historically, "with or against" is more easily defined economically. Either a government will fully and willingly accommodate U.S. corporations who wish to exploit their national resources and labor force, or, they won't. If instead, a state wishes to have a say in how their resources are brought to market and chooses to protect their labor force and insist on a fair wage, thereby ensuring

improved standards of living for all citizenry, they are defined as Marxist and international laws regarding the issue of sovereignty are somehow negated.

The Bush administration has explained their policy toward Iraq in multidimensional terms. There is no question as to the brutality of the Iraqi regime, and as coalition troops advance deeper across Iraqi borders, pictures of police station torture chambers and evidence of human rights violations only serve to verify what has long been public knowledge. There is ample evidence that the Hussein regime fits neatly into the liberal interventionist's requirements for violating state sovereignty. If that were enough, surely Iraq would be only one on a long list of human rights violators, many of whom enjoy excellent relations with the United States. The issue of Iraqi refusal to comply with United Nations resolutions is a serious one, but the Administration's zeal is quite remarkable compared with past reactions to other violations by other countries. The one issue with which the American public most identifies and which garners the most support for the Administration's call for intervention—that Iraq supports terrorism and has connections to Al Qaeda—is the least substantiated. Although the Administration has consistently made references to associations, a “smoking gun” has never been produced. Instead, the repetition of allegation creates a *factoid*, a term coined by Norman Mailer and defined in Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson's (2001) *Age of Propaganda* as a fact “which [has] no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper” (p. 104). Repeating a factoid often enough results in its acceptance by the public as fact. More circumstantial evidence of support for Al Qaeda exists with respect to other countries, some of which are our allies, yet the Administration seems intent on pursuing only those with whom our relations are already tenuous at best. Of course, there is the question of oil, which was addressed earlier

in this paper. Danielle Pletka (2003), from the American Enterprise Institute, recently commented during a Woodrow Wilson International Center roundtable discussion broadcast on C-Span, that a simple cost-benefit analysis would show that intervention for oil is bad business— that the cost far outweighs any chance for profit. But there is much more profit to be made than simply from oil. Contracts are already being awarded to American corporations for the rebuilding of Iraq’s infrastructure. Looking at the long term, though, she may be right. But American corporations have historically been willing to accept short-term gains with little consideration for long-term impact.

The attacks of September 11th have created an unprecedented alliance between the Classic Liberals and the Realists. Both groups now see circling of the wagons as our only defense against the threats from abroad. The realists have invoked the extremist doctrine of preemption as being justified to deter future attacks and, with their realist crystal ball, are willing to predict which countries are most likely to someday be the aggressor. The liberals will acquiesce as long as the realists’ selection process produces candidates that show just cause with respect to human rights abuses. Thus, self-preservation and moral responsibility are satisfied and, as an added benefit, the world becomes safer for American capitalism! The liberal interventionists’ call for moral responsibility, and the realists’ attempt to maintain security, and the ever-present capitalists’ instinctive reaction to protect current interests and exploit new ones have converged to create a “perfect storm” of intervention— a hegemonic tempest that will leave no opposing government standing in its wake. Either you are with us or against us. God help those whom we determine are the latter.

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