

*Philip Green & Drucilla Cornell*

## The Prospect Before Us: Second Thoughts on Humanitarian Intervention

by  
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**W**hy second thoughts on intervention now? As we shall argue, the prospect of regime change in the U.S. does not just raise hopes for a different way of thinking about American policies toward the rest of the world; it also could affect, and ought to affect, the entire way we think about the nature and conditions of humanitarian intervention in the affairs of other nations.

First thoughts about intervention, as occasioned by the war in Iraq, have tended to be more or less the same, and by now are commonplace in intellectual and academic circles. Intervention is “humanitarian,” or it’s more destructive than it’s worth. It prevents the depredations of “rogue states,” or it’s simply a cover for American imperialism, the excuses for it serving the same purpose as parliaments (according to Lenin) do for capitalism. It would be acceptable if truly multi-lateral, but the same actions are unacceptable if unilateral (read, “American,” or “American” with a British cover). To foreswear it entirely would be “neo-isolationist;” to endorse it in principle is to try to become a “world policeman.” And so on. We argued strongly against unilateral action by the United States (see *Logos*, spring 2003) and we still hold to that position. But given the grotesqueness of recent events, we want to stress our own need for second thoughts about the question of humanitarian intervention in general.

As we wrote before, principles of international cooperation and mutual respect, such as multilateralism, are crucially important, indeed now more so than ever, when they are being systematically undermined by those who argue that any such principles are simply out of date in the war on terror. Still, to be a more

effective guide to policy, multilateralism needs an amendment. The disasters of genocide, mass slaughter, famine, and so forth, will sometimes seem to outstrip the capacity of international agencies or coalitions to act in a timely fashion, and calls will arise (as in the Sudan today) for the faster action that only a great military power—the United States, most obviously—can undertake. How should we respond to those calls? Are there any principles that we can apply to the call for unilateral action, that might differentiate legitimate from illegitimate responses to those disasters?

We do not intend to offer a general theory of humanitarian intervention, let alone of international relations. Rather, we want to suggest two considerations that have often been neglected in mainstream discussions. The first of these is that the apparent human need for intervention, even the demand for it from some of the parties whose lives are at stake, does not by itself justify any particular response. It sets the stage, but the stage now has to be populated with the actual actors who propose to do the intervening, and whose prospective policies, motives, and capacities have to be analyzed. This sort of serious analysis was almost totally lacking among supporters of the invasion of Iraq, as though the existence of tyranny, or oppression, or potential threat, had only to be recognized to generate action. This is simply wrong; wishful thinking is not a policy, and cannot justify mass killing. That is why most foreign policy “realists” opposed the invasion: its proponents paid hardly any attention to such essential aspects of policy-making as the need to consider its likely short- and long-run costs to the Iraqi (and American) people, the credibility of the intervening power (i.e., the US), and the policy-makers’ understandings of the region in which they plan to intervene (in this case quite obviously almost nil).

Here, however, we want to add a second consideration that goes beyond both moralistic invocations of what is right, and realistic considerations of what is possible. On the ground, where people live and die, what matters is not simply the ostensible content of principles and policies. It is equally important, in our view, to understand the full moral and legal significance of *who puts those principles and policies into action*. With that amendment we may, at least on some occasions, be able to get beyond the seemingly insoluble dilemmas of the competing positions that we described above.

As applied to Iraq, the dilemmas are seemingly insoluble in the sense that the opposite of what appears to be a true proposition seems always and equally true, and so we intellectuals flailed futilely around us, trying to persuade each other with concessions that were not only rhetorically meaningless but empirically empty. How can you measure one destruction against another? how can you honestly say that the U.S. is not an imperial power? how can you honestly say that American policy has never been based on anything but nakedly imperial self-interest? how can you oppose the spread of a democracy you argue for so ardently at home? how can you be so naive as to believe that democracy can be imposed on others by force? how can *you* be so elitist as to doubt that others want democracy as much as you do?

In this array of not-quite-satisfying principles that seem to demand their own refutation as soon as they are stated, there may often in fact be no firm ground to stand on except historical outcomes that always arrive too late to be of any use. As Hegel wrote, History will be the judge, but that's of help only to the authors of history books. If the Thomas Friedmans and Michael Ignatieffs and Bill Kellers of the world have changed their view of the War on Iraq, it's because the only excuse for the War as they imagined it in the privacy of their imaginations was a particular kind of victory, and that War has already been lost. And if somehow it were to seem as though it might be "won," they would change their minds again. But all the while the real "war," the war of invasion and conquest mobilized by the U.S. against a non-belligerent Iraq, was begun and goes on as though they had never written, or even existed—if they never had, nothing would have been changed.

How do we explain this total disconnection between the educated intelligence and the obvious reality that it was failing to observe? We believe the explanation is that many of us, for or against, were asking only part of the right question. We needed to focus more on who was implementing interventionist principles as part of a matter the question of principle itself. From that perspective we can see that the invasion needed to be opposed even if in some sense it might be said to have "worked." We needed to understand that in international affairs, it is not only the course of action undertaken but also *the nature and quality of the regime* undertaking it that helps to distinguish "right" from "wrong." And the nature or quality of a regime have nothing to do with its stated purposes; with its

intentions. It is misleading, or even false, to say that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” The road to hell is paved with *stated intentions of any kind*, and we set foot on it when we take them too seriously; when we start believing what people say instead of paying attention to what they are and what they do. Thus intellectuals such as Christopher Hitchens and Paul Berman parroted phrases about “democracy” and “ending tyranny” and “Saddam the torturer” on behalf of a regime that was and is visibly not pro- but anti-democratic; that had and has not the faintest interest in preserving anyone’s individual liberties; and that has lied about every one of its actions, domestic and foreign, as a matter of course. When in the minority, its representatives in Congress attempted a constitutional *coup d’etat* against a democratically elected president; when that failed they stole the 2000 election with a *coup de main* in Florida.

No one in their right mind would trust this regime to “bring democracy” to the United States, let alone Iraq; or should have trusted it to have humanitarian values deeper than those of a thug; or to have any interest in replacing destructive violence anywhere with non-violent stability. On the plain record, the bedrock goals of the Bush regime and its various factions are and were manifest: to install and perpetuate plutocratic, one-party rule long enough to enrich its friends and punish its enemies; to secure a *cordon sanitaire* around Iran, in order to prop up a faltering oil-based economy long enough to maintain the nationalist delusions of empire that could sustain one-party rule; to make the mid-East safe for Israeli dominance; to cement its alliance with a neo-totalitarian Christian fundamentalism. To forget all this while talking about “America” and “its” “democratic” goals, as though a “nation” were some imaginary ideal, were anything more than the real people who manage to commit real atrocities in its name for their own visible purposes, was and is a verbal swindle. It is the same swindle that the Commander-In-Chief of Abu Ghraib’s MP’s attempted to foist on the world by saying that “they” didn’t represent the real “us,” as though a real “we” are out there somewhere else, unnoticed by the rest of the world, creating a peaceful “democracy.” (Although since this commander-in-chief governs on behalf of a minority of voters, he might have a point.) In short, the intellectuals, journalists, and prime ministers who promoted the policies of this regime deserve the epithet that Joseph Stalin bestowed on Western fellow-

travelers who thought Communism was about a new world of human equality and pretended the gulag didn't exist: "useful idiots."

This corrective emphasis on the nature of the regime that sets out to engage in "humanitarian interventions," or to "promote democracy," casts a different light on some arguments about both the long-run nature of American foreign policy, and the role of the United Nations in this kind of venture. As to the first, criticisms of the Clinton administration's (and Colin Powell's) reluctance to intervene in the Balkan wars without NATO's support, and of its half-hearted, ill-conceived responses to terrorism, point precisely to the strength of what might be called in retrospect the "Clinton Doctrine" (and the "Powell corollary"): a desire, compared to the present regime, to do as little as possible on behalf of American empire, even while promoting and extending it. The reason for this reluctance was that in its day-to-day behavior the Clinton regime was everything the Bush regime is not: an inward-turning activist and sometime reformist regime (even if we disagreed with some of its reforms), committed to at least preserving if not extending many traditional constitutional protections as well as the social safety-net, and above all being quite open about what it was doing and why it was doing it. In this respect, it is significant that the Clinton administration contemplated action against Iraq, but did not follow through: not necessarily because the leadership had moral qualms, but in part at least because excessive overseas commitments would have undermined its domestic priorities (and been undertaken by a discredited president as well). Aggrandizing power to itself and overturning existing world order were not its primary goals. Contrarily, these were and are clearly the primary goals of the Bush regime, and therefore to have given it credence was to have been, as we have said, an idiot.

As for the United Nations, anti-war but pro-UN commentators such as ourselves have sometimes appeared uneasily to advocate a double standard, or a single standard that seems bound to produce disastrous inaction, as in Rwanda-Burundi or the Sudan today. Against this position unilateralists point to the UN's incapacities: its institutionalized inertia; its numerical domination by nations that are only marginally interested in the strengthening of what "we" consider democracy; its tendency toward the usual corruptions of a sclerotic bureaucracy, as supposedly evidenced in the oil-for-food scandal. This last,

though, is actually a particularly salient example of the need for regime analysis, as the scandal-mongers (William Safire most notably) peddle their anti-UN wares while the administration they support sells Iraqi assets off to its corporate friends and allies on a rigged market where the highest bidder wins. Nor is it a minor matter that the oil-for-food scandal is hardly a blip on the fiscal radar compared to even the minor taxation and expenditures record of the Bush administration, or the theft of Iraqi oil that is going on at this very moment.

That is merely a negative argument, though. More crucially, the pro-UN argument is in one important respect at least correct, despite its highlighted difficulties: for in a sense these are precisely what make it a *more appropriate "world policeman" than the United States*. Here too regime analysis is essential. As regimes go, the UN is so minimalist it barely qualifies. Its dangers are entirely of a negative kind—that it won't do anything. It's no danger to world peace or regional stability; it won't attempt to take over anybody or anything; it has no black helicopters at all; and it is not at all clear that the things it won't do would be better done by the US or any other military power. It surely ought to be strengthened, but at ten times its current possibilities for armed intervention it would hardly be competing with France, or Germany, let alone the United States.

Not simply what the U.S. should do in the world, then, but under what circumstances it might legitimately engage in unilateral intervention; what it ought to do on behalf of or in concert with the United Nations; and how such cooperative, multilateral, action could be arranged, is the question that all of us who believe that humanitarian intervention may on occasions be necessary ought to discuss. But it follows from what we have said that *this discussion can not even begin to take place in a serious way until and unless regime change has take place in the United States*. If a pro-democratic rather than anti-democratic regime were in power here, we could attempt to link its political direction with arguments, directed at conventional American nationalists such as John Kerry, about the usefulness of the UN, prospective limits on the US's imperial sway and economic power, the validity of multilateral interventions, and so on. But if George W. Bush is elected in 2004, there is not a single imaginable foreign regime, anywhere, of any kind whatsoever, that will be better off for

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being the object of America's attentions. Rather, the United States will be among those nations in dire need of humanitarian intervention.

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