

Human Rights and U. S. Militarism

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Since the end of the Cold War, the doctrine of humanitarian intervention — which asserts that severe human rights violations justify the abrogation of national sovereignty — has become a hallmark of liberal and left opinion on international affairs. A Carnegie Endowment Report of 1992 echoed this view when it stated that the destruction of populations within states called for international intervention. The massacre of Bosnian Muslims by Serbs; genocide in Rwanda; the famines and wars elsewhere in Africa — all these understandably added fuel to the argument. Denial of personal and political freedoms was also deemed ground for intervention in the affairs of other countries.

In this scenario, the enemies of human rights are rogue states and left-leaning autocracies in the Third World. These are “the new Hitlers.” In an effective effort to give legitimacy to the Balkan War, Bill Clinton drew a parallel between Nazi genocide and Serbian atrocities. “What if someone had listened to Winston Churchill and stood up to Adolf Hitler sooner. How many lives might have been saved?” he said at the start of the 1999 bombing campaign.

The interventionist mind-set also has a political dimension, especially with respect to Latin America. Since 2003, U. S.-funded NGOs have helped local forces overthrow the government in Haiti, and most recently, Honduras. In addition, they supported a failed coup against Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 2002. Here the line between armed and civil society intervention is blurred.

The specter of fascism is often invoked to give moral legitimacy to intervention, armed or otherwise. This ploy is also meant to disarm critics of U.S. behavior. The term “totalitarian” has been laughably used to describe ousted President Zelaya of Honduras, perhaps because of his unforgivable ties to the supposedly preeminent despot of Latin America, Hugo Chavez. Chavez, too, has been likened to Hitler by the U.S. media and the Venezuelan opposition. (Another variant on this theme is the analogy made between Muslim fundamentalism and Nazi Germany that has given birth to the concept of “Islamofascism.”) Though these analogies might seem far-fetched, they do the job they are meant to do: demonizing the supposed enemies of freedom, adding force to liberal-left guilt.

An alternative to the juxtaposition of freedom/fascism is that of democracy/communism and its relatives. “Drawing on the lesson of the disastrous history of leftist apologetics over crimes of Stalinism and Maoism,” the Anglo-American Euston Manifesto of 2006 concluded that “leftists who make common cause with anti-democratic forces should be criticized in clear and forthright terms,” and thrown into the outer darkness with all the other opponents of the only kind of democracy considered acceptable on the left today: representative democracy. This kind of rhetorical device owes its success in large part to the demise of “actually existing socialism” in the Soviet Union. Not only is state socialism beyond the pale, but anything that smacks of top-down politics is viewed with suspicion if not repugnance.

Which brings us to the human rights argument and its uses. Beginning with Jimmy Carter, for whom a commitment to human rights — “the soul of American foreign policy” — was a way to rehabilitate our reputation after Vietnam, the doctrine of human rights has become part of the reigning orthodoxy of the liberal establishment. The licensing of humanitarian intervention to protect those rights

was given a big boost by the fall of the Soviet Union and the "socialist bloc." At the heart of the political discourse, the dichotomy of capitalism/socialism was replaced by that of democracy/totalitarianism. With no challenge to capitalism, neoliberal economics and representative democracy were embraced not only by the political mainstream but by large segments of the left. As a result, human rights, including the political rights of liberal democracy, moved into the vacuum left by the decline of a left alternative. Humanitarian intervention in the service of human rights, freedom and democracy claimed the ideological high ground in the struggle against the recent forms of "totalitarianism" ranging from Serbia to Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia.

The most important episode in the story of humanitarian intervention was the 1999 Balkan War between NATO and Yugoslavia. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair justified the NATO campaign against the Serbs on the grounds of the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. But more was at stake here than the rights of an ethnic group and the fight for, in Blair's words, "the values of civilization."

Under the moral rhetoric was the need to establish Western, especially U. S. dominance in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. By Clinton's own admission, this geopolitical aim was furthered by the war and the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe. (These guaranteed access to the oil-rich Caspian Sea area and the strategically crucial zone between China and Russia.) Thus did the discourse about human rights and humanitarian intervention come to be the legitimizing cover for American hegemony and global capitalism. If solidarity activists and progressive opponents of militarism object to our recent military build-up in Latin America, they should think twice before supporting the principle of humanitarian intervention anywhere. This principle masks our imperial ambitions. It should be renamed "humanitarian imperialism."

Sources

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