

# Difficult Discussions: Military Intervention and United Nation Reform

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Comments on: MacMillan: Model Describing the Effect of Employment of the United States Military in a Complex Emergency. *Prehosp Disast Med* 2005;20(5):282–289.

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The Theoretical Discussion entitled “Model Describing the Effect of Employment of the United States Military in a Complex Emergency” is welcome—not because of the model’s accuracy, but for the author’s recognition that the complexity and limitations of defining complex emergencies (CEs) are beyond the scope of this model and other models that have surfaced over the years. Unless, of course, your CE missions are chosen to compare and contrast, as was done to support this model. In its simplification, it does provide the reader with acknowledgement that students of CEs remain driven to provide order where there is none. The author does not acknowledge, until the last page, that he is including all military forces in this discussion, not just those of the United States (US). This is an opportunity lost, I believe, because the answers for military intervention will never fall to one country, or should it. The post-9/11 superpower status of the US is focused, not on the deprived and poverty stricken, but on asserting its dominant role in international security by increasing attention to protracted crises and failed states considered bastions of terrorism. Hence, the sudden US interest in Sudan after many years of neglect. Nothing is said of Zimbabwe or northern Uganda where sociopathic despotism defines exactly the criteria that should lead to military intervention.

Political power translates into military power. Military intervention is always a political decision and what that translates into, on the ground, also is political. As such, it can be restrictive or overdone.<sup>1</sup> US military Task Force commanders uniformly report that there is a wide disconnection between what they are told to do and what they find they should be doing. Military humanitarian interventions, given their expertise and robust assets, have received a great deal of press lately. However, as Hansch testifies, during the highly visible airlift of food into Afghanistan in the winter of 2001–2002, the US military delivered only a tiny fraction of the amount of food that was being brought in through conventional operations by the World Food Program and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In fact, UN Agencies and NGOs have every bit and more capability to transport goods across countries and continents at a cheaper rate.<sup>2</sup>

The criteria referred to as core competencies of the US military: (1) providing security for relief efforts; (2) enforcing negotiated settlements; (3) providing security for non-combatants; and (4) employing logistical capabilities has not been realized to the fullest since the Kurdish emergency in Northern Iraq. At that time, all parties agreed that the military worked as an ally with the humanitarian organizations in the common purpose of security and humanitarian relief. In Somalia, the NGOs felt that the military made a positive difference, however, the military did not feel their mission was as successful as they had hoped, and began to find ways to increase both their sphere of influence and control, including getting into the aid business with community health and food programs.

The humanitarian community expects the military to provide protection, not humanitarian assistance. However, in situations in which the presence of humanitarian agencies is lacking or inadequate, or the security environment is prohibitive and preventing access, humanitarian assistance by armed forces is

essential and obligated under international law to save lives and prevent "unacceptable human suffering".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in Liberia, a mission not referred to in this published discussion, was very much unnoticed for the critical tipping point it illustrated. The 2003 war caused many deaths from violence, malnutrition, and a cholera epidemic. Many key NGOs, but not all, seeing that the contending factions in this war were holding hostage the entire population depriving it of food, health, and other necessities of life, were strongly critical of this international abandonment. They called for a military intervention by a multinational force. This action, both correct and successful, is considered one of the rare situations in which the humanitarian community can request armed intervention.

What has happened that we've strayed so far? We are competing, civilian versus military, and with each other, and avoiding or not noticing the obvious...when and why we must intervene in the sovereignty of a nation-state to protect the lives of its citizens? Is it that the former fight is nothing but avoidance so as not to address the uncomfortable realities of the latter? Politics, both here and there, is restrictive and unable to provide the protections MacMillan and other authors correctly claim are needed. If so, international intervention would have occurred in Zimbabwe long ago, and sociopathic despots like John Kony of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda would be long dead.

Yes, the opportunity lost here is that we should be openly talking and debating, not for more US military intervention, but UN intervention. The UN Charter, written in

1945, deals with cross-border wars. As a legal document, it totally fails to address internal conflicts and genocide. The UN reform currently being debated must rewrite the Charter to clearly address these current events. But, it also must implement UN Charter, Chapter VII, Article 43 calling, once and for all, for a UN Standing Task Force with the capacity and will to deal appropriately with genocide and internal conflict. Without implementation, countries like the US will continue to triage where and when they will intervene, confusion will continue to reign, and populations and cultures, unnoticed, will be lost.

Several countries in 2000 recommended, as part of Charter revision and reform, a Collective Security Model that addresses circumstances in which the UN 'doctrine of non-interference' in a nation's internal affairs would be redefined in favor of international intervention.<sup>4</sup> These new 'criteria for involvement' would call for immediate intervention where large-scale loss of life, actual or apprehended, or where genocidal intent through deliberate nation action, nation neglect, or a nation's inability to prevent genocide would obligate intervention. Unless this type of reform is operationalized, and supported by the US, we will continue to rehash, debate, and publish these models and new ones. MacMillan should be applauded for launching this discussion. His legacy, however, will be for opening, once again, Pandora's Box.

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