

# Michael Ignatieff

## The Seductiveness of Moral Disgust

### HEART OF DARKNESS

IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*, CONRAD OBSERVED THAT IMPERIALISM, WHEN looked at closely, is not a pretty thing. "What redeems it is the idea only." The ferocious rapacity of Kurtz's search for ivory is ennobled in his own eyes by his plans to bring civilization to the savages. In the end, of course, this idea redeems nothing at all. When Marlow finds Kurtz, at the final bend of the river, all there is to show of Kurtz's civilizing mission is a row of native heads stuck on pikes and the tattered remains of Kurtz's concluding report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, on the final page of which the delirious Kurtz had scribbled, "Exterminate all the Brutes!"

Conrad's work is a fable about late-nineteenth-century imperialism at the end of its tether, paralyzed by futility and sapped by the temptations of an all destroying nihilism. It is also about the seductions of moral disgust: having failed to civilize the savages, Kurtz turns against them all the force of his own moral self-disillusion.

We tell ourselves that we are living in a postimperial age. What is "new" about the new world order, supposedly, is that it is not imperial. Decolonization in Africa and Asia, the collapse of the Soviet empire, the general triumph of the principle of national self-determination all lead us to think that the reflexes and impulses laid bare so mercilessly by Conrad now belong to the forgotten history of our conscience.

Central to this assumption is the idea that the interventions of the post-1989 period were humanitarian rather than imperial in their

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essential motivation. The three key rescue missions undertaken since 1989—the Kurdish, Somali, and Bosnian operations—were understood as noble attempts to give substance to that formless yet blameless entity, “the international conscience.” Yet Conradian continuities continue to haunt these operations: the ironic interplay between noble intentions and bloody results, between fantasies of omnipotent benevolence and impotent practice, between initial self-regard and eventual self-disgust. Conrad himself could hardly have imagined a more terrible image of these ironies than the spectacle, on all our television screens, of UN soldiers, mostly Pakistani, firing upon Somali crowds and killing the women and children they were mandated to protect. When Conrad encapsulated imperial impotence in the image of the gunboat in *Heart of Darkness*, moored off the African shore, lobbing useless shells into the unanswering jungle, the contemporary imagination leaps to the image of NATO warplanes lobbing shells into abandoned Serbian artillery dugouts. Past and present meet in a shared image of the futility of great power.

Yet we resist thinking about such continuities. We prefer to imagine the acts of rescue undertaken since 1989 as exercises in post-imperial disinterestedness, as a form of moral therapeutics uncontaminated by lust for conquest or imperial rivalry. Nor is this mere illusion. In the case of the Iraqi operation, we explicitly forswore the imperial occupation of Iraq and the remaking of its polity. The troops were halted on the road to Baghdad. In the case of the relief of the Kurds, again we forswore actual occupation and contented ourselves with an air umbrella to allow the Kurds to shape their future as best they could. In the case of Somalia, we precluded taking over the country for the sake of what was called “a quick exit” strategy. In Bosnia, a land kept in peace throughout the nineteenth century by either Austrian or Ottoman dragoons, we supposed that the mere threat of our disapproval, trade embargo, and the occasional lob of a shell from our aircraft would make the recourse to dragoons of our own unnecessary. Skeptical spirits might be tempted to speculate that had

we been more ruthlessly imperial, we might have been a trifle more effective. Had General Schwartzkopf allowed himself to become the General MacArthur of a conquered Iraq, the Iraqi opposition abroad might now be returning to rebuild the country; if the Marines were still patrolling the streets of Mogadishu, the prospects of turning Somalia from the world of Hobbes to the world of Locke might be somewhat brighter; and if a limited NATO force had taken up arms in defense of the Bosnian government against the Serbian insurrection in April 1992, it is possible that Europe might not have had to witness the return of the concentration camp.

Yet the fate of Kurtz should warn us against the seductiveness of imperial ruthlessness. Nemesis may await the ruthless as surely as it awaits the indecisive. In any event, even when we forswear the brutalities of Kurtz, we discover that Conradian ironies haunt the humanitarian path we chose to tread. Even the "conscience of the world" remains a prisoner of that hubris which led Kurtz to boast, "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded." Like Kurtz we continue to be stunned into disillusion and bitterness by the discovery that our good intentions so often end in futility. What else but imperial arrogance could have led anyone to assume that any outside power—even one mandated by the international community—could have gone into Somalia, put an end to factional fighting and then exited, all within months? Who but a European or an American could have believed that "the simple exercise of our will" could have stopped the Yugoslav catastrophe? Was our intervention there not deeply colored by an imperial hubris that believes we represent tolerance, civility, decency, and civilization and have the right to spread these treasures among the subrational zones of our world?

There was a strong element of narcissism buried inside the more obvious motivations leading the West to intervene. We intervened not only to save others but also to save ourselves, or rather an image of ourselves as defenders of universal decencies. We wanted to show that

Europe “meant” something, stood for toleration within a peaceable and civilized civil society. This imaginary Europe, this narcissistic image of ourselves, we believed was incarnated in the myth of a multiethnic, multiconfessional Bosnia.

This discovery of an ideal image of ourselves in a part of Europe that no Western European intellectual had taken the slightest interest in before the war had its peculiar aspects. It was not clear, for example, whether Bosnia did in fact approximate our fantasy. The few experts there disagreed as to whether a multiethnic polity was ever viable in Bosnia. The fact that the Bosnian Serbs set out to dismember this polity from its inception was taken not as proof that multiethnic polity could not work, but that it had been strangled at birth by “nationalists.” This thesis—which sought to salvage the dream of a multiethnic Bosnia from its evident collapse—dismissed the Bosnian Serbs, who had genuine fears and grievances, as tools of nationalistic demagogues. The desire to intervene may just have caused us to rewrite the history of Bosnia to make it conform to our ideal of a redeemable place. It was also ironic, of course, that a Western Europe that had shown no qualms about ghettoizing its own Muslim *gastarbeiter* minorities suddenly discovered in Muslim-Christian coexistence in Bosnia the very image of its own multicultural illusions.

Bosnia became the latest *bel espoir* of a generation that had tried ecology, socialism, anti-totalitarianism, and antiracism, only to watch all these causes absorbed into the banality of bourgeois politics. What was rescued in Bosnia, by this politics, was not Bosnia but the image of the committed intellectual of the Left. Results were secondary. Indeed, failure either did not matter at all or was understood as belonging to a line of noble failure stretching back to the Spanish republican cause of the thirties. This moral allure of noble failure is a seduction to which intellectuals are especially prone.

Bosnia became a theater of displacement, in which political energies that might otherwise have been expended at home—in struggling to create a multicultural, multiethnic society in Western

Europe—were directed instead at defending the mythic multiculturalism of embattled Bosnia. Yet the collapse of a political project at home left internationalism without any of the institutional supports necessary to make it effective: political parties, trade unions, student organizations, clubs, and so forth. The institutions of the new politics—Greenpeace, aid charities like Médecins sans Frontières or Amnesty International—proved to be either too weak organizationally or too divided from each other by their single issue focus to be able to mobilize a domestic constituency behind international intervention. This critical organizational weakness at home helps explain why the demand for intervention in Bosnia joined the doleful list of lost causes on the Left.

The point here is not to put the blame for Western failure on the narcissism of Western intellectuals. Moral solidarity depends on the creation of fictional narratives of concern that link together the fate of victims with the moral self-regard of those who wish to help them. It does not undermine gestures of solidarity to point out that they are sustained by vanity, self-regard, and elements of European cultural hubris. We do have good reasons to be attached to “our” values, and there are universal decencies that can be plausibly defended.

Conrad’s skepticism did not deny that there were universal decencies, sometimes though not always of European origin. His disillusion did not end in relativism, quietism, or empty moral self-disgust. His mordant and complex fictions simply observe that we were not as powerful as we supposed; that we did not have the unlimited power for good that we assumed; and that we so frequently allowed unconscionable means to tarnish decent ends that a question remained as to the real extent of our commitment to these ends.

That is where we should begin when thinking about the rescue missions of the post-Cold War period. Our ventures were more deeply undergirded by illusions of imperial omnipotence than we knew, more underwritten by unquestioned assumptions about our goodness than was prudent; and our failure to sustain decent ends with adequate

means leaves open to question just how deep our commitment to these ends actually was.

Conrad would also have appreciated the irony that it was among those on the European and American Left who were especially skeptical about European universalism, especially doubtful about the European imperial legacy and about the use of force in general, who were often among the most militant in demanding the use of force in the defense of universal decencies in the collapsing states of the periphery. This did not make them hypocrites: it merely meant that the imperial reflexes—the assumption of omnipotence, the unquestioning assumption of one's own goodness—continued to work in the political unconscious of those who, consciously, would have disavowed the influence of such assumptions. Very often the moral reflex—"something must be done"—was sustained by the unexamined assumption that we had the power to do anything. This assumption borrowed from the imperial past but also from unexamined hubris about the West's current technological and logistical might. Even guilt toward the West's economic domination and exploitation of the globe contributes to the myth that it is mere selfishness and rapacity on our part that prevents us from using our omnipotence to reparative effect. Like the survival of religious impulses among the avowedly secular, the imperial impulse continued to animate the most anti-imperial of souls. This unexamined assumption of omnipotence often impeded a reconciliation between indignation and insight and between the designation of ends and the proper calculation of appropriate means. If we had started from humble assumptions—that we can always do less than we would like, that we may be able to stop horror, but we cannot always prevent tragedy—we might have been more responsible and, just possibly, devised strategies of intervention that would have stood more of a chance of success. We might have done better, too, if we had stopped using the language of "we," if we had disaggregated the West in our minds and understood how riven, divided, complex are the power relations that must be mastered if Western

powers are ever to act in concert for even the limited purposes of a humanitarian intervention.

Now that we are faced with the partial failure of almost all of our interventions—the war continues in Bosnia; Saddam Hussein remains in power; the warlords continue to bleed Somalia to death; Rwanda continues to suffer—there is an additional Conradian parallel to consider: the theme of moral disgust. It would be too much to say that “Exterminate all the Brutes!” is now the unavowed conclusion that many draw from Western failures. Yet the thought that civil wars can only end when they burn themselves out of their own accord does sneak into consciousness, coupled with the anguished suspicion that our attempts to stop them either delayed the inevitable or even prolonged the agony.

This is the familiar moral reflex of blaming the victim, and it is the chief seduction of moral disgust, because it provides self-exculpation and a justification for moral withdrawal. A very great deal of exculpatory moral disgust circulates about the failures of the new world order, a self-excusing sense that “we” tried and “they” failed.

In fact, it is seductively apocalyptic to suppose all our actions were failures. The problem in evaluating our actions is that their results are so ambiguous. Kurds were saved from extermination but have no state of their own and continue to live on the sufferance of four malignant neighbors; the Somali famine was palliated, but the rule of the gunmen was not ended; Saddam was punished but not toppled; the UN prevented the Bosnian Muslim people from being wiped out but did not prevent the dismemberment of their state. Those policymakers who say these were the best results we could have hoped for are charged with cynicism. Those who say we could have done more are taxed with a lack of realism. The truth may lie somewhere in between: policymakers often exaggerated our impotence as an excuse to do less than we could have done; those demanding intervention often failed to understand that we could not have done more. Between those who said we could do nothing and those who said we could do it all there has to lie a

position where the ethics of commitment meets the ethics of responsibility, where the commitments we make to strangers in danger can be backed up by believable, achievable strategies of rescue. If we cannot find such a *via media*, policy and public opinion are both likely to lurch between the Scylla of hubristic overcommitment and the Charibdis of cynical disengagement.

### **VIRTUE BY PROXY**

One of the reasons it has proved difficult to reconcile commitment and responsibility in relation to international rescue is that for most of us "doing something" about the disaster zones of the world actually means getting someone else to do it for us. Those of us who have felt outrage over Yugoslavia, Kurdistan, or Somalia do not ordinarily volunteer to do something ourselves. We get professionals to do the work for us: peacekeepers, relief workers, UN negotiators are dispatched in our name.

The indirectness of an ordinary citizen's moral implication in the interventions of the postwar era make it difficult for us to discipline our moral wishes with a due sense of their consequences. It is one thing to volunteer to repel aggression, quite another to volunteer other people to do so. The characteristic of most interventions in the post-Cold War era is that the ironies of good intentions are not borne by those who happen to have them.

Having such intentions turns out to be an easy matter if you are shielded from their consequences. It is noticeable that the desire to intervene appears to bear an inverse relation to a person's distance from the costs. Throughout the Yugoslav conflict, the demand for intervention has come from intellectual and cultural figures who, in the nature of things, could not either "intervene" themselves or directly order intervention. The political leaders who hesitated to intervene did so because they would have had to bear the political costs of failure more directly than most of those counseling intervention. It was customary for the "interveners" to claim the reverse: to argue, on the

basis of a sojourn in Sarajevo, that it was they who were closest to the implications of intervention or nonintervention, while it was the politicians, far away, who were taking refuge in their distance to refuse to face the catastrophe. Yet if intervention at the level desired by the “interveners” did not occur, it was not because those charged with the decisions were in moral flight from the realities, but because they were only too cognizant of the risks.

Those who demanded military intervention in Bosnia, for example, rarely understood exactly to what their indignation was committing them. It was surely disingenuous to suppose that a “lift and strike” policy could have saved the Bosnian government. Arming the Bosnian government before the conflict began in order to dissuade the Serbs against insurrection was a plausible thing to do. Trying to arm them once 70 percent of their territory was in the hands of their enemies was markedly less plausible. As David Rieff points out in his current book, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*, getting the Bosnians adequate heavy weapons required a contingent of NATO ground troops to bring them in by road from Split, fighting off the inevitable Serb counterattack. Air strikes alone would never have sufficed to keep the Serbs at bay, any more than air power could roll back Serbian territorial gains. Only the commitment of ground troops was capable of stopping the Serbs in their tracks and forcing them to negotiate a settlement of their claims. Rieff does not speculate how many troops would have been required, or how long they would have had to engage. Nor does he add—as he should have—that if NATO had sent ground troops into Bosnia they would also have had to do so in Croatia, if only to safeguard their own lines of supply and to stop the Serb attempt to unify its holdings in Croatia and Bosnia. Add to this a further dimension: that the Serbs were not the only aggressors. The Croats deployed 20,000 troops to “cleanse” the Mostar region of Muslims. Once the Croatian theater and the Croatian scavenging operation in Bosnia are entered into the equation, the sheer enormity of the military task facing NATO becomes apparent. Yet few of those demanding the commitment of ground troops faced up to these issues. Rieff is honest

enough to admit the paradox: "most of those who opposed intervention seemed to understand its gravity in a way that many of those who backed it did not" (Rieff, 1995: 13).

The point is not to side with the generals against the campaigners and to sink into gloomy resignation about our capacity to influence outcomes in a civil war. Nor is it to forswear direct military intervention in all circumstances. The right conclusion to draw is that military intervention is a lame second best to effective preventive diplomacy. Had the West intervened diplomatically in 1990 and 1991, informing the nationalist leaderships of the region that any attempt to transfer populations or alter republic boundaries by force would be met with comprehensive economic and military sanctions, including the use of selective air strikes, it is just possible that the nationalist adventurers would not have slipped their leash. Having failed to do so, the Western powers recognized a Bosnian government that had absolutely no means to defend itself. These were criminal and avoidable failures of judgment, and once they were made, it was not possible to put them right by going to war against Serbian aggression.

### **THE PROBLEM OF HINDSIGHT**

The difficulty, of course, is that the right course of action only appears obvious in hindsight. As late as 1989, maintaining the unity of a federal Yugoslavia appeared to be a plausible goal for international policy. Moreover, most states instinctively gave priority to the maintenance of the territorial integrity of states over the claims of national self-determination. By 1990, as the Baltic states resumed their sovereignty, as the tide of democratic self-determination swept across the ruined expanses of the Soviet empire, Slovenia and Croatia began looking for an escape from the Serb-dominated federation. International support for the federation had been rational policy in 1989. Now in 1990, it seemed not merely to be swimming against the irresistible current of national self-determination but to be providing international legitimization for the Serb takeover of the institutions of the federal republic.

Once again, in hindsight, it seems clear that by 1990, Western policy should have changed to assist the parties toward a peaceful divorce with minority rights guarantees and the maintenance of existing republic borders. All sides should have been issued with clear dissuasive threats against the use of force.

In the event, this shift came too late. European and American policy continued to proclaim its support for a unitary Yugoslavia as late as 1991. Not surprisingly, Serbian authorities took such support as a tacit authorization of the use of force to maintain the unity of the federal state when the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) took up arms against the proclamation of Slovenian and Croatian independence in June 1991.

Once war broke out, Europe and America had the choice of offering their services as neutral brokers of a cease-fire or engaging on the side of the Croats and Slovenians against the Serbian aggressor. They might have used limited air strikes both to impede the Serbian advance and to force them to a negotiated settlement. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1991, however, many Western governments continued to view the JNA assault on Croatia as a federal state's legitimate response to a secessionist movement.

It is not merely that the correct moment to shift Western policy is evident in hindsight only. It is also that such a shift might not have affected the outcomes. The problem then and now is that Western threats of the use of force lack credibility. The NATO powers had a weakness that every extremist in the Balkans understood only too well: an extreme reluctance to commit ground troops and to engage in a full-scale, long-haul imperial policing role in the area. The Vietnam experience has exposed the decisive limitations that a democratic politics imposes on the use of postimperial force. Only in rare situations can democratic politicians succeed in creating the consensus for sacrifice international military operations require among domestic electorates. The authoritarian populists of the Balkans displayed a shrewd recognition of this Achilles' heel of modern postimperial power.

A rapid reaction force of professional mercenaries, under permanent UN command, might solve this problem, but their deployment would require Security Council agreement and American logistical support, neither of which is automatic or rapid. Moreover, the demand for intervention grows with the availability of forces available to intervene. A permanent UN force would never be large enough to meet all demands, and inevitably it would soon be spreading its resources dangerously thin.

In retrospect, at least, it seems apparent that those who demanded the use of Western military force in the Yugoslav conflict overestimated the credibility of our dissuasive threats and underestimated the complexity of a full-scale military intervention. Among the "interveners," the tacit assumption about consequences was imperial: that any determined show of strength on our part would cause "the natives" to buckle. Responsible calculation of military risk should emancipate itself from hubris. Military intervention is only plausibly undertaken when it is clearly understood that "the natives" (in this case the Serbs) may not buckle at all. Nor is it the case that displays of Western resolution in one area of the world have much effect in restraining nationalist adventurers in other parts of the world. Milosevic did not draw lessons from the fate of Saddam, or if he did, they were not the ones we wished him to draw. When we draw lines in the sand, they remain just that: lines in the sand, soon effaced by the wind.

This is not to say that direct military intervention may not be necessary in rescue operations in the future. Nor is it to imply that such intervention would have failed in the past in the Balkans. It is merely to make the more modest, subsidiary point that if, as an intellectual, one appeals for the use of military force to defend one's moral principles, one owes it to those who may die in their defense to think through consequences, free of the imperial reflex of assuming easy victory.

### **DID INTERVENTION MAKE THINGS WORSE?**

Having failed diplomatically, Western leaders then fell back on a traditional peacekeeping strategy whose mandate was woefully inadequate

to the realities on the ground. Peacekeepers were deployed when there was no peace to keep; what was called a protection force stood by while Sarajevans were picked off in the streets; "safe havens" were proclaimed and then left to be pounded by Serb gunners; courageous and effective agencies like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees were forced to connive at ethnic cleansing, helping to escort refugees from Serb-held zones. The very presence of UN personnel gave Western governments the excuse to avoid air strikes for fear of hitting their own people or turning them into Serb hostages. It is just possible that the UN presence actually prolonged the death agonies of a whole people.

It is no disservice to the devotion and courage of the peacekeepers, relief workers, journalists, and negotiators who "intervened" on our behalf to ask whether, in the end, they did not make things worse.

We should ask, for example, whether the attempt to deliver humanitarian relief convoys to civilians in the midst of war zones in the end did not prolong the war by sustaining the civilian hinterlands on which militias depend. Against this, it might be said that international relief prevented the total defeat of the Muslim population. While prolonging the war we did prevent one side from being annihilated and possibly exterminated. Yet if we fed the victims, we refused to arm them, and by failing to arm them, we denied them effective means of resistance. We sought, in principle, to bring relief to innocent civilian victims on all sides. Inevitably, some victims were not so innocent, and inevitably much aid found its way into the hands of belligerents. European efforts to broker a negotiated settlement, to promote partition, ratified the gains of aggression and, in dividing up the territory of Bosnia, certainly legitimized the results of ethnic cleansing.

The interventionary strategy that was adopted—to protect the Muslim in safe havens, to keep Sarajevo from falling while doing nothing to stop Serb bombardment—was perfectly consistent with the conviction that we could not commit ourselves to a land war in the Balkans against the Serbs. In effect, the West's policy consisted in

saying: we will not fight the chief aggressor, and we will not enable the victims to resist; but we will try to prevent the victims from being wiped out.

Yet by failing to stop and reverse Serbian aggression, the West became complicit in the destruction of Bosnia and its capital city. The UN allowed itself to become the administrator of the Serbian siege of Sarajevo. The UN both prevented the city from starving to death, and yet, by doing nothing to break the siege, it helped to prolong the city's suffering. Moral results could hardly be more ambiguous than this.

The best one can say is that outside intervention helped to retard Serbian achievement of its goals of a Greater Serbia. Had Croatia not been recognized in late December 1991, it is possible that it would have been conquered entirely. Had UN detachments not gone into Sarajevo, it is possible it would have fallen, and if it had fallen, all of Bosnia would now be in the hands of the Bosnian Serbs. When Western diplomats claim that our intervention has fulfilled its limited mandate, they mean, in effect, that we prevented the full realization of Serbian war aims.

Yet the manner in which this was done should give us all pause. The Yugoslav case seems to illustrate the maxim that the better is sometimes the enemy of the best. The strategies we chose made it impossible to adopt ones that could have done better. By deploying peacekeepers on the ground, the West offered their lightly armed troops as potential hostages to local warlords. This then precluded sustained use of air power as a dissuasive tool and as an instrument of coercive diplomacy. The delivery of humanitarian aid, necessary as it was, probably reduced the incentives of both sides to negotiate a settlement.

The basic problem with the UN mandate, as David Rieff and others have argued, is that the UN wanted peace, not justice. The peacekeepers were impartial without being fair, making no distinction between the primary aggressor, the Serbs, and the primary victim, the Bosnian Muslims. Within a year, the Serbs had seized 70 percent of Bosnian territory. Small wonder that they then showed willingness to negoti-

ate, while the Bosnian government held out, hoping that its army, with outside support, might make good at least some of its losses. Bosnian refusal to capitulate infuriated the UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force) command that wanted peace at any price. The Clinton administration, for its part, undermined the Vance-Owen peace proposals, kept the Bosnians fighting with promises of "lift and strike" that never materialized and, by failing to commit troops to the peacekeeping operation, divided and weakened Western pressure on the Serbs.

The key question posed by the UN's experience in Bosnia is whether there was a viable middle strategy between massive NATO intervention, which was never likely, and traditional peacekeeping, which was never practicable. Journalists covering the war kept calling for a more interventionist, less impartial UN strategy, returning hostile fire, naming and pursuing the aggressor, calling in air strikes, without specifying how the UN could have avoided being cut to pieces by a determined Serb attack. In hard military terms, the UN was hostage to the Serbs and risked annihilation if it pursued them as an enemy. Yet, it was the direct threat of air strikes that broke the siege of Sarajevo and stopped Serb tanks on the outskirts of the encircled enclave of Gorazde. On these occasions, the threat of force proved compatible with a peacekeeping mandate and did not draw down retaliatory fire. Yet those who wanted a more activist stance from the UN often did not appreciate just how vulnerable the UN forces were on the ground. Even in Somalia, the Marines were forced to withdraw when they shed their supposedly impartial role as peacekeepers and, having targeted one of the warlords, found themselves drawn into an ambush that left many of them dead. The vulnerability of peacekeepers can be partly overcome only by increasing the size of the contingents. The basic dilemma remains: can the UN enforce peace in a war zone without compromising its legitimacy as an arbiter?

In practice, the UN stumbled toward a new form of operations in both Bosnia and Kurdistan: the safe haven. Instead of the traditional peacekeeping stance, which is to patrol cease-fire lines between

contending armies, the UN has moved toward the idea of throwing a circle of military protection around unarmed civilians, while leaving their armies to fight it out. This strategy does not bring peace, but at least it addresses the most odious aspect of the Balkan wars: ethnic cleansing, the extermination and/or displacement of unarmed civilian populations. A UN strategy for the future, based on throwing a protective cordon around noncombatants while using additional resources to secure "blue routes"—access roads for the delivery of supplies to these populations—might provide a *via media* between massive military intervention, which domestic electorates will not stomach, and traditional peacekeeping, which manifestly fails to bring peace. Such a strategy at least has the virtue of allowing the UN to be partial in its protection of civilians. But it still does not address the question of how to bring combatants to heel. Here, strategies of suffocation and containment may work best: comprehensive arms embargoes and economic sanctions directed against combatants on all sides, designed to force them toward a negotiated settlement of their differences. Finding a workable strategy to protect civilians in the civil war zones of imploding states is the challenge that will either make or break the UN.

### **THE RETREAT FROM EMPIRE**

The chief threat to international security in the post-Cold War world is the collapse of states and the resulting collapse of the capacity of the civilian populations to feed and protect themselves, either against famine or interethnic warfare. In a world in which nations once capable of imperial burdens are no longer willing to shoulder them, it is inevitable that many of the states created by decolonization should prove unequal to the task of maintaining civil order. Such nations have achieved self-determination on the cruelest possible terms. Either they are torn apart by ethnic conflict, or they are simply too weak to contend with the poverty of their people.

Yugoslavia belongs to a growing category of states in the southern rim of the former Soviet empire and in Africa that have collapsed, leav-

ing their citizens in the Hobbesian war of all against all or, as Michael Walzer puts it, some against some.

What these societies need, desperately, is internal peace followed by the patient reconstruction of the infrastructure of civil society: institutions—schools, hospitals, courts, police stations—in which the rule of law rather than the rule of the gun prevails. This is work that is totally ill-suited to the post-Cold War style of instant intervention and quick exit. What is needed is long-term, unspectacular, patient commitment to a molecular rebuilding of society itself. Obviously, such work can only be undertaken by the people themselves, but patient, long-standing and long-suffering commitment by outsiders can help.

In the nineteenth century, this work was “the white man’s burden”: Kurtz’s burden, the building of the infrastructure of imperial rule and administration in infested and insalubrious jungles. In the Balkans, it was the work of the Ottomans and then of the Austro-Hungarians. Shattered traces of their work still dot the landscape. At least in retrospect, imperial rule has a certain logic: those who cannot agree to rule themselves may be able to submit to rule by strangers.

This logic did not survive the rise of nationalism and the doctrine of self-determination. We are now living with the consequence of the modern axiom that rule by strangers is worse than rule by your own; that it is better for people to govern themselves, even if they make a mess of it, than to be ruled by foreigners, even if these foreigners do a passable job.

For democrats, there is no return from the truth of these axioms. Conrad was right about the deep ugliness of empire. There is no point whatsoever in indulging nostalgia for the heyday of imperial division of the globe. Yet the question remains: what is to be done when self-determination fails, when civil war or famine destroys a polity? Once the immediate crisis has been solved, who is to rebuild civil society? Who is to recreate the institutions necessary for self-determination to function? Even if some form of peace or permanent truce can be brokered in the Balkans, it will take a generation or two to rebuild the institutions

on which civic trust and a functioning polity depend. Who is ready to shoulder this burden? There is no shortage of nongovernmental organizations ready to take up the challenge: groups of lawyers prepared to go out and instruct people in the humble realities of civil and criminal codes; policemen to teach about policing in multiethnic communities; doctors and nurses to rebuild health-care facilities. Yet such activity is vulnerable, piecemeal, and easily reversed unless it occurs within the framework of some kind of international mandate.

It is at this point that, as Michael Walzer argues, the idea of trusteeships and protectorates becomes plausible. For once states have imploded, once trust among ethnic groups has been destroyed by violence, someone must come in and administer the society on a day-to-day basis, not just for months but for years, until ordinary people can shake off the fear and loathing that divide them. This means rule by strangers. Yet such exercises are a potential incitement to insurrection unless they have the legitimacy of an international mandate and a firm time limit. In other words, the next task facing the international community is to devise a form of trusteeship that reproduces the benefits of imperial rule (benefits, that is, for the indigenous population) without reproducing the dynamic of revolt that will destroy what such exercises set out to achieve: a stable and self-determining polity.

## **CONCLUSION**

If one stands back and surveys our fumbled and ambiguous interventions from the standpoint of Conradian irony, what seems worthy of remark is that empire and imperial rivalry provided the zones of safety in which "we" live with a permanent rationale for involvement in the zones of danger in which "they" merely endure. With the passage of empire and the waning of superpower rivalries, the developed "Northern" world seems to have less and less reason to be concerned with the fate of the unstable, collapsing states and nations on its periphery. What is striking is the degree of disconnection between zones of safety and zones of danger, the sense that our securities and our fates are all too divisible. Now it is not even clear that we need the ivory that sent Kurtz into the

jungle. Not even the nexus of economic interest is likely to link a developed world, whose dominance is based on knowledge, to a peripheral world, whose only offering is unskilled labor and raw materials. The rhetoric of the global village, the globalization of media, conceals this increasing disconnection between our most basic interests.

This is in the context in which the revolution in humanitarian concern should be seen. For there has been such a revolution: the refurbishment of the Enlightenment heritage of universal human rights, the emergence of vast constituencies of human rights activists, development workers, aid experts whose moral rationale is the indivisibility of human interests and needs in an interdependent world. Yet this struggle to assert humanitarian interdependency must struggle against rivers of history that seem to be running the other way: toward a disconnection between the economic and security interests of the developed and the underdeveloped portions of the globe. The Conradian irony is that this interdependence was more apparent to the carnivorean Kurtz figures of the nineteenth century than it is to the herbivorean post-imperial politicians and businessmen of the late twentieth century. What needs to be understood more clearly—however pessimistic the implications—is that when conscience is the only linkage between rich and poor, North and South, zones of safety and zones of danger, it is a weak link indeed. If the cause of Bosnia failed to arouse the universal outrage and anguish that the atrocity footage on our television screens led one to expect, it was not because those watching such images in the comfort of their living rooms lack a conscience or a humanitarian impulse. The charitable response was quite strong. The real impediment to sustained solidarity ran deeper: in some nearly incorrigible feeling that their security and ours are indeed divisible; that their fate and ours are indeed severed, by history, fortune, and good luck; and that if we owe them our pity, we do not share their fate. The fact that ethnic civil war elsewhere prefigures what will happen at home if our states fail to hold the ring in our own multiethnic tensions was not enough to make people feel the Yugoslav cause to be their own. Most of us persist in the belief that while the fires far away are terrible things,

we can keep them from our doors, and that while they may consume the roofs of our neighbors, the sparks will never leap to our own. Yet the fire keeps drawing closer. Once the *Heart of Darkness* could be set in the remotest jungles of the European imagination. Now the Heart of Darkness is in Europe itself, barely two hours journey from our homes. It is not our conscience alone that should connect us to these zones, but the most soberly egotistical calculation of our interest. Yet this is the frontier of awareness we have yet to cross.

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