

Somalia Reconsidered: An Examination of the Norm of Humanitarian Intervention

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A number of constructivist and English school scholars have investigated the extent to which humanitarian intervention is allowed and legitimised by international society. In other words, they have examined the nature and strength of a norm permitting humanitarian intervention.¹ It is a contention of this article that another norm of humanitarian intervention – parallel but discrete – has been neglected. It is argued that ideas and beliefs shared by some members of international society – or more specifically a liberal world society of state and non-state actors² – not only *permit* intervention but *prescribe* it in certain circumstances and this has been largely ignored in the literature. By focusing on questions of when, where and why humanitarian action is *permitted*, scholars have neglected to develop theoretical explanations for the significant inconsistencies in humanitarian action that can be observed in the world. States do not intervene to prevent human rights violations simply because they are allowed to. Only by considering when and where humanitarian action is *prescribed* and by examining the interplay of this prescription with the material self-interests of states can we begin to understand why states respond to some grave violations of human rights and not others.

The US-led intervention in Somalia in 1992-4 reveals much about the nature and strength of this norm. The norm prescribing humanitarian intervention has evolved significantly since the Somali intervention, yet the seeds of this evolution can be traced to the decision by President George H. W. Bush to intervene in 1992 and the ramifications of the disaster in Mogadishu one year later. The intervention in Somalia can be described as an ideational false start. While there was no perceived material or strategic interests at stake, the constituted identity and interests of the United States as perceived by the Bush administration prescribed a preference for intervention. However, the commitment to intervention in Somalia in the face of mounting US troop casualties proved to be unsustainable. President Clinton, Bush's successor, was unwilling to accept the political costs of continued compliance with the norm prescribing intervention where no strategic or economic interests were at stake; he was unwilling to sacrifice his mandate for domestic change for the sake of an unpopular foreign policy. Clinton's subsequent

¹ Martha Finnemore and Nicholas Wheeler have both made excellent contributions to this inquiry. See, for example, Martha Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention', in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996); Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'Review Article: Humanitarian Intervention after Kosovo: Emergent Norm, Moral Duty or the Coming Anarchy?' *International Affairs*, 77/1: 113-128 (2001).

² I thank Alex Bellamy for clarifying this distinction for me.

decision to withdraw from Somalia represents an ideational retreat from which the US may still have not fully recovered.

The objective of this article is to explore three interrelated phenomena that the story of the Somali intervention reveals. The first revelation is that ideas matter and can explain state behaviour. The available evidence suggests that the decision to intervene was motivated primarily by ideational rather than material factors. Secondly, in the absence of complementary material interests, a commitment to ideational concerns can prove to be unsustainable when human and economic costs begin to rise as occurred in 1993. Thirdly, the international and domestic norm prescribing intervention functions in direct opposition to the domestic norm of force protection and understanding the interplay of these two norms is crucial if we are to comprehend the possibilities for humanitarian intervention.

The descent into anarchy

In January, 1991, the brutal dictator, Siad Barre, was forced from power and Somalia quickly descended into clan-based civil war. Within two months the US State Department had declared Somalia to be in an official state of disaster and began providing humanitarian aid largely through NGOs and UN agencies. War and drought combined to produce famine and by late January, 1992, 140,000 Somali refugees were reported to have fled to Kenya. In April of that year, the first United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I) was deployed with the consent of the respective leaders of the two leading Somali factions, General Mohamed Farah Aidid and Ali Mahdi Mohamed. Deployment of UNOSOM I was slow and chronic lawlessness prevented aid from being distributed. By October 1992, an estimated 300,000 Somalis had died since the civil war began. A further 4.5 million of a population of only 6 million were threatened by severe malnutrition and disease. At least 1.5 million of these Somalis were deemed to be at mortal risk.³

In the first six months of 1992, the crisis in Somalia failed to generate significant interest in the Bush administration. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for African Affairs between 1986 and 1994, James Woods, recalls that while US administrations had perceived a substantial strategic interest in Somalia in the 1980s, the end of the cold war and the departure of the Russians and Cubans from East Africa had seen this interest give way to 'a new attitude approaching indifference.'⁴ While Andrew Natsios, Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance declared in January, 1992, that Somalia was 'the greatest humanitarian emergency in the world,' and staff at the Bureau of African Affairs tried to attract the attention of the State Department, Woods recalls that the violence and starvation remained 'a third tier issue' for the administration.⁵ He suggests that 'there

³ Report of the Secretary General, UN Document A/47/553 (1992).

⁴ James L. Woods, 'U.S. Government Decisionmaking Processes During Humanitarian Operations in Somalia', in Walter Clarke and Jeffrey Herbst (eds.), *Learning from Somalia: The Lessons of Armed Humanitarian Intervention* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), p. 151.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

existed a hope at intermediate and high policy levels that the United States could avoid the costs and complications of a deeper involvement.’⁶ The absence of any significant media interest in the crisis, in contrast to the strident calls for the protection of Kurds in northern Iraq the previous year, meant that the Bush administration could ignore the Somali crisis and incur little or no political cost.⁷

From July, however, a number of forces began to combine to change the administration’s approach. That month, President Bush received a telegram from the US Ambassador to Kenya that described the humanitarian situation in Somali refugee camps. The emotional description of suffering reportedly prompted Bush to order a policy review and instruct the State Department to become ‘forward leaning’ with regard to Somalia.⁸ At the same time, the Democratic challenger in the presidential election campaign, Bill Clinton, was becoming increasingly critical of Bush’s failure to respond to the suffering in both Somalia and Bosnia. As the humanitarian situation deteriorated, humanitarian relief agencies and some members of Congress began to clamour for action. In August, Bush announced a US military airlift of food declaring that ‘starvation in Somalia is a major human tragedy’ and that the US would provide food for ‘those who desperately need it.’⁹ Prior to this, the three main American news networks had only mentioned the Somali crisis in fifteen stories.¹⁰ Bush’s announcement, however, made Somalia a significant domestic issue and the subsequent sustained media coverage put pressure on Bush to back up his words with more decisive action. Food aid could only reach so many in the absence of security on the ground. As the situation continued to deteriorate, a realisation emerged that ground troops were essential if ‘those who desperately need it’ were to receive food. The Bush administration was aware that only the US could mount an operation, alone or leading a coalition, that could bring dramatic improvement in a short space of time.

The American use of force

During the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, a doctrine that would become known as the Weinburger-Powell Doctrine guided administration decisions on the use of force. First articulated by Reagan’s Secretary of Defence Casper Weinburger in 1984, this doctrine outlined six requirements to be considered before committing US troops to an operation. These included the conditions that vital national interests were at

⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

⁷ Woods recalls that State officials were called six times to give formal testimony on Somalia before House and Senate committees in the period January to June, 1992. However, this did not translate into media interest or Congressional pressure. Ibid., p. 155.

⁸ Robert C. DiPrizio, *Armed Humanitarians: US Interventions from Northern Iraq to Kosovo* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 50. It was this same Ambassador, Smith Hempstone, who would later warn that Somalia could become a ‘tarbaby’ for the United States: ‘If you liked Beirut, you’ll love Mogadishu.’ Quoted in Don Oberdorfer, ‘The Path to Intervention; A Massive Tragedy “We Could Do Something About,”’ *Washington Post*, December 6, 1992, p. A1.

⁹ Quoted in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 179.

¹⁰ Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*. (London: Flamingo, 2002), p. 286, n. 82.

stake and that overwhelming force should be employed to ensure victory.¹¹ Towards the end of Bush's presidency, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Colin Powell reiterated in *Foreign Affairs* journal the main themes of the doctrine emphasising an aversion to limited and incremental uses of force. Overwhelming force should be used in order to achieve quick and decisive victories.¹² As Bush began to speak out on the crisis in Somalia, there was little enthusiasm in the Pentagon for the employment of overwhelming force in the absence of vital material interests.

The importance of ideas in the decision to intervene

In the second week of November, having lost the presidential election to Bill Clinton, Bush gathered his security team and instructed them to develop ways to stop the starvation in Somalia. While Colin Powell and the Pentagon were initially opposed to intervention, they did not impede Bush's determination to act. Within a couple of weeks Admiral David Jeremiah, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared in a Deputies Committee meeting, 'If you think US forces are needed, we can do the job.'¹³ Bush decided that, if other nations would commit troops and the UN Security Council would provide authorisation, the US would lead a multinational intervention into Somalia. On December 3, 1992, the Security Council passed Resolution 794 authorising the US-led Operation Restore Hope.

There were a number of stimuli impacting on Bush's decision to intervene. Certainly, the increased media coverage of the crisis since Bush's promise in August to provide food and subsequent congressional pressures were important factors. Acting Secretary of State at the time, Lawrence Eagleburger, recalls:

...television had a great deal to do with President Bush's decision to go in. I was one of those two or three that was strongly recommending he do it, and it was very much because of the television pictures of these starving kids (and) substantial pressures from the Congress that came from the same source.¹⁴

¹¹ Casper W. Weinburger, 'The Uses of Military Power', Address to the National Press Club, Washington DC, November 28, 1984.

¹² Colin Powell, 'US Forces: Challenges Ahead', *Foreign Affairs*, 71/5: 32-45 (1992/93). For a brief analysis of the Weinburger-Powell Doctrine, see Charles A. Stevenson, 'The Evolving Clinton Doctrine on the Use of Force,' *Armed Forces and Society*, 22/4: 511-535 (1996), pp. 514-518.

¹³ Quoted in William Durch, 'Introduction to Anarchy: Humanitarian Intervention and "State Building" in Somalia', in William Durch (ed.), *UN Peacekeeping, American Policy, and the Uncivil Wars of the 1990s*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 319.

¹⁴ Quoted in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 180. Some have argued, however, that the so-called CNN effect is often exaggerated. See, for example, Andrew Natsios, 'Illusions of Influence: The CNN Effect in Complex Emergencies', in Robert I. Rotberg and Thomas G. Weiss, *From Massacres to Genocide: The Media, Public Policy, and Humanitarian Crises* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1996); and Warren P. Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997). For an examination of the congressional pressures placed on the Bush administration during the Somali crisis, see Harry Johnston and Ted Dagne, 'Congress and the Somalia Crisis', in Walter Clarke and Jeffrey Herbst (eds.), *Learning from Somalia: The Lessons of Armed Humanitarian Intervention* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

A few days after the announcement of the operation, a *New York Times/CBS* poll confirmed that Bush had made a popular decision. 81 percent of respondents agreed that ‘the US is doing the right thing in sending troops to Somalia to make sure food gets to the people there.’ 70 percent agreed that the mission was even worth the possible loss of American lives.¹⁵

Despite its popularity, the available evidence suggests that the decision to intervene was motivated by President Bush’s genuine humanitarian concern for the suffering Somalis as much as any other factor. Bush outlined this motivation when he addressed the nation the day after Resolution 794 was passed: ‘The people of Somalia, especially the children of Somalia, need our help. We’re able to ease their suffering. We must help them live. We must give them hope. America must act.’¹⁶

In addition to the emotional telegram from the Ambassador to Kenya, Andrew Natsios recalls the President describing to him a famine in Sudan that he had witnessed first hand in the 1980s. Natsios suggests that these memories ‘had clearly affected his decision to send troops into Somalia.’¹⁷ Bush’s use of the military in response to humanitarian crises reflected what Natsios believed was Bush’s view of America’s pre-eminent role in the world and its responsibility for international leadership.¹⁸ Natsios claimed in an interview, ‘I know why Bush made that decision... “No one should have to die at Christmas” (Bush said)...It’s not more complicated than that.’¹⁹ While this may be a simplistic explanation, it does likely capture an important aspect of Bush’s motivation.

Some have argued that the timing of Bush’s acknowledgement that Somalia was ‘a major human tragedy,’ almost a year after the outbreak of civil war, must cast doubt on the extent to which concern for the Somalis influenced Bush’s decision.²⁰ However, regardless of how long it took him to react to the crisis, his eventual decision does appear to have been motivated by humanitarian concern. James Woods recalls: ‘It was truly his personal decision, based in large measure on his growing feelings of concern as the humanitarian disaster continued to unfold relentlessly despite the half measures being undertaken by the international community.’²¹

A factor which likely impacted on Bush’s humanitarian impulse was that he was coming to the end of his term as President. It is widely accepted that concern for his presidential legacy contributed to Bush’s decision to intervene. An insight into this concern is provided by a Defence Department official who said at the time, ‘I had the feeling that no matter what was said (by his advisors), he would not want to leave office with 50,000

¹⁵ Durch, ‘Introduction to Anarchy’, p. 320.

¹⁶ George Bush, ‘Address to the Nation on the Situation in Somalia,’ December 4, 1992. <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/paper.html>

¹⁷ Natsios, ‘Illusions of Influence’, p. 161, n. 10.

¹⁸ Natsios, ‘Illusions of Influence’, p. 161.

¹⁹ Quoted in DiPrizio, *Armed Humanitarians*, p. 60.

²⁰ See, for example, Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 179.

²¹ Woods, ‘US Government Decisionmaking Processes’, p. 158.

people starving that he could have saved.’²² The explanatory power of Bush’s exceptional position as a ‘lame duck’ president should not be ignored. Having already lost the 1992 election to Bill Clinton, Bush was relatively unhampered by the day to day domestic constraints on foreign policy decisions which weighed heavily on his successor’s mind throughout the 1990s.

Any explanation for President Bush’s decision to intervene must also account for the failure to take meaningful action to stop the atrocities occurring at the same time in Bosnia. How do we reconcile Bush’s determination to refrain from sending troops to Bosnia²³ with his decision to send troops to Somalia, where the strategic security interests of the US were less threatened? How do we reconcile Bush’s violation of the norm prescribing intervention in Bosnia with his concurrent compliance with the same norm in Somalia attributed, in part, to genuine humanitarian concern for starving Somalis? Any reconciliation must necessarily dilute the strength of the emergent norm of intervention that we might discover in the Somali case.

An important reason for the choice of intervention was that the risks and costs of troop deployment in Somalia were perceived to be less than those that would accompany the deployment of troops in Bosnia.²⁴ Bush’s humanitarian impulses prevailed in the absence of a material interest for intervention in Somalia partly because the operation was predicted to be relatively risk-free and short-term. At a National Security Council meeting in late November, Lawrence Eagleburger argued that ‘we could do this...at not too great a cost and, certainly, without any great danger of body bags coming home.’²⁵ It was around this time that Colin Powell agreed to support military intervention. Woods describes this support of the Joint Chiefs as ‘the clinching factor’ which gave Bush the opportunity to choose to pursue a maximalist course of action.²⁶ While Powell expressed concerns regarding an exit strategy, as did National Security Advisor Brent Showcroft, he was prepared to support the operation provided that it was restricted to protecting the delivery of humanitarian aid in certain regions of Somalia and that there was an understanding that US troops would hand over to a UN peacekeeping force shortly after Bill Clinton came into office.²⁷ With Bush pressing for intervention, the best Powell could hope for was to have the intervention conducted his way. The use of overwhelming force in pursuit of limited objectives was perceived as more achievable and risk-free than an equivalent response to the Bosnian conflict.

²² Don Oberdorfer, ‘The Path to Intervention’.

²³ For a discussion of Bush’s response to the Bosnian war, see Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 247-293.

²⁴ It has been suggested that intervention in Somalia was also perceived to be a reasonable alternative to Bosnia because it was a Muslim country. Intervention in Somalia would quiet claims that the US government was ignoring the plight of Muslims. See, for example, Oberdorfer, ‘The Path to Intervention’.

²⁵ Quoted in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 181.

²⁶ Woods, ‘US Government Decisionmaking Processes’, p. 158.

²⁷ Ioan Lewis and James Mayall, ‘Somalia’, in James Mayall (ed.), *The New Interventionism 1991-1994: United Nations experience in Cambodia, former Yugoslavia and Somalia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 111.

It has been argued that intervening in Somalia satisfied Bush's desire to deflect attention away from calls for the use of force in the Bosnian conflict.²⁸ While it would have been much easier to articulate a national interest to intervene in the Balkans – a particularly combustible part of Europe – the supposed risk-free nature of the Somali operation was more appealing. In a discussion about American national interests, Acting Secretary of State Eagleburger defended the decision to intervene in Somalia:

...this debate is around this issue of our national interest and that's a legitimate issue, but the fact of the matter is that a thousand people are starving to death every day, that this is not going to get better if we don't do something about it, and it is in an area where we can, in fact, affect events. There are other parts of the world where things are equally tragic, but where the cost of trying to change things would be monumental – in my view, Bosnia is one of those.²⁹

President Bush was simply willing to accept the risks and costs of intervention in Somalia but not in Bosnia. The US arguably had more to gain materially by intervening in Bosnia to ensure a stable Europe than saving the lives of distant Somalis who were far from the spotlight of strategic or economic concerns. Pressure from the domestic media to intervene in Bosnia was arguably greater than in Somalia – at least until Bush announced the military airlift of aid into Somalia. However, the norm prescribing humanitarian intervention was not strong enough to compel the Bush administration to engage with European efforts and take meaningful action to stop the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims. For all the values and interests that we observe Bush imputing into American foreign policy at the end of his presidency, the case of Bosnia must dilute any conclusions that we draw about the strength of the norm prescribing intervention to which Bush responded in Somalia. Nevertheless, we do not have to ignore Bosnia to conclude that humanitarian norms had a causal impact on the decision to intervene in Somalia.

Martha Finnemore's constructivist contention is that realists are unable to account for the evidence of a changing international normative context shaping the interests of actors that we observe in the Somali intervention. Finnemore argues that the absence of geo-strategic or economic advantages to be gained for the US indicates that intervention can only be explained by reference to norms.³⁰ While some scholars have attempted to discover economic interests in the decision to intervene,³¹ there is little support for this argument in the literature. It is generally conceded that no significant strategic or economic interests were at stake. Finnemore argues that Somalia is 'perhaps the clearest example of military action undertaken in a state of little or no strategic or economic importance to the principal intervenor.'³²

²⁸ See, for example, John L. Hirsch and Robert B. Oakley, *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope: Reflections on Peacemaking and Peacekeeping* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995), p. 42; and Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 181.

²⁹ Lawrence Eagleburger interview, 'This Week with David Brinkley', *ABC News*, December 6, 1992, Transcript #580.

³⁰ Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention', p. 154; and Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, p. 55.

³¹ See, for example, David N. Gibbs, 'Realpolitik and Humanitarian Intervention: The Case of Somalia', *International Politics*, 37: 41-55 (2000).

³² Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention', p. 154.

Michael Desch disagrees, arguing that Somalia does not pose a serious ‘puzzle’ for realist theory. While realists cannot accept intervention that undermines the strategic or economic interests of the intervening state, he argues, the Somali intervention posed no such threat to the US.³³ Indeed, as Eagleburger argued, the attraction of the intervention in Somalia was that it did not bring with it the costs associated with a Balkan intervention. Nevertheless, states act for reasons. They do not intervene in a far off land simply because to do so will not endanger their security. President Bush’s decision to intervene to alleviate starvation in Somalia is an example of a compliant response to the norm prescribing intervention.

The impact of ideas on the decision to intervene can be understood by considering the impact of both the regulative and constitutive functions of the norm prescribing intervention.³⁴ The regulative function of a norm is that which regulates or constrains behaviour by altering the consequences of a given behaviour and thereby forcing a recalculation of how best to achieve given interests. Pressures from Congress and the media, combined with a desire to alleviate pressure over Bosnia and concern for his historical legacy were the regulative means by which President Bush may have been prompted to respond to the norm prescribing intervention in the absence of a material interest to do so. Constructivists are not alone in asserting the regulative impact of norms, neo-liberals and even some realists have described this regulative causal effect.³⁵ However, the explanatory power of this rationalist description is insufficient. Constructivists contend that the effects of norms can reach deeper – they are shared understandings that constitute the identities and interests of the actors themselves. Constitutive norms are said to create new actors, new interests, and new categories of action.³⁶ Writing about the constitutive effects of norms, Jeffrey Checkel describes how individuals can be exposed to new information and values which are promoted by international norms. This learning can lead elite decision makers to adopt new preferences and interests in the absence of material interests to do so.³⁷ The available evidence regarding the decision making process inside the administration and the motivations of George H. W. Bush appears to correspond with the learning mechanism that Checkel describes. Having adopted a personal preference for intervention, Bush drove the decision to intervene in Somalia in a manner not repeated in any other

³³ Cited in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 202.

³⁴ For a discussion of the regulative and constitutive functions of norms, see Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonisation and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 89; Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein, ‘Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security,’ in Peter J. Katzenstein. (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996), p. 54; and Gregory A. Raymond, ‘Problems and Prospects in the Study of International Norms,’ *Mershon International Studies Review*, 41: 205-245 (1997), p. 214. Jeffrey Checkel and Nicholas Onuf both emphasize that norms can simultaneously have regulative and constitutive effects. Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘International Norms and Domestic Politics: Bridging the Rationalist-Constructivist Divide’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 3/4: 473-495 (1997), p. 74; and Nicholas Onuf, ‘The New Culture of Security Studies’, *Mershon International Studies Review*, 42: 132-134 (1998).

³⁵ Checkel, ‘International Norms and Domestic Politics’.

³⁶ Jepperson et al., ‘Norms, Identity and Culture’, p. 54.

³⁷ Checkel, ‘International Norms and Domestic Politics’.

intervention of the 1990s. State officials such as James Woods and Andrew Natsios have described their perception of the President's genuine concern for the suffering Somalis. The adoption of a preference for intervening to alleviate this suffering embodies the implementation and empowerment of a norm of intervention.

The intervention

On December 4, 1992, President Bush sent 28,000 US troops into Somalia as Unified Task Force (UNITAF). They were expected to police a ceasefire agreement but, for various reasons, the security situation had deteriorated significantly in Mogadishu by May 4, the following year, when the Clinton administration formally handed control over to the second UN operation, UNOSOM II. What had begun to occur was the dreaded 'mission creep' that so frightened Washington. There remains disagreement about who was to blame but history shows that operations gradually expanded to include nation-building and disarmament. Shortly after control was handed over to UNOSOM II, clan leader General Aidid, bitter about what he perceived to be partisan support for his rival, Ali Mahdi, 'orchestrated' attacks on Pakistani peacekeepers conducting weapons inspections and distributing food in Mogadishu.³⁸ 24 Pakistanis were killed and a further 57 were wounded. President Clinton shared the UN's resolve to respond to Aidid's attacks declaring that military action was necessary to strengthen the credibility of 'UN peacekeeping in Somalia and around the world.'³⁹ This determination stands in stark contrast to Clinton's reaction in the face of the deaths of US troops in Mogadishu only a few months later.

The crisis quickly escalated and US involvement deepened. The reasons for this have been explored in great detail elsewhere.⁴⁰ Charles Stevenson summarises reasons commonly given which include a combination of 'high-level inattentiveness in Washington, on-scene bureaucratic infighting, a puzzling command structure, and ad hoc responses to particular incidents that changed the substance of policy without re-evaluating accompanying assumptions and plans.'⁴¹ Of great importance for future humanitarian interventions was the fact that some members of Congress and the Clinton administration believed that blame should be placed on UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali for demanding that troops disarm rival factions, thereby dragging the US

³⁸ An Independent Commission of Inquiry called for by the UNSC in Resolution 885 concluded that Aidid 'orchestrated the attacks,' Quoted in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 194.

³⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴⁰ An excellent resource which draws on the perspectives of a number of members of the Clinton administration as well as those on the ground at the time in Somalia is *Frontline* Website: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ambush which accompanies the documentary: 'Ambush in Mogadishu.' See also Durch, 'Introduction to Anarchy'; and a number of chapters in Walter Clarke and Jeffrey Herbst (eds.), *Learning from Somalia: The Lessons of Armed Humanitarian Intervention*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Charles A. Stevenson, 'The Evolving Clinton Doctrine on the Use of Force,' *Armed Forces and Society*, 22/4: 511-535 (1996), p. 524.

deeper into the clan-based conflict. Whatever the reasons for ‘mission creep,’ Stevenson observes that ‘the result was inconsistency, confusion, and then disaster.’⁴²

UNOSOM II, now engaged in a manhunt, attacked Aidid’s forces killing over 100 civilians in the process. Aidid, aware of American reluctance to accept casualties, responded by killing four US soldiers on August 8.⁴³ When six Americans were wounded by a landmine on August 22, Clinton sent in the Delta Force and Army Rangers.

The absence of material interests and the disaster in Mogadishu

The foreign policy team that Clinton created when he assumed office had outlined its objectives with an imperative for what the new Ambassador to the UN, Madeleine Albright, labelled ‘assertive multilateralism.’ In April, Secretary of State Warren Christopher had announced that the administration was placing ‘a new emphasis on promoting multinational peacekeeping and peacemaking.’⁴⁴ This emphasis was not mere lip-service. At the height of UNOSOM II, as many as 68 nations were contributing to the peacekeeping operation.⁴⁵ In July, Albright had told the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that ‘Peacekeeping has become instrumental in meeting three fundamental imperatives of our national interest: economic, political and humanitarian.’⁴⁶ One could have been forgiven for thinking that the euphoria of the end of the cold war had shaped a (re)constitution of US interests in the form of a preference for complying with the norm prescribing humanitarian intervention.

However, the Clinton administration quickly discovered that its hopes and plans for the post-cold war era were premature. As casualties began to build, so did domestic opposition to the Somali intervention. Republican Senator Robert Byrd wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* concluding that, ‘lacking congressional and popular support, US combat forces in Somalia should be removed as soon as possible.’⁴⁷ In September, both the Senate and the House passed non-binding resolutions with large majorities urging Clinton to report by October 15 on the goals and objectives of the mission in Somalia and to receive by November 15 congressional authorisation to continue US deployment.⁴⁸ Criticism of US policy in Somalia was accompanied by a more general critique of Clinton’s policy of ‘assertive multilateralism’ which many claimed abdicated responsibility for US interests to the UN. Jeane Kirkpatrick, Ronald Reagan’s

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ A spokesman for Aidid’s Somali National Alliance reportedly stated in July, ‘If you could kill Americans, it would start problems in America directly.’ Quoted in Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 197, n. 113.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Ivo H. Daalder, ‘Knowing When to Say No: The Development of US Policy for Peacekeeping,’ in William Durch (ed.), *UN Peacekeeping, American Policy, and the Uncivil Wars of the 1990s* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 41.

⁴⁵ Admiral Jonathan Howe (Special Representative to Secretary General Boutros-Ghali) interview, *Frontline* Website: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ambush.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Daalder, ‘Knowing When to Say No’, p. 41.

⁴⁷ Robert C. Byrd, ‘The Perils of Peacekeeping’, *New York Times*, August 19, 1993, p. A23.

⁴⁸ Daalder, ‘Knowing When to Say No’, p. 50.

Ambassador to the UN, criticised what she saw as ‘a vision of foreign policy from which national self-interest is purged.’ Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger emphasised the drawbacks of Clinton’s enthusiasm for US participation in UN operations: ‘the risk is American involvement in issues of no fundamental national interest, as is happening in Somalia.’⁴⁹

The Clinton administration responded to growing criticism by publicly refocussing on US material and strategic interests. In September, Secretary Christopher emphasised that multilateralism is warranted ‘only when it serves the central purpose of American foreign policy: to protect American interests.’ National Security Advisor Anthony Lake agreed: ‘We should act multilaterally where doing so advances our interests – and we should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose.’⁵⁰ On September 28, President Clinton outlined this tougher stand on peacekeeping to the UN General Assembly in New York:

The United Nations simply cannot become engaged in every one of the world’s conflicts. If the American people are to say yes to UN peacekeeping, the United Nations must know when to say no.⁵¹

With respect to Somalia, the administration began to explore alternatives to the forceful disarming of rival factions which was costing American lives. Defence Secretary Les Aspin called for less focus on the military side of the operation and a reopening of negotiations with Aidid and other clan leaders. Christopher agreed and wrote to Boutros-Ghali to challenge the military focus of UNOSOM II.⁵² As the Clinton administration explored the possibilities of dialogue with Aidid, however, US Rangers continued to hunt him down.

On October 3, 1993, a disastrous raid against Aidid’s forces resulted in a sixteen hour fire-fight that saw the death of between 500 and 1000 people. Almost all were Somalis. Many were civilians. Most significantly, 18 of the casualties were US Rangers. Across the world, televisions depicted images of a dead Ranger being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Senator Byrd led the call for withdrawal: ‘Americans by the dozen are paying with their lives and limbs for a misplaced policy on the altar of some fuzzy multilateralism.’⁵³ Within days, President Clinton completed his administration’s public retreat from multilateral peacekeeping, ceded to congressional and public pressure that had been building at least since August, and promised to bring US forces home by the end of March 1994. He informed America, ‘It is not our job to rebuild Somalia’s society or even to create a new political process that can allow Somalia’s clans to live and work together in peace.’⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Both quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁰ Both quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵¹ Bill Clinton, ‘Address by the President to the 48th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,’ September 27, 1993. <http://www.clintonpresidentialcenter.org/legacy/092793-speech-by-president-address-to-the-un.htm>

⁵² Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, p. 198.

⁵³ Quoted in Daalder, ‘Knowing When to Say No’, p. 56.

⁵⁴ ‘Clinton’s Words on Somalia: “The Responsibilities of American Leadership”’, *New York Times*, October 8, 1993, p. A15.

The norm prescribing intervention and the norm of force protection

The US-led intervention in Somalia be understood as representing a false start for the norm prescribing humanitarian intervention.⁵⁵ Constructivist scholars such as Martha Finnemore were quick to cite Somalia as an example of a normative response to suffering in the absence of material self-interest. However, without material interests, the American commitment to intervention proved to be unsustainable. A key factor in the decision to intervene in Somalia was the belief that there was little risk of casualties. As soon as US troops began to accept a small number of casualties, support for the operation, within and outside the new Clinton administration, vanished. The Clinton administration's retreat from the norm prescribing intervention can be directly attributed to the loss of American lives. Referring to Mogadishu, Michael Walzer chided that if it is a cause for which we are prepared to see American soldiers die, 'then we cannot panic when the first soldier or the first significant number of soldiers...are killed in a firefight.'⁵⁶ The problem was that Somalia was never a cause for which either the Bush or the Clinton administration was prepared to see American soldiers die. When casualties began to mount, the reality that the US had no material interests at stake quickly overwhelmed any commitment to humanitarian norms and US troops were withdrawn.

Martha Finnemore emphasises the importance of examining 'the interwoven and interdependent character of norms.'⁵⁷ Without attending to the relationships between norms, Finnemore argues, we make the mistake of only observing norms in isolation and miss out on the larger picture of norms interacting in a structured social context. She notes the mutually reinforcing nature of international humanitarian norms such as those abolishing slavery, those limiting the rights of sovereign states to inflict harm on their own citizens, and those relating to humanitarian intervention.⁵⁸ Finnemore's works on humanitarian intervention also feature far-reaching examinations of the confluence of norms regarding who constitutes 'humanity'⁵⁹ and those of multilateralism⁶⁰ with norms of humanitarian intervention. Under-examined in scholarship, however, is the conflicting relationship between norms of humanitarian intervention that exist in both the international and the domestic space and norms of force protection that find their strength primarily in the domestic realm.

The forces impacting on President Bush's decision to intervene were both domestic and international. The regulative prescription was to be found in the domestic realm – namely, pressures coming from presidential candidate Bill Clinton, Congress, the media, associated pressures regarding Bosnia, and Bush's concern with his own legacy. If the causal forces were domestic only, one might argue that the relationship between the two

⁵⁵ The Somali intervention can be described as an ideational false start in conjunction with the establishment of no fly zones and safe-havens in northern and southern Iraq in 1991, following the Gulf War.

⁵⁶ Michael Walzer, 'The Politics of Rescue', *Social Research*, 62/1: 53-66 (1995).

⁵⁷ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention'.

⁶⁰ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*.

competing norms of intervention and casualty minimisation is readily discernable – one must only discern the relative domestic pulls of the decision to intervene and risk American lives or to refrain from intervening and avoid risking lives in order to explain the decision behind intervening and the subsequent decision to withdraw. However, the norm prescribing intervention derives some of its strength from the construction of the identities and interests of states in relationship with each other. This is the constitutive impact of norms that constructivists describe. Conceptions of the self and other, and understandings of the appropriate and acceptable response to human suffering, create so-called ‘logics of appropriateness’ which are constructed within the context of the society of states.⁶¹ In the Somali case, President Bush’s learnt values and interests led him to conclude that the United States should respond to the starvation that was occurring on the other side of the world because this was the appropriate response of a great power with the capacity to do so. The relationship of this international norm with a domestic reticence towards accepting casualties in the absence of vital self-interests is highly complex. Moreover, the relationship is indeterminate to the extent that it is dependent on the ability and desires of elites to shape domestic perceptions of what constitutes a cause that is worth the loss of American lives.

An adequate assessment of the relationship between norms of intervention and domestic requirements for casualty-free warfare is beyond the scope of this article and is worthy of a fuller investigation. Suffice to note that the norm prescribing humanitarian intervention cannot be considered in isolation; the impact of the reluctance to accept casualties in humanitarian operations must be also be considered. This article merely and tentatively makes two observations. Firstly, there does appear to be a direct relationship between an administration’s willingness to accept troop casualties and the threat posed to a state’s vital self-interests. The intervention in Somalia probably saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Only 50,000 to 100,000 of those 1.5 million threatened with imminent starvation in October 1992 actually died and half of the 1.5 million refugees returned a year later. Yet, in the absence of material self-interests, domestic pressure caused Clinton to pull US troops out after the death of only thirty-six American soldiers.⁶² We find a different story, however, when we examine wars that were waged in defence of supposedly vital US interests. 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam,⁶³ 10,000 body bags were ordered for potential American casualties in Iraq in 1991 while the electorate were told to prepare for as many as 25,000 casualties,⁶⁴ and American casualties in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion, at the time of writing, approach 2,000. The work of Bruce Jentleson, in particular, has shown that the American public does not simply have a low tolerance for casualties; it has a low tolerance for casualties that are perceived to be lost in vain.⁶⁵

⁶¹ The term ‘logics of appropriateness’ comes from James G. March, and Johan Olsen, ‘The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders’, *International Organization*, 52: 943-969 (1998).

⁶² Stephen A. Garrett, *Doing Good and Doing Well: An Examination of Humanitarian Intervention* (London: Praeger, 1999), p. 171.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶⁴ Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 168.

⁶⁵ Bruce W. Jentleson, ‘The Pretty Prudent Public: Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 36: 49-74 (1992); and Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, ‘Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42: 395-417 (1998). See also Mark J. Conversino, ‘Sawdust Superpower: Perceptions

Perhaps the public does not realise this, however. As was mentioned above, before the intervention began 70 percent of Americans thought that it would be worth the possible loss of US lives.

Secondly, where intervention *does* occur in the absence of vital interests, the commitment to humanitarian norms may be undermined by the employment of means prioritising the avoidance of casualties. In Somalia, the impact of casualty aversion was discernable not only in the decision to withdraw but in the means employed *during* the peacekeeping operation. A reluctance to accept casualties led to tactics which minimised American casualties but cost more Somali lives. This served to undermine the humanitarian nature of the operation. Soon after the fire-fight in Mogadishu, Richard Falk observed that the desire to minimise casualties 'inevitably shifts the main burden of suffering to the civilian population of the target society, which is supposedly the beneficiary of the intervention. America is too ready to kill indiscriminately, and too unwilling to accept death selectively on its side in order to sustain humanitarian claims when these are tested by resistance.'⁶⁶ It is scary how a benign humanitarian mission, such as Somalia, could deteriorate to the point where troops were killing civilians. The argument used by a UN military spokesman to justify an incident during the intervention where UN troops had killed a number of civilians – 'Everyone on the ground in that vicinity was a combatant, because they meant to do us harm'⁶⁷ – is frighteningly reminiscent of orders to soldiers before the My Lai massacre – 'They're all V.C.'s, now go and get them.'⁶⁸

The Somali experience placed the reluctance to accept casualties firmly at the forefront of the minds of American decision makers.⁶⁹ Since Mogadishu, the reluctance to accept casualties has stood in the way of intervention. This was most clearly seen in Rwanda only a few months later.⁷⁰ Moreover, the intervention in response to Serb atrocities committed in Kosovo in 1999 demonstrated that, if a decision to intervene is made, the art of casualty minimisation can be pushed to morally problematic extremes.⁷¹ The desire

of U.S. Casualty Tolerance in the Post-Gulf War Era', *Strategic Review*, 25/1: 15-23 (1997); and, more generally, Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

⁶⁶ Richard Falk, 'Intervention Revisited: Hard Choices and Tragic Dilemmas', *The Nation* (December 20, 1993), p. 760.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Adam Roberts, 'The Road To Hell: Humanitarian Intervention', *Current*, 363: 24-28 (1994), p. 27.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Michael Walzer [1977], *Just and Unjust Wars*, third edition (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 310.

⁶⁹ In his recent auto-biography, Clinton notes that Mogadishu provoked a heightened realization of the consequences of troop casualties on domestic support for the American use of force. Bill Clinton, *My Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 554.

⁷⁰ See Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2000); and Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 329-390.

⁷¹ On the conflicting norms in Kosovo, see Coral Bell, 'Force, Diplomacy and Norms', in Albrecht Schnabel and Ramesh Thakur (eds.), *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention: Selective Indignation, Collective Action and International Citizenship* (Tokyo: UN University, 2000). On the morality of casualty minimisation techniques used in Kosovo, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'International Justice as Equal Regard and the Use of Force', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 17/2: 63-75 (2003); Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (London: Vintage, 2000); and two excellent articles by

to avoid troop casualties has become one of the significant road blocks to a strong norm of humanitarian intervention.

The Somalia debacle altered the approach of the Clinton administration towards UN peacekeeping operations. A few days after the fire-fight in the streets of Mogadishu, President Clinton reaffirmed his retreat from assertive multilateralism and questioned the future of American participation in UN-controlled military operations:

The reports today say that 300 Somalis were killed and 700 more were wounded in the firefight that cost our people their lives last week. That is not our mission. We did not go there to do that...My experiences in Somalia would make me more cautious about having any Americans in a peacekeeping role where there was any ambiguity at all about what the range of decisions were which could be made by a command other than an American command with direct accountability to the United States here.⁷²

Not minding the fact that the debacle of October 3 was instigated by US forces operating under US control, Clinton here followed Congress in placing blame for the Somalia debacle on the United Nations. This apportionment of blame, whether justified or otherwise, has played heavily on the minds of all American decision makers considering the use of American force in conjunction with the United Nations to this day. The reality was, however, that neither Bush nor Clinton was ever willing to accept the risks and costs of a long-term commitment in Somalia. As Clarke and Herbst remind us, 'Nations do not descend into anarchy overnight, so intervenors should expect neither the reconciliation of combatants nor the reconstruction of civil society and national economies to be swift.'⁷³ Yet both the Bush and Clinton administrations had refused to recognise this certainty. Bush ensured that UNITAF would only remain in Somalia for a few months and during that time, did not take the opportunity to disarm the warring factions. Clarke and Herbst suggest that the warlords simply waited for UNITAF to be replaced by the weaker UNOSOM II before challenging them.⁷⁴ Clinton's decision to remove his troops at the first sign of resistance demonstrates that he also failed to accept the costs of effective and long-term nation-building. In the absence of clear and vital material self-interests, intervention was not supported by an acceptance of the inevitable costs – in terms of troop casualties, domestic support or economic costs – of achieving long-term and substantial change. Today, although the crisis has abated, Somalia remains a failed state; unfriendly to Western visitors and a breeding ground for terrorism.⁷⁵

Michael Walzer: 'Kosovo', *Dissent*, 46/3: 5-7 (1999), and 'The Argument about Humanitarian Intervention', *Dissent*, 49/1: 29-37 (2002).

⁷² Bill Clinton, 'Presidential Press Conference on Somalia,' October 14, 1993.

<http://www.clintonpresidentialcenter.org/legacy/101493-presidential-press-conference-on-somalia.htm>

⁷³ Walter Clarke and Jeffrey Herbst, 'Somalia and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention', *Foreign Affairs*, 75/2: 70-85 (1996), p. 71.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74-78.

⁷⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 5, 12.

Conclusion: an ideational retreat

Jeffrey Checkel argues that the causation effects of norms on liberal states such as the US are more likely to take the form of regulative and rational means-ends calculations rather than constitutive learned logics of appropriateness which are more common to 'state-above-society' regimes.⁷⁶ In other words, in a state such as the US where much decision making is politicised and the circle of participants in the decision making process is quite large, norms may impose societal pressures on decision makers that constrain or compel certain actions but are less likely to (re)constitute state interests by teaching elite decision makers new values and interests.⁷⁷ Perhaps the apparent constitutive impacts of the norm of humanitarian intervention on President Bush's decision to intervene in Somalia can be attributed to the fact that he was an outgoing President less burdened with anxiety for the long-term political consequences of his decisions and more able to respond to what he perceived as the moral requirements of an American president. Perhaps, this also helps explain why Bush's compliance with the norm of intervention represents an ideational false start for US foreign policy. President Clinton who assumed office during the Somali intervention was not free from the typical burdens of an American President as Bush may have been. The first Democrat in the White House for twelve years, Clinton was in no position to sacrifice his mandate for domestic change by ignoring the political costs of compliance with the norm prescribing intervention where no strategic or economic interests were at stake. In addition, the initial public support for intervention did not survive the unforeseen deepening of American involvement and Clinton was unwilling to accept the subsequent political costs of a meaningful and multilateral commitment to nation building. Moreover, the reluctance of President Bush to engage with the Bosnian War perhaps belies the depth of the ideational commitment to humanitarian norms in the first place.

The immediate impacts of the Somalia debacle were felt only a couple of months later when Rwanda descended into genocidal anarchy. Unwilling to risk the lives of their own troops and unable to articulate a material interest for acting otherwise, the United States and the rest of the international community stood by as 800,000 civilians were slaughtered. Five years later, the fortunate convergence humanitarian concern with the strategic self-interest of the United States produced an intervention in Kosovo that complied with the prescriptive humanitarian norm to an unprecedented degree. The conflicting norm of force protection, however, showed the commitment to humanitarian principles to be 'intense but also shallow'.⁷⁸ At the time of writing, the administration of George W. Bush is struggling to choose to take meaningful action to end what atrocities that it has labeled 'genocide' in the Darfur region of Sudan. The administration seems paralysed as it tries to respond to a complex blend of humanitarian norms, unclear strategic and economic interests, and an electorate which is in two minds about the causes for which American lives might be sacrificed. It is unlikely that the influence of Somalia will ever fully fade away so long as the image of a dead soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu remains vivid in the memories of American decision makers.

⁷⁶ Checkel, 'International Norms and Domestic Politics'.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ignatieff, *Virtual War*, p. 4.