

Recent History Lessons: War and Human Rights in the Recent Past and the Near Future

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An Interview with Beverly See and Barron YoungSmith
The Carr Center for Human Rights, 24 May 2005

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: In your work, you talk about historical memory and the way that policy makers see human rights through the perspective of "fighting the last war." How will the experience of the Iraq war affect the way policy-makers think about future interventions?

Samantha Power: What it should reveal, of course, is that the priorities or the motives that actually pull you into war tell you a lot about what the means deployed in the field are going to be. So this is a war that is now branded as a humanitarian intervention, but of course the fate of the Iraqi people was quite low on the list of reasons to go to war. No one pretends we went in order to liberate the Iraqis. The lone positive consequence of the war might be that the Iraqis were liberated, but it was evident in the form that the intervention took—the poor planning and the wishful thinking that led to the chaos that followed—that the Iraqis were low down on the list of reasons to go to war.

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So a lesson that should be learned is that motives tell you a lot about means and about how actions are followed through. Instead, of course—and I think more likely, given that these lessons tend to be learned on quite a shallow level—the lesson will be, “Oh, well, when we try to help people it leads to quagmire.” Rather than actually excavating what went wrong, why it went wrong, what the orientation of the system was, and what consequences it yielded, some will simply say, “Wow, there we go, trying to stop a brutal regime and look what happens: We have created a terrorist threat that didn’t exist before; we have created a failed state; we have cost a couple thousand Americans their lives, and we have forfeited our political capital internationally and domestically. That’s the last time we ever go and help people.” So that, I imagine, is the lesson that will be learned, and it is a very unfortunate one.

Journal: It seems like a lot of the arguments for the Iraq war were invoked the concept of a nexus between idealism and realism, which you talked about in your book. How much is that concept driving current foreign policy? How much are human rights involved?

Power: Well, it’s tricky. The test that I use to determine whether something is truly a humanitarian intervention is “but for.” So, you know, “but for” Saddam Hussein’s repression of the Iraqi people, would there have been an intervention? Yes, there would have. In Kosovo, “but for” the atrocities against the Albanians, would you have had an intervention? No. There were other factors in Kosovo, such as NATO’s credibility, Clinton’s domestic standing, and relationships with our allies; but ultimately the key ingredient, the ‘but for’ ingredient, was there.

To answer your question, I do think there has been genuine learning and several epiphanies in Washington; though less so in the wake of the Iraq war than in the wake of 11 September on the link between failed states and repressive states on the one hand and America’s national security interests on the other. In that sense, there is a link between the traditional *realpolitik* and privileging of national security and economic prosperity and a regard for human rights. Human rights advocates used to go blue in the face trying to argue that self-interest and human welfare were linked in some way, and no one took us seriously. The comprehension of that link is new. Or, it is an evolution.

But, the problem is that we do not have unlimited resources. The United States has even fewer resources in terms of political capital, finances, and troops than we’ve ever had before because we are so over-stretched, despite our disproportionate military might. The United States has also strained its ties to international institutions and to other countries like never before. So, even if we see the link and we conceptually under-

stand that we are more intertwined than we thought we were before 11 September, we are not playing the game in a way that gives us the capacity to burden-share and to tend to much of this human suffering. So, ultimately, given our limited resources, our default mode is to do that which is more hard core and more oriented toward national interests as they were traditionally defined. We tend to the most immediate threats to national security.

Here again, we partner with Uzbekistan because we need its bases. Even though the government is boiling people to death and murdering people, we do not denounce it. You can see that the kind of reflex in the foreign policy establishment remains what it was pre-11 September, even though there is a new conversation, and I think a new merger of realism and idealism. This merger might have occurred at an intellectual level, but it has not occurred at a policy level.

Journal: Do you think that merger will last? Is it permanent or something unique to this Administration?

Power: It has to last because it happens to be true. In other words, when you allow a state to rot as we did in Bosnia and Afghanistan—bin Laden got into those countries, traveled on a Bosnian passport and set up camps in Afghanistan. With Darfur today, no one is making the argument that this is a failed state in the making. But, in ten years, we are going to be saying, “Why didn’t we fix Darfur when we could, before the jihadis got comfortable?”

One doesn’t want to be right about these things, but I don’t think there is much danger of this expiring as a truth. The danger is that we throw out the baby with the bathwater. We say, “Well, Bush got us into all this trouble invoking freedom and democratization, and liberty, and moralism, and all these links between terrorism and freedom, and look where it got us. Therefore, let’s forget freedom. Let’s go back.” A real Kissingerian retreat. I think that is the real intellectual danger, definitely. History will slap us in the face if we go there.

The question is how we can unite around the President’s alleged objectives, and then think much more carefully about means, and about whether the United States is the right engine for some of the changes that are needed. We need to stop overestimating American power, and diversify; be more solicitous of local opinion. And just because President Bush is talking about promoting freedom does not mean that we shouldn’t agree with his stated objectives. But we should take note of the fact that he has screwed up the implementation so badly, and never acknowledged his mistakes, so he has tainted a lot of his principles.

Journal: How do people choose which wars to use as a lens through which they view current policies—for instance, many individuals compare Iraq with Vietnam. Do new events replace memories of past events?

Power: There is a great line in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and it's all about how one set of atrocities replaces the memories of other atrocities. I don't know exactly how and why we latch on to certain prisms or analogies. In Iraq, there is no question that we were unduly influenced by the ease with which we "conquered" Afghanistan, and on top of that, I would throw in our success in Kosovo, and even the relative ease with which Indonesia was finally dislodged from East Timor. The Bush administration believed that people who are occupied and repressed will welcome an intervener. It was true of the Albanians, it was true of the Timorese, and to a large extent it was true of the Afghans. So I think Iraq really was another case of fighting the last war. Some combination of chronological or temporal proximity may explain which events individuals hold important. Usually there is some set of variables that are shared—for instance, through our eyes the regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban were repressive, and they were Islamic—even though Saddam was not much of a worshipper. There was an alleged link in our minds to terrorism. So it was inferred that the reaction of the Afghans and Iraqis was going to be the same. But there is no set formula. Sometimes the individuals who shaped the prior policy are the ones most prone to apply the so-called "lessons" of prior cases cookie cutter, but sometimes they are much better at seeing the nuance and differences. Sometimes, when you have lived one set of complex cultural, logistical, and operational challenges, you are better at seeing the inaptness of those lessons. When you're on the outside, when you don't know much, you might just say, "We'll just do what we did in Afghanistan."

Journal: There has now been a strong case made for UN reform. Will the proposed reforms, especially those to the Human Rights Commission, improve the UN's response to human rights abuses?

Power: I'm writing a book about the UN now, and to be honest I don't know what we mean when we say, "The UN's response." Are we talking about Secretary General Kofi Annan or High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour? If so, then no—these reforms aren't going to achieve much. Annan and Arbour are individuals, and they are going to do what they do. I think what the reforms are designed to do, especially when it comes to the Human Rights Commission, is ensure that the UN brand—literally the UN product, the blue and white flag—is less caught up in state politicking. For the most part, the UN is a building, where states can enter and behave like states.

They remain the states that they were before they entered the UN, and ambassadors, for the most part, get their instructions from their capital. The UN is thus pretty much a space where states come to be states.

Now the particular combination of states that gathered over the years at the Human Rights Commission did the UN brand no favors. Some of the states on the Commission were the nastiest of states. The hypocrisy of those nasty states, like Zimbabwe and Sudan, serving on the Human Rights Commission exposed a major contradiction within the UN system—which is that many of the organs are representative. But in being representative, or even democratic, they are liable to be comprised of states that themselves behave in ways antithetical to the principles on which the UN is predicated. That's a reality. That's what many states want. So changing the form is not going to get at the original sin: Many member states ultimately haven't decided that they want to privilege the principles in the UN charter, they want to promote peace and security and promote individual and collective human development. Until that changes, you'll maybe see a shielding of the brand by getting rid of the most egregious human rights abusers but no UN organ that on its own can make a nasty state less abusive or more pacifistic. In essence, all Annan is doing by presenting these proposals is putting pressure on the more liberal democratic states and telling them to use their leverage to make sure that only rights-adhering states are members of bodies that claim to exist to promote human rights.

It is still up to states to decide whether they want that. The developing world could gang up and say, "No. We like it. We don't like your definition of what an abusive state is. Number two, the United States, too, is an abuser because it invades other countries and kills people, so who is the United States, the loudest advocate of UN reform, to talk? And number three, we like things the way they are. We're ok with the status quo." If and when that happens it will be Kofi Annan presenting something and ultimately coming back to the first order problem of IR theory: How do we influence the central unit of interaction on the international stage? That's not the UN. That's the states that comprise it. That, then, comes back to domestic politics, and multilateral diplomacy, and creating incentives and disincentives for states to behave otherwise.

The hope for the UN actually comes from middle powers. It doesn't come from the United States. It doesn't come from the abusers. It comes from some like-minded gathering of middle powers who decide that it's in their interest to unite, and democratize within themselves, and to try to broaden responsibility.

Journal: Leslie Gelb wrote recently that it is no longer legitimate, in most cases, to claim sovereignty as a shield for human rights abuses. Kofi Annan has called for a shift

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away from the principle of sovereignty so that states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens. What progress has there been in terms of focusing on human rights as opposed to state sovereignty?

Power: I don't really know. Sovereignty is a little overstated in terms of how inviolable it used to be. There never was a phase in history in which sovereignty went un-trampled. Yet in our minds we seem to have constructed a mythic golden age for sovereignty that never existed. For the last 50 years the United States has carried out covert operations and assassinations, while also stressing its own sovereignty—insisting that its sovereignty not be infringed upon by international law, international courts, or NGOs. Western powers have been consistently hypocritical in their view of—and *use* of—sovereignty. When we have colonial or national security agendas, we're willing to trample sovereignty left and right. But we don't want to be intruded upon. And then you have developing states who use sovereignty as a shield for murdering their own people, shutting down the media, arresting people, and so on. So sovereignty has always been something of an alibi when it suits states' interests.

14 Gelb is of course an iconic figure in the American foreign policy establishment who's trained in the realist tradition. The argument he is making now, as you describe it, sounds a bit Rip-Van-Winkle-ish. As a realist, he believes that states behave in pursuit of power, which I think smart idealists also agree with. I don't think Gelb would have been normatively espousing the virtues of sovereignty in the way that a repressive state would, but nonetheless, in the 1990s I think you see this old guard—not confused, exactly—but nonplussed by the emergence of a new set of issues that occurred *inside* states and not between or among states. The internal, however, made their way onto the policy radar because they had such external consequences. They spilled over, cost a load of money, generated long term security threats, and created a lot of guilt and demand for outside intervention. The national security and external implications of human suffering are more visible now, and thus they are more prone to be included in high-level debates among policy analysts, and to some degree policymakers. Sovereignty has always been a shield for whatever states want. If you don't want to do anything, you say, "We can't intervene because of sovereignty." But when the United States wants something, it has long had no problem crossing, say, Nicaraguan borders and killing people it finds distasteful.

Journal: What do you think about the implications of China's rise for human rights reform?

Power: I just gave a graduation address at Georgetown on Friday, and one of the things

I talked about was John Rawls' veil of ignorance and how I try to keep a veil of ignorance in my back pocket and put it on. I was using the construct by saying, "Look, if you didn't know whether we were the United States or Burundi, what would you want the rules to be as far as states' compliance in international law and international institutions?" If you don't know if you will be rich or poor, what do you want the distribution of health care and education resources to be? This is not just an incidental question. We should decide upon what we want the rules to be by imagining ourselves not as the number one power, but with China as the number one power. What do want the rules binding China to be? Right now, we want to be bound by no rules but our own; but do we want no rules when China is number one?

China is behaving interestingly within the UN; it's got an interesting road ahead. It's a bit scary to think about the future of human rights when you imagine the rise of a country that privileges sovereignty—that doesn't want external interference—when it violates human rights. We usually talk about sovereignty from a western perspective, but people in the developing world don't want any meddling. How does that cut? What will be? What will they tolerate in the international system—what will the new Asian Secretary General tolerate? That combination of China's ascent and the election of an Asian Secretary General in late 2006 will be very interesting. Those in the western world who were critical of Kofi Annan may become very nostalgic for him. I don't mean to essentialize, as Asia could choose a very humane and cosmopolitan Secretary General, but the real question is whether every great power has to learn the lessons anew about the inseparability of interests and values. Hopefully, China will begin to transform itself internally in such a way that it won't be so hostile to human rights, but there isn't that much evidence that that has been happening, at least at a speed that will keep up with its economic, military, and diplomatic growth.

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Journal: Is the increasing visibility of your works and pieces like *Hotel Rwanda* helping to create a working public consciousness on the problem of genocide? How much can this consciousness affect policy change?

Power: The most inspiring testament to the influence of this kind of work is the young people, the students. I'm wearing a pin for the Genocide Intervention Fund at Swarthmore. The students there said, if the Rwandan killers could butcher a million people in a hundred days, we can raise a million dollars in a hundred days for the protection forces in Darfur. They're raising money for flak jackets, and helmets, and petrol for the peacekeepers. Harvard students here have gotten the university to divest from PetroChina over its business dealings in Darfur. I believe that every single thing that has come out of the U.S. government on Darfur, every policy, every concession,

every act of leadership has come about because of domestic pressure. There is no national interest of the traditional kind—apart from the long term threat that Darfur will become a terrorist haven, which I think nobody is taking seriously—at stake in Darfur. It's simply that Christian Evangelicals, college students, African American groups, human rights groups, Muslim groups, Armenians, Jews, people who saw Hotel Rwanda—this tent of advocates is busting at the seams. Everything attempt to curb the atrocities has come out has come about because of this domestic noise.

The United States is paying for more than 60 percent of the feeding that is going on in the humanitarian response. And then there's the ICC referral! I mean, if you told me that this administration would refer to a case the ICC, I would have said, "You are out of your mind!" The 50 million dollar AU appropriation was totally a product of domestic pressure on members of Congress. I met with [Senator] Sam Brownback last week for two hours, and his foreign policy adviser said Senator Brownback *never* has two hour meetings. There are people in Washington, specifically in Congress, with a few isolated people sprinkled within the executive branch—who really want to stop genocide in Darfur. So one of the many tragedies of Iraq is just how disempowered the United States is at playing an on-the-ground role, and how suspicious other countries are internationally when America attempts to exercise diplomatic leadership. That's just another negative byproduct. But what we really need to see is this kind of domestic pressure being exerted on governments in middle powers, such as those in Europe, Asia, or South America, and you just don't see it. That is what has to change—the networks have to be created outside of the United States. 

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