

A Necessary Balance

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In 1729, the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Jonathan Swift, suggested in "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burden to Their Parents," that the poverty-stricken, famine-threatened, and economically exploited Irish peasantry, who nonetheless produced such beautiful infants, could resolve the troubling specter of recurrent starvation by eating their own babies. In doing so, he argued, they might simultaneously address the complex but related social issues of overpopulation and under nutrition. Maybe Swift's technique of proposing outlandish and obscene solutions in order to accentuate reality and subtly emphasize the need for more humane approaches is at play, as one follows the orchestrated suggestions that we should solve the world's current problems by creating yet another military force, under the aegis of the United Nations, an organization founded 50 years ago so that humanity could beat its swords into plowshares.

In an article in the June 10 issue of the *New York Review of Books*, Brian Urquhart, a former United Nations Under Secretary

General, embraces the concept of a standing army without even alluding to less violent means of resolving conflicts. Mr. Urquhart suggests that “a stillborn idea from the past may suggest an answer to our present world’s crises”—maybe the earlier miscarriage was fortuitous. He declares that the United Nations is “now increasingly perceived and called upon as an international police force and world emergency service,” but he then fails even to mention or offer any suggestions for an expanded humanitarian component to balance the proposed new military undertaking. Is Brian Urquhart, the ultimate UN representative, a new Jonathan Swift? Maybe he is tweaking our moral senses with a modern satire. If not, he seems to have abandoned hope that the world’s peoples can reach a level of harmonious coexistence except when justice is dispensed at the end of a gun barrel.

There are many other examples in the present global minefield to document how readily world leaders convince themselves that more and more armed force will somehow break the cycle of ongoing revolution and violence. It is amazing how few voices of dissent are raised against such proposals. There is no doubt that military power, or at least the implicit threat of its use, may be an indispensable component in peacemaking operations, but it should always be recognized as the most costly and most transient approach to resolving the bitter ethnic, religious, racial, and economic differences at the core of so many current conflicts.

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In Somalia, the “solution” finally employed—after years of arming a brutal dictator and then neglecting all the signs of consequent oppression and anarchy—was an overwhelming exhibition of U.S. military might. At a cost of \$2 billion, the United States demonstrated that 30,000 armed American troops could temporarily prevent local warlords from killing innocent victims as well as each other. Six months after our orchestrated arrival on the strobe-lit, camera-crowded beaches of Mogadishu, and after months of television and media copy showing the

satisfying images of famine being conquered—at least along the main thoroughfares—and of American troops returning safely home, we are again indulging in dramatic displays of military power in Somalia, this time to “teach the local warlord a lesson.” Whatever the domestic political objectives of this particular action may be, we are deceiving ourselves that such a simplistic approach is any substitute for the comprehensive rehabilitation needed in an utterly torn society.

Because we entered Somalia with a military mind set, it must have seemed acceptable to negotiate directly with local warlords, despite the obvious fact that their selfish and deadly battles had been responsible for the deaths of over 100,000 innocent Somalis. By our recognition we initially legitimized the position of General Aidid as a new national hero in the tradition of Mohamed Abdille Hassan, the “Mad Mullah” who defended Somalia’s integrity and sovereignty against the English in the early part of this century. In the eyes of many Somalis, accustomed to the rhetoric and actions of colonial masters, we have moved, in six short months, from a relief force to an army of occupation.

There are profound dangers in quick-fix military solutions to complex problems. For example, is providing more arms to the Muslims in Bosnia really the most coherent solution a great nation like the United States can offer to end a brutal civil war? Do we really want Libyan and Iranian arms flow into Bosnia, further fueling the conflagration, so that we can sleep easily knowing we have equalized the balance of weapons, thereby assuring that the killing, rape, and mutilation will inevitably escalate? Maybe President Bill Clinton is simply utilizing the techniques of Dean Swift, and no one has yet detected the cruel joke.

Should a UN army intervene wherever there are violations of human rights or serious hazards to the health of an oppressed minority? It is generally conceded, for example, that the levels of starvation are currently higher in the war-torn southern Sudan than those recorded at the worst times in Somalia. But there is a recognized and functioning government in the Sudan, and an armed UN intervention would almost certainly be rejected by, at the very least, all third world nations that are keenly aware of how hard they had to fight recently to overthrow foreign colo-

nialism and secure their own basic independence and sovereignty. Somalia, with its society and government in utter collapse, posed few legal complications when we finally acted, and it does not offer a precedent for future UN military actions.

I have had the good fortune to work as a physician for more than three decades in troubled areas of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. I have witnessed the human catastrophes that are an inevitable part of the conflicts and the tragedies that follow earthquakes, famines, droughts, and floods. For part of 22 consecutive years I directed medical teams in Somalia, helping to establish a national health service while observing a political process that evolved from clans to nationhood and then reverted to the horrors that now shock the world.

During these long periods overseas, I discovered the unique role a physician may play, especially in societies where there are multiple reasons for suspicion, cynicism, or even hatred. Those who have intimate contact with the suffering masses, as well as unusual access to their leaders, can contribute to the solution of crises and conflicts in ways that are often impossible for politicians, soldiers, or diplomats. Humanitarian actions can open doors to negotiated settlements. Even in the midst of violence, they can create corridors of understanding that eventually may become permanent bridges to peace.

The present crises in Yugoslavia, Somalia, and many other areas are not isolated events, but are part of a vast panorama of change signaling the turbulent passage of history from one age to another. Most of the old premises of the international system are under siege. Fundamental principles such as national sovereignty, which have stood for hundreds of years, are being challenged by a wide range of developments from the communications revolution to popular mass movements. We cannot, for example, escape the devastating impact of epidemics, such as AIDS, that sweep across continents, attacking the rich as well as the poor. Today, television instantly imprints scenes of distant tragedies and gross human rights' violations upon the world's consciousness and conscience. We can no longer conveniently blot out such knowledge or deny an inevitable, even unwanted, involvement.

As Somalia has unequivocally demonstrated, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance have moved from the periphery to

the center ring in foreign affairs. They can never again be considered merely minor matters to be relegated to well-meaning do-gooders, and will never again be a balm to soothe the emotional outcry of a fickle citizenry. Time is not on the side of those who believe we can maintain the status quo, that we can continue to confront reality with old rhetoric and allow the past to happen over and over again.

Considerable attention has recently been given to the UN Secretary General's proposal to create a standing army based on designated troops that would be available from donor states on 24-hours' notice. Brian Urquhart views this suggestion as only an interim measure, proposing instead a permanent UN army at the disposal of the Security Council. It is suggested, the United Nations could, under either system, promptly respond to threats against, or breaches of, international peace and security, and that such an army's existence might possibly have a sobering effect on would-be aggressors.

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One must question, however, whether the United Nations currently has the institutional capacity to administer a multilateral culturally varied army. To function effectively, such a force would require, in the stress of battle, a level of coordination, integration, technical skill, and command structure that has hardly characterized the UN efforts in simpler civilian undertakings. The very cost of training and maintaining use would automatically give wealthy states a disproportionate say in determining how, when, and even which conflicts the United Nations will attempt to resolve. Furthermore, such an approach would be likely to exacerbate the bitter divisions between rich and poor nations that already are a prime cause of international tensions.

A more comprehensive and humane approach, one closer to the original ideals of the United Nations, is imperative. The United Nations is the only global organization capable of promoting peace by nonviolent means. In developing an expanded

military option, the United Nations should be very careful not to sacrifice its meticulously constructed emphasis on basic human equality and fraternity. A military approach rarely, if ever, allows cooperation with the indigenous people in occupied lands, and military measures alone, unaccompanied by an effective humanitarian component, will only perpetuate a fundamentally flawed, and failed, method of resolving conflicts.

Even when political and diplomatic initiatives prove inadequate and armed intervention is considered necessary, such action should never be a strictly military operation. The plight of civilians caught up in war and disaster situations invariably requires immediate humanitarian assistance; in fact, this is the primary rationale usually offered to justify military involvement. The international community now has a rare opportunity to insure a better balance between its military and humanitarian obligations. Not to insist on this linkage would be catastrophic for future generations. Power will inevitably flow where the money is, and the present UN budgetary rules will guarantee that the military option will prevail. In fact, the peace-keeping costs for 1992-1993 are already 50 percent more than the regular budget of the entire rest of the UN organization.

Chapter 7 of the UN Charter provides for *mandatory assessments* to support military operations, but it only *encourages* member states to *cooperate voluntarily in and offer aid* for humanitarian efforts. Consequently, in many disaster situations, UN assistance is late and insufficient. The General Assembly has sought to correct this inequity by establishing the office of Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs. With much initial fanfare, \$50 million was voluntarily subscribed by donor countries as an operational fund for the new department's worldwide activities. To put that sum in perspective it should be noted that the annual budget for the UN activities in the former Yugoslavia alone is over \$3 billion, and that the budget for the local New York State Health and Human Services Department is over \$30 billion. Furthermore, despite the lofty title, the new Under Secretary General of Humanitarian Affairs has not been given a clear mandate. Too often such separate UN empires as the World Health Organization, the United Children's Fund, the United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United Nations Development Programme end up as competing

and ineffectual forces in a field where coordination and leadership are essential.

While war, famine, disease, epidemics, and other life-threatening calamities increasingly call for international intervention, the UN agencies responsible for relief operations are obliged to engage in a constant round of begging in order to obtain food, medicine, and other critically needed supplies. That approach is becoming more and more difficult. Donor exhaustion and donor distraction are well-known reactions to repetitive humanitarian appeals. It will undoubtedly be exacerbated if donor countries feel their obligations have already been satisfied by military contributions to UN peacekeeping operations.

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The humanitarian operations of the United Nations should be put on the same financial footing as the peacekeeping operations, and these costs should be recognized as legitimate expenses within the meaning of Article 17 of the Charter. Such a decision would not preclude additional charitable contributions. The United Nations' role as the only viable coordinator in most disasters would be enormously strengthened, and the world community would at last be able to channel its caring and compassion into an efficient system, one that would replace the competing and often politically motivated approaches that now tarnish so many relief efforts.

The Secretary General could organize the humanitarian contingents along the same lines proposed for the UN standing army. Member states could be asked to train, equip, and maintain rapid-response disaster relief teams. Sweden, Norway, and Switzerland have already established such teams and it should not be difficult to identify doctors, nurses, engineers, and other necessary personnel in most of the donor countries that are now being asked to supply only military troops.

In the early stages of disasters, the military is singularly equipped to play a crucial role. No other group has the needed

discipline and coordination, much less the essential equipment such as helicopters and field hospitals. An early military response illustrates how the United Nations can adapt to serve humanitarian needs, with an army being used as the iron-fist-in-velvet-glove approach. Relief programs, however, are ultimately the major tool for overcoming military and diplomatic impasses and for promoting attempts at reconciliation in areas where, and at times when, mutual suspicion and even hatred prevail.

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The failure to appreciate both the primacy and the potential of humanitarian efforts is a recurring tragedy that prolongs civilian suffering and hinders the rehabilitation process. Changing a humanitarian effort into a security action may offer a temporary respite from the pain of frustration, but it reflects an approach which, although gratifying the short-term needs of the healer, fails to resolve the problems of the patient. The vast scope of military operations inevitably alters the critical relationship between donor and recipient, drains the finite resources available, and imposes a transient mirage of well-being that simply cannot be sustained.

By cooperating on recognized health problems, it is sometimes possible for deadly enemies to share in alleviating the wounds of war. By identifying common grounds, such efforts can reduce misunderstandings and help begin that difficult but essential journey—one that may start in argument but eventually leads to discussion and finally civilized dialogue. Military and humanitarian components must be seen as equal partners in a coherent program worthy of the ideals of the United Nations. The news from around the world makes this more evident with each day. ■