

# Class, Race and Corporate Power

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Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 2

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2019

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### Recommended Citation

Gibbs, David N. (2019) "The End of Humanitarian Intervention? A Debate at the Oxford Union With Historian David Gibbs and Michael Chertoff," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 2. DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.7.2.008331  
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## The End of Humanitarian Intervention? A Debate at the Oxford Union With Historian David Gibbs and Michael Chertoff

### Abstract

The issue of humanitarian intervention has proven a vexing one of the political left during the post-Cold War era. In light mass violence in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Darfur, Libya, and Syria, many leftists abandoned their traditional opposition to militarism and argued for robust military intervention by the United States and its allies to alleviate these crises. Critics argued in response that interventionism would end up worsening the very crises it was supposed to resolve. These issues were recently debated at the Oxford Union Society at Oxford University on March 4, 2019. The participants were Michael Chertoff -- former Secretary of Homeland Security during the presidency of George W. Bush and coauthor of the USA Patriot Act -- who presented a qualified defense of humanitarian intervention; and myself, who argued against the practice.

### Keywords

Humanitarian Intervention

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### Cover Page Footnote

David N. Gibbs is Professor of History, University of Arizona, and has published widely on the international relations of Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the former Yugoslavia. He is now writing his third book, on the rise of US conservatism during the 1970s.

*The issue of humanitarian intervention has proven a vexing one of the political left during the post-Cold War era. In light mass violence in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Darfur, Libya, and Syria, many leftists abandoned their traditional opposition to militarism and argued for robust military intervention by the United States and its allies to alleviate these crises. Critics argued in response that interventionism would end up worsening the very crises it was supposed to resolve. These issues were recently debated at the Oxford Union Society at Oxford University on March 4, 2019. The participants were Michael Chertoff -- former Secretary of Homeland Security during the presidency of George W. Bush and coauthor of the USA Patriot Act – who presented a qualified defense of humanitarian intervention; and myself, who argued against the practice.*

*In past years, when I debated this issue, I was struck by the sense of almost religious zeal that characterized advocacy for interventionism. “We have to do something!” was the standard refrain. Those who offered criticisms – including myself -- were cast as amoral heretics. However, the repeated failures of interventionism that I note below have taken their toll and have served to moderate the tone. During the Oxford debate, I noted a remarkable absence of emotionalism. I came away from the event sensing that, while some still defend humanitarian intervention, their arguments lack the crusading tone that was so noteworthy in the past. I sense that public support for interventionism is beginning to ebb.*

*What follows is a verbatim transcript of the full statements by myself and Mr. Chertoff, as well as our responses to questions posed by the moderator and a member of the audience. For reasons of brevity, I have omitted most of the audience questions, as well as the responses. Interested readers can find the full debate at the Oxford Union’s [Youtube site](#).*

### **Daniel Wilkinson, Oxford Union President**

So, gentlemen, the motion is: “This house believes humanitarian intervention is a contradiction in terms.” And Professor Gibbs, your ten-minute opening argument can begin when you’re ready.

### **Professor David Gibbs**

Thank You. Well, I think that when one looks at humanitarian intervention, one has to look at the record of what has actually happened and in particular the last three major interventions since 2000: The Iraqi intervention of 2003, the Afghanistan intervention of 2001, and the Libya intervention of 2011. And what all three of these have in common, is that all three were justified at least in part on humanitarian grounds. I mean, the first two partly, the third almost exclusively were justified on humanitarian grounds. And all three produced humanitarian disasters. This is really quite clear, I think to anybody who has been reading the newspaper that these interventions have not gone well at all. And when evaluating the larger issue of humanitarian intervention, one really has to first look at those basic facts, which are not pleasant. Let me add that it’s very surprising to me in a lot of ways that the whole concept humanitarian intervention wasn’t just fully discredited by those experiences, but it is not.

We still have calls for other interventions, including in Syria, most notably. Also, there are frequent calls for regime change, essentially intervention, in North Korea. I really don't know what is going to happen in the future with North Korea. But if the United States does undertake regime change in North Korea, I will hazard two predictions: One, it almost certainly will be justified at least in part as a humanitarian intervention designed to liberate the people of North Korea from a very unwholesome dictator; and two, it'll produce probably the biggest humanitarian disaster since 1945. One of the questions is: Why are we not learning from our mistakes?

The scale of the failures in these three previous interventions is in a lot of ways quite impressive. With regard to Iraq, it's perhaps the best documented failure, I would say. We have the 2006 *Lancet* study. Epidemiologically looking at excess deaths in Iraq, which at that time were estimated at 560,000 excess deaths.<sup>(1)</sup> This was published in 2006. So, presumably it's much higher by now. There have been other estimates, mostly on par with that one. And this is something that is problematic. Certainly, things were terrible under Saddam Hussein, that's indisputable, as they were under the Taliban, as they were under Muammar Gaddafi, as they currently are under Kim Jong Un in North Korea. And so, we went in and removed from power those three figures one by one (or I should say with the Taliban, it was a larger regime, with Mullah Omar leading a larger regime), and things promptly got worse. It didn't seem to have occurred to policymakers that things could actually get worse, but they did.

Another effect that's worth noting is what I would say is a kind of destabilization of regions. This is particularly striking in the case of Libya, which destabilized much of North Africa, triggering a secondary civil war in Mali in 2013, which was directly attributable to the destabilization of Libya. This required a secondary intervention, by France this time, to combat basically the instability arising in that country, again justified at least in part on humanitarian grounds.

Certainly, one of the things one can say in terms the effects of humanitarian intervention, is that if you have a vested interest in intervention and that is something you are seeking, it's an excellent idea because it's the gift that just keeps on giving. It keeps on destabilizing regions, producing new humanitarian crises, thus justifying new interventions. That's certainly what happened in the case of Libya and then Mali. Now if you're interested in humanitarian effect, however the situation does not look so good. It does not look very positive at all.

The very striking thing here is the lack of loss of credibility. I'm very struck by the fact that the people who helped to argue for these three interventions -- and by that I don't just mean policymakers, but also academics and intellectuals like myself. I myself didn't argue for them, but many of my colleagues did. And it's rather remarkable to me that there's no expression of regret or acknowledgement they did anything wrong in arguing for these interventions. Nor is there effort to learn from our mistakes and to try and avoid interventions in the future. There's something very dysfunctional about the character of discussion on this topic, when we fail to learn from past mistakes.

A second problem with the issue of humanitarian intervention is what some have called the “dirty hands” problem. We are relying on countries and agencies of those countries which do not have very good records of humanitarian activity. Let us look at the United States and its history of interventionism. If one looks at that, the history of US interventionism, we find the United States as an intervening power was a major cause of humanitarian crises in the past. If one looks for example at the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, the overthrow of Allende in Chile in 1973. And I think the most striking example, a less known one, is Indonesia in 1965, where the CIA helped engineer a coup and then helped orchestrate a massacre of people that led to about 500,000 deaths. It's one of the really great massacres post-1945, yes indeed, on the scale of what happened in Rwanda, at least approximately. And that was something caused by intervention. And one could also go into the issue of the Vietnam War and look for example at the Pentagon Papers, the secret Pentagon study of the Vietnam War, and one does not get a sense of the United States as either a gentle power or a particularly humanitarian one. And the effects certainly were not humanitarian in any of these cases.

There's a larger issue perhaps of human rights violations by the agencies of state that are involved in intervention in the United States. We now know from declassified documents that both the uniformed military and the CIA were responsible in the 50s and early 60s in conducting radiation experiments on unsuspecting individuals; doing things like going around and having doctors working for the military injecting people with radioactive isotopes and then tracking their bodies over time to see what effects it had and what kinds of illnesses it caused them -- without telling them of course. The CIA had very disturbing mind-control experiments, testing new interrogation techniques on unsuspecting individuals, with very damaging effects. One of the scientists involved in the radiation studies commented in private, again this is from a declassified document, that some of what he was doing had what he called the “Buchenwald” effect, and we could see what he meant. And the obvious question again is: Why on earth would we want to trust agencies that do things like this to do something humanitarian now? This is a course long ago. But the fact that we now use the term “humanitarian intervention” does not make it a magical phrase and does not magically erase this past history, which is relevant and has to be taken into account. I do not want to focus excessively on my own country after all. Other states have done other disturbing things. One could look at the history of Britain and France, let us say, with the colonial and postcolonial interventions. One does not get a picture of humanitarian activity; quite the contrary I would say, either in intent or in effect.

Now I think one of the issues that finally has to be noted is the cost of humanitarian intervention. This is something that is rarely taken into account, but perhaps should be taken into account, especially since the record of results is so bad in terms of humanitarian effect. Well, military action generally speaking is extremely expensive. Amassing division-sized forces, deploying them overseas for extended periods of time cannot be done except at extreme expense. In the case of the Iraq War, what we have is what has been termed “the three trillion-dollar war.” Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia and Linda Bilmes estimated in 2008 the long-term cost of the Iraq War at \$3 trillion.<sup>(2)</sup> Those figures of course are obsolete, because that's over ten years ago, but \$3 trillion is quite a lot when you think about it. In fact, it's greater than the combined gross domestic product of Great Britain at the present time. And one wonders what kind of wonderful humanitarian projects we could have done with \$3 trillion, rather than

wasting it in a war that did nothing but killed several hundred thousand people and destabilized a region.

And these wars are not over of course in either Libya, nor Iraq, nor Afghanistan. Afghanistan is nearing the end of its second decade of war and the second decade of US intervention. This may very well run into being the longest war in US history, if it not already is. It depends how you define longest war, but it's certainly getting up there. And one can think of all sorts of things that could have been done with some of this money, for example, vaccination of children, who are under-vaccinated. (Two minutes is that right? One minute.) One could think of people who don't have enough medicines including in my own country the United States, where many people go without proper medicines. As economists know, you have opportunity costs. If you spend money on one thing, you may not have it available for another. And I think what we've been doing is overspending on intervention again with no significant humanitarian results or very few that I can discern. I guess I'm very impressed by the medical analogy here and the medical emphasis, so that's of course why I titled my book "First Do No Harm." And the reason is that in medicine you don't just go and operate on the patient because the patient is suffering. You have to do a proper analysis of whether or not the operation will be positive or negative. An operation can of course hurt people, and in medicine sometimes the best thing to do is nothing. And perhaps here, the first thing we should do with the humanitarian crises is not make them worse, which is what we've done. Thank you.

### **Wilkinson**

Thank you, Professor. Michael, your ten-minute argument can begin when you're ready.

### **Michael Chertoff**

The proposition here is whether humanitarian intervention is a contradiction in terms, and I think the answer to that is no. Sometimes it's ill-advised, sometimes, it's well advised. Sometimes it doesn't work, sometimes it does work. It rarely works perfectly, but nothing in life does. So, let me first begin by talking about the three examples the professor gave: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. I'm going to tell you Afghanistan was not a humanitarian intervention. Afghanistan was the result of an attack launched on the United States that killed 3,000 people, and it was quite openly and deliberately an effort to remove the person who launched the attack from the ability to do it again. If you think it wasn't worth it, I will tell you from personal experience: When we went into Afghanistan, we found laboratories al Qaeda was using to experiment with chemical and biological agents on animals, so they could deploy those against people in the West. Had we not gone into Afghanistan, we might be inhaling those now as we speak. This is not humanitarian in the sense of altruistic. This is kind of basic, core security that every country owes its citizens.

Iraq is also I think in my view not principally a humanitarian intervention. We can debate in a different debate what happened with the intelligence, and whether it was totally wrong or only partially wrong, regarding the possibility of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But at least that was the major assumption going in. It may have been erroneous, and there are all kinds of arguments that the way in which it was executed was poorly done. But again, it was not humanitarian. Libya was a humanitarian intervention. And the problem with Libya is I think

the second part of what I want to say, which is not all humanitarian interventions are good. And in order to make a decision to intervene, you have to take into account some very important elements of what you're facing. What is your strategy and your objective, do you have clarity about that? What is your awareness of what the conditions in the place you're intervening in actually are? What are your capabilities and your willingness to be committed to see things through to the end? And then, to what degree do you have support from the international community? Libya is an example of a case where, while the impulse may have been humanitarian, these things were not carefully thought-out. And if I can say so, Michael Hayden and I made this point in an op-ed shortly after this process began.<sup>(3)</sup> That the easy part was going to be removing Gaddafi. The hard part was going to be what happens after Gaddafi is removed. And so here I agree with the professor. Had someone looked at the four factors I mentioned, they would have said: "Well you know, we don't really know, we haven't really thought through what happens without Gaddafi?" What happens to all the extremists in prison? What happens to all the mercenaries that he's paid for, who now aren't getting paid anymore? And that led to some of the negative results. I also think there was a failure to understand that when you remove a dictator, you have an unstable situation. And as Colin Powell used to say, if you broke it you bought it. If you're going to remove a dictator, you've got to then be prepared to invest in stabilizing. If you're not prepared to make that investment, you have no business removing him.

By way of example on the other side, if you look at for example the interventions in Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. Sierra Leone was 2000. There was the United Front that was advancing on the capital. The British came in, they repelled them. They drove them back. And because of that, Sierra Leone was able to stabilize, and they ultimately wound up having elections. Or Ivory Coast, you had an incumbent who refused to accept that he had lost an election. He began to use violence against his people. There was an intervention. He was ultimately arrested, and now Ivory Coast has a democracy. So again, there are ways to do humanitarian intervention that can be successful, but not if you don't pay attention to the four characteristics I talked about.

Now, let me give you an example from something that we are literally facing today, and that is what is going on in Syria. And let's ask the question whether a couple of years ago, before the Russians got deeply involved, before the Iranians got deeply involved, whether an intervention would have made a difference in saving literally tens of thousands of people from being killed, innocent civilians with bombs and chemical weapons, as well as a huge mass migration crisis. And I think the answer is: Had we done in Syria what we did in northern Iraq in 1991, established a no-fly zone and a no-go zone for Assad and his people, and if we had done it early, we might have averted what we now see unfolding and continuing to unfold in the region. So, now I'm going to now look at it from the other lens: What happens when you don't intervene, as I suggest that we might have done in Syria? Well not only do you have a humanitarian crisis, you have a security crisis. Because as the consequence of not really enforcing any of the rules I've talked about and notwithstanding the fact that President Obama said there was a red line about chemical weapons and then the line disappeared when the chemical weapons were used. Because of the fact that we didn't enforce these humanitarian measures, we had not only many deaths, but we literally had an upheaval that has now reached

into the heart of Europe. The reason the EU is now having a crisis about migration is because, and perhaps with some intent, the Russians as well as the Syrians deliberately acted to drive civilians out of the country and force them to go elsewhere. Many of them are now in Jordan and putting a strain on Jordan, but many of them are trying to get into Europe. And I have little doubt that Putin understood or quickly recognized, even if it was not his original intent, that once you create a migration crisis, you are creating a disorder and dissension within your principal adversary, which is Europe. And that has a destabilizing effect, the consequences of which we continue to see today.

And so, one of the things I want to say to be honest, is when we talk about humanitarian intervention, there is often an altruistic dimension to it, but frankly there is also a self-interested dimension. Places of disorder are places where terrorists operate, and you've seen Isis until quite recently had territory in parts of Syria and parts of Iraq that were not properly governed. It creates migration crises and similar crises, which then have an impact on the stability and the good order of the rest of the world. And it also creates grievances and desires for payback that often result in cycles of violence that continue over and over again, and you see that in Rwanda.

So, my bottom line is this: Not all humanitarian interventions are warranted, not all humanitarian interventions are properly thought out and properly executed. But by the same token, not all of them are wrong or improperly executed. And again, I go back to 1991 and the no-fly zone and no-go zone in Kurdistan as an example of one that worked. The key is this: Be clear why you're going in; don't underestimate the cost of what you're undertaking; have the capabilities and the commitment to see that you can handle those costs and achieve the result that you set out for yourself. Make sure you are aware of the conditions on the ground, so you make a rational assessment. And finally get international support, don't go it alone. I think in those circumstances, humanitarian intervention can not only be successful, but it can save a lot of lives and make our world more secure. Thank you.

#### **Question (Wilkinson)**

Thank you, Michael. Thank you both for those introductory remarks. I'll ask one question, and then we'll move over to questions from the audience. My question is this: You both cited a number of historical examples. But would you say it is a fair assessment that practically the problem is that there can never be a sufficient long-term plan, sufficient well intentions, sufficient benevolent motivations, or a sufficient harm-analysis to counter the fact that individual organizations and international organizations are fallible. And they will always make mistakes. And the fallibility of those groups means that humanitarian intervention has to be a contradiction in terms. So, Michael, if you'd like to respond.

#### **Answer (Chertoff)**

My answer is this: Inaction is action. Some people think if you don't do something that's somehow abstaining. But if you don't do something, something is going to happen. So, if for example Franklin Roosevelt had decided not to help the British in 1940 with Lend Lease, because "I don't know if I'm making a mistake or not," that would have resulted in a different outcome with respect to World War II. I don't think we'd be saying "well but that was inaction,



so it didn't matter." I think inaction is a form of action. And every time you're presented with a choice, you have to balance the consequences as far as you can project them, from both doing something and abstaining from doing something.

### **Answer (Gibbs)**

Well, I think that of course inaction is a form of action, but the onus should always be on person advocating intervention. Because let's be very clear on this: Intervention is an act of war. Humanitarian intervention is a mere euphemism. When we advocate humanitarian intervention, we are advocating war. The movement for intervention is a movement for war. And it seems to me those who advocate against war really have no burden on them of proof. The burden of proof should be on those who advocate for the use of violence, and really the standards should be very high for the use of violence. And I think we can see it's been used quite frivolously in the past to an extraordinary degree.

And a basic problem you have in small interventions -- for example the 1991 no-fly zone over Iraq -- is these things take place in the real world, not in a pretend world. And in that real world, the United States considers itself a great power, and there'll always be the question of American credibility. And if the U.S. undertakes half measures, such as a no-fly zone, there will always be pressures on the United States from various factions in the foreign policy establishment to take a more maximalist effort and solve the problem once and for all. Hence the need for another war with Iraq in 2003, producing an utter catastrophe. I get very queasy when I hear people discussing "let us just do a limited intervention, it'll just stop at that," because it usually doesn't stop at that. There's the quagmire effect. You step into the quagmire, and you get deeper and deeper into the quagmire. And there will always be those who advocate deeper and deeper intervention.

I guess one more point: I did want to respond to the claim which is a frequent one that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were not really humanitarian interventions. It is true that this was to some extent, both interventions were at least partly traditional national interest, realpolitik, and the like. But if you look back at the record, clearly both were justified in part as humanitarian interventions, both by the Bush administration as well as many academics. I have here before me an edited volume published by the University of California Press, and I believe it's 2005, called *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq*.(4) Just do a Google search on "humanitarian arguments for war in Iraq," and this was very much part of the picture. I think it's a bit of a rewriting of history to say that humanitarian intervention was not a significant factor in the arguments for war in Iraq or Afghanistan. They were very much part of both those wars. And I would say the results very much discredit the idea of humanitarian intervention.

### **Question (Audience)**

Thanks, so you've both talked about some historical examples and I'd like to hear both of your perspectives about the ongoing situation in Venezuela. And the Trump administration and the plans and the reports have come out that they might have plans to use military force there and how you would evaluate that in light of both of the perspectives that you've shared.

**Answer (Chertoff)**

So, I think what's happening in Venezuela is first of all I mean there's obviously a political dictatorship. And as I've said I don't think political regime issues are a reason to intervene militarily. There is also a humanitarian element here. People are starving. But I don't know we're at the level of humanitarian crisis that we've seen in other cases. So, my short answer would be: I don't think we've met the threshold for having a real discussion about humanitarian intervention in a military sense.

That's not to say there aren't non-military ways to intervene, just to be clear so we round the picture out. There are a lot of tools in the toolbox when you deal with intervention. There are sanctions, economic sanctions. There is even potential use of cyber tools as a way of having some impact on what's going on. There is the possibility in some instances of legal action, for example International Criminal Court or something. So, all of these ought to be considered part of the toolbox. If I was looking at Venezuela, assuming it did, which I emphasize it has not, reach the level of humanitarian intervention, you would then have to balance issues like: Is there an endgame we see or a strategy we see to be successful? Do we have the capabilities to achieve it? Do we have international support? I think all of those would probably militate against it. That's not to say it couldn't change, but the dimensions of this I don't think have reached the point where military action is reasonable or likely.

**Answer (Gibbs)**

Well, the most important thing you need to know about Venezuela is that it's an undiversified oil exporting economy, and there's been a drop in oil price since 2014. I'll certainly grant that a lot of what is going on now is the fault of Maduro and authoritarian actions he's been taking, as well as mismanagement, corruption, and so on. Most of what has been going on by any reasonable reading, by any informed reading, is due to low oil prices.

It points to I think a larger issue, which is the way humanitarian crises are often triggered by economic crises. Discussions of Rwanda almost never discuss the fact that the genocide – and I think it really was a genocide in the case of Rwanda -- the genocide by the Hutu against the Tutsi took place in the context of a major economic crisis resulting from the collapse of coffee prices. Again, a very undiversified economy that was reliant almost exclusively on coffee. Coffee prices collapse, you get a political crisis. Yugoslavia had a major economic crisis just before the country broke up and descended into hell. We know about the descent into hell, most people don't know about the economic crisis.

For some reason people find economics boring, and because it's boring and military intervention seems more exciting, we think that the solution is to send in the 82nd Airborne Division. Whereas perhaps it would have been simpler and a lot cheaper and easier and better from a humanitarian standpoint to address the economic crisis; the very heavy emphasis placed on austerity in the international economic system and the very damaging political effects austerity has in many countries. Historical context is necessary here: For all the constant, repetitious references to the Third Reich and to World War II, which we hear again and again and again and again, people often forget that one of the things that brought us Adolph Hitler was the Great Depression. Any reasonable reading of Weimar Germany's history would be

that without the Depression, you almost certainly would not have gotten the rise of Nazism. So, I think a greater addressing of the economic issues in the case of Venezuela -- Even if the United States were to overthrow Maduro by whatever means and replace them with someone else, that someone else would still have to deal with the issue of low oil prices and the damaging effects on the economy, which would remain unaddressed by humanitarian intervention, whether we call it that or something else.

I guess another point about the United States and Venezuela is that the United Nations sent a representative down there and condemned the US sanctions as greatly intensifying the humanitarian crisis. So, the intervention the United States has been doing -- economic at this point mostly, rather than military -- is making things worse, and that clearly has to stop. If we're interested in helping the people of Venezuela, surely the United States would not want to make it worse.

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(1) Gilbert Burnham, et al, "Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross Sectional Analysis Cluster Sample Survey," *Lancet* 368, no. 9545, 2006. Note that the *Lancet's* best estimate of excess deaths due to the invasion is actually higher than the one I cited above. The correct figure is 654,965, rather than the 560,000 that I presented.

(2) Linda J. Bilmes and Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*. New York: Norton, 2008.

(3) Michael Chertoff and Michael V. Hayden, "What Happens after Gaddafi is Removed?" *Washington Post*, April 21, 2011.

(4) Thomas Cushman, ed., *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.