

Chris Brown

"Delinquent" states, guilty consciences and humanitarian politics in the 1990s

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Brown, Chris (2008) "Delinquent" states, guilty consciences and humanitarian politics in the 1990s. *Journal of international political theory*, 4 (1). pp. 55-71. ISSN 1755-0882

DOI: [10.3366/E1755088208000086](https://doi.org/10.3366/E1755088208000086)

© 2008 [Edinburgh University Press](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27890/>

Available in LSE Research Online: January 2011

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

“Delinquent” States, Guilty Consciences and Humanitarian Politics in the 1990s’

Chris Brown,
Department of International Relations,
London School of Economics
Houghton St., London WC2A 2AE
c.j.brown@lse.ac.uk

Abstract:

Notions such as ‘guilt’ and ‘forgiveness’ can be defined in objective terms, but more normally have an emotional dimension that cannot be experienced by institutions – but perhaps some analogs to these emotions can be discerned in the behaviour of states? In the 1990s the Western powers were engaged in dealing with a sequence of crises which appeared to call for some kind of intervention – Bosnia 1991/95, Somalia 1992/3, Haiti, 1993/4, Rwanda 1994, Kosovo 1998/9 – and this essay explores the extent to which it can be said that action/inaction in one case can be related back to moral judgements of behaviour in earlier cases. What emerges is not a single narrative of guilt and rectificatory action, but two narratives focusing on different referent objects – obligations towards one’s own citizens and toward the putative common good. The picture is complex and no clear lessons can be drawn from the analysis, except perhaps the counter-intuitive point that a ‘guilty conscience’ may actually be more effective when the guilt in question is not attributable to the individual whose behaviour is affected. This point is made initially with respect to Chancellor Willy Brandt’s 1970 apology for past German misdeeds, and reiterated with respect to Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 1999 response in Kosovo to the perceived failings of the previous British Government in Bosnia in the early 1990s.

Introduction

As previous papers drawn from the series of workshops and panels sponsored by the Ethics, Institutions and International Relations Network have demonstrated, discussion of moral agency in relation to bodies such as states, intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, business enterprises and the like presents real difficulties, but when the focus shifts to the notion of a ‘delinquent’ institution things become even

more complicated.¹ Notions such as ‘delinquency’, ‘blame’ and, by extension, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘guilt’ engage the emotions as well as the intellect, and although the strict separation between reason and the emotions characteristic of a great deal of contemporary moral theory is now being challenged, partly in response to the revival of interest in the moral world of the Classical Greeks, there are genuine problems posed by this conjuncture.² When the agency of human individuals is in question the emotions and the intellect cannot be understood as wholly separate, but when the agency of institutions is at stake qualitatively different and more difficult problems are posed.

Notions of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘guilt’ are not necessarily emotionally laden. Still, although it might be possible to think of the notion of ‘forgiving’ unemotionally – for example, we speak of ‘forgiving a debt’ as synonymous with writing it off – generally to say that we have forgiven somebody, or have been forgiven by somebody, suggests a change in emotional states. Similarly, we might think of ‘guilt’ as something that can be assessed dispassionately, for example by the verdict of a court, but guilt is also a state of mind, something that we feel (or do not feel). We may be found guilty of a criminal offence without actually *feeling* guilty (because we did not do it, or because we do not think ‘it’ should be a crime), and vice versa. Guilt can also be ‘existential’ in the sense that we may feel guilty about situations over which we have no control and for which we are not in any meaningful sense responsible; the approach to issues such as world poverty by cosmopolitan international political theorists and anti-globalization activists illustrates the point here.

‘We’ in these sentence can be taken to signify private individuals, but some legal systems allow corporations to be held criminally responsible for their actions, and here the problem is posed more starkly. It is certainly possible for such a delinquent institution to be found guilty of, say, corporate manslaughter (assuming such a crime is on the statute book), but whether a corporation can *feel* guilt is another matter – and

¹ These Workshops have been supported by the British Academy, the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International affairs, the International Studies Association and the British International Studies Association, and have been reported in, *inter alia*, Toni Erskine (ed) *Can Institutions have Responsibility: Collective Moral agency and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and *Ethics and International Affairs* Vol.15 No.2, 2001. I am grateful to all the participants, and especially to Toni Erskine and Kirsten Ainley for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

² A key reference point here is the work of Martha Nussbaum, e.g. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

without feeling guilty, is it possible to ask for forgiveness? A corporation or a state that is blamed for some action can be punished – by a fine, reparations or, in extreme circumstances, by dismemberment or occupation – but it is the individuals who make up the delinquent institution who feel (or perhaps do not feel) the *emotional* force of blame, punishment and the attribution of guilt.³ The effects of this disjuncture are not always predictable; thus, for example, the so-called ‘war guilt’ clause of the Versailles Treaty of 1919 actually assigned responsibility to the German *state* for the outbreak of war in 1914 simply to provide a legal basis for claiming reparations for war damage (and, incidentally, merely repeated similar clauses in previous Treaties, including those drafted by Imperial Germany) but for the German *people* this restrictive, legal notion of state responsibility was translated into the emotional language of guilt, and deeply resented.⁴ What began as a legal formality and a judgement on the foreign policy of the Wilhelmitic *Reich*, was translated in the minds of the German people (and some of their former enemies) into an assertion of the collective guilt of all Germans, with serious consequence for post-war politics. Some figures in the Social Democratic Party anticipated these consequences and tried to divert the resentment of Germans towards the *regime* of Kaiser Wilhelm II, but without much success – however one might rationally defend Article 231, the emotional damage had been done and it simply did not prove possible to separate state, people and regime.⁵

In short, the problem this dual nature of notions such as ‘guilt’ and ‘forgiveness’ poses is easy to see. While it is certainly possible to argue that institutions possess agency, and thus it is only a relatively small step to suggest that they can possess moral agency, the idea that institutions are capable of an emotional response is much more problematic – individuals who represent institutions are certainly so capable, but the relationship between these warm bodies and the institutions they represent is complex

³ See e.g. Hannah Arendt *Responsibility and Judgement* edited Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003) for an argument that guilt is exclusively an individual moral category.

⁴ The wording of Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty states that ‘The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies’..

⁵ See Karl Kautsky *The Guilt of William Hohenzollern* London, 1920. The idea that the Versailles Treaty was unfair to Germany also came to dominate progressive opinion in Britain and the US, also with serious consequences; nowadays historical opinion is a little kinder to the peacemakers of 1919 – see Margaret Macmillan *Peacemakers* (London: John Murray, 2003).

and difficult to unravel. Clearly institutions do not experience emotions in the literal sense of the term, but are there institutional equivalents to emotions that can be seen to exert influence on state behaviour? This is a problem that is best approached through actual examples and that will be the strategy of this essay; the main focus is on British and American decision-making with respect to the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, but first it may be illuminating to reflect on what was, for someone of my generation, the most striking image of guilt and forgiveness of the post-war era, the actions of Willy Brandt in Warsaw, 1970.

Brandt, head bowed, in the rain at the Warsaw Ghetto

On 7 December 1970, (West) German Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt, in the course of an official visit to Poland to sign a treaty recognising the post-1945 boundaries of that country, knelt, head bowed, in the rain, in front of the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto rising of 1943.⁶ The photographs of Brandt kneeling in a nondescript raincoat are deeply moving, the acceptance of guilt and the plea for forgiveness are unmistakable and compelling – the square in which this event took place is now Brandt Square and has itself become a place of pilgrimage for visiting German statesmen. Brandt's gesture is widely seen as marking a key point in the post-war history of Europe, symbolising a central plank of his *Ostpolitik*, namely his understanding that the normalisation of East-West relations could only take place on the basis of a reconciliation between Germany and its victims, and that a conscious acceptance of guilt by Germany had to be part of this process.⁷ More, and crucially, he understood that this could not be conveyed by words in a speech or the text of a treaty; rather, an emotional gesture was necessary – whether his action was spontaneous or not is still debated, but is, I think, largely beyond the point.

The key issue is whether, or, perhaps, in what sense, Brandt could actually be seen as representing the German people, or 'Germany', when he knelt in the rain.

⁶ The much anthologised photograph of this event can be seen at http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/image.cfm?image_id=161. Brandt's was *Time* magazine's 'Person of the Year' in 1970 and the citation for this award contextualises the events surrounding Brandt's gesture very well: <http://www.time.com/time/poy2000/archive/1970.html>

⁷ The willingness of Poland's Kaczynski twins to reopen old wounds over a relatively trivial issue at the recent European Summit (June 2007) suggests that this reconciliation is still not complete – but then Brandt's gesture was related to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943, not the Polish Home Army's action in Warsaw of 1944, in other words was directed particularly towards Nazism's Jewish victims.

Certainly, he held the constitutional position of head of government but, perhaps significantly, he was not head of state; it is normally the occupant of the latter role – which is seen as in some sense beyond partisan politics, rather than the former, which is necessarily political in a partisan sense – who is taken to represent the nation as a whole.⁸ As head of government Brandt was entitled to act as he did and the fact that, according to one poll, 48% of Germans thought his gesture ‘exaggerated’, as opposed to 41% who thought it ‘appropriate’ is, in politico-legal terms, beside the point.⁹ But it is not at all clear that this is beside the point when we look at the *emotional* dimension of his act, which implied that he was representing Germany in a much more than constitutional sense. The German Chancellor was not simply expressing remorse and asking for forgiveness on behalf of his government, but on behalf of ‘Germany’, the German nation and the German people.

Interesting and significant in this context was Brandt’s personal history. As a young SPD militant he had gone into exile during the Nazi years, and – as the more unscrupulous of his opponents never allowed the German people to forget – had returned to Germany in 1945 wearing an Allied (actually Norwegian) uniform.¹⁰ With this history, Brandt was the ideal representative of a Germany other than the Germany represented by the Nazis, the Germany of Goethe and Schiller, of Hegel and Kant, of Bach and Beethoven. Almost without exception, every contemporary commentary made the point that Brandt was expressing a guilt that he did not personally share, asking for forgiveness for a crime that he had not committed – although whether Brandt himself accepted this description is questionable; he may well have felt that the history of Germany could not be parcelled up in this way into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ elements and have seen himself as their heir to both darkness and light.

But what is really striking is that it seems to have been precisely his personal standing as an anti-Nazi that made his gesture acceptable to so many people. His predecessor as Federal Chancellor, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, had actually been a member of

⁸ This division is not present in political systems where head of state and head of government are combined in one person, such as that of the United States; at times this presents problems – the mental gymnastics involved in extending respect to a symbolic figure who represents the nation, but whose political values one despises have often been witnessed in recent years.

⁹ Cited from *Time* article, see fn 3.

¹⁰ ‘Willy Brandt’ was actually a *nom de guerre* from the period of exile; he was born Herbert Frahm.

the Nazi Party between 1933 and 1945, serving in the Propaganda Ministry and requiring denazification before being allowed to join the Christian Democrats after the war. Here was someone who really had something to apologise for. Brandt's successor Helmut Schmidt had been a junior artillery officer in the *Wehrmacht* during the later years of the war, and although he did nothing discreditable in that position, he was implicated in the history of those years in a way that Brandt clearly was not. Logically, a gesture of repentance and remorse from either Kiesinger or Schmidt ought to have counted for more than one from Brandt's because in both cases an element of personal responsibility might plausibly have been seen to be present – but at an emotional level there was simply something *right* about what Brandt did, and it seems unlikely that a similar action from Kiesinger or Schmidt would have had the same power. Brandt could make amends on behalf of the German people, this 'delinquent institution', it seems, precisely because of the distance that existed between him and them; his innocence allowed him to represent their guilt. The fact that personally he had nothing to apologise for emphasised the 'national' quality of his gesture. As an aside, the furore over Gunter Grass's recent admission that he served in the *Waffen SS* in the war makes a similar point in a different way – Grass's standing as someone who has always been keen to accuse others of whitewashing the national past has been seriously damaged by the realisation that he hid his own guilty secrets. As with Schmidt, he (probably) did nothing criminal in the war years but he must have believed, and probably rightly, that had he told the truth about his wartime experiences, his castigations of others for their Nazi past would have been perceived as tainted, hence the deception. To act as the conscience of the post-war nation he needed to have clean hands.¹¹

Returning to the main line of argument, what all this highlights is just how difficult it is to employ the language of guilt, blame and forgiveness in assessing the moral responsibilities of institutions. The particular focus of this essay is on the humanitarian actions (and, especially, inactions) of the 1990s, and the core issue under examination is whether, in deciding when to act and when not to act, the responsible statesmen and women were influenced by emotional and/or moral sentiments with

¹¹ Gunter Grass *Peeling the Onion* London: Harvill Secker, 2007. In fact, of course, the deception actually is the stain on his character since his behaviour in 1945 is (apparently) otherwise guiltless.

respect to their previous actions or inactions. Is the notion of a guilty conscience appropriate here? Intuitively, it is not wholly implausible to think that, say, the willingness of Western leaders to go (almost) all the way in Kosovo in 1999 was partly shaped by a realisation that in earlier crises in the 1990s – in particular, in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda – they or their predecessors had failed to rise to the moral seriousness of the problem. Perhaps a guilty conscience led to a desire to make amends? But intuition is not always a reliable guide in such matters. When we look at the history of this period things become very complex, and the kind of purity discernable in Brandt's gesture is hard to find. It seems that, for the leading actor, the US, there were two narratives of guilt in play in the 1990s, which sometimes interacted to cancel each other out.¹²

Bill Clinton, Somalia, the Rwanda Genocide and the Wars of Former Yugoslavia

If there is one event in the 1990s that ought to have generated guilt and remorse, it is the failure of those in a position to act to do anything substantive to prevent, or curtail, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and so this is a reasonable starting point for a discussion, although, as will be noted below, it is not actually the beginning of at least some of the relevant narratives. Equally, it makes sense to start this story with the US reading of these events, not because the US necessarily bears the most guilt for the genocide, but because it – and its leaders – have been more introspective about issues of guilt and innocence than most of the other parties involved. Samantha Power tells us that when President Clinton read Philip Gourevich's *New Yorker* articles on the Rwanda genocide, he sent copies to aides annotated with comments such as 'Is what he's saying true?' and 'How did this happen?'.¹³ Power describes Clinton's outrage as 'oddly timed' since he showed no interest in the issue in 1994, but she also acknowledges that the genocide never got near the top of the list of things with which the President was concerned on a daily basis, and that there was never a full-scale staff conference on the subject, which

¹² Brandt was also contributing to two narratives, an overt external narrative concerning Germany's relationship to its past victims, and a more tacit narrative about what it meant to be a German in 1970. but, as will become apparent, this is not really a parallel to the events of the 1990s.

¹³ Samantha Power 'Bystanders to Genocide' *The Atlantic Online* taken from *The Atlantic Monthly* September 2001. Gourevich's articles later become his book *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda* (NY: Straus & Farrar, 1998), Power's turned into 'A Problem From Hell' *America and the Age of Genocide* (London: Flamingo, 2003)

suggests it is not implausible that he genuinely did not have a clear sense as to what was going on. Moreover, the horrific nature of the things that were happening in Rwanda were such that even those better informed than the President found it difficult to believe that reports from that country were not exaggerated, especially when those who were in a good position to know the true state of affairs, in particular the French, supported this thesis, arguing that both sides in a civil war were responsible for atrocities.¹⁴ This, incidentally, is an argument that was repeatedly used in Bosnia as well; but the fact that both sides in a civil conflict are usually implicated in some kind of atrocity ought not to prevent us from recognising significant moral differences – the RPF in Rwanda never intended genocide, the Rwanda government and armed forces did; the Government of Bosnia did not support ethnic cleansing as a matter of principle, its Serb opponents, supported by Belgrade, did. Returning to Rwanda, even today it is emotionally difficult to accept the truth of reports of terrible events that, with our intellect, we know happened.

In any event, Clinton clearly felt the need to make amends in some way. Unfortunately the method chosen did not exactly help those who would make excuses for his earlier inaction. The terms of the ‘apology’ that later, in the course of a whistle-stop tour of Africa in March 1998, he offered during a stop-over lasting a couple of hours at Kigali Airport, regretting that ‘...we in the United States and the world community did not do as much as we could have and should have done to try to limit what occurred’ have attracted much criticism.¹⁵ Power is understandably scathing about this wording; apart from the strange use of ‘limit’ rather than ‘prevent’ (with the apparent implication that more limited atrocities would have been somehow acceptable) it implies that something, but not enough, was done, whereas in fact, not only did the US do nothing itself, it actually on occasion obstructed others who wished to act. Still, for all the evasions there seems little reason to doubt that Clinton was, in fact, genuinely disturbed

¹⁴ It should not be assumed that everyone was in good faith in this respect; Andrew Wallis argues convincingly that the French government knew exactly what was going on – see *Silent Accomplice: The Untold Story of France’s Role in the Rwanda Genocide* London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. The French Government under President Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Kouchner is finally beginning to acknowledge its own responsibilities in this area. See *Le Monde* 2 July 2007. ‘Génocide rwandais : ce que savait l’Elysée’.

¹⁵ Apologies of this kind are usually defective in some respect. For example, the famous 1998 and 2000 ‘apologies’ for past wrongdoing of the Catholic Church actually refer to ‘sons and daughters’ of the Church having done wrong, rather than the institution itself.

and upset by what he read in Gourevich's articles.¹⁶ In any event, the interesting questions are first whether a sense of guilt over Rwanda actually affected Clinton's personal decision-making in the other crises of the 1990s, most particularly in the case of the intervention in Kosovo of 1999 and second, whether Clinton's sense of guilt (assuming it to have existed) was personal, or the expression of a collective guilt attributable to the US as an international actor?

Rephrasing this, and focusing on the second of these questions, we might argue that in the context of the Rwanda genocide, the US Government could be described as a 'delinquent institution' which failed to act in accordance either with its own values or with the, albeit rather vague, requirements of the Genocide Convention.¹⁷ The rather half-hearted request for forgiveness that President Clinton made in March 1998 could be seen as an acknowledgement of delinquency, but more impressive evidence of an acknowledgement of this status would be provided had the Administration behaved differently in later, analogous crises – to return to the Brandt example, it was precisely because he wanted Germany to be understood as a different kind of polity from that of the Nazi years that his apology was made and accepted. Can a similar kind of shift be seen in the US case?¹⁸ Unfortunately, the analogy does not hold because the history of US reactions to humanitarian disasters in the 1990s does not begin with Rwanda; indeed, US inaction in Rwanda in 1994 is often associated with an obsession with the costs of the failed intervention in Somalia of 1992/93. Whereas Willy Brandt was able to situate his gesture in 1970 in a narrative where he was apologising for an offence committed by an earlier generation, and with a view to preparing the way for policy shifts in the future, Clinton in 1994 was already embedded in another kind of narrative, one not entirely of

¹⁶ Also, it should be acknowledged that the Rwandan Government were less upset by the terms of his apology that were Clinton's domestic critics; President Paul Kagame's speech on the tenth anniversary of the genocide is instructive here. He accepted the apologies of the British, Belgians and Americans as a sign of their basic decency, while attacking the French, accusing them (accurately enough) of having financed and underwritten the genocide, and of refusing to acknowledge this fact, which led to a walk-out by the French Ambassador to Kigali.

http://www.gov.rw/government/president/speeches/2004/07_04_04_genocide_speech.html

¹⁷ In 1994 it was widely believed that describing what was happening as a genocide would mandate action – hence the many evasions ('acts of genocide' and so on). But Darfur has been described as a genocide by the US and other state actors, and, sadly, nothing has followed from this example of truth-telling.

¹⁸ I stress again that I ask this question not in order to suggest that the US was the most guilty state in the 1990s, but for the very different reason that the US leadership was the most introspective and thus opened themselves up to an enquiry of this kind.

his own making, where more recent and immediate events bore down upon him. If failure to act in 1994 constituted delinquency and generated guilt and a desire for forgiveness, this failure in turn can be partially explained in the context of guilt associated with an earlier failure, but this time a failure of commission rather than omission.

And here yet another complication muddies the water. German guilt over its Nazi past focused on atrocities committed by Germans, but the guilty conscience experienced by US decision-makers over the Somalia debacle was not usually related to the failed intervention itself, and the fact that the Somali people were abandoned to anarchy, but to a side-effect of this failure, the loss of the lives of American soldiers, and in particular the 18 lives lost in the infamous 'Black Hawk Down' incident on 3 October 1993. The loss of life here was obviously not on a very great scale, but there seems no reason to doubt that it had quite a considerable effect on the political, if not the military, leadership of the US. The Pentagon saw this abortive mission as confirmation of their scepticism about the whole enterprise ('we do deserts, we don't do cities' was Colin Powell's mantra when Chair of the Joint Chiefs) but were perhaps better equipped to place the loss of life in perspective than the predominantly civilian group who surrounded President Clinton, most of whom, like their leader, had avoided military service and had genuine qualms at putting their fellow-citizen's lives at risk. In this case putative US 'delinquency' was not (solely) related to its international obligations but to its responsibilities towards its own citizens/soldiers whom it had, allegedly, let down by placing them in harm's way without sufficient reason or a clear enough sense of mission. In short, we have here a second narrative of delinquency which privileges US citizens as the referent object, as opposed to privileging the international common good, as is the case with narratives that focus the Genocide Convention.

The Somalia affair led to a recasting of US attitudes towards UN peacekeeping operations, exemplified by Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 25, a version of which was released to the public in May 1994, that is to say right at the height of the Rwanda genocide. PDD 25 was widely read as making it much more difficult for the US to commit troops to humanitarian interventions, and, as such, was seen as partially responsible for the failure to intervene in Rwanda. Still, although the substance of this proposition – that, for whatever reason, whether morally based or simply pragmatic, US

policy towards Rwanda was shaped by its experiences in Somalia – is widely cited in the literature on humanitarian intervention it is, in fact, rather difficult to substantiate. The events of 3 October 1993 were certainly present in the minds of US (and UN) decision makers, but David Halberstam in his authoritative history of the Clinton administration implies that the events of 10-12 October 1993 at Port au Prince in Haiti were actually rather more significant.¹⁹ On 10 October the USS *Harlan County* arrived with peacekeeping US soldiers on board in response to a crisis caused by the exclusion of the elected president, Aristide, by a military junta headed by Raoul Cedras; rioting mobs at the port prevented them from disembarking and, two days later, the *Harlan County* left with its tail metaphorically between its legs. It seems to have been this humiliation as much as events in Somalia that persuaded the Clinton administration not to become involved in Rwanda – although Haiti and Mogadishu were linked indirectly as the dockside thugs in Port-au-Prince taunted the US soldiers by chanting ‘Somalia, Somalia’.

But although the Clinton White House may not have been much exercised by the Somalia precedent (or by Rwanda at all), Madeleine Albright, then US Ambassador at the UN was obliged by her position to be concerned with the situation in Rwanda, and, interestingly, she *does* refer explicitly in her memoirs to conversations with the parents of American soldiers killed in Somalia, explaining her sensitivity to the parlous position of the UNAMIR peacekeepers in terms of a desire to avoid a similar situation developing.²⁰ Her discussion of the possibility of US involvement in a rescue mission to Rwanda also refers to Somalia as a key factor, but in strictly pragmatic terms. She also argues that PDD25 precluded US involvement in such a mission. In fact, while PDD25 certainly suggested that the US should be circumspect in its future support of UN peacekeeping operations and only commit US soldiers if US interests were directly at stake (and then only under US command), it specifically acknowledged that there were circumstances where these considerations could be overridden. Where ‘[gross] violation of human rights coupled with violence, or threat of violence’ occurs and ‘[The] political, economic and

¹⁹ David Halberstam *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals* (NY: Touchstone Books, 2002), pp 273-278.

²⁰ Madeleine Albright *Madame Secretary: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 2003) p. 150. Generally, Albright’s memoirs are a good source for discussions of guilt and US foreign policy in the 1990s; her sensitivity to these issues seems to have been considerable, or in any event, considerably higher than President Clinton’s.

humanitarian consequences of inaction by the international community have been weighed and are considered unacceptable' the US would support and if 'U.S. participation is necessary for (the) operation's success' participate in UN actions.²¹ Since all these conditions were met in Rwanda, US action there would have been perfectly consistent with the Directive.

It is, therefore, difficult to see that guilt over Somalia had much, if any, impact on Clinton's thinking over Rwanda – but, shifting to a later point in this narrative, did guilt over inaction there influence his administration's policy in later humanitarian disasters in the 1990s? Again, Albright is interesting; she concludes her discussion of Rwanda by commenting on the advance warning of the genocide that had been received, remarking..."Next time, I pray the world will listen and act, but I am far from confident it will."²² This sentence was written after she left office, and it is perhaps significant that there is pretty much no further reference to Rwanda in her memoirs.²³ The main international humanitarian issues that concerned Clinton in the second half of his Presidency (by which time Albright had become his Secretary of State) revolved around the fate of Former Yugoslavia. Here again, observers have argued that the West in general dropped the ball, politically and morally, in the early part of the Yugoslav Wars, and although there was no official US acknowledgement that this was so to parallel Clinton's near-apology to Rwanda, it might be that a sense of failure here combined with the sense of failure over the genocide, lay behind the later willingness to act in Kosovo in 1998/1999.²⁴

²¹ Taken from Clinton Administration Policy on Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations (PDD 25) Bureau of International Organizational Affairs, U.S. Department of State, February 22, 1996. Executive Summary. This is selective quotation, of course, but Albright also selects – the point is that PDD25 could have been read as underwriting a rescue mission if such had been on the cards, which it was not.

²² Albright, p. 155.

²³ Her one substantial comment post 1994 is actually quite perceptive; in the course of discussing peacekeeping in Africa she remarks: "The lesson of Somalia was that [the UN] invited disaster when it took sides in a conflict. The lesson of Rwanda was that the UN invited disaster when it heeded the lesson of Somalia." p. 452. One wonders whether either of these lessons were actually learnt; in any event, the quotation makes a good essay title and exam question.

²⁴ A central point here is that the Clinton Administration believed, with some reason, that its record during the Bosnian War, 1992-95 actually stood up to scrutiny, and that shortcomings in the Western response to Serb aggression in Bosnia could be attributed to the Europeans, especially the British. Samantha Power (*op cit*) is less forgiving, but Brendan Simms *Unfinest Hour* (London: Penguin, 2002) is more sympathetic to this position, as will be outlined below.

Again, the record here is somewhat unclear, but not generally supportive of the position that perceptions of prior delinquency had much impact on policy. What does come through is that Milosevic's behaviour was seen as continuing a pattern established earlier, and so a *political* lesson does seem to have been drawn from past behaviour, but it is more difficult to see a process of *moral* learning in action here. Halberstam's account of the run-up to the Kosovo War suggests that for most of the crisis the President was more focused on his domestic concerns (especially, of course, the Lewinsky affair) and, in so far as foreign policy impinged in major way on his consciousness, it was in relation to Iraq not former Yugoslavia. Halberstam argues that, in January 1999, only Madeleine Albright actually wanted to see action to protect the Kosovars; other foreign policy actors – Sandy Berger, National Security Adviser and the Joint Chiefs – were much opposed to being drawn into the Balkans.²⁵ What shifted opinion was the Serb massacre at the village of Racak, which played the same role as the 1995 Serb massacres of Muslim men and boys in the 'safe area' of Srebrenica in acting as a belated 'wake-up' call to the West. This allowed Albright, and her new ally, the NATO Supreme Commander in Europe, General Wesley Clark, to pull the US into a more active stance – but again, what seems to be going on is not any sense of US/Western *responsibility* for the massacre, rather a sense that the West *would be* morally responsible if it allowed Milosevic's tactics to succeed.

Albright's memoirs are instructive here. As UN Ambassador she did not have quite the detailed involvement in the Bosnian civil wars of Assistant Secretary and Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke, but she was quite closely involved in UN and US actions with respect to ending the conflict, and was clear about the lessons she drew from these actions. Explicitly referring to Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement (with her Czechoslovakian origins amplifying her distaste for the Munich Agreement), she expresses pride that "belatedly or not, we did come to the aid of the Bosnian people, to their benefit and ours."²⁶ Later, when discussing the onset of the Kosovo conflict she remarks, on looking at photographs of the victims of a Serb massacre of Kosovars on 30 September 1998, "[I] thought again of my vow not to allow a repeat of the carnage we

²⁵ Halberstam (*op cit*) p. 409.

²⁶ Albright, p. 191.

saw in Bosnia. There, several hundred thousand people had been killed. In Kosovo the current toll was several hundred. For most it was not too late, but we had to summon our resolve.”²⁷ That such resolve was summoned was largely due to Albright – with an assist from Milosevic himself, and, in a different way, from Tony Blair as will be discussed below – and what became to some known as ‘Madeleine’s War’ was a tribute to her persistence and recognition of what was important. Perhaps in this case an element of moral as well as political learning can be discerned, and certainly her emotions, her moral sentiments, seem to have been engaged, as well as her critical faculties. The reader will, however, note that this is, again, a case of an individual’s emotions being engaged and the extent to which the institution which she represents can be said to be expressing these feelings is highly debateable, especially since she, unlike Willy Brandt, was not head of government, much less head of state.

Tony Blair, Bosnia and Kosovo

In American narratives of the 1990s, the British are, for the most part, cast as bit-players on the world scene. This is broadly accurate, which is why this essay has focused on the US Administration. Still, over Kosovo, Tony Blair probably did have some influence, and in any event his position is interesting because he represented a fresh face in 1998/99. President Clinton was in office for the final years of the Bosnian war as well as for Rwanda, Haiti, Kosovo (and later East Timor) and the various intersecting narratives of guilt and innocence that can be constructed around the US record in these years all concern his decisions and non-decisions or those of his subordinates. Blair’s Labour government, on the other hand, replaced the Tories of John Major in May 1997 and thus had not been in power in the early 1990s. The most important figure of the administration that had been in power was Major’s longest-serving Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd; his role in the Bosnian War was, and remains, deeply controversial. Hurd believed, in essence, that the war was the latest manifestation of long-standing, basically tribal, animosities, and that the rest of the world would do well to avoid taking sides. James Baker, George H.W. Bush’s Secretary of State, famously remarked early in the

²⁷ *Op cit* p. 388.

wars of Yugoslav succession that “we don’t have a dog in that fight”.²⁸ Hurd preserved that attitude for a long time after it was no longer morally acceptable, if it ever had been. Brendan Simms in *Unfinest Hour* has set out the sorry story of how Britain between 1992 and 1995 consistently frustrated attempts on the part of the Americans (and, sometimes, the French) to give assistance to the legitimate government of Bosnia in its struggles with Serb separatists backed by Belgrade. Certainly this was a complex issue, the Bosnian Government were not entirely blameless, and Britain did have troops on the ground delivering aid which the Americans did not – still, the defeatism and negativity of British diplomacy in this period attracted criticism from many quarters, left and right, not least from the former Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher, whose pugnacious instincts would have served the country better on this occasion than Hurd’s weakness and vacillation.

When the Labour Party came to power in 1997, the new Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, made great play with the notion of stressing the ethical dimension of foreign policy, somewhat to the disgust of Downing Street, where Cook’s position was regarded as gesture politics of the worst kind.²⁹ Still, Blair was determined that his government would not be seen as weak on foreign or defence issues – Labour’s past anti-NATO, anti-European Union stance and its nominal support for unilateral nuclear disarmament had been a major electoral liability – and he shared the view that Hurd and Major had not been ready enough to resist Milosevic’s aggression in the early 1990s. Kampfner makes great play of Blair as a resolute militarist, who fought five wars in six years.³⁰ This is over-egging the pudding, but it is clear that Blair was prepared to be a very active and, if necessary, forceful liberal internationalist. During the Kosovo War he took it upon himself to make the moral case for the war and somewhat irritated the Americans by

²⁸ Halberstam, *op cit* p. 46.

²⁹ See John Kampfner *Blair’s Wars* (London: The Free Press, 2003) p. 15. Kampfner’s book is generally well-researched, although his judgement on US politics is rather shaky, and it should be remembered that in Labour’s own tribal wars, his loyalty is to Cook not to Blair.

³⁰ Operation Desert Fox, (1998), Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001/2) and Iraq (2003); since neither the first (air raids on Saddam) or the third (military support to the government of Sierra Leone) can really be seen as ‘wars’ in any normal meaning of the term, while the British involvement in Afghanistan was fairly minimal, a certain amount of padding in order to make a point seems to have gone on here.

continually raising the issue of the ultimate necessity to commit ground troops to the conflict if the bombing campaign failed.³¹

What is interesting from the perspective of this paper is that Blair actually comes much closer to the model of guilt-driven action than Clinton ever did, in spite of, *or perhaps because of*, the fact that he was not personally implicated in the guilt in question. Blair does seem to have believed that Britain had been a ‘delinquent’ state in its attitude to the Bosnian War, and seemed determined to expunge this blot on Britain’s record, even though he had played no part in putting it there.³² Blair was, in effect, making amends for his Britain’s past failings in not being prepared to oppose tyranny – he had a ‘guilty conscience’ not with respect to anything he had done, but with respect to things that his country had done (or, more accurately, not done). Whereas he could have drawn a line under the past and attributed all past errors to his predecessors (not an uncommon political stance) he chose instead to clear the record by action rather than rhetoric. The parallel with Brand’s gesture is clear – albeit at the level of motivation rather than the overall moral significance of his action. One should not overstate the point – as always, there were obviously other motives involved in Blair’s action as well as expiation, but acknowledging that this was so does not take away from the point that one of his motives was to rectify past errors.

There is another interesting point here – should past errors lead to attempts to rectify bad situations, or ought they actually to inhibit action? If Tony Blair was partly motivated over Kosovo by a desire not to repeat past mistakes, many of his critics seem to have read the same mistakes in a different way. On the contrary, the point was made that because Britain, or the US, or the West more generally, had not acted to restrain Milosevic in the past, they should not do so now – they had, in effect, lost the moral licence to act because of their past conduct. Similar arguments have been heard with respect to the interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 –given its past complicity in supporting the mujahadeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and in giving aid to

³¹ Alastair Campbell in his recently published diaries recounts a furious row between Blair and Clinton over this issue; *The Alastair Campbell Diaries* London: Hutchinson, 2007.

³² Simms makes the case that Blair’s policy over Kosovo was partly shaped by his sense that Britain’s record in the earlier stages of the war of Yugoslav Succession had been ignominious.

Iraq in its war with Iran in the same period³³, it was argued that it was hypocritical of the US to make any kind of moral argument in support of the overthrow of the Taliban and Saddam. Irrespective of the rightness or otherwise of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this seems to me to be a very bad argument; guilt ought, surely, to stimulate action not paralysis. The argument that because one has done the wrong thing in the past, one should not do the right thing now seems perverse.

Conclusion

Where have these reflections taken us? Not very far perhaps, although there are a few tentative generalisations that can be made. First, while scholars after the event will focus on some particular issue such as US policy towards the Rwanda genocide, at the time this was only one of a great many issues on which Clinton was being briefed by his staff; perhaps it should have been highlighted, and occasionally an issue will indeed force all others off the President's (or Prime Minister's) agenda, but most of the time the unceasing flow of events does not allow the top decision-makers to focus long enough on any particular subject to engage in deep introspection. The inability to grasp this point, or to understand its significance, is one of the reason why academic and journalistic accounts after the event are so frequently critical of the moral sense of decision-makers.³⁴

Second, and even taking the time factor into account, it is pretty clear that notions such as blame and forgiveness actually played very little part in the way politicians thought about humanitarian issues in the 1990s. They may have sometimes thought of other states as 'delinquent institutions' but rarely their own; only rarely did they, ask for or give, forgiveness and although they sometimes blamed others, they rarely blamed themselves. There is no equivalent in this period to the grand gesture of Willy Brandt in 1970 – the closest we come to this is the suggestion that in 1999 Tony Blair was, by his

³³ Actually, contrary to popular belief, the US did not give aid to Bin Laden, and the assistance to Saddam in the 1980s was mostly confined to sharing satellite intelligence – his actual war machine was made up of Russian and French arms, as an examination of the debris on the battlefield confirms – but the point stands.

³⁴ Popular fiction makes the same mistake. In the, generally very instructive, TV series *The West Wing*, President Bartlett and his staff somehow always seem to be able to make the time to concentrate fully on, sometimes quite minor, crises. Recently Dame Eliza Manningham Buller, then head of Britain's security service, MI5, commented "I wish life were like *Spooks* [the TV series] where everything is, a, knowable, and, b, solvable by six people," cited from *The Sunday Times* 12 November, 2006.

support for action in Kosovo, making amends for the past sins of the British state, but even in this example, as acknowledged above, there are many other factors at work.

But, third, it would be a mistake to suggest that politicians and diplomats do not learn from the past, and sometimes the things they learn are moral lessons to accompany the political wisdom that reflecting on past errors may bring. Madeleine Albright's memoirs are, perhaps, an example of this, and provide an interesting contrast with Douglas Hurd's.³⁵ Predictably neither Hurd nor Albright makes a big issue about the mistakes they made – memoirs are usually apologies rather than self-indictments – but it is in the nuances that differences can be found. Hurd seems to have come out of his time in office with much the same set of ideas that he went in with, and he clearly still does not understand why so many people still feel upset by the policies he pursued in Bosnia; Albright, one feels, developed and matured in office and, importantly, this maturing did not involve suppressing her obvious emotional responses to some of the crises she was forced to deal with. At times this probably made her an uncomfortable person to work with, and might even have contributed to mistakes, but if we are seriously concerned with the moral responsibilities of institutions – as we should be – then sometimes an emotional response is the right response.

Fourth, a conscious attempt to learn from the past may be institutional as well as personal, but does not necessarily affect future behaviour, at least not in a positive direction. PDD 25 was an attempt to draw out the lessons of Somalia and it at least contributed to later inaction in Rwanda. The UN's Carlsson Report of 1999 on the Rwanda Genocide was more self-critical of the institution, and of particular individuals including the by-then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, but, again, it is not clear that behaviour was altered thereby. The Carlsson Report was intended to shape future responses to similar events, but, in practice, the day to day politics of the UN dominates outcomes.

Final point; an emotional response is not necessarily engaged by *personal* guilt and a *personal* sense of the need for forgiveness. Like Willy Brandt in 1970 with reference to the Nazi era, Tony Blair after 1997 does seem to have experienced a sense of guilt for *Britain's* misdoings in the early 1990s, even though by no stretch of the

³⁵ Douglas Hurd *Memoirs* (London: Little Brown, 2003).

imagination could he be seen as personally responsible for these misdeeds. There may be a significant point of political psychology at work here; it is one thing to identify, regret and attempt to rectify one's country's past mistakes, but it is another thing altogether when the mistakes in question are one's own. Moreover, the notion of a repentant politician expiating past guilt by current action is not one that seems to be accepted by the public at large. Perhaps, paradoxically, it is only the innocent – those who are detached from an earlier period of delinquency – who can handle guilt and allow it to affect their behaviour?

Chris Brown

London, Jan 2008