A sharp exposé of US “humanitarian intervention” in the former Yugoslavia—but some false conclusions

By Charles Bogle and Paul Mitchell
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Professor David N. Gibbs is to be commended for writing the first full-length academic exposé of the “widely accepted consensus” that the Western powers intervened reluctantly in the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s.

In First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia, Gibbs refutes as well the claim that the great powers acted only after pressure was exerted by former “anti-establishment” intellectuals, such as Samantha Power, Christopher Hitchens, Michael Ignatieff, and Todd Gitlin.

Power, for example, has written, “US policymakers did almost nothing to deter the crime [genocide in Yugoslavia]. Because America’s ‘national interests’ were not considered imperiled by mere genocide, senior US officials did not give genocide the moral attention it warranted.... The key question...is: Why does the United States stand so idly by?”

Gibbs, associate professor of political science at the University of Arizona, systematically debunks the notion that the Western powers were motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns, rather than “power politics,” and that human rights conditions were improved in the region as a result. He marshals a large body of evidence to support his thesis that so-called humanitarian intervention was a “classic act of power politics,” “perfectly consistent” with the geostrategic interests of the US and other key states, as well as “private interest groups” within those states.

The author outlines his quite correct “basic argument” that “during the post-Cold War period, the US was seeking to reaffirm and then strengthen its position of worldwide dominance.

“US policy makers resolved to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991: They sought to use this circumstance to establish a new order of unilateral US hegemony with no challengers, and to perpetuate this dominance as far into the future as possible.”

This perspective found expression in the Pentagon’s 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), authored by then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz and other neo-conservatives, outlining a policy of unilateralism and pre-emptive military action to prevent any other nation from rising to superpower status and thus threatening US access to oil and other resources. Many of the main elements of the DPG were incorporated into the US National Security Strategy, published in 2002 and known popularly as the “Bush Doctrine.”

Gibbs argues that a “closely related” US objective was to find a new role for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), considered “a key instrument of US hegemony.” However, this unilateralist US vision “collided” with the ambitions of the European Union (EU), particularly a newly “assertive” re-united Germany, which was seeking to become “a major international actor, independent of the US.”

Thus, Gibbs concludes, Yugoslavia became the “principal arena” in which the US and EU sought to “showcase” their “respective capabilities” and “power positions.”

He reminds his readers that it was Germany that first intervened in the Balkans region, not the US, which was still preoccupied with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Operation Desert Storm in Iraq. First Do No Harm presents new evidence revealing that the Germans encouraged Slovenia and Croatia, months before the civil war broke out, to secede from the Yugoslav federation.

The initial “quiescence” of Washington in the Balkans region, Professor Gibbs argues, was seen as a sign of weakness. But, he explains, the Republican administration of George H. W. Bush, contrary to the claims of most studies, began actively intervening in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where war broke out in April 1992. US officials encouraged Bosnian leaders such as Ilija Izetbegovic to secede, undermining the European-brokered Lisbon peace agreement and sparking off “one of the most visible and important conflicts of the post-1945 era.”

The Clinton administration, coming to power in January 1993, faced the same dilemma as its Republican predecessor—how to use the Yugoslav conflict to reaffirm US power and offset Europe’s quest for an independent role, without getting embroiled in a “Vietnam-style quagmire,” involving large numbers of ground troops. The US continued to block EU peace plans and supplied Bosnian Croat and Muslim forces with military equipment in a large-scale covert operation.

Clinton invoked Serbian human rights violations—going so far as to compare them to the Holocaust—to justify “Operation Storm,” involving 100,000 Croatian troops backed by aircraft and artillery against Serb targets in the fall of 1995, which resulted in “probably the largest single act of ethnic expulsion of the entire war,” Gibbs notes.

The Dayton Accords that ended the war, not substantially different in their content from the earlier EU-sponsored peace plans, Gibbs argues, allowed the US to put a diplomatic face on its actions. Even
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