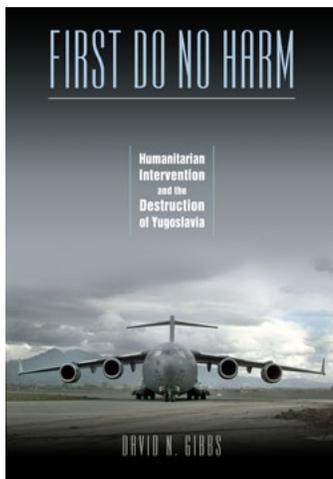


An interview with David N. Gibbs, author of *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*

By Charles Bogle and Paul Mitchell
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Earlier this month, the *World Socialist Web Site* posted a review of *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* by David N. Gibbs, Associate Professor of History and Political Science at the University of Arizona. We commended the book as the first full-length critique of the widely held belief that the Western powers, and especially the US, intervened reluctantly in the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s.

We also commended Professor Gibbs for debunking the claim that the great powers acted only after “anti-establishment intellectuals” had pressured them to do so.

First Do No Harm is not a flawless book. We thought his characterization of Slobodan Milosevic, former president of Serbia and Yugoslavia, was incomplete. We also found his “first do no harm” solution to the problem of “humanitarian interventions” to be inadequate and the result of an inconsistent consideration of the class and geopolitical interests that motivate US policy.

We wanted to give Professor Gibbs an opportunity to respond to these criticisms, as well as clarify and amplify other issues pertaining to the book, the academic world, and the ongoing global economic crisis. He was gracious enough to grant us an interview, which follows.

WSWS: Could you begin by providing a brief summary of your academic background?

David Gibbs: I received my undergraduate degree at George Washington University in 1979, my masters degree from Georgetown in 1983, and my doctorate in political science from MIT in 1989. I’ve been at the University of Arizona ever since, first in political science, and now I’m in history.

WSWS: Why did you leave the political science department?

DG: There are two reasons. Political science in general was going in a very quantitative direction. It took the form, after the Cold War, of a silly ideological jihad. I was also raising the issue of the connection between CIA and political science historically, and I was discussing that in public, and I think there were people within the department who were unhappy with that, making me uncomfortable with the department, so I simply moved to the history department. Nominally, I have affiliations with both departments.

WSWS: Could you explain your position in regard to CIA and academic collaboration?

DG: It’s a well-established fact that the CIA and military intelligence have a long association with academia, especially certain fields in the social sciences. It’s been well-documented that in the 1950s and early 1960s the intelligence agencies were one of the main sources of support for overseas research in the social sciences. We know less about the connections between the intelligence agencies and academia today because they’ve not been studied very well. But we know they’re still there to some degree. They pose a basic problem of conflict of interest, which is to say that a lot of people within the social sciences and history study conflicts with the CIA as an active party.

It’s very difficult to see how you can be an objective scholar studying these things if you are being financially supported by the CIA, one of the players in the conflict that you’re studying. I see this as a basic conflict of interest, similar to academics, in the biomedical sciences, who are funded by the pharmaceutical companies. The CIA conflict of interest is more serious than the pharmaceutical company conflict of interest because the CIA is an intelligence organization that is dedicated, by its very nature, to a high level of secrecy, and secrecy and academia are, in my view, quite incompatible for the most part.

I think that some biomedical journals require scientists who publish articles to declare in the article if a drug company is funding them and to acknowledge the conflict of interest in print. I’ve never in my career seen somebody do that with regard to CIA funding, and again it reflects the high level of secrecy. The final problem with this is that the CIA is also an agency of government that specializes in propaganda dissemination, including the dissemination of so-called “black propaganda,” i.e., dissemination of politically false information. And again, the dissemination of false information is extremely incompatible with academic standards and potentially could be very corrupting of academics who work with the CIA. I’m very concerned with this particular issue.

It’s also the scale of involvement. We know that the CIA has supported

the funding of books; I believe a Senate investigation found a number of books secretly funded by the CIA up until the 1970s; we have no information since that time. What was often involved was that an academic would write a secret report for the CIA and the CIA would allow the academic to then publish a book, with the understanding that the CIA would also edit the book before publishing. In other words, you have books in the library that were secretly edited by the CIA with no indication that this has been done. That's something that shouldn't happen in a democracy, from my point of view. It's completely antithetical to academic standards.

Something like that has no doubt been happening in recent years, even though we don't have the information to support the assertion.

One more point on the CIA-academic world connection. I did a survey of the top five political science journals that focused primarily on international relations—I covered 1990-2000. I did not find a single article with any lengthy discussion of CIA covert operations, such as the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile in 1973, Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, that sort of thing.

Very rarely do you find a single sentence or a footnote that makes any mention of covert actions. Apart from that, you never find anything of any length that discussed those issues. In the field of statistics, it is often stated that a statistic of zero is significant, and that's what we have here, a statistic of zero. It is very difficult to prove that this lack of attention to covert operations is due to the influence of the CIA, but that's my suspicion, because you have the history of collaboration between intelligence agencies and political science. Based on the evidence, I think that suppression of the discussion of certain topics the CIA would find embarrassing is a reasonable speculation based on the evidence.

WSWS: What do you consider the most important points raised in *First Do No Harm*?

DG: I'll separate Yugoslavia from the larger picture of the left in US foreign policy. In Yugoslavia, the principal finding of the book was that Western intervention was a key cause of the Yugoslavia break-up in the first phase, and in the later phases, Western intervention helped to intensify the violence and destruction of the wars that followed the break-up.

Again, this finding was very much against the general consensus, which holds that the Western powers, including the US and Western Europe, were not involved in the break-up to any significant degree, and only became involved with the greatest reluctance and without any significant economic or geo-strategic interests, and my argument is to the contrary, that they were deeply involved, even before the war began.

Also I argue that there was an effort by Western Europe, and to some extent Germany acting independently, to affirm their power independent of the United States after the end of the Cold War and use Yugoslavia as a context in which to demonstrate that power capability. And there was equally an attempt by the United States to try and check these European efforts at independence by trying to reaffirm American dominance after the Cold War.

So there was a sort of contest between the US and Europe for dominance after the Cold War, and Yugoslavia became the arena in which this played out. And those, I would argue, are the main interests involved. And again, this goes against the consensus that there was no significant Western interest in becoming involved in Yugoslavia and therefore, according to consensus view, the intervention must have reflected humanitarian objectives.

The final point concerns the outcome of the interventions. The widely accepted view, promoted by such people as [Obama advisor] Samantha Power in her very influential book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, is that the interventions, when they finally occurred in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 and in Kosovo in 1999, alleviated the humanitarian emergency and greatly improved human rights. I argue in

contrast that Western intervention in these two conflicts, and also in Croatia, had a very negative impact from a human rights standpoint and greatly increased the scale of violence and atrocities.

So with respect to the case of Yugoslavia itself, those are my main conclusions. With respect to the larger issue of intervention and the left, there's a large shift in left-wing opinion since the Cold War, which is this. During the Cold War, the left—there were some exceptions—took the view that intervention by foreign powers is a predatory activity that must be opposed in most cases. When one thought of the Cold War, one thought of Vietnam, one thought of the My Lai massacre, one thought of the overthrow of Allende in Chile, events like that.

After the end of the Cold War, many on the left came to see US intervention in a somewhat more benign light. Yugoslavia was the first place where that really happened on a large scale, but of course there are other cases as well, most recently and notably Darfur, with the calls for intervention from many liberal or left wing figures.

I think the general view was that everything had changed with the end of the Cold War, and the US and Europe had become reluctant to intervene now in the changed conditions of the post-Cold War era and that there should be more, not fewer, interventions to prevent things like mass killings, genocide, ethnic cleansing and the like. It also became an accepted belief that the left should fundamentally reassess its view toward warfare in general, that warfare isn't necessarily a bad thing, and intervention isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Concomitantly, spending on these activities, i.e., the military budget of the US, isn't necessarily a bad thing either because these "interventionist intellectuals," and I'm thinking here of people like Samantha Power, Christopher Hitchens, Paul Berman, and Susan Sontag, basically saw the need for more, not less, intervention with a humanitarian purpose.

I make an argument against this point of view, i.e., that intervention in Yugoslavia made things worse, not better, and that a typical outcome of these interventions is that these interventions will make the situation worse, not better.

And we've had, by the way, a fairly dramatic case of that in Iraq. The Iraq war, it should not be forgotten, was justified in part as humanitarian intervention to liberate the Iraqi people from a vicious dictator. Intervention in Afghanistan was similarly justified to liberate the people of Afghanistan from the Taliban.

I just saw this weekend an article by Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* emphasizing that the reason we're in Afghanistan is to enable girls to get an education. According to Friedman, that's the only possible reason we could be there, and we're having a positive impact on that account. I think these types of arguments had a lot of resonance on the left.

And I should point out that not everyone on the left supported intervention in Darfur and Iraq, but quite a few did, e.g., Hitchens and Berman, and they openly said that we must intervene in Iraq and Afghanistan for precisely the reasons we intervened in Kosovo. They saw continuity between Kosovo, on the one hand, and Iraq, on the other hand, and as we all know, the Iraq war was a catastrophe from the human rights standpoint, and in all probability wound up killing far more people than Saddam Hussein ever killed.

This underscores the basic problem here, which is that wars have a great potential for killing people and causing human harm. Whether we call them humanitarian or not does not alleviate or reduce that risk. Of course, one has to look at the motives of the United States for doing these things, and any reasonable person would have to be very cynical about human rights justifications for intervention because great powers almost always use human rights justifications. There's a real echo here of 19th century imperialism and the "white man's burden" that justified the British empire.

WSWS: We argue that the movement of the so-called left to the position

you just identified is a clear indication of their real class interests. Do you agree with this assessment?

DG: Is much of the left supporting a ruling class agenda? Yes, I think that's right; basically, you could say that people like Paul Berman are doing excellent work on behalf of the US foreign policy establishment. They like to see themselves as anti-establishment intellectuals, but whether they like it or not, they're arguing from a position that people in Washington love to hear, which is the need for more, not less, US intervention.

WSWS: In the review of your book, we criticize your characterization of Milosevic and also the conclusion. We would like to give you the opportunity to respond to these criticisms.

DG: You're arguing from an explicitly Marxist standpoint, and you're taking an explicitly Marxist point of view, and I understood perfectly where you're coming from. I do myself have something of a Marxist background in terms of my intellectual formation. I don't fully disagree intellectually with the criticism you made. I think it's more a matter of style; I made a very conscious decision in writing this book that I would try to have maximum impact, and in order to do that I used, first of all, very conventional vocabulary.

I think part of what you're objecting to is my vocabulary, really, that I'm not using a more Marxist vocabulary; I'm using a more mainstream vocabulary, and that's true, that's quite intentional. You also criticize me for not doing a class analysis of the situation, and it's true I didn't do that in detail.

I did emphasize certainly the economic underpinnings of the collapse of Yugoslavia in terms of the debt crisis of the 1980s. One of the reasons I didn't do a detailed class analysis was that the book didn't really focus on the internal politics of Yugoslavia; that was more background, so that the reader could better understand international relations in terms of Yugoslavia.

So, I didn't deal in as much detail as I might have with these types of internal issues pertaining to the dynamics of the break-up as I would have had I been discussing this from the standpoint of the internal politics of the country. In other words, I think there is a question of focus here. I also, as I said, made a very conscious effort to adjust my vocabulary. That's how I would respond to the criticisms. Do you want to come up with any counterpoints to any of this?

WSWS: Our argument was for a more consistent focus on class and historical analysis. Also, could you expand on why you chose to use a different, more mainstream vocabulary?

DG: Again, my emphasis here is on maximum impact. Let me put it this way. I'm not hung up on words, and if I can say the "foreign policy establishment" rather than the "ruling class," I see it as saying the same thing. I don't really see that much difference between the two phrases. I mean, there's a little difference, but not that much. And if I say "foreign policy establishment," I'll simply appeal to a far broader audience than I would if I said the "ruling class." Based upon that account, I don't see adjusting vocabulary as a big deal, but I can understand that that may be received differently, and I respect that.

WSWS: In your book, you establish very clearly the fact the Republican and Democratic parties have been virtually indistinguishable. Given that, do you see Barack Obama as offering hope, i.e., as much of the liberal left has been arguing, that he can be pressured into doing what they want him to do?

DG: I remain an optimist. I remain optimistic that circumstances will force Obama's hand to rethink both foreign and domestic policy in a more progressive direction. I'm not naïve. I know perfectly well that's not the default option; the default option is to do exactly what he has been doing, which is largely to continue previous policies with some relatively small modifications and a large modification with respect to style. Stylistically, we've seen a big shift, but I'm not that interested in style, so

that doesn't matter much to me.

It's a basic fact of life that the Democrats and Republicans don't differ all that much. Let me enumerate what I see as the major differences. First, if the Democrats had won the 2000 election, we probably would not have been at war with Iraq, and I see that as a big difference. Another big difference is that with Obama winning, I think it's very unlikely we'll have war with Iran, just because I would see that as irrational from the standpoint of US establishment's interests. If the Republicans had won, there was a real possibility of that happening.

WSWS: We've argued on the site that what you're seeing, up to this point, is a case where the US is essentially surrounding Iran rather than initiating a direct engagement at this point.

DG: As somebody who doesn't want to see another hot war in the world, à la Iraq, I think instead of very bellicose reactions being taken by Obama towards Iran, his present actions are less negative than outright war with Iran, which is, I think, the other possibility and one that we quite possibly would have seen had John McCain been elected.

I see a difference of substance here, so I emphasize that there are some differences, while one should not exaggerate these differences. With regard to Yugoslavia, there really wasn't that much difference at all, I would agree. To a large extent, I would say that Bill Clinton continued the Bush policy in Bosnia until he was able to establish a plan of action and a consensus within his administration for actually engaging in an offensive strategy of intervention.

On Kosovo, I think the Republicans and Democrats weren't that far apart. If [Republican Bob] Dole had won the election of 1996, there is very little doubt in mind that he would have done pretty much what Clinton did in Kosovo in 1999. The intervention in Yugoslavia was sort of bipartisan, and so there I think you see more clearly than you do with Iraq, a case where there wasn't much difference at all.

WSWS: Speaking of perspective, what is your opinion of the WSWS, i.e., our perspective, and do you think there is a socialist or an internationalist solution to the present crisis?

DG: I think WSWS is a wonderful resource, and I read it regularly, very regularly since the Asia crisis, and so I commend WSWS for maintaining a socialist position and doing it in a serious way by making it very accessible to people.

In terms of the large issue of the basic position that the WSWS takes, I'd say that I come from a socialist perspective, and I think socialism has an important role to play in the world today and in the future. I think there is a basic problem of optimism, which is this. As I see the WSWS position, it has to be based on the idea that a socialist success in the United States is at least a reasonable possibility within, let's say, the next twenty years. I myself just don't see anything on the horizon to suggest that that is a position I can agree with. It just doesn't seem realistic to me. Now, in terms of the long term, say 50 to 100 years, I remain optimistic about socialism; but I don't see socialism as something that in this country is going to take off any time in the medium or near term future.

Professor Gibbs' first book, *The Political Economy of Third World Intervention: Mines, Money, and U.S. Policy in the Congo Crisis*, was published in 1991 as part of the American Politics and Political Economy Series. *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, published by Vanderbilt University Press, is available at Amazon.com.

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