

# All Anti-Utopians Now

*David Rieff*

**At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention**

*Simon and Schuster, 2005, 270 pages.*

*Reviewed by Clifford Orwin*

For everything there is a season, a time and place under heaven. Under the liberal democratic heaven of the 1990s, the thing was humanitarian military intervention. It began in hand wringing, issued in brief claps of martial thunder, and (on the evidence of the present volume) has lapsed back into hand wringing. As was widely remarked at the time, humanitarian intervention was a highly anomalous practice. It mobilized some of the nicest, most peace-loving, war-hating people in the Western world on behalf of some nasty little wars waged on behalf of some nasty little peoples. David Rieff, author of the new book *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention*, is a prime example; he ranked foremost among those

whom Adam Wolfson, then-editor of *The Public Interest*, christened “humanitarian hawks.” By this, Wolfson meant hawks for humanitarian purposes only: While not even Will Rogers is likely to have claimed never to have met an army that he didn’t like, the humanitarian hawks had a fairly long history of never meeting one that they did. Bumper stickers proliferated on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but rare was the one that read, “Unleash the Dogs of War.”

Nor is Rieff just any old product of a quasi-pacifistic milieu. His mother was Susan Sontag, intellectual matriarch of the antiwar movement of the 1960s, and it is to her that this book is dedicated. A brilliant essayist and social critic, Sontag’s displeasure was terrible to behold. Fortunately for Rieff, her response to his saber rattling of the 1990s was not to wonder where he had gone wrong as a son (or she as a mother), but to jump in with both feet, and like her son she strongly supported humanitarian intervention in Bosnia.

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Whatever else one may think about Rieff's views, his stance on Bosnia was extremely persuasive. Bill Clinton had been right to run in 1992 on a platform of American intervention there, as he had been wrong to drag his feet once in office. In the meantime, of course, there was the Somalia fiasco, and enthusiasm for interventions was in short supply. Still, Bosnia wasn't Somalia, and as the sequel would prove, effective intervention at a reasonable price was eminently feasible in this instance. It wasn't mere sentimentality to insist that tolerating a genocide in Europe fifty years after the Holocaust was a disgrace to all the balky parties, American as well as European. It took the Rwandan genocide of 1994 (and a great deal else besides) to goad Clinton into action in the Balkans. By then, the most charitable thing that could be said was that even much too late was better than never: An early response could have preserved Bosnia's original borders (and its viability as a state) while saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslims. The actual intervention, however, came much too late to do either.

Of the journalists who had agitated for American intervention in Bosnia, Rieff was among the most effective. A frequent visitor to Sarajevo, he conveyed eloquently the desperation of a city under siege, one that the Western

powers took far too long to lift. His resulting book, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (1996), was a powerful exposé of the duplicity of all the powers involved in the Balkan scandal, and of one conspicuous non-power, the United Nations. However low your opinion of the UN, it won't have reached absolute zero unless you've read Rieff's book. True, the UN labored under many disadvantages, not least the discord among the permanent members of the Security Council as to the exact task of the United Nations Protective Force deployed in Bosnia. In the end, the force succeeded—barely—in protecting itself and other humanitarian aid workers. It did not, however, protect Bosnian Muslims, not even in those "safe havens" where it had promised to do so.

In *Slaughterhouse*, Rieff powerfully expounded on the pitfalls of halfhearted intervention, arguing that the UN had actually collaborated with the Bosnian Serbs in their policy of massacre, mass rape, and ethnic cleansing. He showed that the very term "humanitarian military intervention" is a misnomer, and a far from innocent one. Traditionally, humanitarianism conceived of itself as impartial, which is to say, apolitical. What was required in Bosnia, however, was a *political* intervention that took clear sides. In the case of Bosnia,

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the banner of humanitarianism merely obfuscated shameful inaction. Thus, as the UN and the European powers practiced humanitarianism, the Bosnian Serbs practiced genocide; the two, Rieff insists, went hand in hand. Whomever the Serbs failed to kill, the UN fed; sometimes, however, it fed them just to keep them alive until the Serbs could kill them. At Srebrenica, it turned them over to be slaughtered.

*Slaughterhouse* was not a pro-American book. Although the more hawkish of Clinton's advisers (Madeleine Albright, Richard Holbrooke) emerged as heroes, Clinton's policy (or lack thereof) earned Rieff's harsh censure. Still, it was a pro-interventionist book, and the duplicity and discord of the European powers persuaded Rieff, as it did many others, that any effective intervention in the post-cold war world could be mounted only by the U.S.

In Rieff's next book, however, he made both the case for intervention and, somewhat confusingly, the case against it. *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2002) repeated the arguments of *Slaughterhouse* on the inadequacy of humanitarianism to confront political crises that cried out for military intervention. At the same time, looking back on all the interventions of the 1990s, the results seemed ambiguous at best. Often (as

in Kosovo and in Central Africa) one simply empowered the victim to become the victimizer. Rieff's argument here was both tortured and tortuous: He seemed to blame governments alike for ducking intervention and for taking it on, humanitarians alike for resisting intervention and for facilitating it.

Now comes *At the Point of a Gun*, a collection of essays published between 1996 and 2004. Rieff has divided it into two parts: "The UN and International Relations Leading Up to Iraq," and "The Iraq War and Its Aftermath." There are some unifying elements: An introduction, an afterword, and prefaces and postscripts to some of the chapters. Still, like many books of this sort, the whole makes less of an impression than its parts.

The essays collected in the first part of the book are of considerable interest. They include a thoughtful and unsparing analysis of the shortcomings of the UN and the prospects of reforming it ("Hope is Not Enough," 2003) and a sobering "Defense of Afro-Pessimism" (1998)—the fear that most of Africa, despite development aid and the supposed benefits of globalization, will remain misgoverned and impoverished for a long time to come. "Lost Kosovo" (1999), which describes the irresoluteness of the NATO forces on the ground

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in the early stages of that crisis, is a fine piece of reportage. "An Age of Genocide" (1996), one of Rieff's best essays, begins with a searing chronicle of the events in Rwanda and proceeds to memorialize Raphael Lemkin, the remarkable inventor of the term genocide and unsung father of the Genocide Convention of 1948. There then follows a trenchant discussion of the vicissitudes of the notion of genocide since. Rieff also includes the "most extreme pro-interventionist argument I have ever put forward," as well as the "most sanguine account of U.S. power I have ever allowed myself to entertain" ("A New Age of Liberal Imperialism?" 1999). While he admits that this essay seems very far from him now, he concedes that "it obviously would have been intellectually dishonest not to include it."

As Rieff makes clear, much of what distances his later self from his earlier one is the trauma of Iraq. Unfortunately, his current writings on Iraq suffer more than his earlier ones on other subjects from the short shelf life of most journalism. Even if they appear topical on first glance, they now read like old news: We have heard as much as we need to know of the poor planning and lack of training for the war's after-effects, as well as of crippling divisions between the Pentagon and the State Department. Rieff sides with State, so you would have to look

elsewhere to get the Pentagon's side of the story.

Like most writers hostile to the administration, Rieff stresses the drawbacks of its policies without considering those of the alternatives. Yes, it was questionable to disband Saddam's Ba'athist-dominated army, but failing to do so would surely have posed severe problems of its own. Indeed, because there proved to be no easy decisions in the wake of the war, there were few clear and obvious mistakes. And of course, the grass is always greener by the side of the road not taken. At the same time, the difficulty of the available choices has resulted in a great deal of vacillation, which may have proved the biggest liability of all.

Like so many critics of the war, Rieff casts its supporters as victims of their arrogant overconfidence. It is no doubt true that some in the administration did underestimate the difficulties to follow; perhaps most did. Yet many of us who backed the war conceded the uncertainty of the aftermath. To use a phrase current at the time, we accepted the possibility that the coalition might win the war, but lose the peace. In fact, I knew no supporter of the war, inside the government or out, who did not expect the sequel to prove more difficult than the war itself. And since even Rieff admits, however grudgingly,

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that “obviously, it is possible that Iraq will eventually be a decent place to live in,” supporters of the war owe it to the Iraqis (as well as to themselves) to continue to work for that day.

**B**oth the younger, sadder Rieff and the older, wiser Rieff have taken their stand on the principle of “anti-utopianism.”

In the aftermath of Kosovo [and Rwanda]... I could see no alternative to Western military power—above all to U.S. power. It seemed to me that if one was not a utopian (and even the most cursory reader of my work will see plainly enough that if there is anything that distinguishes it, it is its vertebral anti-utopianism; it probably accounts for my lack of sympathy with either the Left or its mirror image, neoconservatism), then one could not wait for the world to change....

And yet if I think anything today, indeed, if this book argues *for* anything, I suppose it is against consistency, against ideology and utopia, and for the proposition that each case must be argued on its merits. In other words, it is an argument against both the interventionist utopia of a Paul Wolfowitz or a Robert Kagan and the anti-interventionist utopia of a Noam Chomsky or an Edward Herman.

While continuing to hold that “each case must be argued on its merits,” Rieff now believes that “we

should lean away from war, lean as far away as possible without actually falling over into pacifism.” But how far away is that?

I have carried home my doubts about the entire project of humanitarian intervention. Does this mean I am prepared to consistently oppose them? It does not. I still believe we should have sided with the Bosnians and moved heaven and earth to save the Rwandan Tutsis. But it does mean that I am no longer an interventionist.

Yes to moving heaven and earth, no to being an interventionist. No longer able to support intervention, Rieff can't in good conscience *refrain* from supporting it either.

Rieff sketches the present situation as one in which “interventionism is the order of the day both on the human rights Left (Darfur) and the neo-Conservative Right (Iraq, and now perhaps Iran).” In other words, there are two Lefts: the obsessive anti-Americans who are overly hostile to intervention, and Rieff's former comrades-in-arms who are too eager for it. It is these latter, Rieff claims, who share ascendancy today with their mirror images on the Right.

In fact, however, it is clear that there will be no intervention in Darfur, and none in Iran, either. Rieff

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greatly exaggerates the enthusiasm of both today's Left and today's Right for military intervention; he writes as if only *he* were once bitten, twice shy.

Rieff's anti-utopian stance is what allegedly sets him apart from Left and Right alike: He inhabits the anti-utopian center. Yet Rieff's anti-utopianism does not distinguish him from the contemporary Left, virtually the whole of which casts itself as anti-utopian.

"Anti-utopianism" is in fact most deeply entrenched among the humanitarian Left, the wing that has proved friendliest to American military intervention. Indeed, its very commitment to humanitarianism signals its rejection of utopianism, specifically of the Marxist milieu in which so many of its leaders were educated. Abandoning the task of creating a heaven on earth—or even of reforming the prosperous capitalist societies from which they spring—they devote themselves to alleviating faraway hells. Their moral consciousness having been shaped by the Holocaust, they aspire not to achieving a comprehensive good, but to relieving unspeakable evils. If utopianism was distinctively modern, the humanitarianism of today is post-modern (which is to say, among other things, post-Marxist). Bernard Kouchner, ranking celebrity humanitarian

and the most eloquent spokesman for the movement, has stated his—and its—principle as "absolute pessimism": "I believe that we must expect the worst; it is the best way of remaining an optimist." Only if we expect our struggle against evil to come to nothing will we avoid disappointment.

Nor does Rieff's anti-utopianism distinguish him from the contemporary Right, in particular the American neo-Conservatives who are his *bête noire*. Neo-Conservatism, too, originated in anti-utopianism, which remains its bedrock to this day.

It is perhaps unfair to Woodrow Wilson that his name has become a byword for utopianism, but I've heard that Paul Wolfowitz bristles when described as a Wilsonian. If he has advocated taking risks to kick-start democracy in the Middle East, it is because, in his view, the Islamist challenge to the security of the United States admits in the long run of no other response.

Rieff should have recognized that utopianism is a red herring. As an example of his antagonists' position, he cites Eliot A. Cohen: "In the end, it makes very little difference whether one thinks of the United States as an empire or as something else... the real alternatives are U.S. hegemony exercised prudently or foolishly,

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consistently or fecklessly, safely or dangerously.” This strikes me as a fair statement of the neo-Conservative viewpoint. But where is the utopianism in it? Where in particular is the justification for the supposed “interventionist utopia” (i.e., mania for endless intervention) that Rieff foists on Cohen and his colleagues? After a careful reading of Rieff’s book, it is still unclear just where he disagrees

with Cohen’s statement. In the post-modern West, at least, it seems that we are all anti-utopians now.

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