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Setting a Dangerous Precedent in Somalia

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**Executive Summary**

The Bush administration's decision to send nearly 30,000 U.S. troops to Somalia is likely to have far-reaching and potentially dangerous implications for the United States and the international community. Not only does the intervention itself entail significant risks, but it sets a precedent for similar humanitarian military crusades--either unilateral or under the banner of the United Nations--elsewhere in an increasingly turbulent world. The American people would be wise to reject the embryonic doctrine of humanitarian intervention as the new U.S. mission in the post-Cold War era. Although such a mission undoubtedly appeals to those who have an insatiable desire to correct all the ills of the planet and the hubris to assume that American power can achieve that utopian objective, it would inevitably entangle the United States in an array of bloody conflicts that have no relevance whatsoever to America's security interests.

**A Limited Mission in Somalia?**

In his December 4, 1992, address to the nation officially announcing Operation Restore Hope, President Bush stressed both the humanitarian purpose and the limited nature of the U.S. military intervention in Somalia:

> Our mission has a limited objective--to open the supply routes, to get the food moving, and to prepare the way for a U.N. peace-keeping force to keep it moving. This operation is not open-ended. We will not stay longer than is absolutely necessary.[1]

He stated further that the United States had no plans to "dictate political outcomes" in the war-torn East African nation.

High-level administration officials exuded confidence (at least on a "not for attribution" basis) that American forces would be able to complete their mission and return to the United States in time for the inauguration of President Bill Clinton on January 20, 1993. Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney and military leaders were more circumspect, indicating that it would probably be approximately three months before "the bulk" of U.S. troops could be withdrawn. Nevertheless, they also offered assurances that American forces would not get bogged down in a Somali quagmire. Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, compared the U.S. mission to having the cavalry ride to the rescue and then transferring responsibility to the "marshals" (i.e., U.N. peace-keepers) once the situation stabilizes.[2]

Whether the administration's optimistic pronouncements prove accurate depends on a number of factors. One of the most important is whether the U.S. intervention is something more than a publicity gesture to allow George Bush to leave office having "done something." (The prime-time landing of the initial military units under the blaze of television camera lights also lends credence to the thesis that the Somali operation is at least partly designed to be promotional advertising for maintaining the current size and budget of the armed forces.) If U.S. policymakers intend merely to make a grand display of American military prowess in overwhelming Somalia's feuding militias just long
enough to get relief supplies flowing, there is a reasonable chance that U.S. forces will be able to leave Somalia with minimal casualties. Of course, Somalia would probably revert to chaos once the American troops departed, and the intervention would have accomplished nothing of lasting importance. One would hope that U.S. officials would not engage in such a cynical exercise. If Washington's goal is to have a long-term beneficial impact on the suffering in Somalia, however, the risks rise appreciably.

The lack of armed opposition to the initial landing of Marines in Mogadishu on the morning of December 9 should not lead to the conclusion that there is no danger of casualties. From the beginning, it was unlikely that the various militias would be so foolish as to launch a frontal attack against large numbers of U.S. troops. There is a significantly greater risk, however, as American forces fan out into the countryside in smaller units. Moreover, the greatest likelihood of clashes is not during the first few weeks of the operation but later when one or more political factions may regard the U.S. presence as detrimental to their interests.

Some proponents of intervention concede that even creating the conditions necessary for the distribution of relief supplies will require "disarming" rather than intimidating the militias--an inherently dangerous undertaking. U.S. leaders and military planners may honestly believe that there is a clear distinction between limited intervention for humanitarian purposes and intervention for larger political objectives, but that is an illusion. There is, at best, a vague zone of transition from one mission to the other.

Just days before President Bush's announcement, Smith Hempstone, the U.S. ambassador to Kenya, cautioned in a confidential cable to his State Department superiors that the United States should think "once, twice, and three times" before getting involved in Somalia.[3] He warned that Somalis are "natural-born guerrillas" who would engage in ambushes and hit-and-run attacks. "They will not be able to stop the convoys from getting through. But they will inflict--and take--casualties." Referring to the ill-fated U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1982-83 that ultimately cost the lives of more than 260 Marines, Hempstone concluded, "If you liked Beirut, you'll love Mogadishu."

From Beirut to Mogadishu

Although Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and other officials dismiss Hempstone's assessment as excessively pessimistic, it is worthy of careful consideration. There are ominous similarities between the situation in Lebanon during the early 1980s and the current environment in Somalia: for example, politically fractured societies with an assortment of heavily armed militias backing various factions. The U.S.-led multinational peace-keeping force went into Lebanon with the best of intentions, determined to dampen the violence and alleviate civilian suffering without becoming entangled in the underlying political disputes. And for a while they were welcomed by most, if not all, of the long-beleaguered Lebanese people.

Ultimately, however, it became clear that regardless of U.S. intentions, there was no such thing as a politically neutral intervention. The mere presence of the peace-keeping forces bolstered the positions of some players (primarily Christian leader Amin Gemayel) in Lebanon's complicated power struggle at the expense of others. Disadvantaged factions then began targeting the Marines for retaliation, and sniper fire soon started taking a toll. The intervention reached its disastrous culmination in October 1983 when a terrorist bomb blew up the Marine barracks in Beirut, claiming 241 American lives.

Perhaps the mission in Somalia will have a happier outcome, but the similarities of the two situations should make U.S. policymakers apprehensive. There has been a pervasive tendency among American commentators to dismiss the contending Somali forces as "warlords," "bandits," and "thugs." Although those terms may reflect some truth, the political landscape in Somalia is more complicated than such facile descriptions imply. Somalia may not be fractured along religious and ideological lines to the extent that Lebanon was, but there is a political dimension to the clan-based fighting and to the overriding power struggle between the two principal "warlords," interim president Ali Mahdi Mohamed and the chairman of the United Somali Congress, Mohamed Farah Aideed.

Given that power struggle, Aideed's surprising receptivity to the deployment of U.S. forces should cause suspicion rather than rejoicing. Aideed stresses the need for an effective central government, and there is little doubt about whom he has in mind to head that government. He may well hope that the U.S. intervention will help him to finally outmaneuver his rivals, and he may even be hoping for tacit U.S. support for his effort to consolidate power. Even if
Aideed's hopes are unfounded, the U.S. military humanitarians are wandering into a potential political minefield. To complicate matters further, there is a potent secessionist effort, led by the Somali National Movement, to create an independent republic of Somaliland in northern Somalia. Indeed, political leaders there have taken advantage of the absence of a strong central government in Mogadishu not only to proclaim but to make great progress toward establishing their new state--although it has yet to receive diplomatic recognition from the international community.

The volatile and multifaceted political environment in Somalia creates considerable danger for U.S. forces. The longer they remain, the greater the likelihood that they will be viewed by one or more factions, not as impartial purveyors of humanitarian relief, but as outside meddlers with their own agenda. If they are seen as participants in the power struggle, it is inevitable that they will become the targets of disgruntled or disillusioned factions. There is little danger of large-scale battles with an opposing army. The principal danger will be sniper fire, booby traps, and the other hit-and-run tactics that guerrilla forces employ to inflict limited but debilitating casualties.

In a best-case scenario, that may not happen, but the Somalia intervention is the foreign policy equivalent of bungee jumping: a risky undertaking without a compelling need. Of course, it is impossible not to be distressed by heartrending scenes of violence and starvation, but emotionalism is rarely a wise guide for policy. Washington can and should support the humanitarian relief effort in every prudent way possible, and it has, in fact, already made major contributions of food and other supplies and provided U.S. planes and ships to transport the supplies to East Africa. Putting American soldiers in harm's way, however, is another matter. That risk should never be taken unless the security interests of the republic are imperiled.

The Facade of a "UN" Operation

Bush administration officials emphasize that the intervention in Somalia is a United Nations' operation. As President Bush stressed, not only was the introduction of military forces approved by the Security Council, but troops from approximately a dozen countries will be joining the U.S. units. Colin Powell and other spokesmen have also offered assurances that U.S. forces will be withdrawn as soon as UN "peace-keepers" are available to take over their duties.

There is less to this "UN" intervention, however, than meets the eye. Most of the dozen nations that have offered to join the operation will make little more than token contributions of troops. For example, France contemplates sending 1,700, Italy 1,500 to 2,000, and Canada 900. The U.S. deployment of 28,000 to 30,000 troops dwarfs such meager contributions.

The pattern is familiar. The two largest UN peacemaking or peace-enforcement missions--in Korea and the Persian Gulf--exhibited a similar disparity. In the former, the United States provided nearly 90 percent of the outside (non-South Korean) forces for what was supposedly a UN "police" action. The situation in the gulf war was only slightly better, with America providing nearly 80 percent of the outside forces.

As was the case in the gulf war, there are some notable absentees from the Somalian intervention. Tokyo has once again offered money but declined to send troops, citing article 9 of Japan's Peace Constitution as an impediment. Thus far, Germany has not even offered to send money, much less put troops in Somalia.

Perhaps the most conspicuous absentees are member states of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). It would seem that the conflict in Somalia is precisely the type of problem that a regional organization such as the OAU is designed to handle. But the OAU has failed to take any meaningful action, preferring to pass the responsibility along to the United Nations, which, in operational terms, means to the United States. Nor have the individual members displayed much enthusiasm for the Somalian mission. Only Nigeria (1,000 troops), Zimbabwe (1,000 troops), and Egypt (300 to 600 troops) have thus far pledged military personnel.

There is reason to question the sincerity of the Bush administration's portrayal of the Somalian intervention as a genuinely collaborative international enterprise. That representation would seem to be designed primarily to, once again, thinly disguise a U.S. operation under a UN patina and defuse potential domestic opposition.[4]

There is also reason to question whether a reliable UN peace-keeping force will be available to take over the Somalian
mission from the United States once the situation stabilizes. General Powell's assumption that the U.S. "cavalry" will be able to transfer responsibility to the UN "marshals" in a few months ignores the possibility that there may be an insufficient number of marshals, they may have no inclination to become entangled in combat operations, or they may have policy agendas that could actually worsen the situation in Somalia.[5]

The Dubious UN Agenda in Somalia

The last point deserves far more attention than it has received. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the members of the Security Council have been disturbingly vague about the United Nations' long-term political objectives in Somalia, other than the cliché of restoring order. What is the UN position, for example, on Somaliland's bid for independence? Given the long-standing UN bias for perpetuating the international status quo—even when it means trying to preserve artificial and inherently unstable political entities such as Sudan and Zaire—it is highly probable that UN "peace-keepers" will try to discourage, if not forcibly suppress, the breakaway republic. Boutros-Ghali's emphasis on the goal of "reconciliation" of all Somali factions would seem to leave little room for the option of secession.

Insisting on maintaining Somalia's territorial integrity would be a grave error since the people of northern Somalia (minority groups as well as the dominant Issak clan) have demonstrated that they want to determine their own political destiny, and they have thus far largely managed to avoid the chaos and starvation that have afflicted southern Somalia. It would be morally odious for the United States to be an accomplice in destroying the aspirations for independence of the people of Somaliland, but there is no indication that U.S. policymakers gave the matter the slightest thought when they committed the United States to being the United Nations' military agent in Somalia.

A Perilous Precedent

In addition to the risks inherent in the Somali intervention itself, the action creates a dangerous precedent for the United States. The various military interventions Washington launched during the Cold War were all at least arguably related to the defense of American security interests—although that justification was sometimes stretched to the breaking point. Even the Persian Gulf War had a plausible (albeit weak) security rationale. But no one contends that Somalia has the slightest relevance to the security of the United States. The justification for this intervention is based entirely on appeals to America's "moral obligations."

That is what makes the Somalian precedent so worrisome. If the United States abandons its own security interests as the standard by which to decide whether to use military force, there is virtually no limit to the possible arenas in which American lives may be sacrificed. Washington will have a rudderless foreign policy buffeted by the unpredictable winds of emotionalism. Where and when we intervene will be determined by television images of suffering or the lobbying skills of foreign political factions, not the relevance of the stakes to the security of the American republic.

If moral outrage is the new guiding principle for U.S. military action, there will be a surplus of opportunities to risk American lives. How does one justify intervention in Somalia but not a few hundred miles away in Sudan, where a seemingly interminable civil war has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilians? The effects of internece conflicts in Liberia, Angola, and Mozambique are equally appalling. Virtually every argument used to justify taking action in Somalia could be used for intervention in any of those places. (Ominously, Boutros-Ghali has now proposed to send 8,000 UN "peace-keepers" to Mozambique.)[6]

And Africa is not the only arena of political turmoil and massive suffering. Bloody strife persists in Afghanistan, Moldova, East Timor, the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Turkey, the republic of Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Sri Lanka, and, of course, the former Yugoslavia. One must ask whether supporters of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention advocate U.S.-led interventions in those tragic conflicts as well. It is of no comfort that some of the strongest proponents of intervention in Somalia (including New York Times columnists Anthony Lewis and Leslie Gelb) have also been beating the war drums for action in Yugoslavia.

Former president Ronald Reagan goes further, suggesting that just as the democracies banded together to defeat Soviet totalitarianism, so they should now unite to "impose civilized standards of behavior on those who flout every measure of human decency." He calls for the creation of a permanent UN army (presumably with extensive U.S. participation) to establish global order and carry out a policy he describes as a "human velvet glove backed by a steel fist of military
force."[7] A permanent UN army is also popular with other advocates of humanitarian intervention and is being pushed vigorously by Boutros-Ghali.[8]

It is increasingly apparent that aggressive interventionists regard the Somalian mission, not as an exceptional measure, but as the prototype for U.S. policy in the post-Cold War world. Some even spin elaborate schemes for UN trusteeships or a revival of Western colonialism--backed, of course, by the military power of the United States--to manage such chaotic situations as those in Somalia, Yugoslavia, Liberia, and Haiti.[9]

The American people should oppose both the Somalian intervention and the policy it represents. Accepting the costs and risks of intervening in internal or regional conflicts during the Cold War to thwart allies and clients of the Soviet Union was bad enough--especially since that strategy led the United States into Vietnam. Doing so in the post-Cold War period when there is no need to counter the threat posed by a rival superpower is far worse. In the absence of a compelling strategic rationale, meddling in an assortment of parochial struggles would be masochism.

The primary responsibility of the U.S. government is to guard the security and liberty of the American people. Washington has neither a constitutional nor a moral writ to play Don Quixote and attempt to rectify all the ills of the world. American lives and resources must not be sacrificed in international military crusades waged in the name of humanitarian intervention. Defending the security of the republic is a demanding enough task for the armed forces of the United States. U.S. leaders should never again let American troops become the Hessians of the 1990s--the hired guns of the UN Security Council--as they have in Somalia.

Notes


[5] Even Powell seemed less than confident about the transfer, conceding that some Marine units might have to remain off shore for a possible return if the situation again deteriorated.


