

## RECONSIDERING A DARFUR INTERVENTION

*An Interview with David Rieff  
by Christophe Chung*

*During the 1990s, David Rieff spent extended periods of time in Bosnia and Rwanda, covering the siege of Sarajevo and the Rwandan genocide. He is a frequent contributor to The New Republic, The New York Times, and The Los Angeles Times. Rieff is also the author of Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West and A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis and co-editor (with Roy Gutman) of War Crimes: What the Public Should Know. His upcoming book is entitled At the Point of a Gun.*

**BardPolitik** Do you believe Darfur is another Rwanda or Kosovo? A combination of the two or neither?

**Rieff** Let me start by saying that all analogies are invidious. Don't get me wrong; I understand that one wants to create a template. However, in the case of Darfur, these kinds of templates are morally dangerous, because what one seeks from the Rwanda comparison is a morally ironclad way of reassuring ourselves that we are doing the right thing.

What fascinates me most about Darfur is the extent to which it's driven by the neo-

Conservatives. It is the *Weekly Standard* that has most openly called for intervention and I believe there is a right-wing tradition of human rights in the United States. And indeed, to some extent, both the neo-Conservatives and the human rights activists—which many would associate on opposite sides of the political spectrum—are descendants of Wilsonianism. We are still talking about American hegemony and American interventionism. However, it is still a liberal, imperialist vision, whether done through soft-power and multi-lateral institutions, or through hard-power and unilateral force.

Darfur is a strange beast. If one agrees with the

Srebrenica precedent, then genocide *is* taking place in Darfur. However, the problem lies in the fact that if Srebrenica was genocide, then, in essence, all wars in the Third World are genocidal wars. At that point, I start wondering if we are using the term “genocide” as a way of saying “horrible war?” Because if a genocide is everything—from massacres that kill thousands to attempts at mass extermination that kill millions— then I don’t know what we’re talking about. I get nervous thinking that we’re starting to use the term “genocide” in a way that expresses our revulsion. And, we don’t want the definition to no longer qualify as what we originally intended it to be.

**BardPolitik** How should we classify the Darfur conflict?

**Rieff** I think it is an incredibly barbarous and savage repression of a rebellion that targets the civilian population and uses ethnic cleansing. The government of Sudan is one of the most hateful governments on the planet, but I do not think there is evidence to show that this massive campaign existed before the rebellion in Darfur. There were clashes between Arabs and Africans, but as in Rwanda, these so-called racial distinctions do not conform to what you actually see. This is a war of ethnic cleansing, and it is a war in which the government has organized a systematic campaign, which constitutes crimes against humanity. But is it useful to put this in terms of “genocide?” I am by no means convinced of it.

**BardPolitik** Do you see other roots to this conflict?

**Rieff** Resource scarcity is partly to blame. Disregarding politics and pan-Arabism, the southward march of the Sahara has a major effect on the tension in the region. If the trees still existed in northern Darfur, as they did during the Roman era, I think one of the principle causes of this war

would not exist.

**BardPolitik** What role are NGOs playing within this context?

**Rieff** First and foremost, NGOs must maintain neutrality. I think many of the NGOs have become incredibly serious about understanding the religious context, whether it is Médecins Sans Frontières or even some of the Christian evangelical groups. Diakonie, a German evangelical humanitarian group, has made concerted efforts to be religiously sensitive and not to proselytize. But are there exceptions? Of course.

If these NGOs wish to be responsive to humanitarian norms, they’ve got to be independent. If not, they will simply be seen as foreigners without

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guns, but foreigners nonetheless. This can get them into a lot of trouble.

**BardPolitik** Do you believe the West should intervene in Sudan?

**Rieff** Anger at the West is so deep and pervasive in the Islamic World. What surprises me about the Bush administration is that many times it appears to forget that the good name of the United States is also a strategic asset. In terms of Sudan, I would be very cautious of overt American leadership. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with General Colin Powell’s work with the UN; and I certainly don’t think there would be anything wrong with an African Union intervention supported by US logistical support.

**BardPolitik** Could another country or organization replace the United States as a leader in this kind of intervention?

**Rieff** I am a great and increasing believer in regional institutions. I am very skeptical of the UN. It is too remote, and frankly, a hell of a lot better at being a diplomatic forum and a humanitarian/development agency than its original primary function—maintaining peace and security. Peace and security is something the UN does not do well and cannot do well, because it is an inter-governmental institution. Thus, the only way out of this mess is for regional institutions to take over. What was good about the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo was that NATO carried out both. That said, an intervention in Darfur carried out by the African Union would be excellent.

Now it's true that the Nigerians screwed up in Liberia and Sierra Leone. But it was the right idea—even though they committed terrible and massive war crimes. To have Western armies re-colonize the world is the wrong answer. However, I do not want to be misunderstood: I am not Pat Buchanan, and I am not Noam Chomsky. I do not believe that we, who have military forces, should sit around and let the people of Darfur die. That is immoral. If we're going to have this huge army that is often used for not such great things, let's at least occasionally use it for decent things. But we do not need a third wave of Western colonialism.

**BardPolitik** If an African Union intervention in Darfur were to be a complete disaster, would it still have been worth the risk?

**Rieff** I think our only hope is regional. There have to be local reference points; otherwise, we're just talking about a new colonialism, which will be followed by new anti-colonial wars and revolutions. One must remember that the European colonization of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was undertaken in the name of humanitarianism. We're back in that same infantile moralism, when we believe our good intentions trump everything else—practicality, feasibility, other people's reactions. It can't be done this way.

Regional solutions can be very dicey and could go wrong, but I just don't see another option. The whole thing beggars belief and this call for unilateral, Western intervention is a fantasy of omnipotence that seems to be the product of idealistic lawyers and neo-conservative armchair warriors besotted by the possibilities of military force.

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