

August 2008

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Recommended Citation

Saladino, Christopher J. (2008) "Book Review: Thomas G. Weiss, Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2: Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol3/iss2/10>

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Book Review

Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. Pp. 176, paper. \$19.95 US.

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The end of the Cold War opened the door for states to cooperate on behalf of peoples in need around the world. The creation of the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the promulgation of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's "Agenda for Peace" pushed states, including the great powers, to fund and participate in a new kind of international relations: institutionalized, multilateral humanitarian intervention. While the actions taken were not without some historical precedent, the nearly euphoric period of dramatic expansion of peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention of the early to mid-1990s seemed to promise that the world would not collectively stand by and watch people suffer and die simply because they were across a sovereign border. That euphoria faded quickly with the disconnection of the great powers, particularly the United States, following the development of strong perceptions of mission failures, rising costs, and increasing disagreement among the powers and international institutions on how and where to intervene. Regardless of this estrangement, the need for humanitarian intervention did not fade away with the reluctance to intervene. In fact, events in the late 1990s and on into the twenty-first century have proved time and again that the need to intervene may never dissipate. Political unrest, military conflict, economic crises, and health and environmental disasters all continue to constitute a clear and present danger to millions of the people of the world, and, in most of these cases, the only hope is multilateral humanitarian intervention.

Thomas Weiss captures this historical progression in *Humanitarian Intervention*, and his analysis is honest and sober: there is a persistent and significant need to use military force to protect the lives of millions of people around the world, and this need runs counter to many of the rules, norms, and concepts that continue to shape international relations. Weiss provides a remarkable depth of analysis while offering a terse, lucid, and succinct overview of the key concepts, cases, and challenges to upholding what has come to be known as the "responsibility to protect" (100). What is most difficult but also most realistic about his study is that it avoids both gratuitous cheerleading and overly sour deconstruction. The result is a hopeful, but barely, consideration of why intervention is necessary and how difficult it will continue to be to realize effective intervention. Beyond how to make it happen, what drives *Humanitarian Intervention* is the more important variable of need.

Perhaps the strongest reassessment Weiss delivers comes in the form of an explanation of conceptual building blocks. Intervention literature tends to be polarized between the realist camp of political science and the more normative ideas of human-rights scholars and practitioners. At times Weiss can be clearly understood as espousing neither and both of these oppositional paradigms. By clearly operationalizing the key concepts of international politics, his analysis portrays the pragmatic and prudent view of international relations that realists demand. States do have strong

ideas about sovereignty, reciprocity, and national interest in terms of their relative positions in the system. State leaders are wary about violating these norms; in particular, states fear reciprocal action resulting in a loss of relative power. But Weiss goes against the strict grain of prudent realism by describing states and the state system in dynamic and transformative terms. In this same world of relative self-interest, there *is* change, there *is* cooperation, and there *is* a strong normative consensus that human suffering can and should be stopped. The world is not black and white, and the rules can and do change . . . but slowly, and in small increments.

By accepting the persistence of the strong preventive norms of international politics, Weiss acknowledges that these are difficult barriers to the cooperative use of military force to mitigate human suffering. But by concurrently accepting the history of change and cooperation in the international system, he clearly argues that more and more can and should be done to help endangered populations around the world. It is a fine line, and this book grudgingly accepts that there is not yet any single paradigmatic theory to overcome the prudence of realism and drive states towards the intervening actions that it so powerfully endorses. Instead, Weiss promotes the idea of the responsibility to protect (R2P) as a powerful and developing norm of international relations.

Emerging from the establishment of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, Weiss shows, the idea of R2P is not simply another suggestion as to the foreign policies of great powers by the humanitarian crowd. On the contrary, Weiss offers the developmental history of this concept and concludes that it is as strong a norm as sovereignty or anarchy. States believe in the concept, but they are often torn between protecting others and protecting their own interests. The standard priority has always been self-interest over helping others, and this is certainly to be expected of rational decision makers. This is where Weiss notes that the promotion of R2P must be vigilant: states cannot claim exemption simply because they have interests, because all states are the same in that respect. Perhaps what *Humanitarian Intervention* does not completely capture is the need to promote R2P as a requisite component of all states' interest, or, more precisely, how extremely difficult a change that will be.

This puzzle of incorporating the strong norm of the responsibility to protect into the more historically powerful norm of rational self-interest drives the bulk of the study. Weiss is effective in highlighting both how important it is to overcome this dilemma and how that can be possible. But, rather cleverly, he offers no panacea, no miracle cure, and no easy path to success. Rather, we know in the end that this will require a vigilant effort across the state system and especially among the great powers. And we know that this effort has not yet come close to being a reality. Therefore, Weiss is cautious about delivering the news: It can and must be done, but the record is still not good, and the forecast is questionable.

Humanitarian Intervention packs a powerful and serious message, and it does so without the ubiquitous uplifting and hopeful conclusion. In the final chapter—appropriately titled “So What?”—Weiss challenges states and statesmen, students of politics, and citizens of the world to stand up and promote the responsibility to protect, but he notes that there is still no clear universal commitment to this goal. While the logic of how these competing ideas can be reconciled seems to work for Weiss, he knows that the audience that really matters is not yet fully convinced. Until all of the powerful international actors accept this norm as an essential part of their own interest, states will continue to choose to withhold the military force needed to save lives all over the world.