

On “Humanitarian” Military Intervention

by Anne Winkler-Morey

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Elites who benefit from war don't fight them, and those men and women who do, would never pick up a gun to protect the interests of some 19th century railroad tycoon or 21st century oil company or weapons manufacturer. So there must be a trumped up humanitarian justification. Sometimes that humanitarianism is couched in bigotry: the enemies are in need of a different god, or are less capable of governance. Nevertheless, the people are led to believe they are doing good.

A quick review of history of the humanitarian propaganda used to sell U.S. militarism:

- 1600s – 20th century: The “Indian Wars.” These were “manifest.” God willed that the United States spread from sea to shining sea and save Native Americans souls, dead or alive. What is more humanitarian than saving someone from eternal damnation?
- 1846-48: U.S. Mexican war was to “Overthrow a tyrant.” Mexican President Santanna was tyrant enough. Nevertheless that had nothing to do with U.S. desire to grab half of Mexico's land and get access to ports on the Pacific Ocean.
- 1898: The war in Cuba that resulted in the United States inheriting a Caribbean and Pacific empire from Spain was “the splendid little war.” (I just read a few days ago someone use that same phrase ironically for the war in Libya.) The author of the 1899 best seller “Our War for Cuba's Freedom” argued it was the first altruistic conflagration in the history of mankind. (An ad in the New York Times in late April, put out by the NGO “Global Citizens”* made the same argument about Libya, 2011.) Like Mexico, the Spanish empire was indeed tyrannical. But, to encapsulate the sentiments of Jose Marti, U.S. intervention was taking Cuba “from the frying pan into the fire.” Cubans could defeat the dying Spanish Empire. But, as Marti said, “Once the U.S. is in, who will get her out?”
- 1914-1918: In WWI all sides argued they were fighting to defeat a tyrant—and all sides were right. The U.S. argued theirs was an anti-imperialist struggle and a “war to end all wars.” The vibrant pacifist and actual anti-imperialist movements of the time were usurped to justify a truly insane and deadly war between imperialists squabbling over territory. During this period the United States invaded and/or occupied Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.
- 1930s -1990: Before, during, and after WWII, “the war to defeat fascism,” the United States coddled and trained tyrants, fascist and otherwise, in order to “defeat

communism.” Anti-communism worked for a while as a humanitarian ideology, but Americans grew wary of it after Vietnam.

- 1980s: To overcome this “Vietnam Syndrome” covert tactics were perfected to hide wars and interventions from the U. S. public. Most of the Caribbean region interventions (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala) were covert. The 1983 invasion of Grenada, however, was overt. It took place a moment after an internal coup and so it was billed, not as an effort to overthrow the popular Maurice Bishop, but to “restore democracy.”
- 1989-1991: After the Panama invasion “against a madman” and the Persian Gulf War, successfully sold as an anti-imperialist war (opposing the intervention of a large nation—Iraq—against a small neighbor—Kuwait), Bush Sr. declared the Vietnam Syndrome dead.
- 1990s: Interventions in Haiti and Bosnia were about “nation building,” “avoiding a bloodbath” and “against ethnic cleansing.” In Haiti it appears that the United States heavy hand was involved in the 1991 removal, 1994 reinstatement and 2004 removal of President Aristide, based on his willingness and lack thereof, to comply with neo-liberal measures imposed on him by the Bush One, Clinton and Bush Two administrations. Nation building?
- 21st Century: Let us not forget that the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 were sold as efforts to “take down a tyrant” and “save the world from weapons of mass destruction.”

There is no evidence that the Obama administration is set on changing the course of our country’s foreign relations history—not in the Middle East where tyrants like Mubarak are friends until they are no longer able to hold onto power, and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan still rage, and Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain are still major aid recipients; not in Latin America, where just days ago Obama refused to apologize for the U.S. sponsored coup overthrowing Allende and installing the brutal dictator Pinochet in 1973.

Any entity that uses bombs as the instrument for carrying out humanitarianism must be rejected. The emperor wears no clothes. Bombs are not humanitarian. They kill people. Period.

We, too, can capitalize on humanitarianism. I’ve noticed that the gung ho veterans in my classes tend to share that extra dose of humanitarianism that WAMM members have. We need to think about how to talk to people of all political stripes who in their core are humanitarians like the rest of us.

We need to talk about real humanitarian alternatives. Unions like the ILWU, the longshoremen’s union, use work stoppages to protest attack on workers across the globe. Consumers use boycotts as we did in resisting apartheid South Africa and in Arizona, more recently. The courageous people in the international solidarity

movement, Witness for Peace and the Non-violent Peace Force send people to war-torn regions to stand before tanks and broker peace and justice. You don't have to be a hero. Anyone with a buck can support these organizations engaged in real humanitarianism.

But, as the health professionals say, "First do no harm." Our first responsibility as U.S. humanitarians is to stop U.S. military madness.

*Editor's Note: Not to be confused with several organizations with the similar names such as Citizens for Global Solutions, an organization with the mission of reforming the UN; Global Research, a progressive resource center, Global Exchange founded by Code Pink's Medea Benjamin.

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