

The New York Times
David Rieff
1 June 2008

Ours is an age in which the **responsibility for protecting** people when their physical survival is at stake has become an increasingly accepted principle in international relations. It is even enshrined in a United Nations-approved covenant as the "**responsibility to protect**" the idea being that a state that engages in criminal behavior toward its own people has forfeited not just its moral but also its legal right to sovereignty.

(...) [I]t is striking that all the strong talk about the need to intervene immediately in Myanmar did not in fact lead to action of any sort, let alone the kind of radical action activists and some major international political figures like Kouchner considered. Certainly there were practical reasons why nothing was done. The Chinese were opposed and the U.S. military unenthusiastic, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made clear. And in fairness, the **responsibility to protect** is a new doctrine; it was only adopted at the U.N. World Summit in 2005.

() Perhaps the Myanmar example is anomalous in that it involves a natural disaster and a malefactor government's acts of omission, not commission. The **responsibility to protect** was not originally intended to cover catastrophes. Yet the debate differs little from those that have taken place over the man-made disasters of ethnic cleansing and massacre.

Think of Darfur. No international political cause since the campaign against apartheid in South Africa not Bosnia, not Tibet, not El Salvador has been as compelling to as many Americans as what, in this country at least, is generally thought to be the genocide going on in western Sudan. (...)

But the stubborn fact is that despite this extraordinary mobilization, no effective intervention has actually been mounted to prevent the genocide in Darfur. (...) Part of the reason is that China opposes such a move, and it is a lot harder for the U.S. in 2008 to go against the wishes of a country that holds so much of its government paper than it was to defy the wishes of a then-weak Russia in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999. But while realpolitik certainly has played a role, the failure to intervene in Darfur cannot be attributed to calculations of power alone.

After the Iraqi debacle, it is hardly surprising that we are hesitant to undertake interventions that may well involve regime change. And regime change its moral legitimacy and political practicality is the ghost at the banquet of humanitarian intervention. Use any euphemism you wish, but in the end these interventions have to be about regime change if they are to have any chance of accomplishing their stated goal. (That is why they are opposed in many parts of the formerly colonized world even as they are supported in the formerly colonizing West.) (...)

[A]s Iraq has taught us so painfully, the law of unintended consequences may be one of the few iron laws of international politics. (...)

David Rieff, a contributing writer, is the author of "At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention."

Source:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/magazine/01wwIn-lede-t.html?_r=2&ref=magazine&oref=slogin&oref=slogin