

What happened at Srebrenica 10 years ago stands as a failure on many levels. At today's commemoration former US envoy to the Balkans Richard Holbrooke called it a failure of NATO, of the West, of peacekeeping and of the United Nations. Well, what then are the lessons of the failure at Srebrenica for US policy-makers? Walter Russell Mead is a fellow in US foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City and joins us now

Mr. MEAD: In a sense the lesson is that there is no lesson--that is to say that there's no process answer to a problem like this. You can go through international institutions and they can fail. You can try to act unilaterally and it can fail. You can just look at Darfur and see yet again there's a failure to act.

SIEGEL: Ten years ago, though, there was a doctrine justifying inaction. The Powell doctrine, it was called, said that the US should use military force when and only when there's a clear risk to our national security, and there should be a very clear exit strategy. Bosnia, 1995, and before that didn't seem to fit the bill.

Mr. MEAD: That's right. It didn't, and you have to remember that for Powell and others there was the experience of Somalia where the US went in on a humanitarian mission and ended up leaving really with its tail between its legs. So there was a sense in the '90s that too much US intervention could put the US in a very vulnerable position and that interventions could fail.

SIEGEL: One question that Bosnia posed to the US and to the Europeans as well was: Are you on the side of one of these parties warring? Is one of them in some way, either by virtue of what it stands for or what's happening to it, morally superior to the others or is evenhandedness the ideal to be aimed for?

Mr. MEAD: Well, that's right, and it's a problem you see in any kind of conflict where there's a humanitarian dimension, because an organization like the Red Cross or any humanitarian organization that wants to be able to work generally has to do so by getting both the parties to recognize that it's not a participant, that it's militarily neutral to some degree. But what happens when you have a war of aggression or a war of genocide--is neutrality moral in that case? The reality is, I think, that there are more humanitarian emergencies in the world than the American people or any other people has the stomach to deal with at any given time. And these humanitarian disasters and these aggressions and genocides don't come on our calendar. In other words, it doesn't wait till we think it would be a good day to deal with something

SIEGEL: The United Nations was there and was in the strange position of refereeing a rather brutal war, it seems. Do you think that today UN peacekeeping missions guarantee any more for the people who are seeing those blue helmets around their village than they did back in Bosnia in 1995?

Mr. MEAD: Not really, I'm afraid. I think we all hope that this terrible example won't be repeated, but if blue helmets are all you have to keep you safe, then you are in trouble. And what we've seen very frequently is that on all kinds of issues, international issues, the five permanent members on the Security Council don't agree. And so the secretary-general, the whole UN system are not any more effective than the weakest or most reluctant member of the Security Council

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