

To Intervene or Not to Intervene, That is the Question

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*The following article offers analysis of the Munk Debates which took place on 1 December 2008, featuring Rick Hillier and John Bolton arguing against humanitarian intervention and Mia Farrow and Gareth Evans arguing in favor of it. More information on the Munk Debates can be found at <http://www.munkdebates.com/>*

The economy isn't the only human endeavour taking a beating these days. The pursuit of universal human rights is also under assault. And it's not a stretch to say that the two are connected. Prior to 9/11 and its aftermath, there had been a half-century of nearly uninterrupted acceptance of the idea that there are certain core rights to which all humans are entitled. But that support seems to be shifting and nowhere is this more evident than in the world's attitude toward the concept of humanitarian intervention. Remember Bosnia? Remember Kosovo? Remember then President Bill Clinton saying "enough is enough" to former Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic?

These were the actions of world leaders who were cognizant of values thought to be at the very core of the community of nations, not to mention the human condition, stuff like the right to be free from state oppression, the right not to be exterminated, the right to justice.

### **Times change**

Back then, the pillars of the international community accepted their responsibility to prevent ethnic cleansing and genocide, to arrest war criminals, to restore democracy and to provide disaster relief when national governments were either unable or unwilling to do so. The reluctance of the Western world to go where it once boldly went was at the heart of a recent debate in Toronto before a well-heeled crowd who had gathered to witness a publicized clash over the value of humanitarian intervention. The tension between narrow national interests and global humanitarian values promised to heat up an otherwise frigid late-fall evening at what are known as the Munk Debates, sponsored by the University of Toronto. It was a promise largely unkept.

### **The right to protect**

In support of the right to protect, actress and activist Mia Farrow, delivered a largely listless defence of humanitarian intervention while the event's obligatory dark knight, (George W. Bush's) former ambassador to the UN John Bolton, fired off well aimed rounds of crisp rhetoric wrapped in impeccable logic. What's more, if Bolton dominated the debate, it was his intellectual partner in the night's event, Gen. Rick Hillier, Canada's former chief of defence staff, who came in a close second. Hillier cautioned people not to confuse national interest with an appeal to global values.

### **For or against**

Prior to the start of the debate, the audience voted either for or against humanitarian intervention. Pre-debate results were 79/21 in favour. In the end, few changed their position.

Post-debate, the results were 68/32 in favour. Still, while most of the audience seemed sympathetic to the right to protect and humanitarian intervention, one couldn't help but wonder just how deep that support went. Consider Zimbabwe's almost criminally neglectful response to the plight of its people or Sudan's equally criminal actions against the people of Darfur, or the European Union's reluctance to intervene in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo. ()

### **Universal declaration**

This month, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Magna Carta of our times, marks its 60th anniversary. With national interests seemingly nudging out global values, it's as good a time as any to re-assess our notion of what the international system is meant to be. Is it just a collection of legal nuts and bolts cobbled together by governments to protect other governments? Or is it a living framework of rules designed to internationalize the human conscience? ()

Source: <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/12/09/f-vp-rose.html>