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CAMPAIGN 2000: Let the U.N. Fight Our Humanitarian Wars

Time for a National Debate

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The presidential campaign has begun to sharpen debate about at least one critical issue of American foreign policy: whether the U.S. must intervene in humanitarian crises abroad, or whether a multinational force can be developed to do that job. Democratic presidential candidate Bill Bradley posed the question recently at Tufts University. The other candidates should follow suit.

At the issue's core is the controversial matter of sending U.S. troops into peacemaking operations where the United States has little if any national interest as traditionally defined--in terms of economics, territory or national security. Such interventions began in 1992 when the United States sent a military mission to Somalia. They continued in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo.

In each case, pressure from the media, which now bring us faraway bloodshed with our supper, from ethnic and other special interest groups, and sometimes from foreign governments build steadily until Washington feels it has to act.

But there is an alternative to such U.S. military action. It is to develop a reliable international force to handle these humanitarian crises. The crisis in East Timor finally proved that the U.S. military need not always play the main role,

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but unfortunately it took weeks to get an international police corps in place. What is needed is a force that can act quickly as well as effectively.

The United Nations is at the center of the problem. One of that organization's principal roles is peacemaking. But the victorious Allies who founded it after World War II built two crippling precautions into its structure, the Security Council veto and provisions in its charter that sharply restrict intervention in the internal affairs of any nation.

For U.N. peacemaking to work, the great powers must cooperate. But in 1945 they were so suspicious of each other that none would have joined the United Nations without the veto, which allows any one of them to block U.N. action through the Security Council. And except for the Soviet Union's colossal slip-up in not vetoing U.N. entry into the Korean War, that device has consistently stymied U.N. peacemaking, most recently in Kosovo, where the United Nations was not even called upon because it was known that China would veto intervention.

The second precaution, limiting U.N. ability to intervene in the internal affairs of any nation, was intended to assure that the organization never became an international rogue force able to break into anyone's country for whatever reason. In the mid-1940s that provision seemed reasonable given the U.N. founders' assumption that most conflicts would occur between nations rather than within them. Unfortunately, the latter has been the case to an appalling degree since 1945.

Today, those two precautions create a dilemma for Washington policymakers. They know that a powerful international force that could quickly subdue the kind of atrocious behavior we have seen in nation after nation in this decade alone could also be potentially very dangerous. With considerable military power, able to intervene in internal national affairs, and not subject to political restraint through the veto or some other device, such a force could become the rogue force the U.N. founders feared. But our policymakers also know that a strong, reliable, rapid-response force is precisely what is needed today.

The logical solution is to replace or radically modify the United Nations. But how and with what? These are the questions that must be answered by those who seek to lead us in 2001. The major candidates need to explain at least in general terms how they will cope with this dilemma.

Until the 1992 crisis in Somalia, the problem hardly registered in Washington. Humanitarian interventions were not part of the foreign affairs landscape. Meanwhile U.S. policymakers considered the United Nations inefficient, often anti-American, and generally useless in security issues. But now U.S. political leaders need to realize that the United States needs an effective United Nations or something very like it.

Most Americans want to avoid military interventions in places they have never heard of and where they perceive no vital American interests. Therefore, an international force could lessen our burden and even be more effective than the U.S. government in humanitarian rescue missions because, while the United States has intervened often, it also has ignored many humanitarian crises. The new force should not have that option.

The force would have to be one in which the United States has a major say, which could intervene quickly within national boundaries in cases of major human rights violations, and which could not become an international troublemaker. Not an easy challenge.

Bradley did not provide any details about such a force, but he put the issue squarely on the agenda. Now let's hear from the other candidates.

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