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# THE MORAL LOGIC OF HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

*Samantha Power made a career arguing for America's "responsibility to protect." During her years in the White House, it became clear that benevolent motives can have calamitous results.*

**By Dexter Filkins**

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*An activist turned adviser, Power saw how good intentions could go wrong.* **Illustration by Malika Favre**

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For eight years, Samantha Power served President Obama as an aide and then as U.N. Ambassador but also as an in-house conscience on matters of foreign policy. When she entered the White House, at the age of thirty-eight, she had already established a reputation as a kind of Joan of Arc for humanitarian intervention. Ben Rhodes, an Obama foreign-policy adviser and speechwriter, imagined that she bore a permanent tagline that seemed to announce her position at every meeting: Samantha Power, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of " 'A Problem from Hell': America and the Age of Genocide." When innocent lives were

threatened abroad, Power frequently pushed for forceful action. Obama said that he welcomed her advocacy, but he sometimes bristled when she voiced it. More than once, Obama told Power, "You get on my nerves." In 2013, during a meeting in the Situation Room to discuss Syria, Obama, put off by her arguments, snapped, "We've all read your book, Samantha."

In " 'A Problem from Hell,' " published in early 2002, Power detailed a century's worth of American inaction in the face of grotesque massacres: of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, in Europe during the Holocaust, in Rwanda in 1994, and in the Balkans for much of the nineties. Power had gone to the Balkans as a freelance reporter fresh out of Yale, and witnessed the violence that raged as the former Yugoslavia came apart. Like most people who saw the war up close, she understood that the violence was not primarily a spontaneous outburst of old hatreds but the result of ethnopolitical machinations. Ethnic and sectarian enmity, fomented and backed by the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević, was unleashed in terrible waves of killing, rape, and starvation. In " 'A Problem from Hell,' " Power wrote of Sidbela Zimic, a nine-year-old Bosnian girl who had been jumping rope in front of her apartment building in Sarajevo with her friends when she was killed by a Serbian shell. When Power arrived, a few hours later, she found only a pool of blood, a jump rope, and girls' slippers.

Power was enraged by claims in the West that nothing could be done. President Clinton was famously persuaded by "Balkan Ghosts," a travelogue written by Robert D. Kaplan, who argued that Balkan antagonisms were too deep-rooted and mysterious for outsiders to fathom. "Their enmities go back five hundred years, some would say almost a thousand years," Clinton told Larry King. As Clinton dithered, a hundred thousand people died.

What finally moved Clinton to act was not ethics but politics: in 1995, as he prepared to run for reëlection, images of Serbian barbarities began to affect his prospects. That summer, he ordered devastating air strikes on Serbian military positions and dispatched an envoy, Richard Holbrooke, to pressure the parties to make peace. In Dayton, Holbrooke forged a deal that stopped the killing. A few years later, when Milošević launched a violent campaign against separatists in Serbia's ethnic-Albanian province of Kosovo, NATO intervened fast and hard with an air campaign, pushing out the Serbian Army and clearing the way for the Kosovars to secede.

" 'A Problem from Hell' " built upon the lessons of the Balkans: not just that the American intervention had stopped the bloodshed but that, in Bosnia, it had begun three years too late. Power advocated greater interference in countries' internal affairs in defense of an unwavering principle of humanitarianism. "Given the affront genocide represents to America's most cherished values and to its interests, the United States must also be prepared to risk the lives of its soldiers in the service of stopping this monstrous crime," she wrote.

The book inspired a generation of activists, helping to establish the doctrine of "responsibility to protect," which held that the United States and other wealthy countries had an obligation to defend threatened populations around the world. It also made a star of its author, a charismatic, cracklingly smart presence who urged others to take up the cause. "Know that history is not in a hurry but that you can help speed it up," she told Yale's graduating class of 2016. "It is the struggle itself that will define you. Do that, and you will not only find yourself fulfilled but you, too, will live to see many of your lost causes found."

Power's book didn't offer much discussion of failure, of the limitations of intervention, even in places where it was unclear that American efforts could have succeeded. In Rwanda, which is often cited as an example of U.S. inaction, most of the killing was done so swiftly—eight hundred thousand people in three months—that it's hard to imagine the American bureaucracy and military orchestrating a response quickly enough to make a difference, and then staying around long enough to insure that violence didn't recur. But in 2002 the notion that America could police the world didn't seem so far-fetched. NATO had recently taken on

three new members. China's economy was a tenth of its present size. The World Trade Center had been destroyed, but the U.S. had toppled the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The invasion of Iraq was still a year away.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were not pitched as humanitarian interventions. (That came later, as proponents looked for retroactive justification.) But for many in the American foreign-policy establishment the coming decade served as a rebuke to the idea that the U.S. could remake the world. In Iraq, the U.S. occupation—in its incompetence and brutality—became emblematic of American decline. In 2014, less than three years after the Americans departed, the Iraqi Army collapsed, and the state nearly followed. In Afghanistan, U.S. officers, soldiers, and diplomats were almost entirely ignorant of the country and its languages, and relied on gangsters and strongmen to further their aims. The result was a state that functioned mostly as a sprawling extortion racket—the Americans called it VICE, for "vertically integrated criminal enterprise"—and that, by its lack of legitimacy, helped Taliban recruitment. Nearly two decades after the occupation began, U.S. diplomats are now negotiating a final exit from the country; the Afghan state seems unlikely to fare any better than the one the Americans built in Iraq.

Power's new book, "The Education of an Idealist," takes in much of this tumultuous time. In the opening pages, she warns that the title might suggest that she had "lofty dreams about how one person could make a difference, only to be 'educated' by the brutish forces" she encountered. She adds, "This is not the story that follows." But the book does hint at the death of a dream. Power, who provided Obama with foreign-policy advice when he was a senator and a Presidential candidate, joined the White House in 2009 as a champion of humanitarian intervention in an Administration dedicated to ending the conflicts it had inherited and refraining from entering into others. One of the questions facing the new Presidency was whether someone like Power, an insistent voice for the primacy of morality over politics, could be effective—or whether the idea of humanitarian intervention, on which she had built a career, had essentially exhausted itself.

The first test came in early 2011, with an uprising against Muammar Qaddafi, who had dominated Libya for forty-two years. Rebels had seized Benghazi, the country's second-largest city. Qaddafi dispatched several thousand troops to crush the revolt.

With a bloody showdown seeming inevitable, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, and the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced that they would set up a no-fly zone to protect civilians. Obama expressed reluctance, but some aides argued that if he did not act a massacre would take place. As Qaddafi's troops massed outside Benghazi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton flew to Paris and met with Mahmoud Jibril, one of the heads of the rebels' leadership council. Jibril—American-educated, fond of Western suits—helped convince her that the opposition was coherent, secular-minded, and capable of governing.

In Washington, Obama concluded that a no-fly zone would do little to stop a massacre, and decided instead to strike Libyan government positions on the ground. The intervention was on. Obama, wary of unilateral action, was careful to secure a supporting resolution from the United Nations Security Council. And he proclaimed the operation primarily European, with the U.S. providing assistance—"leading from behind," as one aide described it. But the French and British air forces began to run out of bombs, and that pretense fell away.

At the time, Power was working in the White House as a member of the National Security Council. In her book, she doesn't agonize much over the part she played in the response to the Libyan crisis. But senior Administration officials say that Power, a forceful personality, pushed hard for a military intervention. "She was clear in her views," Derek Chollet, another member of the National Security Council, told me. A *Times* story described her role, along with that of Clinton and U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, as decisive. Power, in her memoir, calls the story "bizarre." Yet she concedes that she did recommend the course of action

that Obama chose, while saying little about the catastrophic consequences that followed, apart from noting a "severe downturn in security."

She also refrains from addressing several questions that linger over the intervention, the kind that preoccupied her in her first book. The most basic among them is whether, given the way the intervention turned out, war was necessary. As the uprising gathered momentum, Qaddafi sent a menacing message to Benghazi. "We are coming tonight," he said, and for rebels who do not lay down their arms "there will be no mercy." Qaddafi had a well-established record of murder and torture when it came to domestic opponents. But, in the decades during which he had presided over Libya, he had typically suppressed uprisings by killing their leaders, rather than by mounting wholesale massacres. No large-scale massacres had occurred in the cities that his forces had recently recaptured. Was it going to be more than bluster this time? It's difficult to say. If Qaddafi had put down the uprising in Benghazi, the rebellion might have ended altogether. A tyrant would have remained in power, and many people would have died—but perhaps fewer than died in the intervention.

Another question is why the Obama Administration decided to destroy Qaddafi's regime, rather than merely stopping a massacre. The U.N. Security Council resolution authorized taking "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians; there is no evidence that this was meant to authorize the destruction of the Libyan state. Yet, within days of the intervention, NATO airplanes began attacking central elements of Qaddafi's regime. Qaddafi himself hung on for seven months, before rebels captured him hiding in a drainage pipe, sodomized him with a blade, and executed him. During that time, the Libyan state was mostly demolished. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, claimed that his government had been deceived by the United States and subsequently vetoed many U.N. resolutions related to the Syrian civil war. Hillary Clinton, in "Hard Choices," her account of her tenure, claims that Lavrov was being "disingenuous," and that he "knew as well as anyone what 'all necessary measures' meant." But she doesn't explain how he might have known. The Kremlin took Qaddafi's fate as a cautionary tale. Libya had, in 2003, effectively become an American ally: it relinquished what it had by way of weapons of mass destruction, agreed to make payments of $2.7 billion to families of the Lockerbie plane bombing, and began to provide the C.I.A. with information about Islamist militants. From the perspective of Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, Qaddafi had received better treatment from America as an enemy than he had as an ally.

Secretary of Defense Bob Gates, who opposed the intervention, said that Obama had explicitly stated that removing Qaddafi would be a mistake. In his memoir, "Duty," Gates is vague about when the decision to remove Qaddafi was made, or whether such a decision was ever actually made. Power is silent on the question. Derek Chollet told me that the decision to destroy Qaddafi's

regime ultimately became indistinguishable from the goal of protecting civilians. "The whole experience shows the fundamental pull of mission creep," Chollet said. "The mission was civilian protection, but we never defined when that would be satisfied. When we had grounded the air force? When we had decimated the army? Our judgment was ultimately that civilians would not be safe as long as Qaddafi was in power."

In " 'A Problem from Hell,' " Power chastised American policymakers for denying that genocide was taking place, and then, when it became undeniable, for convincing themselves that nothing could be done. "The real reason the United States did not do what it could and should have done to stop genocide was not a lack of knowledge or influence but a lack of will," she wrote. But, in Libya, Obama acted decisively, and while his Administration may have prevented a massacre, it also became responsible for a more durable disaster. For all the hand-wringing that preceded the Libyan intervention, no one in the Obama White House seems to have given serious consideration to what would happen if a civil war broke out. Obama, knowing that Americans had little interest

in another foreign entanglement, assured citizens that the U.S. would put no troops on the ground, and would play no major role in reconstruction. This was a gamble with very long odds.

The collapse of Qaddafi's regime loosed a wave of anarchy. The coalition government that took power after Qaddafi's fall failed to disarm the many militias that had fought in the rebellion, and a military conflict among armed factions swept the country. The conflict drew in neighboring countries, with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia backing more secular groups and Turkey and Qatar supporting the Islamists. The most recent fighting features a weak government in Tripoli, nominally backed by the U.S. and other Western countries, against forces led by Khalifa Haftar, a former Libyan general and C.I.A. proxy, who has been supported by Egypt, the U.A.E., and Saudi Arabia. It's difficult to determine the exact number of people killed since the uprising began, but credible estimates suggest that it is at least twenty-five thousand.

The absence of a central authority turned Libya into even more of a magnet for the wretched of sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. Today, there are as many as a million migrants in Libya, typically on their way to Europe, across the Mediterranean. Only a deeply problematic initiative, in which the European Union pays the Libyan coast guard to block migrants, has stemmed the exodus. The apprehended are often sent to detention camps—centers of rape, robbery, and human trafficking. This is the "severe downturn in security" that Power refers to.

Power essentially absolves herself and the Administration of what happened after the bombs: "We could hardly expect to have a crystal ball when it came to accurately predicting outcomes in places where the culture was not our own." In a certain light, this sounds like an argument for not intervening at all. Obama has referred to America's involvement in Libya as the worst decision of his Presidency.

Power is ideally placed to write about the clash between moral imperatives and political necessities. Instead, her memoir unfolds as an inspiring story of a woman's rise. We are witness to her childhood in Ireland; her parents' separation; her courtship, marriage, and motherhood; and her career as an activist and a government official. For the most part, the issues that she struggled with so intently in " 'A Problem from Hell' " receive cursory treatment. Attention is paid to President Obama's anti-Ebola campaign in Africa, which Power helped lead, and which was a refreshing success. But the focus is on lengthy reconstructions of Power's mundane duties, such as when, as U.N. Ambassador, she visited the embassies of a hundred and ninety-two member states. "By visiting the other ambassadors rather than having them travel to the US Mission to meet me (as was traditional), I was able to see the art my colleagues wanted to showcase, the family photos on their desks, and the books they had brought with them all the way to America," she writes. Almost no one in this book comes in for a critical word. Of the late Vitaly Churkin, the Russian U.N. representative who vetoed a resolution commemorating the Srebrenica massacre as a genocide and defended Russia's annexation of Crimea, she writes, "Vitaly and I both loved sports, and the only times he didn't answer his phone were when Russia was competing in the Olympics or the World Cup." Much of the book reads as though it were written by someone campaigning for her next job—one that requires Senate confirmation.

So it's striking that Power opens her book by describing a day, in September, 2013, when she and Obama conferred over how to respond to the chemical-weapons attack, in defiance of the "red line" Obama had drawn the previous year, that had killed more than a thousand Syrian civilians. This was one of the most dramatic moments in Obama's years in office. Power quickly drops the issue, and does not revisit it for three hundred and fifty pages. Yet the challenges she has chosen to sidestep are ones that weigh heavily in the assessment of Obama's Presidency.

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The Syrian uprising was set in motion in 2011, when citizens began demonstrating against Bashar al-Assad and the autocratic regime run by the Assad family for four decades. The protests were largely peaceful at first, but the regime responded with brutal repression, and the country spun into civil war, with rebels receiving military support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. By February, 2013, some seventy thousand Syrians had been killed.

The noncombatants targeted by Assad were almost all Sunni, members of the country's majority population, and so his actions plausibly fit the legal definition of genocide, which Power described in her first book as an irrefutable call to action. But, in office, she found that practical and political considerations overwhelmed the moral concerns. The President had campaigned on a promise to get the U.S. out of the Middle East. I visited Obama in the White House in the winter of 2013, half a year after he had drawn his red line. He clearly had no enthusiasm for any kind of armed intervention. "We can't even identify the groups on the ground that we might support," he told me.

Regime change seemed exceedingly difficult, because there was no organized group remotely capable of taking over. Even substantial military strikes were problematic, in part because the regime held a sprawling arsenal of chemical weapons, much of it in hidden locations that were unknown to American intelligence. A U.S. attack might provoke their use; decapitating the regime posed the risk that these weapons could fall into the hands of ISIS.

Chastened by Libya, Obama took only the smallest steps in Syria. Early in his second term, his advisers, including Power and Clinton, supported imposing a no-fly zone. No-fly zones can be effective. The no-fly zone over northern Iraq, put in place in 1991 to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussein's armies, helped provide the Kurds with space to build a semi-autonomous state and army. A no-fly zone established over Bosnia in 1993, though not rigorously enforced, effectively grounded the Serbian air force. In Syria, Assad's strategy relied heavily on aerial attacks—using poison gas, indiscriminate shelling, and barrel bombs to terrorize the population, until everyone except the rebels fled. The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) estimates that the majority of chemical-weapons attacks have been delivered by helicopter. With a no-fly zone, such a campaign would have been impossible.

But Obama declined. A no-fly zone would have required destroying the country's formidable Russian-provided air-defense network, and killing many Syrian soldiers. And Syria was far from a defeated state, as Iraq had been in 1991. Nor would a no-fly zone have stopped all chemical-weapons attacks. The attack that prompted the crisis meeting Power describes in the opening of her book involved sarin-gas shells delivered to a Damascus suburb by artillery. As the reports were confirmed, Obama initially indicated that he intended to punish Assad. He deployed warships to the Mediterranean and reviewed options for a strike—only to call the strike off at the last minute to ask Congress for permission. Congress was having none of it.

Abroad, though, the idea of "leading from behind" may have resulted in a qualified success. In September, 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry publicly mused that the crisis could be solved if Assad surrendered his chemical weapons. The Russians volunteered to help, and they eventually managed to remove most of Assad's arsenal—thirteen hundred tons of chemical weapons at twenty-three locations across the country. For Obama, this was a humanitarian victory, even if it required a humiliating sacrifice of international prestige. It may also have forestalled a more pressing need to invade. The operation to remove chemical arms from Syria concluded in the summer of 2014, just as ISIS swept in from the desert. Had those weapons remained, the U.S. might well have felt compelled to send a huge force to seize them. "Obama would have invaded Syria," Chollet said. "We could not have allowed even the smallest chance that ISIS could have gotten hold of them." Instead, Obama dispatched some seven thousand American troops to northeast Syria and to Iraq in order to fight ISIS. After they arrived, a de-facto no-fly zone was established in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria. The policy, which remains in effect, has kept Assad and his allies from bombing civilians in the area.

But elsewhere in Syria the story was very different. Assad started making and deploying more chemical weapons—usually chlorine gas, which is barbaric but not illegal, and often in less than lethal concentrations, to avoid attracting attention. According to the GPPi, the regime has used chemical weapons two hundred and sixty-six times since the U.N. declared that they had been removed. After two such attacks, in 2017 and 2018, Donald Trump ordered missile strikes. They didn't work: Assad has used chemical weapons sixty-one times during Trump's tenure.

Obama's hesitation led to one other unintended consequence: it brought in an indiscriminate Russian campaign of bombing and artillery barrages that drove millions of Syrians out of the country. Hundreds of thousands fled to Europe, helping to trigger a continent-wide wave of reaction. In this way, a humanitarian crisis morphed into a geopolitical one.

Power, who once urged Americans to search the world for people whom they could help, writes of reassuring herself by looking inward. In one chapter, she describes how Obama weighed a response to a chemical attack that caused the deaths of hundreds of Syrian children. After long deliberation, he declined to act. Power steps back from the debate and concludes the chapter on a personal note. "I reminded myself of my good fortune: I could put my kids to bed knowing that, when I checked on them late at night, they would be there, breathing soundly in their sleep," she writes.

The memoirs of former Obama aides follow a similar pattern in reckoning with the catastrophe in Syria: the aides discuss their revulsion at the slaughter and their desire to use American power to ameliorate it. But they don't say much about failure and its consequences, or about what might have been done differently—perhaps because such arguments have no end.

If the United States had intervened more forcefully, would the Syrian war have turned out otherwise? Robert Ford, the last American Ambassador to Syria, opposed a no-fly zone and sending American troops to fight, but he thinks the outcome would have been different had Obama heeded his recommendation to arm moderate rebels. By late 2014, Ford believes, it was too late. He had served several years in Iraq, where he watched how the insurgency against the Americans evolved; over time, the secular and nationalist forces were pushed aside, and radical Islamists came to dominate. Ford believed that he was witnessing a similar dynamic in Syria. "If we don't help the moderates, we are going to end up having to fight the extremists," he said.

Acting on the recommendation, though, would have meant arming the rebels with sophisticated weapons, like anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, and American officials feared that those weapons could fall into the wrong hands. The Pentagon did mount an effort, at a cost of as much as five hundred million dollars, to engage Syrian fighters. But it was directed solely at attacking ISIS, and most of these combatants wanted to fight the Syrian government. The C.I.A. launched a similar campaign, but it proved

ineffectual. "There was never enough, and it was always too little too late," Ford told me. Perhaps so, but the dismal results posted by the C.I.A. and the Pentagon suggest that doubling down in the same endeavor would have failed. Anyone who has spent time in Iraq or Afghanistan during the past fifteen years knows that American soldiers and foreign-service officers are ill-equipped to shape events in dangerous countries. An effective effort would have required U.S. military officers to fight Assad's forces alongside the rebels, a troops-on-the-ground policy that had no domestic political support and that Obama was unwilling to advocate.

Ford continued to publicly support Obama's policy in Syria, even though he thought it was failing. In 2013, during an appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he was harshly criticized by both Democratic and Republican senators, particularly by John McCain, who excoriated him for his role in a "shameful chapter in American history." Ultimately, Ford quit. "I was defending a policy I didn't even support," he said. Power, in her book, recounts a telephone conversation, in 2014, in which McCain lit into her in a similar fashion. Obama's policy, he told her, was a disgrace, and she was defiling herself by defending it.

Before slamming the phone down, he shouted, "You should resign." Power didn't resign, of course, and it's unclear that she should have. If the events of her tenure at the White House have taught us anything, though, it is that the moral case for intervention is only as strong as the practicality of the mission itself. There is no moral case for doing something you're not able to do.

The biggest reason that memoirs from the Obama Administration tend to avoid lingering on humanitarian intervention is simply that the record provides little to brag about: a disaster in Libya and in Syria, and a quagmire in Afghanistan, where the prospects of millions of women, empowered by the removal of the Taliban, hang in the balance. In Iraq, Obama's decision to withdraw American troops, against the advice of his military, opened the door to ISIS, whose fighters massacred thousands of Yazidis and Christians, and other minorities. In other places where Obama turned down requests for military assistance—as in Ukraine—the counterfactuals are just as murky. Could Obama have done more? In retrospect, the answer is always yes. Would the results look better? Knowing the answer would require, as Power said of the decision to intervene in Libya, a crystal ball. ♦

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