

Delusions of war

Пише: Seumas Milne
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During the 1990s, many one-time leftists in the west and elsewhere were drawn towards the idea that human rights could somehow fill the gap left by the decline in socialist politics. In the wake of the Bosnian bloodbath and the Rwandan genocide, that crystallised for some into support for unilateral humanitarian intervention and war.

A decade on, the hopes that were invested in such delusions lie buried in the graveyards of Falluja and Kandahar, the ethnically cleansed Serb and Roma districts of Kosovo and the torture, kidnapping and internment jails run by the self-proclaimed liberators and human rights champions of the war on terror.

As regular readers of comment is free will know, Conor Foley is a veteran aid worker who has seen from the inside how the human rights agenda has been conscripted to legitimise and underpin the US and British wars of occupation and domination of the past 10 years.

Part working travelogue from almost every recent major conflict zone, part political journey and analysis, Foley's new book, *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War*, is an important and thoughtful contribution to understanding why western "humanitarian interventions" - from Somalia and Yugoslavia to Sierra Leone - have largely failed in their own terms and left such a dismal and unstable legacy.

Foley is effective at deconstructing some of the mythology and deceit around these debacles - including the illegal Kosovo war of 1999, which paved the way for the aggression against Iraq, but is still seen as a successful humanitarian intervention by many who balk at the more nakedly imperial Iraqi and Afghan disasters. As Foley reminds us, the Nato bombing campaign was supposedly launched to stop war crimes and ethnic cleansing, grotesquely exaggerated in Anglo-American propaganda. But both increased dramatically as a result: it turned a "simmering crisis into a full-scale humanitarian disaster". And in the months after Nato troops took over in Kosovo, a thousand people were killed or disappeared as up to 250,000 Serbs and Roma were driven from their homes in the new western protectorate.

But he is at his most insightful about the role played by the battalions of NGOs he has wrked among, which follow the conquering armies like missionaries, often urging them on and

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providing the social infrastructure for the bloated occupation regimes that are then imposed on hostile lands. As Foley highlights, most non-governmental organisations in the humanitarian line of work are no longer really NGOs at all - they're increasingly sub-contracted GOs, which get the bulk of their funding from western governments with political strings attached. Foley describes returning to Afghanistan in 2004 to find that "the humanitarian effort had become part of a wider counter-insurgency operation". The then US secretary of state Colin Powell hailed the humanitarian NGOs as "a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team". Against such a background, it's hardly surprising that aid workers come to be seen as targets by some of those fighting occupation.

Steeped as he is in NGO-speak and thinking, Foley can often lapse into loaded terminology and assumptions: he repeatedly uses the term "international community", for example, when he clearly means the US and its allies. In the same vein, he largely accepts the reasons given by the western powers for their interventions at face value, along with, say, the legitimacy of occupied Afghanistan's fraudulent elections, in which political parties weren't even allowed on the ballot paper. And so keen is Foley to dissociate himself from "anti-imperialists" that he reserves some of his sharpest - and least sure-footed - attacks for a writer such as Naomi Klein, over her analysis in *The Shock Doctrine* of disaster capitalism in post-tsunami Sri Lanka.

But in a sense that only strengthens the force of his critique, coming as it does from someone immersed in the ideology and practice of the "humanitarian community" - who has learned from personal experience how calamitous invading other people's countries in the name of democracy and human rights has proved on the ground. When he describes the role played by western governments and NGOs in Sierra Leone and Liberia as a deeply resented "recolonisation", you know it's not meant as a rhetorical flourish.

Far from making another Rwanda less likely, the liberal interventionist wars of the past decade have postponed the development of a genuine rules-based system of international protection by discrediting

humanitarian intervention as a mechanism of imperial power enforcement applied only to weak and recalcitrant anti-western states. In the circumstances, Foley's conclusion that humanitarian NGOs should return to a policy of the strictest neutrality and broaden their focus from individual human rights to the wider inequalities of wealth and power that underlie conflict and humanitarian crises is surely only common sense.