

BOOK REVIEW: Can Intervention Work?

Emily Deters, Webster University – Saint Louis

As human beings, we all have the right to physical security. Therefore, no one should live in fear of having all of their possessions taken away from them or being killed walking out of their house. In times when security is threatened, it is always a difficult decision to determine when it is an appropriate time for outsiders to intervene for human rights protection. The book *Can Intervention Work?* addresses this difficulty with two essays by Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, which shares the authors' experiences with interventions in Afghanistan and Bosnia. The motivations for intervention were completely different in these two cases; Stewart and Knaus tell us what made Bosnia a successful intervention, while careless actions made Afghanistan a failure.

Stewart and Knaus agree that the war on terror in Afghanistan was doomed from the beginning. In Afghanistan, there was a lack of understanding and communication with local populations. There was too much interaction solely with officials, few stayed in Afghanistan for extended periods of time, outsiders rarely bothered to learn the language and dialects of the people they were trying to work with, and many focused on shaping Afghanistan into a model nation that it was never going to be. Without submersing themselves into local cultures and truly understanding how this country operated, there would be little success in planning an intervention strategy that would work.

According to Stewart and Knaus, the first step toward having a successful intervention is working with locals and ensuring that they support the plan of action that is being attempted. Without

the local support of villages and other political leaders, there is little that can be accomplished. There has to be a collaboration if the intervention is to be successful. More and more man power and money is thrown into Afghanistan, all in hopes that a new nation-building strategy will work, but it all seems to fail. Stewart asks if there is really a possible way to nation-build while civilians are under fire. The U.S. government entered Afghanistan to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda, so there was going to be war from early in the intervention strategy. As a result of this tension, policy makers had to figure out how they were going to change the government and still be able to reassure the local people that this action was for the best. At the same time, homes were being destroyed and people were being killed, so it was hard to get the support they needed. Again, a fundamental flaw was that little communication was being done to convince citizens that this activity would be in their best interest and support their futures.

Afghanistan was also a failure because of the short-term scope of intervention strategies. United Nations officials, diplomats, and military members had very short stays on the ground and were never able to implement any of their long-term projects efficiently. A new leader would come in and say that his or her new strategy for development was the best, changing what progress had been made during the past year or so. Without extended tours to keep a specific action plan on track, the Afghans began to lose trust in the international community. One strategist was quoted in the book as saying that it felt like the only way to get a clear idea about the next step was to document what had not worked previously. A useful strategy needed to be both international and regional, joint civilian-military, coordinated, long-term, focused on capacity-building, and combining respect for sovereignty as well as local legitimacy and human rights. Such a strategy required “a hard-headed approach: setting clear and realistic objectives with clear metrics of success” (p.37).

Stewart comments that the international community did not do a very good job at trying to understand the customs, language, and way of life in Afghanistan. In past interventions, UN members and officials would submerge themselves in the culture and language, spending a lot of the time trying

to better understand what the right moves would be to help a country succeed. This way they were able to speak personally to local leaders and villages and get a clearer idea of what kind of help was needed. In the case of Afghanistan, Stewart observes that UN staff, non-governmental organizations, and journalists were restricted to specific areas, mainly heavily guarded compounds where they worked on computers. The restrictions kept them from going into potentially unsafe areas and made them particularly unable to leave the compounds at night. This isolation deterred outsiders from getting a clear picture of the real Afghanistan, as well as formulating a clear plan that may have potentially helped improve the situation. While these observations on what did not work are useful, it's unfortunate that Stewart did not devote more time in his essay to expanding on good solutions to assist future interventions.

On the other hand, interventions into Bosnia and the rest of the Balkans offer examples of how intervention has been successful in the past. True, Bosnia offered very different circumstances than Afghanistan – only after the mass murder of 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslims) men and boys in Srebrenica (by Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats in 1995) did the international community feel that it was time to take action. In that case, genocide and ethnic cleansing prompted international action. The success in Bosnia became a model strategy of how interventions should be handled. Knaus quotes Paddy Ashdown, a British politician, saying that key to any success was “to go in hard from the start” and to establish the rules of law. Close relationships with civilians and the military were also credited for success; without the cooperation and understanding of the local people and their government, there could be no positive advancements.

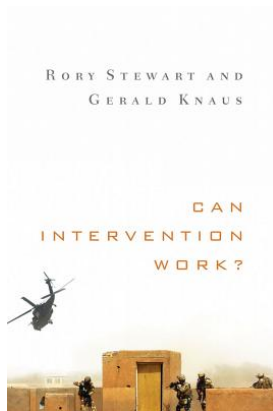
Knaus tells of his experiences in Bosnia and describes how the actions that were taken made it successful. The success led the three parties to sign the Dayton Peace agreement, and the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR) took legal action based upon this peace agreement. The peace agreement gave the OHR the authority enforce legislation, which included

removing any politicians, civil servants, and judges that threatened the success of the peacekeeping plans. In addition, the promise of joining the European Union (EU) served as a catalyst for halting war and war crimes. Joining the EU meant a lot to the Balkan states: “It was this promise of joining a community of prosperous and stable democracies as equal members that gave reformers in all countries powerful arguments to leave behind nationalist vision of the previous decade” (p.142).

Knaus argues that the Balkans offered us four different perspectives or approaches for understanding intervention strategies: the planning school, the liberal imperialist school, the futility school, and principled incrementalism. The planning school’s main focus is on resources, including people and money, which are all available for an extended period of time. This approach focuses on past strategies that did or did not work; the right fit between means and ends is everything. This lesson is the most highly valued among American policy-makers. Next, liberal imperialism focuses on “spoilers” and warlords. This perspective tries to find people who are going to impede the process of obtaining good governance. Those who argue that both humanitarian intervention and nation-building are generally bound to fail embrace the third way, described as the futility school. Lastly, principled incrementalism challenges a number of conventional wisdoms about what has and has not worked in postwar Bosnia.

In the end, the intervention strategies used in Bosnia – which utilized many human and financial resources – resulted in great failure when used in Afghanistan. The United States has invested 25 times more money and 50 times more troops in Afghanistan compared to Bosnia thus far. What may be missing is a lack of understanding on the ground, as well as an unfortunate “failure is not an option” approach that has led to harmful consequences. We can learn from the intervention in Bosnia, which we can view as an example of what needs to be undertaken to accomplish an intervention strategy. It wasn’t used properly in Afghanistan, but we could implement it in situations such as Syria and the Ukraine.

The one negative observation to note from this book is the authors don't present specific solutions in either Afghanistan or Bosnia. Although the authors outline the positive and negative consequences of particular strategies, they need to spend more time gleaning lessons from past mistakes and successes. They did not give any real solutions or full strategies themselves for what may have been a better plan of action, versus what others were doing or what they have already tried. However, the two essays give two great examples of what intervention did not work and what did work. The fact that the two authors spent an ample amount of time on both Bosnia and Afghanistan shows that they were dedicated to their work and helping to improve human rights conditions around the world.



Book Information

Can Intervention Work?

Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus (2011)

236 pp, Norton, \$15.95

© Copyright 2014 *Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights*. All rights reserved.

Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights is an academic journal that provides space for undergraduate students to explore human rights issues, challenge current actions and frameworks, and engage in problem-solving aimed at tackling some of the world's most pressing issues. This open-access journal is available online at www.webster.edu/rightingwrongs.