

David Rieff, A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2002) 366pp (Can\$41.00)

[DRAFT]

Review by Sean M. Maloney, PhD

While working in Kosovo in 2001, I saw a member of a prominent non-governmental relief organization handing out foodstuffs to refugees. The message on his T-shirt could have been the alternative subtitle to this book: “If vegetarians eat vegetables, what do humanitarians eat?” David Rieff, a journalist with extensive Balkans and African experience, has finally thought the unthinkable and written the unwritable: humanitarianism is a dangerous ideology which generates more problems than it alleviates. Practically each sentence in Rieff’s book is a truism particularly to those of us who have viewed with circumspection the activities of NGOs prior to, during and after hostilities throughout the 1990s. Indeed, Rieff notes that “Aid workers can do great harm, however inadvertently...Are they serving as logisticians or medics for some warlord’s war effort? Are they creating a culture of dependency? And are they being used politically?” Rieff also takes pains to point out the myriad of cases where humanitarian NGOs reverse the process and use images of suffering to manipulate and use governments (and the resources of their sometimes well-intentioned citizens) for crass internal political purposes. The most egregious examples of manipulation involve the use of media images of children caught up in violent events and the tacit assumption that all civilians in conflict zones are like these innocent children: “They are victims; that should go without saying. But too often we need to think of them as innocent victims. And many of them are not...We do those who are in pain and in need no favour by infantilizing them.”

We must not forget, Rieff adds, that “international institutions –first and foremost, the UN itself-and international treaty regimes that exist are not the expressions of community but of power. But just because these

institutions exist does not mean any moral consensus exists.” Indeed, the book examines humanitarianism’s institutional and ideological origins and blows away many assumptions commonly held by Canada’s cultural elite and the audience it services. His revelations about the Red Cross organization’s complicity in the Holocaust and the long term moral effects of its policy on international humanitarianism up to and through the Biafra affair in the late 1960s and into the 1990s are by themselves worth the price of the book. How, for example, could the Red Cross have railed against the use of chemical weapons in the First World War against soldiers and then choose not to do so when similar gases were used to exterminate unarmed civilians? There is an answer to this question and its not one that will sit well amongst those who assume that NGOs are all about doing good in the service of mankind.

In many ways, A Bed for the Night is an inadvertent but effective critique of the ‘soft power’ and ‘human security’ policies championed by Lloyd Axworthy and certain factions within the Department of Foreign Affairs throughout the last decade. The paternalistic smugness and moral superiority of the proponents of humanitarian intervention and their NGO supporters is very similar in tone to the European colonizers of the 19th Century: Rieff takes pains to note the similarity in language and intent. Canada’s bungled 1996 intervention in Zaire to assist Rwandan refugees is also put in context which underlines the moral problems of humanitarianism: “In a way, what had happened [in Zaire] is comparable to what might have taken place had two hundred thousand SS soldiers taken their families out of Nazi Europe as it fell to the allies to somewhere they could hope to be sheltered from retribution.”

And why should countries like Canada risk the lives of their soldiers to assist in similar projects? They should only do so if and when “humanitarianism is melded with national interest” since “only then is there likely to be any tolerance for casualties. It is for this reason that humanitarians’ reliance on the power of images and on the utopian fantasy of

a global village of moral concern is such a trap.” And Canada has been caught in that trap, by pretending that armed humanitarian operations are the same as peacekeeping and thus are somehow an extension of Canadian values.

In the end, Rieff is correct in his identification that, flying in the face of human history, “the deep radicalism of humanitarian action is its belief that people are not made to suffer. To assume such a stance in a time of such widespread evil and pain is astonishing in and of itself.” It is high time, with Canada’s foreign and defence policy review looming on the horizon, that we seriously examine what Rieff has to say so that our limited resources are no longer squandered out of sheer emotionalism aggravated by the manipulations of those who do not have Canada’s interests at heart.