

# SIX REASONS FOR AMERICA TO BE A RELUCTANT INTERVENER

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAY 23 2011

America's great power and wealth tempts some to advocate its intervention when civil wars in weakly or ungoverned lands threaten to become humanitarian disasters or when tyrants refuse to surrender their thrones. Our aid for victims should be readily offered in these cases, but very rarely should our troops. America must avoid becoming the global policeman, self-designated or not. Beyond the continuing burden of the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which, though the interventions were motivated by other factors, should tame the American intervention urge for a generation, there are at least six reasons not to take on the job.

1). It is very hard to find serious partners among other rich and powerful nations when we seek to form a coalition to act. Interventions often meet strong resistance, sliding into costly and bloody contests over which local group or groups will be allowed to govern their own land. Most rich nations live comfortably under the American security umbrella and therefore need only to maintain minimal forces. Those with real military capabilities are rarely willing to expose them to significant risk in these foreign interventions. Almost inevitably, no matter how many flags are shown on the coalition website, Americans will end up doing much of the fighting and dying.

2). It is very hard to employ the United States government's full resources in such interventions. We are constantly told the key to successful interventions is effective nation building, mobilizing all the talents of our government to create new, responsive governments for failed or newly freed states, but it is the US military that gets to do most the government creation. The United States doesn't have a deployable civil service because it doesn't have a colonial service. No one should wish us to develop one or expect our military to be an especially good substitute for one.

3). It is very hard for a military to interact effectively with the civilian populations when it is being attacked by insurgents who hide among them. Military inclinations in these situations run disastrously against revealed counter-insurgency doctrine which demands saintly restraint and burdensome nation/trust building efforts from the military. Counter-insurgencies are often drawn out campaigns that wear down the discipline of even professional soldiers when they face the tension of repeated dangerous deployments.

4). It is very hard to maintain public support for interventions. Expectations of quick, low cost success sell interventions, but public support fades as casualties mount. This obvious political process encourages the generals and politicians to be overly optimistic at the beginning and to promise a fast and cheap turn around when problems are encountered as they often are in interventions. Victory is always just around the corner.

5). It is very hard to end the dependencies created in the interventions. The local military trained to take on the security task easily becomes fearful of its ability to fight on its own, and the local elites worry what will happen to their wealth once the intervention subsidies end. They will likely cling onto our troops and dollars as long as possible. Instead of stable independent nations, interventions can create long term security and economic dependencies that are just a step beyond colonial and that are often sustained by corruption and fraud.

6). It is very hard to ignore the opportunity costs interventions hold for American society. Now 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the US still cannot put its full attention on its domestic problems, the real deficiencies that exist in

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our public education, infrastructure and health care. Its talent is too often mobilized, not to help those in need at home, but rather to social engineer foreign societies.

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**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.