

Can Intervention Work?¹

Reviewed by *Captain Brett Warcholak**

Introduction

By now Rory Stewart is a familiar name with Western diplomats, international development types and students of counterinsurgency. His first book, *The Places In Between*, chronicles a leg from Herat to Kabul in his long walk across Central Asia in 2000–2002.² His second book, *The Prince of the Marshes*, recounts his experiences a year later as a governorate coordinator in Southern Iraq under the Coalition Provisional Authority.³ Stewart was briefly in the British Army before joining the Diplomatic Service with posts in Indonesia and Montenegro. After Iraq, he returned to Afghanistan and founded a non-profit organization. More recently, Stewart was Professor and Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and in 2010 was elected Member of Parliament for the Conservative Party. Having achieved all the classic prerequisites for success in British politics and more, Stewart, who is only thirty-nine, is definitely one to watch.

Despite this whirlwind of high adventure and professional activities, he has managed to co-author a third book, *Can Intervention Work?*, with Gerald Knaus, Harvard fellow and head of the European Stability Initiative research and policy institute. The book tackles the question of what makes some foreign interventions successful and others fail.⁴

Their discussion is not about the moral or legal justifications for foreign intervention but rather practical considerations that limit the international community's power to effect change through foreign intervention. "It is not a question of what we ought to do but what we can: of understanding the limits of Western institutions in the twenty-first century and of giving a credible account of the specific context of a particular intervention."⁵

The book is divided into two essays, one written by Stewart and one by Knaus. Stewart's essay is about what the international community misunderstood about Afghanistan, the consequences thereof, and what lessons can be drawn from these experiences.⁶ Knaus's essay, on the other hand, is about Bosnia, an intervention success story that has been used as a model for other interventions, albeit "a triumph misdescribed and misunderstood."⁷ More on that later.

Stewart and Knaus first raise their conceptual piñatas, the prevailing schools on foreign intervention: the "planning school," which "prescribes a clear strategy, metrics, and structure, backed by overwhelming resources" and "the liberal imperialist school," "which emphasizes the importance of decisive, bold, and charismatic leadership" by foreigners.⁸ While these schools differ in their approaches, both overestimate the capabilities of the international community and underestimate local capacity, claim the authors.⁹

On account of these shortcomings and the inherently dangerous, unpredictable, and fluid nature of foreign intervention, Stewart and Knaus instead champion an alternative approach called "principled incrementalism" (Knaus) or "passionate moderation" (Stewart).¹⁰ In their view, success is "dependent on the exact location and nature of the crisis and the capacity of the interveners (which is always limited) and the role of neighbors, the regional context, and local leadership (which is always more influential than is assumed)."¹¹ In order to make success more likely, the authors recommend that would-be interveners "distinguish brutally between the factors they can control, the dangers they can avoid, and the dangers they can neither control nor avoid."¹² While success cannot be guaranteed, Stewart and Knaus recommend developing a thorough understanding of the context prior to intervention and returning power to locals through elections as soon as possible.¹³

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¹ RORY STEWART & GERALD KNAUS, *CAN INTERVENTION WORK?* (2011).

² RORY STEWART, *THE PLACES IN BETWEEN* (2006).

³ RORY STEWART, *THE PRINCE OF THE MARSHES* (2007).

⁴ STEWART & KNAUS, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *See id.* at xvi.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at xvii–xviii.

⁹ *Id.* at xviii.

¹⁰ *See id.* at xxiv–xxv.

¹¹ *Id.* at xxv.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *See id.*

The Plane to Kabul

Stewart's essay is more of a hodgepodge of astute observations and historical and personal examples, which is his natural style, than a rigorously structured argument. Stewart first muses on the isolation of foreign workers in Afghanistan from the daily realities of Afghan life, a topic covered in his previous works.¹⁴ Stewart sees this as the underlying reason for the slow pace of progress.¹⁵ Stewart blames their lack of knowledge of local history, culture, and politics on short tour lengths, security restrictions, career structures, educational backgrounds, and simply being foreign.¹⁶ A typical development consultant in Afghanistan today is young, was educated at elite institutions, is optimistic to a fault and expert on abstract theories, but has little knowledge of the Afghan context and few opportunities to experience local life, Stewart writes.¹⁷ He compares today's foreign worker in Afghanistan to past British colonial officers in East India, exemplified by John Lawrence, British Viceroy of India from 1864 to 1869, who had years of extensive language and history training before his first field assignment in Delhi, which lasted an astonishing sixteen years (his second field assignment to the Punjab was another fourteen years).¹⁸ Unlike today, colonial officers like Lawrence came from a system that valued long area studies in preparation for duty and rewarded long experience in-country and in-depth knowledge of local cultures and languages.¹⁹ While Stewart acknowledges the harsh ways of British colonialism,²⁰ he is clearly romantic about the system that created such efficient overlords, some of whom later took up political careers, which served as an important check against badly conceived intervention abroad.²¹ He praises their critical views but points out that even their insight could not avert British defeats in Afghanistan in 1842 and 1879.²²

Stewart recognizes early successes in post-intervention Afghanistan in health, education, finance, and infrastructure, which were made possible by foreign technical expertise and

money or simply by lifting Taliban restrictions.²³ He believes the international community went wrong, however, when it began tinkering with the fundamental structures of Afghan society in order to create a "sustainable solution" in Afghanistan.²⁴ Western leaders and westernized Afghans described the problems of Afghanistan and their solutions in abstract terms, e.g., "rule of law," "governance," "security," and "human rights," according to their Western understanding of what these terms meant.²⁵ Laboring under such concepts, foreigners and Afghan elites overlooked, or saw as woefully deficient, traditional forms of providing security and justice, especially in rural areas, and saw an ungoverned vacuum that had to be filled.²⁶ Despite costly rule of law programs, many Afghans have remained skeptical about the ability of modern institutions to deliver fair justice and continue to prefer traditional means of dispute resolution.²⁷

Stewart also criticizes foreign efforts at the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of armed groups in Afghanistan and provides examples how DDR has been misused by political rivals, unintentionally benefitting infamous individuals, and worsening the security situation.²⁸ He casts doubt on claims that Afghanistan really poses "a unique threat to global security: a nation that could endanger the very survival of the United States and the global order, not simply one troubling country among many,"²⁹ reminding the reader that British and Russian public figures had made similarly specious threats about Afghanistan during the "Great Game" for control of central Asia in the nineteenth century.³⁰ But, unlike today's officials, those of the nineteenth-century British and Russian Empires had the good sense to refrain from implementing a full scale occupation of the country, he writes.³¹

After his critique of the international community's intervention, Stewart disappointingly offers no positive recommendations for the way forward in Afghanistan. Had he done so, his recommendations would almost have

¹⁴ See, e.g., STEWART, *supra* note 2, at 245–46 (describing friends working in Afghanistan, the background of policy-makers, and their ignorance of Afghan perspectives).

¹⁵ See STEWART & KNAUS, *supra* note 1, at 13.

¹⁶ See *id.*

¹⁷ See *id.* at 18–20.

¹⁸ See *id.* at 22.

¹⁹ See *id.*

²⁰ See *id.* at 66.

²¹ See *id.* at 66–67; see also STEWART, *supra* note 2, at 247 n.59 (comparing Western administrators with colonial officers).

²² See STEWART & KNAUS, *supra* note 1, at 67–68.

²³ *Id.* at 25–27.

²⁴ *Id.* at 27.

²⁵ *Id.* at 34–35. See, e.g., STEWART, *supra* note 3, at 230 (observing on experiences in Iraq, "What was a lived experience for one side was often an abstract concept, learned in a textbook, for the other. Too often, the sophisticated and controversial points that we imagined we were making were experienced by our listeners as sonorous platitudes.").

²⁶ See STEWART & KNAUS, *supra* note 1, at 44–45.

²⁷ See *id.* at 45–46.

²⁸ See *id.* at 47–49.

²⁹ *Id.* at 60.

³⁰ See *id.* at 65–66.

³¹ See *id.* at 67–68.

certainly included a drastic downscaling of the international community's goals for Afghanistan and a reduction of troop levels. Stewart views Afghanistan mostly as a cautionary tale.

Stewart's approach to intervention can be summed up in a few simple maxims: avoid it whenever possible; exhaust alternatives first; and when you absolutely must, proceed with caution and keep objectives realistic.³² Perhaps the most useful, concrete thing that can be done, according to Stewart, is the creation of a stronger corps of regional specialists with deep knowledge of local contexts, who can help set realistic goals for interventions and guide us to them.³³ To this end, Stewart would be in favor of first undoing current institutional preferences for generalists.

Readers will enjoy Stewart's personal stories about the late Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, whom Stewart greatly admired, and Stewart's teasingly short comparisons of past British experiences about Afghanistan with the international community's present troubles, as alluded to above. The similarities are indeed uncanny, but Stewart neglects material distinctions. Notwithstanding this minor criticism, Stewart otherwise raises valid points and his appeal for a more cautious approach toward intervention is wholly reasonable.

The Rise and Fall of Liberal Imperialism

Knaus takes a more methodical approach in his essay by comparing the explanatory power of the different schools of intervention to account for events in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the NATO military intervention in Fall 1995.

According to the planning school, success in Bosnia after 1995 was the inevitable result of the bountiful resources, people, and money the international community had devoted to Bosnia.³⁴ In 1996, there were sixty-thousand international

troops in Bosnia, two thousand international police monitors, and more than five billion dollars had been donated for reconstruction—all for a small population under four million.³⁵ As Knaus writes, “this theory holds there is a clear causal relationship between the amount of assistance provided and the stability that ensues.”³⁶ But looking at economic data and troop levels in Bosnia and Afghanistan, Knaus finds no such corresponding decrease in violence.³⁷ Knaus finds more dispositive reasons for the success in Bosnia, namely, that initial strategy was to co-opt local elites rather than fight them, and that international troops entered Bosnia under the terms of the mutually agreed Dayton Accords and took great measures to avoid armed conflict.³⁸ Lessons learned in such a context have little application in Afghanistan and Iraq, both non-permissive environments with no peace agreements.³⁹ For these reasons, Knaus does not agree with planners who believe in universal lessons on state-building that can be applied everywhere.⁴⁰ Only when the context of intervention is analogous to the permissive environment in Bosnia in 1995 should we look back to Bosnia for guidance.⁴¹

Liberal imperialists tend to focus on spoilers, who want to maintain the dismal status quo and stymie the good work of interveners.⁴² For liberal imperialists, the key is to empower foreign interveners with sufficient authority to overcome domestic opposition and overhaul existing institutions.⁴³ Charismatic leadership and bold decisions in the model of Paddy Ashdown, the UN High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2002 to 2006, are *de rigueur*.⁴⁴ According to liberal imperialists, progress in Bosnia did not happen until after the so-called Bonn powers were agreed in 1997, which gave the Office of the High Representative (OHR) sweeping powers to impose legislation and fire obstructionist officials.⁴⁵ But Knaus dissolves the claim that the exercise of these powers led to political progress in Bosnia. He notes the peculiar willingness of Bosnians to go along with OHR decisions, considering how it had no arrest powers or prisons as means

³² See *id.* at 77–78.

³³ See *id.* at 79. But cf. STEWART, *supra* note 3, at 398 (writing on Iraq, “We overestimate the power of the United States and its allies. Even critics of the war mistake our capacity. Those who blame stupidity in the administration, the early decision of Bremer, or the failures to win ‘hearts and minds’ share many of the assumptions of the administration itself: namely, that the invasion could succeed if the invaders were competent. Such critics imply that the problem is that we sent the ‘B team.’ And that somewhere else an ‘A team’ exists, or that at least such a team might be created, of ideal nation builders with the qualities of a Machiavellian prince—informed, charismatic, intelligent, flexible, and decisive, supported by their own populations and powerful enough to fundamentally reshape alien societies. But in fact there are no such Machiavellian princes. If they emerged, our societies would not support them; and even if they existed and won support, they would not be able to succeed in Iraq.”).

³⁴ See STEWART & KNAUS, *supra* note 1, at 131.

³⁵ See *id.* at 131–32.

³⁶ *Id.* at 134.

³⁷ See *id.* at 135–37.

³⁸ See *id.* at 137.

³⁹ See *id.*

⁴⁰ See *id.* at 140.

⁴¹ See *id.* at 141.

⁴² See *id.* at 143.

⁴³ See *id.*

⁴⁴ See *id.* at xvii–xviii.

⁴⁵ See *id.* at 142.

to enforce them.⁴⁶ Knaus explains, “the benevolent authoritarian rule of OHR was much preferable to any other political system they had ever experienced, and reminiscent of the relative stability of authoritarian rule under the Yugoslav communist regime.”⁴⁷ Knaus also explains that many OHR dictates were first privately agreed to by local parties who later distanced themselves from them, finding it easier to do so than explain compromises to their electorates.⁴⁸ Based on successes in Bosnia claimed by liberal imperialists, their approaches, “go in hard, avoid early elections, implement drastic reforms in the golden hour,”⁴⁹ were taken to their logical extreme in Iraq by the Coalitional Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer.⁵⁰ Knaus reminds the reader that, unlike in Iraq, major overhauls were not implemented in the early stages of the Bosnia intervention for fear of a nationalist backlash. He argues that the counterproductive effect of liberal imperialist approaches in Iraq proves the point that such approaches are universal.⁵¹

In addition to the “planning school” and “liberal imperialist school,” Knaus introduces the reader to “the futility school and intervention skeptics” and his own “principled incrementalism.”⁵²

Intervention skeptics do not think that Bosnia, with its tenuous peace and simmering rivalries, has been much of a success—let alone an example for larger interventions.⁵³ Like Stewart, Knaus has a healthy pessimism for foreign intervention, but argues that, in regard to Bosnia, a little credit is in order. Knaus rattles off a litany of reasons to believe that Bosnia is a success story: it did not prove to be a quagmire for foreign troops; refugees and minority ethnic groups have largely returned to their homes; free and fair elections have been held; effective border controls are in place; and, most importantly, there has not been a return to violence as it existed prior to intervention.⁵⁴ Ultimately, “Bosnia did not prove unable to live together,”⁵⁵ he writes.

Knaus attributes Bosnia’s successes to slow, cautious, essentially *ad hoc* solutions to its intractable problems. He

highlights in particular the way in which the return of refugees, previously believed impossible, could be accomplished after 2000 through a mix of OHR negotiations, the presence of foreign troops, and the willingness of refugee groups to take advantage of their right of return.⁵⁶ But the return of refugees was not accomplished all at once or according to one paradigm for every area of resettlement: “In practice every progress was the result of bargaining, endless negotiations in the field, weighing risks, and supporting, wherever possible, domestic initiatives. It was a process of principled incrementalism.”⁵⁷ Knaus also credits the U.S. strategy to weaken the Serb entity by strengthening the Bosniak-Croat Federation army, the diplomacy of statesman Carl Bildt, the first High Representative from 1995 to 1997, who supported moderate Serbs and sought to isolate radicals; and especially the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) after it gained traction in 1997.⁵⁸ The ICTY has allowed Bosnians to avoid the contentious infighting that would have inevitably resulted from domestic attempts to prosecute warlords, and it has discredited their nationalist agenda.⁵⁹

In conclusion, Knaus answers the book’s main question in the affirmative, because foreign intervention did work in Bosnia.⁶⁰ Knaus deduces some morals from recent experiences for future use. As the cases of Rwanda and Srebrenica show, “there is a high price, in human, moral, and strategic terms, of not attempting to intervene when this seems within our power in the face of mass atrocities.”⁶¹ Decisions to intervene must be made on a case-by-case basis.⁶² Success depends on the importance of the local and regional context with nation-building “under fire,” such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, posing far different challenges from situations like Bosnia.⁶³ While Knaus deeply doubts the feasibility of intervention “under fire,” he remains optimistic about the chances for success in other contexts.⁶⁴ NATO’s successful, limited military intervention in Libya has justified this optimism.

Bosnia today is indisputably in better shape than it was just prior to intervention. But a more interesting question

⁴⁶ See *id.* at 156.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ See *id.* at 156–57.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 157.

⁵⁰ See *id.* at 154.

⁵¹ See *id.* at 157.

⁵² *Id.* at 129–88.

⁵³ See *id.* at 161–63.

⁵⁴ See *id.* at 167–68.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 167.

⁵⁶ See *id.* at 175–77.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 178.

⁵⁸ See *id.* at 178–82, 184–86.

⁵⁹ See *id.* 185.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 188–89.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 189.

⁶² See *id.* at 189–91.

⁶³ See *id.* at 191–92.

⁶⁴ See *id.* at 192.

not fully treated by Knaus is whether its fragile peace would hold without continuous foreign maintenance. There are reasons to doubt so. It has been necessary to keep both the OHR and foreign troops (now the European Military Force (EUFOR)) in Bosnia—over fifteen years after intervention. Actions of Republika Srpska leaders continue to threaten national cohesion.⁶⁵ Only history will tell if Bosnia will be able to stand on its own, will remain an international protectorate or disintegrate along sectarian lines. Although Stewart and Knaus are quick to dismiss Afghanistan and Iraq, the same can be said for these countries as well. Before judging the success of an intervention, it is necessary to take the long view.

Conclusion

For military readers, certain passages of this book, especially overbroad statements about Afghanistan and Iraq, might sound heretical. But these passages permit the authors to develop their positions.⁶⁶ Stewart and Knaus are hardly radical. Their message is simply a call for more conservatism in foreign policy, not isolationism but caution. Decisionmakers contemplating intervention and foreigners working in post-intervention environments would be well advised to read this little book.

⁶⁵ See Valentin Inzko, Speech by the High Representative to the UN Security Council (May 9, 2011) (transcript available at http://www.ohr.int/ohr-dept/presso/presssp/default.asp?content_id=46014).

⁶⁶ See STEWART & KNAUS, *supra* note 1, at xiv.