

# Was it Anarchy in Somalia?

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“You just have to turn on a television to see that those people need help, and no one else is going to help them but us,” said Todd Schuppert, a truck driver from Pekin, Ind.”

—*New York Times*, Dec. 1992

“Who tries to hold what flashes in the worldly storm will drown.”

—Taoist poem

“They want bases and the oil in Somalia,” I told Ed, looking into his intense, sad eyes. I was responding to the same question he posed to me during the Persian Gulf war. A former leftist, Ed wanted to know whether I believed “the U.S. could ever do anything good.”

Well, I thought, if he got fooled about the Iraq slaughter, it was going to be tough to convince him about this.

As I write in late-February, the press reports that the United Nations is finishing a plan to bring home most American troops by June and replace them with a multinational corps under the command of a Turkish general. So, unless the March riots in the capital city presage a greater explosion, it looks like the Somalia expedition may end with a whimper, not the bang of the media spectacle with which it began.

The Pentagon public relations boys worked overtime to come up with the moniker for this invasion—Operation Restore Hope. Left unsaid was whose hope it was intended to restore, but its name was an attempt to give it the spin of a sappy, “caring” act of benevolence in contrast to the imperial triumphalism of Operation Desert Storm.

The media-drenched, stage-managed, initial landing of U.S. Navy Commandos in full battle dress, complete with green camouflage make-up, made for dramatic TV footage and front page photos late last year. As the equipment-laden troops struggled up the beach outside of the capital city of Mogadishu, they were met, as the *New York Times* of that day reported, “by a big press contingent,” instead of an opposing army. In fact, had it not been for the misery afoot in the land, it would have been comical. Battle-ready Navy Seals in full gear were met by TV cameramen wearing Nikes and shorts—someone was inappropriately dressed!

Since then, the activity of the U.S. expeditionary force in Somalia has begun to command decreasing attention in the media. Speculation continues that the new Clinton administration, beset with public relations gaffs, charges of broken campaign promises, and an impending fight with Congress over taxes and spending cuts, was anxious to disengage entirely from that country to focus its complete attention on the still faltering U.S. economy.

Some U.S. troops have already been withdrawn and news reports of Somali starvation deaths have dropped off almost to zero. The 14 factions of warlords, being literally under the gun, have made promises to cease fighting. At peace talks in Geneva, they are expected to create a compromise which would establish a formal central government, a unified army and a national police force. As the accompanying article states, this is all necessary to recreate a context suitable for Western military and economic needs.

## **Wreckage of Colonialism**

The tragedy of Somalia is part of the wreckage left by the European colonization of Africa and the aftermath of Cold War imperial rivalry over this strategically positioned country. Strategically positioned, that is, for the European powers which began intervention there as early as 1541 when the Portuguese established forts to protect its trade routes with India. After centuries of foreign penetration, final dismemberment of Somalia into directly ruled colonies by Italy and Britain began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was this fate which set the stage for what would occur in this land of pastoral and nomadic people in the post-World War II era.

Using the model of the European nations which ruled them, the emerging nationalist movements of Africa during the late 1940s through the 1960s pushed out direct colonial rule and attempted to forge modern administrative political states. Across the continent this approach proved to be a disaster for the long-suffering African people, producing only military dictatorships, authoritarian one-party states, coups and countercoups, environmental nightmares, the erosion of tribal and village life, a population explosion which has created some of the world's largest (and most dreadful) cities, and the destruction of subsistence farming, leading to widespread, endemic starvation.

The grotesque scenes of starvation in the streets of Mogadishu and Baidoa are repeated throughout Africa; four of the world's five poorest nations are on that continent. Poverty is, of course, a modern condition and a relative one thrust upon a people who were once affluent in the sense that all of their needs were met within the traditional structure of tribe and clan through their farming and herding activities. Once modern society introduces wage work, commodity agriculture and a money economy into the colony, first by European masters and then by the triumphant "national liberation" movements, those on the margins of the world capitalist market lose their autonomy, and indeed become, as Franz Fanon put it, "the wretched of the earth."

The anti-colonial political figures who triumphed over their European masters (often their former employers) recognized the power relations of the world they had only recently entered, and set about to maneuver within them. Many a heroic figure of the anti-colonial movements quickly realized their limited options. There was neither the choice nor desire on the part of the new crop of rulers to return to pre-state, tribal society.

However, economic existence on the fringe of the world market held little promise unless the emerging nation-states submitted to becoming sub-vassals of their old bosses and/or pawns in the Cold War rivalry. Neo-colonialist relationships which quickly destroyed traditional livelihoods and cultural traditions soon proved to be the rule, accompanied by domestic corruption which turned the new governments into one-man rackets often with a Stalin-like cult of personality.

## **Shattered State Apparatus**

General Muhammad Siad Barre took power in Mogadishu in 1969, nine years after its independence and began a series of high stake gambles in which he attempted to play off the rival superpowers against one another. All his maneuvers, however, only led to increasing disasters, and a final defeat in the Ogaden war of 1977-78 smashed the clan coalition which President Siad Barre had controlled, heralding a downward spiral of repression and civil war which continued until his overthrow in 1991.

None of the warring factions proved strong enough to enforce their authority as a government, so brutal warlords, particularly from the Hawiya tribe based around the capital, began the scramble for what was left of the shattered state apparatus. Much is made in the media of the "warring clans" as producing a condition of "anarchy." (In fact, one cannot recall in recent memory that term appearing with such regularity in the media, albeit only in this typically maligned form.)

The intense and repeated presentation of the governmentless social and political chaos in Somalia functions conveniently as an advertisement for the political state. The clear message is that without an ostensibly neutral, supervisory mechanism in place to allow diverse people to live in peace, the population will viciously turn on one another. On the face of it, this statist view seems to be sadly confirmed as we witness events in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, no less than in Somalia where government collapses have generated wars of all against all rather than an ethical anarchism. (More on this below.)

In fact, the traditional clan structure of Somalia served exactly such a function as that ascribed above to government. Somali clans are matrilineal, non-authoritarian, extended-family affairs which co-existed quite well, in the main, on a land which was able to provide for the different tribal groups comprising the region. The so-called leaders and warlords such as Gen. Mohammed Farah Aideed and Ali Mandi Mohammed are distorted remnants of the colonial era and the Siad Barre regime. They are deposed bureaucrats who have grouped around them family members and an armed retinue hoping their faction of the state racket will regain power. Although the corrupt warlord system attempted to shatter the country's clan-based tradition, it still retains the ability to exact the greatest loyalty from Somalis, more so than the modern edifices of nation or gang.

But back to Ed's question which assumed I would at least approve of this intervention after opposing all of the others throughout U.S. history. The U.S. intervened militarily in Somalia and not in any of the other miserable sites of hunger, starvation and internecine ethnic slaughter across the world because it would work there and not anywhere else. Here was a situation in which the U.S. needed no invitation to land the Marines since no viable client state existed to extend nor deny one.

It looked like a free ride. Here was an authentic yet media defined and controlled crisis for Americans and an easily manufacturable humanitarian concern to function as cheap pro-Pentagon public relations in a post-Cold War world. The country is mostly desert terrain, perfect for the post-Vietnam syndrome military ("We don't do mountains," said one U.S. general referring to Bosnia and remembering how in Iraq the opposing troops were sitting ducks with nowhere to hide), and Bush correctly anticipated that there would be little political or popular opposition to the expedition.

## **The Ubiquity of Television**

And it did play well, as indicated by the opening quote to this article. The headline of the December 9, 1992 *New York Times* reads, "U.S. Forces Arrive In Somalia On Mission To Aid The Starving." But in this age, it is television which supplies the living images that most strongly identify the crises the U.S. faces and which affirms the responsibility and the right of the empire to intervene.

The ubiquity of television grants it the power to command absolute attention and unflagging loyalty in large sections of the population even though situations are defined entirely on the basis of imperial needs. Whether it is in the name of saving students on a small Caribbean island, arresting an odious drug dealing

Central American dictator, turning back aggression in the Persian Gulf, or now, feeding the destitute, the television paints an unambiguous portrait of American righteousness and power. It gives the sense at the moment that the viewer is not only part of imperial power, but of virtue as well when American forces go into action across the globe. Mainstream media rarely presents opposing interpretations of the official scenarios cited above unless it is as a footnote to show how America tolerates dissent.

If you remind a loyal citizen that starvation as great or greater exists in Mozambique and that starvation has for the first time in history become a permanent institution in the world claiming up to 20,000,000 lives a year mainly resulting from the functioning of the revered world market, little or no response is forthcoming. In fact, the United States regularly uses starvation as a weapon in its battles with recalcitrant little nations such as it is currently doing in Iraq and Cuba. The military destruction of crop land and watersheds was conscious policy in the U.S. war of destruction against Vietnam to the extent that critics coined the term "ecocide" to label it. Attacks on agricultural communities and projects by U.S. client mercenaries in countries like Nicaragua and Angola had a similar intent.

Also, nations across the so-called Third World which have been dragged into the world capitalist economy face increasing poverty and starvation due to the introduction of cash crops and the elimination of subsistence farming, which adequately fed local populations for eons. Cotton, tobacco, coffee, marijuana, coca, cocoa and other such crops grown for the global capitalist supermarket turn once independent farmers into starving, landless peons while depleting their soil and poisoning their communities wrecked once traditional agricultural methods and produce have been abandoned. Fast food hamburgers and often even the flowers on people's dining room table frequently come directly from lands stolen from campesinos in Mexico and Guatemala by powerful landlords. The

money local elites make goes to pay for luxury items and for military hardware to keep their murderous oligarchies in power.

For instance, coca farmers in the cloud forests of Peru's mountains have increasingly stripped the lush vegetation from the area to grow what will eventually wind up in Detroit as crack while intertwining them with the corruption of Sendero Luminoso narcotrafficante politics. Another process creating starvation is the ruination of small farmers and their transformation from subsistence farming, to tenants on the land, to workers on agribusiness plantations. Starvation is a central and integral feature of Western policy both in its geo-political strategies and to provide super-profits for the multinational food conglomerates.

## **Rich People, Rich Nations**

There are great similarities between the response of the U.S. citizenry to starvation in Somalia and to hunger and homelessness here at home—an expression of concern, even shock, but an unwillingness to see the pivotal role the U.S. and the market system play in enacting these horrors. Poverty is viewed at best (when not ascribed to racial inferiority or the faulty habits of the poor) as an unfortunate natural occurrence akin to a hurricane.

Rich and middle-class people often express a “sympathy” for the poor, but recoil at an examination of how their wealth is directly linked to the poverty of others. It seems so simple on the face of it: there are rich and poor people, and rich and poor nations because the rich have the disproportionate amount of available wealth. Rich people and nations maintain elaborate security mechanisms to deflect any direct assault on this set-up, but also control as a primary line of defense the social myth and image making apparatuses to create the illusions which justify the duality of rich and poor as “natural.” The latter function is so highly successful that when the foregoing analysis of poverty is put forth, even to the poor, you are often met only with a blank-eyed stare.

## **It's About Oil!**

The excursion into Somalia was another inaugural gift from the Bush administration to the incoming Clinton government as an ongoing commitment to intervention in (relatively) low-cost, low-risk, short-term situations that legitimate ongoing militarism beyond the Cold War. (Obviously, what has been expended by the military so far could probably feed the Somali population for years.)

However, this is not to say the Somali expedition was simply a general exercise to keep the legions fit for more important interventions or to inure the U.S. population to their frequency (although these are both factors). There are direct military, geo-political goals the U.S. seeks to achieve in the region, many of which are listed in the accompanying article in this issue. Besides the desire for an on-going military presence in the Horn of Africa, the U.S. is heavily motivated by its ferocious addiction to oil.

It came to light in the Jan. 28, 1993 *Los Angeles Times* that the now-deposed Siad Barre regime had granted drilling rights comprising two-thirds of the country to multinational, mostly American, oil giants—Conoco, Amoco, Chevron and Philips. Those companies, favorites of oilman Bush, are hoping the intervention will secure their multi-million dollar investments. Although hidden from public view, so close was the connection between the oil corporations and the U.S. government, that Conoco's Mogadishu office became the de facto American embassy in the days before U.S. forces arrived in Somalia. Conoco was the only major corporation to maintain an office there through two years of strife and was also used by Bush's special envoy as his temporary headquarters in advance of the Christmas-time presidential visit.

## **Is this Anarchy?**

None of the foregoing is particularly shocking to anyone familiar with the usual operations of the empire (Didn't Baudrillard say, “The only scandal is that there is no scandal?”) The details, the data differ, the mode is

constant. However, what is shocking is the degree to which “anarchy,” in the sense used by the media, and not the anarchy of our desires prevails in the areas where government has collapsed.

What do events in Somalia, Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia have to tell us? Have we transmuted as a species, as Camatte suggests in *The Wandering of Humanity*? Are we no longer possessed of the qualities of cooperation and mutual aid that made anarchy a socio-biological component of the evolution of our species? Have 8,000 years of slavery under the political state and religion wiped out the historic memory of a time when people lived without either? Do the consequences of modern society dictate irrevocably the intense ethnic, racial and religious rivalries we see about us? In short, is our vision of a libertarian society a hopeless anachronism that has been eclipsed as a human potential?

These are dreadful questions to ask since the mere posing of them suggests the possibility of an answer in the affirmative. Visionary movements seeking humanity’s renewal are eviscerated once the dynamic powering them is in doubt. Still, we are not religious or marxist, so we must face the answers regardless of the implications for our beliefs.

One answer, no more dire than current events, is a yes to the above questions. It holds that humanity has dug its own grave with its deadly institutions of the state and technology, and a population size which can only produce strife and environmental destruction. Under these conditions, a renewal is impossible and only a “scouring” is ahead in the form of catastrophic plagues, generalized war, ecological collapse or all of them.

It strikes me that, indeed, an apocalypse may await us or our immediate successors, but would such a knowledge, even if it was possible to attain, encourage us to live any differently than as rebels against the forces bringing it about? Anarchy isn’t a political movement like socialism which seeks administrative control of people’s lives after some distant event. While it similarly looks to a revolution in the future, anarchy also implies a set of ethics and values we apply to our daily lives whether there are millions of us in a movement, as in the 1930s in Spain, or just a solitary individual resisting the demands of the state to register for the draft. Whether revolution or ruin awaits us, we still have to live out our lives. It is better to do so in the tradition of the men and women who sought a different world than to mimic a model citizen, the cheerful robot, the lover of Big Brother.

Currently, world events are discouraging in the extreme for the possibility of anarchy, but hasn’t all of civilization been a bloody sword, a pile of corpses? Some periods are worse than others, to be sure. Imagine the mood of anarchists in the late 1930s and early 1940s after the defeat in Spain, the triumph of fascism in Europe and Asia, the onslaught of another world war, and the impending slaughter of entire populations. Anyway, what exists today is not a crisis of anarchy, but of the state. Somalia and Bosnia, Tazekistan and India, all suffer from the results of having had too much government, not too little.

It is difficult to say whether the communal warfare taking place across the world signals the future or not. However, what choice do we have other than to grieve at such situations and try to bring about authentic anarchy to the small spaces in which we are active?

## **Authentic Anarchy**

A final note on what “we should call for” or what our “position” should be on questions like Somalia or Bosnia where there is the possibility that U.S. intervention, even with malevolent motives, would alleviate some suffering and hunger. Need we either put forth brittle slogans such as “U.S. Out of Africa,” or cheer on the imperial legions on “humanitarian” duty? I think not. Pacifists and certain leftists have demanded of the UN and the U.S., troops, no; aid, yes. This is not the worst formulation, but one totally divorced from geopolitical reality. It would be like calling for the Reagan/Bush administration to support the Sandinistas.

The U.S. interest in Somalia and Bosnia is to have them brought up to a level of “acceptable” starvation such as prevails in Brazil and Mexico, one which allows a functioning government and work force to proceed with daily business. The little we can do at this juncture, is expose the cynicism at work in the U.S. policy of intervention and grieve at what we see in the streets at Mogadishu and in the Muslim mountain villages of Bosnia.

Authentic anarchy will come another day.

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