GOOD INTENTIONS

Norms and Practices of Imperial Humanitarianism

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Front cover image: According to the official caption, this is US Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Porfirio Nino, from Maritime Civil Affairs Team 104, who practices speaking Kinyarwanda, one of the official languages of Rwanda, during a civil observation mission in Bunyamanza, Rwanda, August 7, 2009. (DoD photo by Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Jon E. McMillan, US Navy. Public domain.) This particular photograph was also used as the lead image for a 2011 presentation by AFRICOM titled, "United States Africa Command: The First Three Years". On the image the following words were superimposed: "'Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngamantu' I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.~ Zulu proverb"

Back cover image: According to the official caption, these are US Airmen assigned to the 23rd Equipment Maintenance Squadron, 75th Aircraft Maintenance Unit "downloading" an A-10C Thunderbolt II aircraft during an operational readiness exercise at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, August 4, 2009. (DoD photo by Airman 1st Class Joshua Green, US Air Force. Public domain.)

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The Terrorist, the Tyrant and the Thug: "Anti-Anti-Imperialism" in American Media and Policy

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Modern imperialism can be seen as the militarization of neoliberal ideology seeking to maximize the area of the market available for capitalist penetration (Hanieh, 2006, p. 171). In order to maintain support for the near-permanent war entailed by this logic, manufacturers of public opinion in core capitalist states must produce and propagate moral and ideological justifications for the invasions, airstrikes, and interventions constituting the more overt forms of imperial aggression (Wood, 2006, p. 16). Proponents of imperialism have selectively applied liberal conceptions of humanitarianism to legitimize interventions (Fassin, 2010, p. 270) and opponents of imperialism are discredited by being painted as opponents of the moral imperatives of humanitarianism, or worse. Recently the narrative surrounding the war on terrorism has been an integral part of US efforts to discursively construct catastrophes to which interventionist strategies can be administered, as another set of justifications for war.

Mainstream western media routinely participate in the perpetuation of such narratives. Along with US politicians, the media habitually treat governments and non-state ac-

tors inimical to the interests of multinational corporations and NATO member-states in excoriating terms while reserving more nuanced language for those favourable to western and business interests. Catastrophizing rhetoric emanating from Washington is repeated, often with little critical discussion. Dynamics of discursive authority privileging the statements of government officials and mainstream media analysts allow these discourses a public legitimacy often not enjoyed by more critical analyses.

Catastrophization as the Rationale for "Humanitarian" Interventions: Breaking a Few Eggs

A crusade against evil itself, if expressed in and on those terms, needs no justification and is virtually immune from criticism. "An enemy that rejoices in the murder of the innocent" (Bush, 2003/9/12) is pitted against "the cause of freedom" (Bush, 2001/11/8) in a narrative that provides a "self-evident rationale" for militarist adventures around the world (Hodges, 2011, p. 59) and rhetorically conflates critics with "those who hate innocent life" (Bush, 2003/1/3). In the last decade this narrative of foreign intervention constructed by the George W. Bush administration has demonstrated "its ability to subsume a variety of foreign policy objectives under the rubric of the war on terror" (Hodges, 2011, p. 41). The occupations of entire countries can thus be justified not only as acts of self-defence in the national interest, but as moral imperatives springing from a humanitarian ethic couched in the rhetoric of human rights.

The war on terror narrative can be seen as a form of catastrophization. In cognitive psychology the term denotes a cognitive bias in which mildly negative events are magnified into catastrophes with severely negative implications (Ophir, 2010, p. 59). More globally it can refer to the process by which the volume of negative events/outcomes in a given situation is seen to rise,

whether objectively, discursively or both, marking a point in which "catastrophe is imminent" (Ophir, 2010, pp. 61, 62). Discursive catastrophization identifies causes of imminent disaster and seeks to prepare for them (Ophir, 2010, p. 65), often employing the kind of moral rhetoric exemplified in Bush's addresses. As a political strategy it allows discourse-generating entities to classify negative phenomena, "arouse moral and political reactions," identify enemies, and potentially justify the creation of actual catastrophes as a means of thwarting those enemies (Ophir, 2010, pp. 63, 64, 65, 66). A catastrophizing narrative can thus directly affect "sociopolitical reality [through] its capacity to organize experience and human happenings" (Hodges, 2011, p. 63). These organizing discursive processes can be identified, for example, in the war on terrorism narrative's classification of terrorism as a military threat, in political reactions to 9/11 such as the passage of the PATRIOT Act, in the proclamation that "states like [Iraq] and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil" (Bush, 2002), and in the prolonged and bloody occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As a rhetorical strategy catastrophization is applied selectively by American power. For example, the war on terror has been emphasized much more than the threat of climate change, resulting in the fact that total US federal war spending from 2001 to the present runs upwards of US \$3 trillion (Crawford, 2013, p. 1), while spending on climate change stood at US \$8.8 billion a year in 2010 (Government Accountability Office, 2011, p. 5). Within the realm of geopolitics, traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia, a Wahhabist absolute monarchy which was ranked as fifth to last on the Economist's 2012 Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013, p. 8), are discursively treated with kid gloves in comparison to countries with governments inimical to American interests. The American National Security Strategy for 2006 approvingly stated that "Saudi Arabia has taken some preliminary steps to give its citizens more of a voice in their government" (Bush, 2006, p. 2), while saying of the democratically elected govern-

ment of Venezuela that, "a demagogue awash in oil money is undermining democracy and seeking to destabilize the region" (Bush, 2006, p. 15). Meanwhile the Sahara-Sahel region, an important source of American oil imports (Keenan, 2013, p. 11) was described by General Charles Wald in no uncertain terms as a "Swamp of Terror," which "we need to drain" (Powell, 2004), even though "extremist Islamist movements are not particularly strong and popular in the Maghreb" (Byman, 2013/7/10). Selective catastrophization reflects US foreign policy objectives.

Governments or organizations selected for discursive catastrophization by US authorities are generally those that oppose US international power. As such, the selection criteria may be said to be one of anti-anti-imperialism. Algeria, run by an "authoritarian and repressive regime" (Keenan, 2013, p. 224) with a history of state involvement in terrorism (Byman, 2013/7/10; Keenan, 2013, p. 184) has not been selected as a candidate for regime change by Washington, as it has not historically challenged US hegemony; instead the two governments "consult closely [...] on regional issues" (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2012). Libya under Gaddafi, on the other hand, historically exhibited a tendency to challenge US power, fund the wrong kind of paramilitaries and pursue pan-Africanist and pan-Sahara policies which alarmed American planners (Keenan, 2013, pp. 60–63). Even writing more than two decades ago, Lieutenant Paul Bremer III referred to Libya's embassies as "terrorist infrastructure" and to the country as a "terrorist state" (Bremer, 1993, p. 258), and today Gaddafi has been removed from power with the help of swiftly deployed American discourse ("Those who perpetrate violence against the Libyan people will be held accountable" [Obama, 2011/3/3]), and bombs. Iraq, under a Ba'athist Arab socialist regime which nationalized oil resources, threatened US ally Israel and pursued regional power, was invaded and occupied, while Turkmenistan, ranked sixth from last above Saudi Arabia on the Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013, p. 8), provides refueling and "essential overflight

clearances" for US military aircraft (Rice, 2008/5/29), has a most favored nation trade agreement with the US (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2013) and received military and other funding (Office of the Coordinator of US Assistance to Europe and Eurasia, 2011). Saudi Arabia remains a pivotal US ally while Iran remains the target of substantial but recently more muted discursive catastrophization. In perhaps the most ironic case, the Taliban government in Afghanistan was overthrown for its harbouring of al-Qaeda, both organizations having come about partly as a result of catastrophizing US rhetoric and subsequent interventionist policy concerning Soviet expansionism; the US provided hundreds of millions of dollars via Pakistani intelligence to finance anti-Soviet *mujahideen* in Afghanistan, some of whom would later coalesce into the Taliban (Price, 2012, p. 55) after prevailing in the conflict that spawned al-Qaeda (BBC, 2004/7/20).

Imperial Realism is Real Imperialism: Good Guys, Bad Guys, Our Guys, Dead Guys

American rhetoric concerning the terrorism, tyranny, and thuggery of other states is rooted in an imperial realpolitik and reflects specific foreign policy goals. Thus states can be divided into four hierarchically ranked categories according to their discursive treatment by American power. Liberal, industrialized NATO and allied states with US-aligned interests making up the imperial core constitute the first category (good guys), followed by non-core states friendly to American interests (our guys). Non-core states more or less hostile to American interests make up the third (bad guys), and states targeted for intervention the fourth (dead guys). Membership in these categories can shift over time and can sometimes be ambiguous, as with Iraq under Saddam Hussein which at one point found itself partially aligned with US interests in its conflict with Iran, but soon found itself excluded again

from the benefits of being on the right side of American realpolitik.

Good guys almost never find themselves at the pointed end of US catastrophizing rhetoric. One does not hear about the tyranny of France as it intervenes in former colonial possessions like Mali, nor do we hear US officials alleging that British intelligence may have provided support to terrorist organizations (Meacher, 2005/9/10); mass arrests and illegal searches in Toronto during 2010's G20 summit (Morrow, 2011/6/23) were not condemned as unacceptable thuggery blocking the legitimate aspirations of the Canadian people. These states are euphemistically termed the international community (Ching, 2012/9/12) and are effectively immune from humanitarian criticism. Their systems of government and economics are held to be self-evidently superior.

Official doctrines of liberal states emphasizing democratic and egalitarian principles might preclude some authoritarian states' entry into the good guys category, but friendly dictatorships with abysmal human rights records like Saudi Arabia or Turkmenistan need not fear hegemonic discourse from the White House proclaiming them to be the terror-states of ruthless tyrants. Instead we hear of US appreciation for "Saudi Arabia's leadership in working toward a peaceful and prosperous future," presumably being worked towards with the weapons and armour it has been sold by the US (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2013a), while pundits and "experts" agree that the absolute monarchy is the best option available (Hancock, 2004/4/20), or, in the case of the Central Asian dictatorships, mostly keep silent. Qatar, another absolute monarchy with no political parties (The Economist, 2013/6/8), recently sentenced a poet to life in prison (later reduced to 15 years) for insulting the leadership (BBC, 2013/10/21), but remains "a valuable partner to the United States" and NATO (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2013b).

States which defy US power or threaten US international hegemony, however, are treated discursively

as agents of catastrophe. Attacks on humanitarian grounds are common as are criticisms of the lack of government transparency, the insufficient openness of markets and the supposedly questionable fairness of elections. Even democratically elected governments are accused of "undermining democracy" as with Venezuela (Bush, 2006, p. 15). A new-found appreciation for anarcha-feminist punk rock was apparently enlisted to express "serious concern" at Russia's sentencing of Pussy Riot members (Earnest, 2012). Iran, an Islamic state which nevertheless incorporates democratic elements such as elections (Parsi, 2013/6/13), and is "probably the most stable [state] in the Middle East outside of Israel, with the greatest degree of popular representation" (The Economist, 2013/9/23) remains the target of threats of war (Miryousefi, 2014/2/3) and accusations of human rights abuses (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2013c). These states openly espouse anti-US government positions, particularly criticizing US foreign policy, and the rhetoric leveled against them reflects a mutual animosity. Wieseltier writes in *The New Republic* of the leader of Iran, who is not a monarch,

> "This same mullah-king supports the murderer in Damascus and the murderers in Lebanon and Gaza, and remorselessly pursues a foreign policy animated by anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism and intra-Muslim hatred. We may have extended our hand, but the Supreme Leader—the title itself is repugnant to decent modern ears—has not unclenched his fist". (Wieseltier, 2014/1/25)

Unsurprisingly, no mention is made of American support for murderers in Riyadh or Jerusalem, nor of the repugnancy of the terms Supreme Court or Commander-in-Chief, nor that the term Supreme Leader is an English translation of a Farsi term of respect and does not appear in the Iranian constitution which simply refers to a Leader "equal with the rest of the people of the country in the eyes of law" (Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

States targeted for regime change experience a significant ramping up of apocalyptic rhetoric. Here catastrophization seeks "the anticipation and portrayal—realistic, exaggerated, or imaginary—of the imminent danger posed by an enemy whose intention and actions are not simply negative, but threaten the very existence of the group, the state, or the ruling power" (Ophir, 2010, p. 65). Where a state cannot be shown to directly threaten the American state or people, it is portrayed as threatening abstractions such as freedom and democracy upon which American "liberty" is purported to depend (Bush, 2006, p. 3); thus in Libya "protestors" were met with "an iron fist" wielded by a "brutal regime" which "chose the path of brutal suppression" and a "campaign of intimidation" and will no doubt "commit atrocities" after which a "humanitarian crisis would ensue" and the "region could be destabilized, endangering many of our allies and partners" (Obama, 2011/3/18). It is estimated that 152 civilians were killed by government forces during the initial protests (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014). Compare this with rhetoric about Egypt, an American ally ruled since 1981 under a form of martial law (Shehata, 2004): upon Egyptian President Mubarak's removal from office after protests resulting in the deaths of 846 people (BBC, 2011/7/8), Obama said that Mubarak had "responded to the Egyptian people" and now it was up to the military who have "served patriotically and responsibly as a caretaker to the state" to institute democracy, while the US "will continue to be a friend and partner to Egypt" (Obama, 2011/2/11). The military has since deposed an elected government and sentenced 528 of its supporters to death (BBC, 2014/3/24); the US continues to regard its relationship with Egypt as important "for a variety of security, economic, regional reasons" though it has suspended "some" aid (Harf, 2014/3/25).

Words Matter:
US Media as Private Propaganda

Discourses surrounding war and intervention are not all created equal. Anti-war graffiti scrawled on an underpass does not carry the same authority and commonly ascribed legitimacy as an opinion piece in a national newspaper. Foucault, writing of medical professionals, argues that those agents judged to produce legitimate discourse benefit from a privileged status in relation to society including "criteria of competence and knowledge [and] legal conditions that give the right…to practice and extend one's knowledge" (Foucault, 1972, p. 50). Like medical professionals, those working in media enjoy conditions allowing them to *diagnose* problems with the appearance of scientific detachment, and their statements are imbued with a certain discursive authority.

Assertions appearing in privately-owned mainstream media are often assumed to stem from a professional competence unavailable to most others, and draw upon the privileged status of official sources to shore up their own legitimacy. One journalist who was covering the invasion of Iraq was asked by his Iraqi translator why he was quoting US officials when what they were saying was clearly misleading. He replied that a journalist must present both sides and let the reader draw their own conclusions: "I had to tell him I had no choice but to quote the American officials, even if I knew that by doing so I would give their half-truths a measure of credibility" (Fassihi, 2007, p. 171). In the same breath he writes that journalists who write "detailed contextual and emotional accounts of war" risk being accused of bias, after having written that "the US military has tried to manage the flow of information by expecting reporters to practice a sort of self-censorship" (Fassihi, 2007, pp. 169, 171). What is written between the lines but left unsaid is this: rather than simply giving a lying US official credibility by quoting him, an individual journalist risks losing credibility by refusing to quote a lying official or by frankly pointing out that he is lying. This

is part of a sort of feedback loop of credibility in which the reader assumes that an official would not be quoted if he were not a credible source and that the journalist would not be writing if he were not a credible writer. Questioning the validity of either begins a chain reaction of deconstruction with no end in sight, for newspaper articles and government statements are not peer-reviewed and do not need to justify their assertions. Their claims to legitimacy are functions of their privileged discursive position in relation to society as a whole.

The philosopher Habermas writes that when speakers are engaged with one another there is an assumed "background consensus" wherein they recognize that four claims to validity are being fulfilled by the other speaker: that what the other is saying is intelligible; that its content is true; that it is appropriate for the speaker to be saying it; and that the speaker is being honest (Campbell, 1992, p. 341). The validity of any mainstream media's assertions likewise rests on these four propositions being unchallenged by the reader; further, it is in the nature of the news media format that they cannot actually be directly challenged by the reader in any way meaningful to the context of reading a newspaper. For this reason these assertions of validity are simply assumed to be legitimate, and most anything printed in a major newspaper becomes validated under the unquestionable background consensus of the press, even if it is not intelligible, true, appropriate or honest. A fine example is that of the phrase *war on terror.* Originating as a quotation from Bush administration officials, it became so widely used that eventually the quotation marks were dropped by major media and it began to be used as a stand-alone phrase to describe an aspect of US policy. The fact that the phrase is meaningless (that is, unintelligible: as with the war on drugs, one cannot fight a war against an entity that is not an army) was rendered moot by the press' permanent background consensus.

An attitude holding that the truth can be found between "both sides" of a story means that the truth can be

produced by picking which two sides to present, and journalistic practice privileging the statements of powerful politicians means that they will always have an influence on this production. Their narratives are repeated thousands of times as dramatically divergent narratives become harder and harder to print while maintaining the illusion of objectivity. Their invective becomes normalized language. Their catchphrases become standard jargon. Their silences remain largely unnoticed.

A conservative pundit wrote in the Washington Post after the death of Hugo Chávez, one of the most outspoken anti-imperialist leaders in recent history, that he was a "dictator," "one of the most noxious figures in the hemisphere" who "denied basic civil liberties," tried to "destabilize democratic governments" and supported terrorist groups (Rubin, 2013/3/6). This echoes Bush-era rhetoric about Chávez's populism, though the pundit turned to more contemporary American conservatives, quoting a Republican congressman who hoped that "the oppressed people of Venezuela will be able to live in freedom, not under miserable tyranny". She scathingly contrasts this with Obama's less hysterical statement emphasizing the US' professed commitment to freedom and democracy. Two perspectives have been presented and journalistic principles have been preserved; what is lacking, one might note, is the perspective of any of the "oppressed people of Venezuela" getting ready to elect a new "dictator". Rhetoric about this democratically elected president being a dictator has been normalized in the western context; an example of this in practice can be found on the site About.com, whose overview of Chávez is entitled, "Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's Firebrand Dictator" (whereas Pinochet's is simply titled, "Biography"). On the other hand, one is hard pressed to find a news source openly referring to the Saudi regime as a thuggish oligarchy running a brutal dictatorship; instead the preferred term seems to be "deeply conservative" (eg. Elwazer & Quiano, 2014/4/3; Greene, 2014/1/10), the distinction being that one is an ally cooperating with Western capital and one is not.

Who gets labelled a terrorist group as opposed to free-dom fighters is also a telling distinction and one largely made based on who the group opposes. As Yassir Arafat once put it, "the difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist lies in the reason for which each fights" (Arafat, 1974). Just as the leaders of most kinds of regimes will lay claim to some sort of democratic legitimacy, the detractors of most armed oppositions will portray them as terrorists. Thus militias and other armed subnational groups opposing the US and allied states are generally termed terrorists with little hesitation, or given the similarly loaded appellation insurgents. Similar groups fighting regimes unfriendly to American interests are generally called rebels or fighters, as in the ongoing Syrian debacle. Media are often more than willing to follow the lead of official word choice. As I am writing this, the government of Ukraine has inaugurated an "anti-terrorist operation" against pro-Russian separatists in the east of Ukraine whose actions have mostly consisted of occupying government buildings. Articles I found dealing with these events all used the term "anti-terrorist operation" but none questioned the use of the term (eg. Luhn, 2014/4/15; Carter, Smith-Spark & Black, 2014/4/15).

Conclusion

An accurate indicator of how foreign state or non-state ac-tors will be rhetorically treated by US politicians can be found in their relationship to US interests. Systematic hu-man rights violations by allies are glossed over, but similar violations by hostile actors are classified as being represen-tative of imminent threats to be countered, perhaps by military intervention. The logic of neoliberal imperialism stresses the openness of markets to the penetration of US capital and the willingness of actors to facilitate US mili-tary objectives as being some of the most important ele-ments of alliance, while the moral arguments of

humanitarianism are employed to admonish and ulti-
mately threaten those who fail to live up to these precepts.

As Mark Danner notes in his essay "Words in a Time
of War": "truth is subservient to power. Power, rightly
applied, *makes* truth" (Danner, 2007, p. 20). The enormous
power of media-owning corporations allows them in many
ways to control how truth is ascribed and to what.
Interests closely aligned with neoliberal ideology more
generally ensure that media narratives rarely differ
substantially from official ones, and using sources such as
government officials with obvious agendas and a great
deal of motivation to utter mistruths being seen as a
condition of respectable media objectivity compounds the
near-unanimity of the discourses of media and
government with regard to imperial practices. As a result,
catastrophizing rhetoric is easily transplanted from official
sources to the minds of the public, and mass media in the
west often acts as a self-censoring conduit for official
narratives. Public relations objectives of imperial planners,
namely the dissemination of discursive processes that
classify and identify threats and justify reactions to them,
can be met with a minimum of difficulty. Anti-anti-
imperialism becomes the default position in the minds of
many, and as a result it becomes easier for NATO states to
deploy violence in the furtherance of foreign policy
objectives.

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