

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman on Zimbabwe: A case of unclean hands

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The foreign affairs columnist of the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman, published an op-ed piece on July 16 entitled “So Popular and So Spineless.” The column was devoted to denouncing the Russian-Chinese veto, delivered on July 12, of a US-sponsored UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe. The sanctions targeted Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who responded to his March 29 electoral defeat with a campaign of violence and repression against the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The legal concept of “unclean hands” allows courts to throw out complaints where the plaintiff is shown to have acted in bad faith with respect to the subject of the complaint. Amid US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, supported by the *Times* and justified by Friedman as exercises in “democratic nation-building,” which have cost the lives of millions of civilians and wounded or displaced millions more, Mr. Friedman’s long-suffering readers have every right to question the good faith of his claims to moral outrage.

After noting at the beginning of his column “the decline in American popularity around the world,” China’s greater popularity in Asian countries, and the weakness of “America’s overextended military and overextended banks,” Friedman writes: “Welcome to a world of too much Russian and Chinese power.”

Citing polls showing worldwide hostility to US foreign policy, Friedman tosses off the type of obligatory and cynical criticism of US “excesses” that has become commonplace among liberal apologists for America’s wars of aggression. “We should have done better in Iraq,” he writes. “An America that presides over Abu Ghraib, torture and Guantánamo Bay deserves a thumbs-down.”

That said, he proceeds to lambaste the polls: “I also find some of these poll results self-indulgent, knee-jerk, and borderline silly. Friday’s vote at the UN on Zimbabwe reminded me why.”

The Sino-Russian veto is “truly filthy,” he continues. And South Africa’s call for Mugabe-MDC negotiations prove that “when it comes to pure, rancid moral corruption, no one can top South Africa’s president, Thabo Mbeki.”

Friedman concludes: “Perfect we are not, but America still has some moral backbone. There are travesties we will not tolerate. The UN vote on Zimbabwe demonstrates that this is not true for these ‘popular’ countries—called Russia or China or South Africa—that have no problem siding with a man who is pulverizing his people.”

Evidently, according to Friedman’s moral and political bookkeeping, America’s destruction and plundering of countries is an “imperfection,” in no way comparable to the maneuvers of nations that thwart US foreign policy aims.

Friedman appears to have forgotten the proverb that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. When it comes to supporting the “pulverizing” of political opposition as state policy, Friedman himself is hardly a neophyte.

The 1999 US-led NATO air war against Serbia lasted for ten weeks and involved 38,000 combat missions and hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missile strikes, largely against civilian targets. During the second week of the onslaught, with concerns mounting in Washington over continued Serbian defiance, Friedman wrote on April 6: “Twelve days of surgical bombing was never going to turn Serbia around. Let’s see what 12 weeks of less than surgical bombing does. Give war a chance.”

On April 23 he wrote: “It should be lights out in Belgrade: every power grid, water pipe, road and war-related factory has to be hit... [W]e will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389.”

In a 1999 piece for the *New York Times* magazine, he reiterated his enthusiasm for the destructive power of the American military, writing: “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps... Without America on duty, there will be no America Online.”

And in the lead-up to the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, Friedman famously wrote in a January 5, 2003 column, “I have no problem with a war for oil.”

After the US invaded Iraq and was forced to admit that the alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction did not exist, Friedman wrote in a June 4, 2003 column: “[T]here were actually four reasons for this war: the real reason, the right reason, the moral reason and the stated reason. The ‘real reason’ for this war, which was never stated, was that after 9/11 America needed to hit someone in the Arab-Muslim world. [...] Smashing Saudi Arabia or Syria would have been fine. But we hit Saddam for one simple reason: because we could.”

These columns exemplify Friedman’s talent for “spinning” US imperialist policy in accordance with the needs of the State Department—a talent that he continues to evince in his July 16

column. As the *New York Times* remarked in a July 12 article on the Russo-Chinese veto, the US proposed the sanctions knowing “that it would lose [the vote, but] it decided to proceed with the vote anyway, to force the Russians and eventually the Chinese to publicly take a stand in support of Mr. Mugabe.”

Four days later, Friedman’s column denounced Russia and China along precisely these lines. Were he on the State Department payroll, he would write no differently.

When he now exudes moral indignation over Sino-Russian policy in Zimbabwe, informed readers are naturally inclined to ponder the real reasons for his outrage.

A major concern of the US in Africa today is the rapid growth of Russian and especially Chinese influence. Sino-African trade volume has risen from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$70 billion in 2007, and China has become Africa’s second-largest trading partner, after the US.

China obtains one quarter of its oil supply from Africa, especially Angola and Sudan, and the new government of President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua in Nigeria, Africa’s largest oil producer, is considering bids from Russian and Chinese companies to take over oil fields previously operated by Anglo-Dutch oil giant Royal Dutch Shell. In return for oil and other raw materials, China is exporting large quantities of cheap consumer goods to Africa.

In response, the US government in 2007 established Africom, a military command with responsibility for a unified African policy. President Bush explained in a press conference that Africom’s goal was to “strengthen our security cooperation with Africa and help to create new opportunities to bolster the capabilities of our partners with Africa.” In March 2008, Africom’s commander, General William Ward, testified that Africom would help to “professionalize the continent’s militaries, making them more accountable and effective.”

Judging by the experience of Latin America—whose militaries in the 1970s and 1980s went from training by US forces at the School of the Americas to military coups and bloody dictatorships (Pinochet in Chile, Galtieri in Argentina, Montt in Guatemala)—this indicates that the US hopes to counterbalance Chinese influence with the threat of installing US-backed dictatorships throughout Africa.

In the context of the Sino-American rivalry in Africa, US imperialism has many reasons for interest in Zimbabwe. China’s growing trade ties to Zimbabwe reportedly include large-scale imports of tobacco, chromium (a key ingredient in making stainless steel), and platinum. More significantly, Zimbabwe is strategically located between China’s two largest trading partners in Africa, South Africa and Angola. It is adjacent to one of China’s main infrastructure projects in Africa, a transcontinental railroad linking the oil-rich west coast of Angola, Zambia’s copper mines (in which China has invested heavily), and Tanzania’s major east coast port at Dar-es-Salaam.

Beijing is alarmed at US threats to further destabilize Zimbabwe and prepare a justification for possible intervention there. As a result, it has shipped weapons to Mugabe—a fact that came to international prominence in April, when South African port workers in Durban refused to unload arms destined for Zimbabwe

from the Chinese freighter *An Yue Jiang*.

It is the fact that Mugabe stands in the way of US strategic calculations, and not his political gangsterism, that drives US policy towards Zimbabwe. To deal only with world leaders whose names begin with “Mu,” there is nothing that can be said of Mugabe’s crimes that cannot be said of the US-backed dictatorships of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan.

As shown by the recent post-electoral violence in Kenya, Washington is quite content to back a state engaged in warfare against the political opposition when it suits US strategic interests. After Kenya’s December 2007 elections, which were widely assumed to be rigged by ballot-stuffing in provinces favoring the incumbent, President Mwai Kibaki, violent confrontations broke out between security forces and supporters of opposition candidate Raila Odinga.

The Heritage Foundation, a right-wing US think-tank, wrote in a January 8 memo: “Using tactics favored by authoritarian regimes around the world, Kibaki banned live television and radio broadcasts and instructed security forces to put down unrest by force. Violence erupted, fanned by both Raila and Kibaki, leading to numerous attacks, arson, and at least 300 deaths. [...] The US ambassador to Kenya quickly accepted the re-election of Kibaki, noting that while there were ‘problems with the process,’ the United States would abide by the decision of the electoral commission.”

After months of fighting that claimed over 800 lives amid reports of large-scale population displacements due to tribally-based ethnic cleansing, the UN brokered a power-sharing arrangement between Kibaki and Odinga in late February 2008.

Substantial differences exist between Kenya and Zimbabwe, but it should be noted that in terms of the scale of reported atrocities, the two post-election conflicts are not dissimilar. The Zimbabwean MDC told the Associated Press on July 12 that 113 of its members had been killed in political violence since the elections.

For reasons best known to himself, Friedman has chosen to comment on the violence in Zimbabwe, but not on that in Kenya.



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