

# The humanitarian industry: A “force multiplier” for imperialism

Humanitarianism Contested, Where Angels Fear to Tread, by  
*Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss*

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Typhoon Haiyan, which devastated the Philippines in November, once again highlighted the nature of internationally-organized humanitarian aid: the paucity of real help and the exploitation of such crises by the Great Powers to further their own geo-strategic and military agendas.

The pattern, from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, has become brutally apparent. Food and medical support is woefully inadequate, administered by a patchwork of uncoordinated agencies, each with its own agenda. No lasting improvements are made to forestall the next disaster.

The most striking continuity to the pattern is, however, the fact that humanitarian responses by International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are increasingly dominated by the military. In the wake of the typhoon in the Philippines, the arrival of the USS George Washington aircraft carrier, with its seven warships, reflects the preoccupation of the American government with its “pivot” to Asia and associated military preparations against China.

The role of INGOs as a Trojan Horse for world imperialism was also demonstrated in the propaganda lead-up to the planned shock-and-awe style assault against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad last August-September. Among the most strident voices was that of Bernard Kouchner, the co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders—MSF) and former foreign minister in the right-wing government of President Nicolas Sarkozy. He impatiently asked in late July, “The famous American drones, where are they?” imploring the imperialist powers to take military action in the name of humanitarianism.[1]

The MSF, recipient of the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize, was the first to report the August 21 attack in Ghouta, Syria, which the US hoped to use as a direct pretext for a military assault. As the organization admitted, the MSF’s decision to issue an international press release on the incident—which had not taken place in an MSF hospital, but in its “silent partner” facilities in rebel-controlled areas—was highly political.

The group was well aware that their prominent announcement of chemical weapons deaths would be immediately seized upon by the Obama administration to claim that Syrian President Assad had crossed the “red line” and to stoke the drive for war. And it was [2]. At the time, the MSF was admittedly working “under the auspices” of US-backed anti-Assad militias. Several days later, the group back-tracked, issuing another statement to the effect that they couldn’t know the source of the neurotoxin involved in the purported gassings. But the impact of its August 24th statement remained.

In fact, the US Center for Strategic & International Studies approvingly noted that the MSF made a “risky, tough call” in issuing an immediate pronouncement, particularly since MSF doctors were not even present at

the scene. A month after the fact, the *New York Times* belatedly mentioned that doctors are often “notoriously wrong” when assessing chemical weapons injuries. [3] Most recently, journalist Seymour Hersh has demonstrated that the US government and President Barack Obama were knowingly lying when they claimed that the Syrian government had carried out the sarin gas attack last August (See: “Seymour Hersh exposes US government lies on Syrian sarin attack”).

The military mobilization around Typhoon Haiyan and the role of the MSF in Syria are just the most recent examples of the growing nexus between imperialism and INGOs. The 2011 book, *Humanitarianism Contested, Where Angels Fear to Tread*—authored by two leading American political scientists, Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss—while written long before these specific events, is a timely read for its exposure of the trend.

The book gives an insider’s view of the business of humanitarian aid—now a veritable industry, estimated at a whopping \$18 billion a year, with a staff numbering over 300,000. As one might expect, the book is in no way a critique of capitalism. The authors hold out the hope for a reform of humanitarianism, believing that it is the most significant existing effort to address poverty and the effects of war. Despite this outlook, the book brings to light the basic trajectory of the humanitarian industry: the massive growth of state-funded INGOs and their operational integration with imperialist governments.

## History of humanitarianism

The use of the emotional appeals to humanitarianism by the imperialist powers is not new. The Marxist movement has long sought to expose the class interests behind the crocodile tears of the ruling elite as it embarks on new rounds of conquest and plunder in the name of humanitarianism.

While treating diseases, supplying food or making micro loans, a broad range of state-funded organizations—there are 37,000 separate INGOs—are working in every area of concern to world imperialism. Many, like MSF, have become involved in CIA and military operations and serve as informants for the imperialist powers. [4]

In surveying the humanitarian business, the authors of *Humanitarianism Contested* examine three eras: birth and maturation (1864-1945), the traditional enterprise (1945-89), and the post-Cold War period. They discuss growth—in personnel, organization and resources. They quote Philip Gourevitch, known for his coverage of the Rwandan crisis, who

states that, “a persuasive argument can be made that, overall, humanitarian aid [does] as much or even more harm than good.”

United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland, the author of the introduction to *Humanitarianism Contested*, admits that, “the world is more socially unjust than in previous generations... The poorest two billion live in the same abject misery as before and on less than \$2 a day.”

The failure to save lives or improve the lives of those facing poverty, famine, war or the impact of natural disasters, however, is the least of the damage done by such organizations.

To review some salient points from Barrett and Weiss’s historical survey: official organized humanitarianism is typically considered to have begun with the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1864 by Henri Dunant. It was the forerunner of all Western humanitarian aid organizations and is still considered its “gold standard.”

Inherent contradictions within the notion of humanitarian aid were pointed out at the time by Florence Nightingale, who acquired international recognition for her heroic efforts on behalf of soldiers wounded in the Crimean War. Nightingale is considered the founder of the modern nursing profession.

She opposed Dunant’s proposed agency, instead calling for governments to care for their own sick and wounded. She reasoned that Red Cross volunteers, while providing palliative care and needed organization, would make it easier and less expensive for governments to engage in longer wars.

The book demonstrates the growing impotence of such organizations to ease suffering. It demonstrates the subordination of humanitarian aid to the dominant powers, to one degree or another, from the beginning. For example, during the era of colonialism, the book’s authors explain, the humanitarian ethos was interpreted as bringing the benefits of Western civilization to the heathen masses. The scramble for Africa was largely carried out under the banner of the “white man’s burden.”

The authors also note the role of Herbert Hoover’s 1918 “famine relief” operation, which was principally aimed at undermining the Bolshevik revolution and the workers’ state it established in Russia. This effort was followed by the League of Nations’ High Commission for Refugees, founded in 1921 in an attempt to stop the spread of revolution throughout Europe.

The authors’ historical survey exposes the claim that such agencies were ever “impartial, neutral and independent,” as they claimed. But the biggest ethical controversy within the humanitarian community followed the October 14, 1942 decision of the International Committee of the Red Cross to keep silent about the Nazi Holocaust.

“The Red Cross has long acknowledged its awareness of the treatment of Jews during World War II, maintaining that if it had disclosed what it knew, it would have lost its ability to inspect prisoner of war camps on both sides of the front,” said the ICRC in its 1996 apology.

### Origins of Doctors Without Borders (MSF)

Specifically repudiating the ICRC’s ostensible neutrality, in 1971 Bernard Kouchner, Rory Brauman and a group of doctors co-founded Médecins Sans Frontières. The organization embraced “speaking out and bearing witness.” Further, MSF traced its roots to the outrage of Kouchner and his colleagues over the famine in the African breakaway region of Biafra during the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war, as *Humanitarianism Contested* explains.

Characterizing the human rights lobby and its rise as humanitarianism’s “lawyerly twin,” the book traces the impact of the Biafran suffering on a

generation. Quoting author Philip Gourevitch, the book states that humanitarianism in the impoverished war-torn province offered young people a way to “stand always with the victim, in solidarity with clean hands.” *Humanitarianism Contested* does not delve further into the political origins of MSF, other than restating Gourevitch’s point that such humanitarian projects were “the most enduring legacy of the ferment” of the May-June 1968 protests, when capitalism faced possible overthrow in France.

MSF, however, presents a very interesting case study in the evolution of INGOs, and became a prototype. It is necessary to take a brief look at this history.

That the human rights lobby/industry and MSF arose in some form from the revolutionary events that shook France in 1968 is a salient point. May-June was the greatest threat to bourgeois rule since the Russian Revolution. Tragically, the working class remained under the political domination of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), enabling the regime of President Charles de Gaulle to survive.

This mass uprising had a traumatic effect on the French intelligentsia, many of whom recoiled in horror. Many who had considered themselves Marxists promptly turned to the right, embracing post-modernism and post-structuralism. This appears to be the social layer from which Kouchner and his compatriots emerged. Kouchner had a political background, as a former member of the youth movement of the French CP.

In the immediate aftermath of the general strike, Kouchner left France for Biafra. There he became identified with demands for humanitarian intervention—a policy that dovetailed with de Gaulle’s geopolitical efforts. The French were the only major power to side with Biafra. The former colonial power, Great Britain, was allied with the Nigerian government, which was overseeing the protection of Shell Oil and its interests. The Republic of Biafra was the oil-rich region of the country.

Thus, the development of MSF met the needs of French imperialism from the start. It continued in this direction, becoming a cat’s paw for the American government as well.

First in Cambodia in the late 1970s and then in Afghanistan beginning in 1981, MSF functioned in tandem with the CIA’s National Endowment for Democracy [5]. MSF representatives met with US neo-conservatives and participated in Operation Cyclone, the code name for the CIA operation to arm and finance the Afghan mujahedeen prior to and during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, urging the US to step up the fight against communism.[6] It is little wonder that Kouchner went on to support the 2003 invasion of Iraq stating, infamously, “The No. 1 weapon of mass destruction is Saddam Hussein.” Kouchner also supported the 2011 US-NATO war against Libya, and demanded military intervention in Syria.

### Rebranding of humanitarianism

The overtly reactionary character of the Western powers’ relief aid during the Cold War presented something of a public relations problem, according to *Humanitarianism Contested*. For example, the book points out that it was relatively well known that during the Reagan administration’s attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, humanitarian aid was directed to military efforts, going exclusively to areas controlled by the Contras. In a parallel fashion, during the US-backed war of the ultra-right Salvadoran regime against the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front during the 1980s, aid was withheld to all areas under rebel control.

In examining the growth of the role of governments in utilizing humanitarian aid for direct state policy, Barnett writes, “everything

changed” in the next decade. It was a rebranding of humanitarian aid. “In the 1990s,” writes Barnett in a lengthier work, *Empire of Humanity*, “human rights talk seeped into every nook and cranny of world affairs. The UN Security Council began to articulate the importance of human rights, to link human rights and security, to invest peacekeeping operations units with human rights units, and to ensure that human rights were part of post-conflict endeavors.” [7]

The number of INGOs exploded and funding for human rights activities nearly tripled. The authors point out, moreover, that the source of most funding shifted to a handful of “powerful states,” i.e., the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Today, the US government provides more humanitarian “aid” than the next 12 donors combined.

Why did this occur? As the WSWS has explained, the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union was seized on by the United States as an opportunity to seek global hegemony. Without a constraint on its military power, US imperialism erupted throughout the decade of the 1990s. From Operation Desert Storm (Iraq) to Operation Provide Comfort (Kurdish areas of northern Iraq), the US conducted 31 separate military operations in the decade, including the invasion of Iraq in 1991, a three-year operation in Somalia, the bombing of Serbia, and deployments to El Salvador, Chad, the Central African Republic, Panama, Honduras and Lebanon.

### Humanitarian military operations

The modern humanitarian industry emerged as part of this push for a US-dominated “new world order.” *Humanitarianism Contested* points to the first such military human rights event, which occurred during the 1991 Gulf War, when the UN created “safe havens” in northern Iraq. This was followed by the UN intervention in Somalia, which for the first time invoked humanitarianism rather than “international peace and security.” The Security Council resolution authorizing the intervention was a sharp departure from the norm, calling 18 times for a humanitarian deployment and denying any claims of Somali sovereignty, under the banner of “responsibility to protect.”

Seeing the benefits of their investment in humanitarianism, the imperialists ramped up their financial support. Barrett and Weiss show the humanitarian aid business growing from \$2 billion in 1990 to \$6 billion 10 years later, a three-fold increase, followed by another tripling to \$18 billion by 2008.

The previous pretense of impartiality and neutrality gave way to support for military force and programs earmarked for “security-related” operations. This was systematized with the creation of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs in 1992.

This initiative complemented the Pentagon’s Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) of the same year, outlining a policy of using military force to prevent any other nation from rising to superpower status and thus threatening US economic and geo-strategic interests around the world.

A large segment of the upper-middle-class former antiwar protest movement applauded the new garb in which the old imperialism was dressed—the phenomenon of “human rights” militarism. Barnett and Weiss emphasize the pivotal significance of the breakup of Yugoslavia in popularizing the new approach.

While it is not specified in the book, it is germane to mention that the first use of the words “humanitarian bombing” or “humanitarian war” is attributed to Vaclav Havel, the then-president of the Czech republic, in his demand for NATO intervention in the Balkans.

“I believe that during the intervention of NATO in Kosovo there is an element nobody can question: the air attacks, the bombs, are not caused by a material interest,” said Havel in 1999. “Their character is exclusively

humanitarian: What is at stake here are the principles, human rights, which are accorded priority that surpasses even state sovereignty.” Havel, an anti-communist, was at the same time overseeing the dismantling of the Czech education, health and pension systems, as part of the development of “wild west capitalism.”

As part of the propaganda campaign, the book explains, NATO was given permission by the United Nations during the Balkan wars to “effectively take over the humanitarian operation from the inside,” building camps, distributing relief, ensuring security and setting the agenda. This had, Barnett said, “relatively little to do with the needs of the refugees and everything to do with NATO’s need to maintain support for the air campaign.”

In Kosovo, NATO insisted on controlling all humanitarian aid as part of its overall mission. It is worth noting that Kouchner was brought in to safeguard imperialist interests as a UN advisor to the Kosovan government in the aftermath of the imperialist-orchestrated breakup of Yugoslavia.

As part of this process, a former left-leaning lawyer became direct advocates for imperialist crimes—a process revealed in their open support for imperialist wars in Libya and Syria. Humanitarian intervention has become a means to bring together imperialism and elements of the pseudo-left such as the French New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), practically and politically.

Since 9/11, *Humanitarianism Contested* explains, humanitarian aid agencies have integrated themselves even more closely with military and intelligence operations. “Counterterrorism and humanitarianism, at least according to the United States and other major Western powers, have become partners,” write Barnett and Weiss. By 2002, the allocation of humanitarian aid was largely determined by the US military—with nearly half of all funds given by donor governments to the United Nations handed over to the US military’s efforts in Afghanistan. The authors emphasize the control of the US over UN “aid” allocation, particularly 9/11. Linda Polman, author of *The Crisis Caravan*, calls Iraq the largest and most expensive American “aid” project since the Marshall Plan, with Afghanistan the second largest.

The MSF research director in Paris, Fabrice Weissman, corroborated that the US dictated to INGOs all aid policies in Afghanistan. He said: “After the defeat of the Taliban, many institutional donors [i.e., governments] required INGOs and UN agencies to help stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan. The vast majority of humanitarian actors placed themselves at the service of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and of the interim government. Both of these actors receive varying degrees of support from coalition forces.”

### Colin Powell: NGOs are “force multipliers”

The most illuminating characterization of the humanitarian aid industry was made by none other than US Secretary of State Colin Powell, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs. According to the authors, in 2001 Powell stated, “Just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there serving and sacrificing on the front lines of freedom... NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team” in Afghanistan.

Not incidental in this sordid history is the money paid for services rendered. The bulk of it flows from governments to INGOs and into the pockets of their top personnel, as well as to their coterie of contractors and subcontractors. Of course, millions are garnered from various foundations and corporations as well. MSF cites among its private \$1 million-plus donors the Bloomberg Company and Daniel Goldring, a hedge fund

manager, with smaller amounts from Goldman Sachs, Google and many other American businesses.

Polman describes an upper-middle-class social layer attracted to this “aid” work. She states, “the salaries, and per-diems, and danger and discomfort bonuses... make working in the established aid sector highly attractive.” She adds that even in the most hellish environments there is a secure capital, with swimming pools, tennis courts, golf courses, discos, five-star restaurants and prostitutes, concluding that in some cases “aid workers live like colonial administrators of old, perhaps even better.” [8]

Terrible crimes are being perpetrated. Even the limited exposure of the lies of the imperialists and their humanitarian hangers-on made by the authors of *Humanitarianism Contested* provides a salutary lesson for those prepared to reject the liberal apologia for imperialism and examine the fundamental class questions involved.

**Footnotes:**

[1] The West “A TV Witness” to Syria.  
<http://www.breakingnews.ie/world/the-west-a-tv-witness-to-syrian-strife-601661.html>

[2] Federal News Service, New York Times, August 26, 2013  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/world/middleeast/text-of-kerrys-statement-on-chemical-weapons-in-syria.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/world/middleeast/text-of-kerrys-statement-on-chemical-weapons-in-syria.html?_r=1&)

[3] Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Anne Barnard, Hwaïda Saad, “In Syria, Doctors Risk Life and Juggle Ethics”. New York Times. October 21, 2013  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/22/health/in-syria-doctors-risk-life-and-juggle-ethics.html?pagewanted=2&hpw>,

[4] Can the USG and NGOs Do More? *Information-Sharing in Conflict Zones*, [https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol49no4/USG\\_NGOs\\_5.htm](https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol49no4/USG_NGOs_5.htm)).

[5] Fabrice Weissman, “Silence Heals...from the Cold War to the War on Terror, MSF Speaks Out: a Brief History”.  
<http://www.msf-crash.org/livres/en/silence-heals-from-the-cold-war-to-the-war-on-terror-msf-speaks-out-a-brief-history>

[6] Claude Malhuret, Report from Afghanistan, Foreign Affairs, Winter 1983/84.  
<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/38237/claude-malhuret/report-from-afghanistan>

[7] Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity, A History of Humanitarianism*, (Cornell University Press, 2011), 167.

[8] Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan, What’s Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (Henry Holt and Company, 2010), 144.



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