

2015

## Responses to David N. Gibbs Article by John Theis, Scott Laderman, Jean Bricmont, Latha Varadarajan, Kees van der Pijl, and John Feffer

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**DOI:** [10.25148/CRCP.3.2.16092101](https://doi.org/10.25148/CRCP.3.2.16092101)

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### Recommended Citation

Authors, Various (2015) "Responses to David N. Gibbs Article by John Theis, Scott Laderman, Jean Bricmont, Latha Varadarajan, Kees van der Pijl, and John Feffer," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

DOI: [10.25148/CRCP.3.2.16092101](https://doi.org/10.25148/CRCP.3.2.16092101)

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## Responses to David N. Gibbs Article by John Theis, Scott Laderman, Jean Bricmont, Latha Varadarajan, Kees van der Pijl, and John Feffer

### **Abstract**

This piece comprises the responses of six scholars to the article posted in this same issue of *Class, Race and Corporate Power* by David N. Gibbs titled "How the Srebrenica Massacre Redefined US Foreign Policy."

### **Keywords**

Srebrenica; Srebrenica Massacre; US Foreign Policy; Humanitarian Intervention

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## **Response by John Theis, Lone Star College**

David Gibbs discusses an important change in the way American foreign policy is conceptualized today. The points Gibbs raises are important and my own personal experiences can shed some light on the issues at hand.

“Dear Mr. John J. Theis, We have heard about your decision to host Michael Parenti as guest speaker. Mr. Parenti is the leader of a campaign to defend Slobodan Milosovic, who was charged and tried with war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina but died before his victims were able to justice achieved. On behalf of many Bosnian war victims’ and survivors’ organizations in Bosnia and North America we urge you to end all contact and co-operation with Mr. Parenti without delay or hesitation. Michael Parenti is a man who publicly denies the substance and scope of genocide and other crimes perpetrated in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war.” Thus began the first letter I received in January 2013 as I prepared to host Dr. Michael Parenti for a speaking engagement on our campus. It was an opening salvo that would occupy significant portions of a month of my time and lead me places I didn’t think we could go in American colleges.

I had come across Michael Parenti’s work in grad school and while I didn’t agree with everything he wrote, I had found his perspective thought provoking and began using his book “Democracy for the Few” in my American Government classes as a supplement to the standard texts. I have always seen my role as a professor as one of building the intellectual curiosity and critical thinking capacities of my students. Parenti provided a perspective, in an accessible and readable way, which challenged students to think beyond the tired clichés that make up many standard government texts. When I had the opportunity to bring him to my school I jumped. What better way to promote our mission as an institution of higher learning committed to academic inquiry into controversial subjects?

I made a conscious decision to ignore the letters, after all, he was speaking in just 3 weeks. In the subsequent days additional letters began arriving. It seemed like we were going to have a problem, so I notified our Speaker’s Bureau members and our campus president. I told her I would send some innocuous words about free speech after the event had occurred and I thought our best strategy was to ignore the letters. I also ordered a copy of Parenti’s book, “To Kill a Nation” and went to the websites contained in the letters I had been receiving. Listed as genocide deniers were Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, John Pilger, and David Gibbs, among others. The list was a collection of voices that dissent on American foreign policy and one name jumped out at me. As a senior graduate student at the University of Arizona, I had become friends with Dr. Gibbs and had tremendous respect for his work. It became clear that this list of academics and journalists were victims a campaign of intimidation aimed at anyone who failed to tow the U.S./Bosnian line of a Manichaeon struggle between good and evil in the Balkan crisis of the early 1990’s.

A week before the scheduled event my president came to me with a letter that had been sent to her. My strategy of lying low and waiting had not worked. My president asked why if Parenti was not denying genocide, as the letter claimed, had a San Jose, California group recently uninvited Dr. Parenti? If you had not read the book and hadn’t looked into the charges, it would give someone pause and lead to concerns of a potential public relations nightmare. In my discussions with her, I explained what our interpretation was and how the talk Dr. Parenti was giving was entitled “Deceptions of Empire” and not even relevant to the concerns the activists were raising. Against my recommendation, she responded with some comments about free

speech in the academy and the next day we received a response that had been cc'ed to the Lone Star College System Chancellor. It criticized use of the "...ubiquitous free speech argument" and stated they were alarmed "...by the opportunity given to Mr. Parenti to distort historical facts and propagate hate speech at your institution...". Fortunately, the Speaker's Bureau had been working to craft a response, had received communications from Dr. Parenti, and letters of support from Noam Chomsky, David Gibbs, and Bruce Cumings among others. To us, this was a simple issue: do institutions of higher education submit to bullying when free speech is at stake or do we understand that academic inquiry requires protection for views which we may disagree with? In all, we received 87 letters from "Bosniaks" around the U.S., Canada, and the world. Despite their trepidation, the administration ended up supporting the faculty and allowing Parenti to speak. He scarcely mentioned Bosnia to the crowd of 250 and the additional police presence was unnecessary.

Yet, this episode underscores Gibbs mention of intimidation and "denunciation of writers who opposed such tendentious accounts..." As a community college in Texas, we are extremely sensitive to public perceptions and it was a battle to keep the school from taking the easy way out. Yet if we cave every time a letter writing campaign is undertaken will we ever be able to engage in academic pursuits that do not have the imprimatur of the official class? If we deign to broach certain subjects because they might elicit controversy, can we as an institution of higher education really perform our duty or do we become just another instrument of state propaganda? As Gibbs points out in his article, the Balkan crisis served to redefine the U.S. military role in the world in terms of providing humanitarian relief for the oppressed. This raises larger questions regarding the military industrial state. At a time when many poor and working class American's can't even afford the rather reasonable tuition at our community college, we continue to pour 1 trillion dollars each year into the military complex, postponing rather than reaping the "peace dividend" that we were told we would receive when the Cold War ended. The potential is limitless if we want to use military force to end every bad act that occurs in the world. There are simply not enough resources at our disposal to eliminate human wickedness, set aside the potential for blowback and unintended consequences that we are witnessing today across the Middle East. Perhaps, Noam Chomsky summed it up best when he said "You know, it's a very simple ethical point - you're responsible for the predictable consequences of your actions. You're not responsible for the predictable consequences of someone else's actions." These are the types of big questions that higher education should be at the forefront of engaging our students in seeking answers to, not cowering every time someone objects to something that is being said on a campus.

### **Response by Scott Laderman, University of Minnesota, Duluth**

Like his book *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), David Gibbs's article in *Class, Race, and Corporate Power* offers us a powerful and vital analysis of Washington's role in the recent history of the Balkans. The wars in Bosnia and Kosovo remain two of the most misinterpreted conflicts of the post-Cold War era, and Gibbs deserves credit for seeing through the miasma of liberal misdirection they have spawned. As he compellingly argues both here and in his book, the United States exploited the Balkan conflicts to consolidate and expand its imperial reach in the Cold War's wake, viewing the atrocities in Bosnia (and later Kosovo) as an opportunity,

through the reorientation of NATO, to secure American influence in Europe while providing a multilateral alternative to the United Nations.

Gibbs rightly acknowledges the horror of the Srebrenica massacre, which claimed thousands of innocent lives. Yet what happened in Srebrenica is more than just a tragic chapter from the recent past, he argues. The atrocities have become a lesson – and, as we know, American policymakers love to cite lessons when justifying American militarism. The problem, as Gibbs notes, is that the lesson is faulty and relies on what seems to be a willful failure to account for the full evidentiary record. According to Gibbs, the American distaste for European diplomacy made the massacre possible, while the “NATO interventions in Bosnia actually worsened the atrocities they were intended to resolve.” These can be decidedly unpopular arguments in some circles, but they are compelling and important and speak to the power of myth (and the myth of power) in buttressing the resort to “humanitarian intervention.” Gibbs is also correct to raise the politics of the term “genocide.” While I think his own use of the term is too narrow – genocide is not, I believe, just about “mass killings” – he appropriately notes how legal and intellectual disagreements over the term’s boundaries have been exploited by proponents of American power.

Where Gibbs goes too far, in my view, is in attributing to the atrocities in Srebrenica a redefinition of U.S. foreign policy and a recasting of the “whole idea of military intervention.” His article implies that it was only after July 1995 that Washington began citing an obligation to prevent genocides, massacres, or oppression in justifying its interventionism, and he points to several prominent examples in which the conventional lesson of Srebrenica served to rally the twenty-first-century masses. Yet while the Srebrenica experience may have helped to crystallize this sentiment among “a whole generation of political activists” who began forcefully advocating “humanitarian intervention,” Gibbs errs, I believe, in seeing intervention-as-atrocity-prevention as a post-Srebrenica development.

Empires have frequently framed imperial maintenance in benevolent terms, and the United States is no exception. In the nineteenth century, Washington, like its European counterparts, invoked the civilizing mission in its subjugation of native peoples, and for much of the twentieth it conjured the threat of “Red imperialism.” Citing the prevention of mass atrocities, which Gibbs portrays as new, in fact goes back decades. In the late 1960s, for example, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger raised the “bloodbath theory” in Vietnam in arguing for continued American intervention. The idea was simple: the United States could not withdraw from Vietnam because, if it did, there would be a wholesale massacre of those countless Vietnamese who opposed the revolutionaries and supported the United States. This was an unusual resort to morality for the so-called realists, and it was one that conveniently reversed the war’s moral calculus. It ascribed a callous indifference to those who opposed the war while elevating its champions to selfless humanitarians.

John Wayne made his pro-war film *The Green Berets* (1968) to in part highlight the concept – “[w]e want to bring out that if we abandon these people, there will be a blood bath of over two million souls,” he wrote to the White House – while President Nixon articulated the theory perhaps most famously in his landmark November 3, 1969, speech on Vietnam; this was the same televised address in which he introduced the term “Vietnamization” and appealed to the “great silent majority” for support.<sup>1</sup> “For the South Vietnamese,” Nixon told millions of his

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*, rev. ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 248.

compatriots that night, “our precipitate withdrawal would inevitably allow the Communists to repeat the massacres which followed their takeover in the North 15 years before.”

They then murdered more than 50,000 people and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps. We saw a prelude of what would happen in South Vietnam when the Communists entered the city of Hue last year. During their brief rule there, there was a bloody reign of terror in which 3,000 civilians were clubbed, shot to death, and buried in mass graves. With the sudden collapse of our support, these atrocities of Hue would become the nightmare of the entire nation—and particularly for the million and a half Catholic refugees who fled to South Vietnam when the Communists took over in the North.<sup>2</sup>

Nixon got the history wrong, both in this instance and in others, but the point is his use of atrocity prevention to justify continued aggression.<sup>3</sup>

In fairness, I should note that there is at least one significant difference between the American campaign in Southeast Asia and the post-Srebrenica conflicts to which Gibbs refers: the United States did not allude to the bloodbath potential in first intervening in Vietnam. Rather, Washington raised the specter of Communist atrocities years later in justifying its continued military presence. No such chronological issues complicate the 1991 war in Iraq, however. There, too, the United States cited the need to put a stop to widespread atrocities in rejecting diplomacy and opting for intervention. At times this meant comparing the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to the Nazi génocidaire Adolf Hitler. At a fundraising luncheon in October 1990, for instance, President George Bush spoke of the “ghastly atrocities perpetrated by Saddam’s forces,” suggesting that what the world was witnessing in Kuwait was “Hitler revisited.”<sup>4</sup> But in some ways, Bush said, the Iraqi dictator was even worse. With “over 300 innocent Americans” held against their will in Kuwait, with many of them reportedly being used as human shields, the president was adamant: this was “something that even Adolf Hitler didn’t do.”<sup>5</sup> No, “I don’t think I’m overstating it,” Bush responded when asked by a reporter whether he “might be exaggerating a bit for effect” in saying that Saddam Hussein “was even more brutal than Adolf Hitler.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” November 3, 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 902.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the bloodbath theory, see Scott Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), 87-122.

<sup>4</sup> George Bush, “Remarks at a Fundraising Luncheon for Gubernatorial Candidate Clayton Williams in Dallas, Texas,” October 15, 1990, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1990*, at <<https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2328>> (accessed November 9, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> George Bush, “Remarks at a Republican Party Fundraising Breakfast in Burlington, Massachusetts,” November 1, 1990, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1990*, at <<https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2379>> (accessed November 9, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> George Bush, “The President’s News Conference in Orlando, Florida,” November 1, 1990, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1990*, at <<https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2381>> (accessed November 9, 2015). When pressed later on “what Saddam Hussein has done that can be compared to the Holocaust,” Bush backtracked slightly. “[W]ell, I didn’t say the Holocaust,” he insisted. “I mean, that is outrageous. But I think brutalizing young kids in a square in Kuwait is outrageous, too. And I think if you go back and look at what happened when the Death’s Head regiments went into Poland, you’ll find an awful similarity.” Bush, “The President’s News Conference in Orlando, Florida,” November 1, 1990.

The choice was clear. “The terror Saddam Hussein has imposed upon Kuwait violates every principle of human decency,” Bush told college students in an open letter.

Listen to what Amnesty International has documented. “Widespread abuses of human rights have been perpetrated by Iraqi forces ... arbitrary arrest and detention without trial of thousands ... widespread torture ... imposition of the death penalty and the extrajudicial execution of hundreds of unarmed civilians, including children.” Including children – there’s no horror that could make this a more obvious conflict of good vs. evil. The man who used chemical warfare on his own people – once again including children – now oversees public hangings of dissenters. And daily his troops commit atrocities against Kuwaiti citizens. This brutality has reverberated throughout the entire world. If we do not follow the dictates of our inner moral compass and stand up for human life, then his lawlessness will threaten the peace and democracy of the emerging new world order we now see: this long dreamed-of vision we’ve all worked toward for so long. A year after the joyous dawn of freedom’s light in eastern Europe, a dark evil has descended in another part of the world. But we have the chance – and we have the obligation – to stop ruthless aggression.<sup>7</sup>

It was thus essential that the United States intervene.

Months later, Bush again invoked the lessons of World War II in justifying his Persian Gulf campaign. Speaking at a Simon Wiesenthal Center dinner just a few months after the war ended – and as the devastating sanctions that would ultimately claim perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives were increasingly crippling the civilian population – Bush drew the audience’s attention to Wiesenthal’s dictum that “[s]ilence is admittance” and cannot be tolerated. To have succumbed to “Saddam Hussein’s brutality” would have been unconscionable, he said. “It was because of Saddam’s aggression that we made our stand in the Persian Gulf. The world had ignored the brewing madness 50 years ago. We would not make the same mistake this time. It was a moral imperative to act.”<sup>8</sup> So the United States did, restoring the Kuwaiti petroregime while shoring up Washington’s authoritarian allies in Riyadh.

Of course, there have been times when the United States has steadfastly rejected the possibility of “humanitarian intervention.” In East Timor, which suffered what numerous scholars have concluded was a genocide in the years following the 1975 Indonesian invasion, the United States not only did not intervene on behalf of the Timorese people but it offered political, financial, and military support to the Indonesian perpetrators.<sup>9</sup> In Palestine, the United States has

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<sup>7</sup> George Bush, “Open Letter to College Students on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” January 9, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1991*, at <<https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2608>> (accessed November 9, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> George Bush, “Remarks at the Simon Wiesenthal Center Dinner in Los Angeles, California,” June 16, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1991*, at <<https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/3103>> (accessed November 9, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> For several examples of scholars writing of the genocide in East Timor, see James Dunn, “Genocide in East Timor,” in Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny, eds., *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2004), 263-293; Ben Kiernan, “War, Genocide, and Resistance in East Timor, 1975-99: Comparative Reflections on Cambodia,” in Mark Selden and Alvin Y. So, eds., *War and State Terrorism: The United States, Japan, and the Asia-Pacific in the Long Twentieth Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 199-233; Geoffrey Robinson, “*If You Leave Us Here, We Will Die*”: *How Genocide Was Stopped in East Timor* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); Nina Silove, “Genocide in East Timor,” in Colin Tatz, Peter Arnold, and Sandra Tatz, eds., *Genocide*

allowed a brutal Israeli occupation to persist for nearly half a century while according Israel “major non-NATO ally” status and rendering it “the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance since World War II.”<sup>10</sup> And in Rwanda, American officials did everything possible to avoid characterizing the 1994 atrocities as genocide – their lexical gymnastics would be comical if the implications were not so tragic – so as to elide Washington’s legal obligation under the Genocide Convention to intervene.

What this seeming inconsistency suggests is not that American policy has changed or fluctuated over the years. For the most part, it has not. Rather – and here I think David Gibbs would be the first to agree – it suggests that atrocity prevention is less a genuine policy objective than a rhetorical device. Srebrenica may have been conjured by the “humanitarian interventionists” in recent years to legitimize their calls to arms in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere. But the Balkans did not hatch this concept, nor, it appears, will we witness its demise anytime soon.

### **Response by Jean Bricmont, Université Catholique de Louvain**

The paper by Professor Gibbs defines quite accurately the “disastrous” nature of the US policy response to the 1999 events in Srebrenica. Whereas massacres during wartime have traditionally constituted a forceful argument against war, war being the inevitable source of such tragedies, the United States foreign policy establishment has managed to reverse this logic. Instead, they have succeeded in elevating to mythical status a particular massacre committed in the last days of a civil war, using and reusing it as an incontrovertible argument in favor of one war after another.

They have done this by pretending that the best or even only way to prevent such disasters is U.S. military force. This myth discredits diplomacy, portrayed as “giving in to dictators who want to massacre their own people.” As Gibbs points out, the Srebrenica myth has been a standard pretext for justifying US attacks against one country after another. It was used against Serbia to detach the province of Kosovo, where a huge US military base was immediately installed. It was cited to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It was used in Libya to kill the country’s leader and destroy the country. It is currently being used to justify efforts to overthrow the government of Syria. It appears to have become a permanent and valued fixture of US war justification.

The domestic political consequences of the Srebrenica myth have been devastating. As Gibbs correctly points out, the false claims of “humanitarian” intervention succeeded in “galvanizing a whole generation” behind the notion that U.S. military power was not only justified but even necessary in order to defend “human rights” throughout the world. This illusion destroyed the peace movement and hastened the demise of the traditional left, which

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*Perspectives II: Essays on Holocaust and Genocide* (Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger/Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2003), 216-242; and John G. Taylor, “‘Encirclement and Annihilation’: The Indonesian Occupation of East Timor,” in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163-185. I am grateful to Robert Cribb, Craig Etcheson, Rowan Savage, Colin Tatz, and Sam Totten for bringing a number of sources on East Timor to my attention.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp, “U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel,” Congressional Research Service, June 10, 2015, at <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>> (accessed November 11, 2015), unpaginated “Summary” section.



after abandoning its concern for the working class completed its transformation by abandoning its historic rejection of military aggression. Thus the Western left lost all serious purpose and by its kneejerk denunciation of the latest ejectable “dictator” has functioned as a public relations asset of U.S. foreign policy. Today, simple realism remains the main source of opposition to US aggressive war, regardless of political labels.

Perhaps because of his clear intention to inject some measure of realism into mainstream debate, Professor Gibbs does not challenge the official version of the facts of the Srebrenica massacre, only its interpretation. For those who have studied the controversies surrounding those tragic events, Gibbs’ conformism can appear willfully ignorant, if not unprincipled, especially when he goes so far as to declare that “the killings in Srebrenica were largely orchestrated” by, among others, the Bosnian Serbs’ political leader, Radovan Karadžić, who has been on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for five years without a verdict. Even for Gibbs, there is no innocence until proven guilty for Serbs. This is regrettable<sup>11</sup>.

Besides, since Gibbs criticizes the climate of intellectual terrorism surrounding the whole Srebrenica affair, which applies to everything labelled genocide nowadays, and where skeptics about the “official version” are automatically called “deniers”, how can one be so sure about what really happened? Anybody familiar with the history of the natural sciences knows that it is only if every idea is allowed, even the “crazy” ones, that one can find the truth. Why would it be different for political events, specially those that are endowed with such a high moral value by the powers that be?

However, Gibbs’ acceptance of the orthodox view of the facts can be considered the price to pay for daring to attack the main functioning falsehoods of the Srebrenica narrative. Like many other scholars, some of whom he names, Gibbs denies the far-fetched labeling of the Srebrenica massacre as “genocide”. Perhaps even more to the point which he is endeavoring to make, Gibbs undertakes to refute at length the false claims that the absence of Western intervention made matters worse while the belated intervention made things better. This is the perhaps the most pertinent part of what is overall an excellent paper.

This argument against the utility of military intervention is particularly needed at a time when a Democratic Senator from Maryland, Ben Cardin, is introducing a “Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act” which would make it national policy:

“1. to **prevent mass atrocities and genocide** as both a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility;”

“2. to mitigate the **threats to United States security** by **preventing the root causes** of insecurity, including masses of civilians being slaughtered, refugees flowing across borders, and violence wreaking havoc on regional stability and livelihood;”

“3. to **enhance its capacity to prevent and address mass atrocities and violent conflict as part of its humanitarian and strategic interests...**”

The “capacity” will take the form, as usual, of more contracts for the military industrial complex.

Gibbs concludes that US political leaders have drawn the wrong conclusion from the Srebrenica massacre. But it was almost certainly the conclusion they wanted to draw. Indeed, it is not as if the U.S. had never intervened illegally in the internal affairs of other states before Srebrenica. Just think of Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, not to speak of Indochina. The

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<sup>11</sup> For another view on the Yugoslav wars, see Diana Johnstone, *Fools Crusade: Nato, Yugoslavia and Western Delusions*, Pluto Press, London, 2002.

pretexts vary (struggle against communism then, humanitarian wars or war on terror now), the policies remain. Plus ça change...

A final remark: the number of deaths due to the war on terror and the embargo against Iraq ranges in the hundreds of thousands if not more than a million<sup>12</sup>. Whatever happened at Srebrenica is drop in the sea compared to the ocean of American crimes. To use the former to justify the latter is beyond hypocrisy.

### **Response by Latha Varadarajan, San Diego State University**

The 1990s were inaugurated with the slogan of a “new world order” and the promise from its liberal defenders that the post-Cold War era would finally yield “the dividends of peace.” What it has yielded over the past two and a half decades is a series of wars, initially seemingly limited and now more open-ended and geographically unbound. While few still speak in terms of the “end of history,” the idea that most – if not all of these wars – embody the defense of liberal, humanitarian values is one that has become enshrined in the dominant narrative about global politics. David Gibbs’ article on the Srebrenica massacre is a timely and vital corrective to this misconception, exposing in particular the murky origins of the post-Cold War era of “humanitarian intervention.” In a nuanced, unsparing analysis, Gibbs reveals the manner in which the Srebrenica massacre was in fact made possible because of specific policies adopted by the actors who are usually treated either as “victims” (in this case, the Bosniak leadership) or “heroes” (the United States, which spearheaded the call for the NATO bombing campaign). The main focus of his analysis, however, is the way in which this tragedy ultimately became the issue around which a coterie of liberal hawks and conservative pundits organized themselves to demand the re-orientation of US foreign policy along the lines of humanitarian military interventions. As Gibbs correctly points out, Srebrenica marked an important transitional moment in post-Cold War politics, when the idea of military intervention acquired a gloss of righteousness and legitimacy with its re-inscribed link to the cause of humanitarianism. In that sense, the implications of the massacre and the response it generated go beyond the immediate effects on the trajectory of the Balkan Wars. Srebrenica, Gibbs argues convincingly, made possible the ideological justifications that would become commonplace in the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, what is less convincing is Gibbs’ explanation of what led to these post-Cold War developments, specifically his claims about US hegemony.

The invocation of the term hegemony is problematic not just at the conceptual level, but also at the political. To distill Gibbs’ argument to its essence, it was American national interests that shaped the global politics surrounding the Balkan wars, whether in terms of scuttling potential diplomatic settlements, re-defining the concept of genocide, establishing the ICTY, or attributing crimes to particular nationalities. These interests, including the desire to re-purpose NATO for the post-Cold War world, could be served because, in the 1990s, the United States was the hegemonic actor in global politics. While clear at one level, this rendering of global politics raises a rather important question – what exactly does it mean to talk about the US as a hegemonic actor in the

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12 See Body Count Casualty Figures after 10 Years of the “War on Terror” Iraq Afghanistan Pakistan First international edition - Washington DC, Berlin, Ottawa - March 2015 , available from: [http://www.ipnw.de/commonFiles/pdfs/Frieden/Body\\_Count\\_first\\_international\\_edition\\_2015\\_final.pdf](http://www.ipnw.de/commonFiles/pdfs/Frieden/Body_Count_first_international_edition_2015_final.pdf)

The total figures reached in that study is 1.3 million deaths, for the “War on Terror” in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

1990s? If all it means is that the United States was militarily the most powerful actor in global politics, then “hegemony,” is merely a stand-in for a “great power,” perhaps in a unipolar vein. However, if the expression is meant to suggest a kind of dominance beyond mere military power, we begin to run into some serious issues. At the end of the Second World War, the United States was undoubtedly the hegemonic actor in global politics. But this was a position that rested not just on its military might, but a kind of economic preponderance that world had not witnessed until that point. It was this unique conjuncture of economic and military power that enabled the United States to play a decisive role in shaping the contours of the post-war economic and political order. However, by the 1990s the situation had changed drastically. The “Golden Age of American Capitalism” had lasted barely two decades after the end of the war, giving way to stagflation, Reagonomics, and a volatile finance capital driven-global economy. By the end of the Cold War, while American military power continued to be on the rise, the same could not be said of American economic power. The contradiction between the two in fact signified, if anything, a crisis of American hegemony. Far from being an expression of its renewed hegemony, it is exactly the economic *decline* of the United States in the post-Cold War era that, paired to its enduring military dominance, set it on an inevitable collision course with the rest of the world. Srebrenica was then among the first instances in a long and bloody series of adventures that necessitated a prolonged and contradictory renegotiation of the ideological underpinnings of the “new world order.” This is not to deny that there were important and essential continuities between the post-Second World War era and the 1990s. But to understand those, we need to move away from the conceptual fuzziness of hegemony, and focus on the question of imperialism.

Imperialism, as Lenin argued a century ago, is a system that is essentially tied to the development of capitalism on a global scale. What this means is that so long as capitalism continues to exist, engendering a very specific relationship between politics and economics, the international system will be essentially imperialist in nature. This is not to claim that global politics has remained more or less unchanged since the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the very dynamism characterizing capitalist developments implies that the overt forms of imperialist politics can and do change. The de-legitimation of colonial rule in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the enshrining of sovereignty as the bedrock of the post-WWII era, and in fact, even the overthrowing of that principle through the celebration of humanitarian interventionism all represent changes in the overt form of imperialist politics. However, the underlying logic – that of capitalism understood not just as an economic system, but in all its political reverberations – remains constant. Keeping this in mind enables us to see the ways in which all the crucial points made by Gibbs – about the desire of the US Air Force to demonstrate its capabilities, the push by certain figures of the Cold War establishment to insist on military intervention in the Balkans, and the greed of the arms manufacturers in the private sector – all add up to something bigger than assertion of American military power.

The “US foreign policy establishment,” Gibbs asserts, was “seeking some function for itself after the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the familiar Soviet enemy.” But, who constitutes this establishment? Is it merely a group of individuals or is it a group of individuals that represent a particular class interest? If the former, then the argument would logically lead one to conclude that a different cast of characters might have changed the trajectory of US foreign policy, and still could. If the latter, the argument would be qualitatively different, emphasizing the inevitable tendency towards more brutal wars so long as the existing class relations persisted. The distinction between the two is crucial, for it leads to very distinct political claims and very distinct notions of what political change ought to entail. Unfortunately, this critical political issue is

occluded by the reference to hegemony. I would suggest that Gibbs' own nuanced and far-reaching analysis demands a re-framing of this assertion. The US foreign policy establishment, as an institution of the capitalist class, sought not so much a new function, but rather a new set of justifications for its already enshrined function – that of advancing the interests of American capitalism, broadly defined. While framing these interests as “national” interests was par for the course, the specific politics of the post-Cold War era (the almost overnight disappearance of the convenient “evil empire,” the sudden opening up of once unreachable potential markets, the shifts within factions of the capitalist class, the threat by the EC to strike out on its own, etc.) posed a new set of challenges. In responding to these challenges, the ideological justifications put forth by the American ruling class, their allies and enablers through the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lurched from the hailing of the principle of sovereignty through to the celebration of the rights of self-determination, to ultimately proclaiming the sanctity of humanitarian interventions. Far from being mere flights of rhetorical fancy, these shifts worked to justify wars fought under different pretexts in the new millennium. It is in these wars that one finds the legacy of the Srebrenica massacre, and it is for this reason that we need to understand its nature and consequences.

### **Response by Kees van der Pijl, University of Sussex**

David Gibbs's piece on Srebrenica and US foreign policy makes a number of important points with which it is difficult to quarrel. He is right that it allowed Washington to henceforth present interventions as humanitarian, even though the case for it, in this as in other instances, was lopsided and replete with misrepresentations and fabrications. He is also right in highlighting that whoever disagreed with the official line became the target of a phenomenon not seen, in Europe at least, since the 1950s: the drawing up of lists of names of people ‘in denial’ even if they did not contest any facts but merely questioned, as David Gibbs does here, the use of terms like genocide for the ethnic cleansings in Yugoslavia.

However, one can always change the lens and get a broader picture. In this case I would enlarge the portrait painted by Gibbs to a canvas that stretches back to the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time the British geographer, Halford Mackinder, famously argued that whoever controlled the land bridge connecting Europe with Asia, labelled the ‘heartland’, would also control the Eurasian land mass, the ‘world island’, and next, the globe as well. Of course the author also noted, in the very same paper, the formation of ‘an outer ring of outer and insular bases for sea-power and commerce’ surrounding Eurasia.<sup>13</sup>

Since his analysis privileges geography over political economy, Mackinder did not infer that the growth of capitalism in this ‘outer and insular ring’ would in effect turn the scales against the dark forces lurking in Eurasia—Russia to be exact, the rival of the British Empire in the Great Game on India's northwest frontier. Hence it was not the Eurasian heartland, but a liberal, *Lockean* heartland of globalising capitalism that would rise to pre-eminence—rather than the land mass facing it. Even so, this was a precarious, non-territorial pre-eminence of which the geographic aspect would remain a weak link. The fear of losing Western Europe to a Eurasian combination has remained a concern of the Anglophone ruling classes formed in the particular, transnational spatial constellation of the capitalist heartland. Indeed the formation of an Atlantic

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<sup>13</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’. *The Geographical Journal*, 23 (4) 1904, pp. 421-437.

ruling class incorporating those of the large continental countries, Germany and France in particular, would likewise remain a tentative project characterised by very specific spillbacks to which the Mackinder thesis continues to provide the key.

The first of these spillbacks occurred briefly after the Great War and the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks in power in Moscow and the government of the defeated German *Reich*, recast as the Weimar Republic, concluded a treaty on the margins of the Genoa reparations conference, in nearby Rapallo. Under the provisions of the Rapallo treaty, Germany was able to compensate for the loss of European and overseas raw material bases by gaining access to Russia's oil, ores, and grain, whilst obtaining a future market for its heavy industries. Rapallo, which also contained secret clauses allowing the German army and air force for training on Soviet soil, has remained a code-word for the fear of a Eurasian union, and the response to the original treaty is testimony to the specific operation of a geopolitical dynamics within Atlantic capitalism.

The Dawes Plan of 1924, which rehabilitated German finances after the Great Inflation and ushered in a flow of foreign investment, and in 1947, the Marshall Plan that laid the foundations for a Fordist mass production/consumption economy, can be understood, at least in part, as Anglo-American interventions to interrupt the drift towards Eurasian economic integration. This in my view constitutes the framework without which we cannot fully understand the crisis in Yugoslavia and the US intervention in the civil war that erupted after newly unified Germany, with Austria and the Vatican in tow, moved to recognise the secession of economically most viable parts of the heavily indebted federation, Slovenia and Croatia. How US diplomacy intervened to prevent a compromise over Bosnia, can be read in Gibbs's article. The endgame, in which the United States used NATO to restore and enforce its pre-eminence over any independent departures by European rivals, received the imprimatur of Washington's top diplomat in Yugoslavia, Richard Holbrooke, in a 1995, post-Dayton article in *Foreign Affairs*. Titled, significantly, 'America, a European Power', Holbrooke argued that 'the West must expand to central Europe as fast as possible in fact as well as in spirit, and the United States is ready to lead the way'.<sup>14</sup>

In the background was the fear that after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the pattern of capital accumulation still entrenched in continental Europe, the corporate liberalism structured around class compromise with organised labour in Fordist mass production, might be bolstered by an infusion of residues from the defunct central planning and welfare structures of the former Soviet bloc. This might then work to limit the penetration of Anglo-American capital seeking to introduce the social relations associated with neoliberalism, and there were several dramatic instances besides the Yugoslav civil war itself that reveal the murderous intensity of this specific instance of Atlantic rivalry.<sup>15</sup> It is certainly a reminder that if Srebrenica served as a beacon to launch interventions under humanitarian slogans, the United States and its allies never removed the 'direct hit', bloody coups, torture and murder from their arsenal.

Why is the 'Rapallo' perspective important? Because today, we are again in the midst of a struggle to prevent Russia and the large continental European economies from jointly finding a way out of the crisis. This crisis, as Wolfgang Streeck has argued, goes back to 1968-'69 but has been postponed by several instances through inflation and a proliferation of debt and debt

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Holbrooke, 'America, A European Power', *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (2) 1995, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Kees van der Pijl, *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq*. London: Pluto; New Delhi: Sage Vistaar, 2006, chapter 8, pp. 256-296..

instruments.<sup>16</sup> Trying to solve it by a sustained application of neoliberal recipes (privatisation, liberalisation, austerity) is reaching the limits of what the social order in Europe can bear. In these circumstances, depriving Russia from the industrial component of the former Soviet economy in Ukraine, one it would need to realise the Eurasian Union by which Moscow aspires to launch a Trans-Eurasian Development Corridor (TEBR in Russian) jointly with European and Japanese corporations<sup>17</sup>, is best understood in the ‘Rapallo’ lineage. In the coup in Kiev in February 2014, no ‘humanitarian’ considerations were involved, because there the US on the back of a popular movement against oligarchic rule and corruption, worked with vintage fascists to bring an anti-Russian bloc of forces to power, whilst encouraging it to destroy the Donbass economy in the ensuing civil war.<sup>18</sup> The proposed TTIP may also be viewed in light of the Rapallo syndrome.

The response to the Srebrenica massacre allowed the US to paint some of its foreign interventions in humanitarian colours. The response to Rapallo-like challenges to the Atlantic heartland includes the entire arsenal, from ‘soft power’ interventions like the colour revolutions in eastern Europe, to all-out war.

### **Response by John Feffer, Institute for Policy Studies**

In his provocative essay, David Gibbs makes the following statement about diplomacy and the war in Bosnia. “There is also abundant evidence that diplomacy might have prevented the Bosnian war and thus prevented the Srebrenica massacre, but this option was blocked by prointerventionist forces in the United States, which demanded a military option instead.”

This statement is embedded in a larger argument about the inappropriate lesson – concerning the perceived need for more military intervention – that the U.S. foreign policy establishment drew from the killings in Srebrenica and the war more generally in Bosnia. Ideally, I would like to support this conclusion. Unfortunately, despite Gibbs’s claims of “abundant evidence,” diplomacy had a poor track record in preventing the conflict from escalating in former Yugoslavia, diplomatic options were more frequently scuttled by forces inside the country rather than outside, and it’s not at all clear that the “foreign policy establishment” drew any one particular lesson about intervention from what happened in Srebrenica.

First, let’s look at the track record for diplomacy. Gibbs begins his account of the diplomatic efforts to avert war with the Portuguese diplomat José Cutileiro and the European Community’s plan to create a Bosnian state composed of a dozen or so ethnically based cantons. All three ethnic groups, Gibbs relates, agreed to this peace plan on March 17, 1992. Ten days later, however, the deal was dead, largely because the United States opposed it and persuaded the Bosnians to do the same, or so Gibbs argues. The war officially began on April 6.

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<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Streeck, *Gekaufte Zeit. Die vertagte Krise des demokratischen Kapitalismus* [Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2012]. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013. English translation, *Buying Time*, London: Verso.

<sup>17</sup> Yury Gromyko ‘Beyond the “BRICS”’—New Patterns of Development Cooperation in the Trans-Eurasian Corridor’. In Kees van der Pijl, ed. *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Production*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine. Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: IB Tauris, 2015. The story of the coup is told in Andrew Higgins and Andrew E. Kramer, ‘Yanukovych was defeated even before his ouster.’ *International New York Times*, 5 January 2015.

But this account glosses over the very substantial disagreements that all sides had with the European Community's peace plan. The three sides came to some rough agreement on March 17 but significantly did not *sign* any agreement. The Bosniak side, in particular, was unhappy with the very ambiguous powers delegated to the "federal" authorities compared to the kind of power the proposed cantons would wield. The Serbs would later balk at a follow-up proposal that the federal center would have a single president and an 18,000-man army. All three parties couldn't agree on where to draw the boundaries for the cantons.

The United States could have invested more of its political energies into the European plan. But James Baker supported the EC process, and at least formally so did Warren Zimmermann. The notion that Zimmermann single-handedly scuttled the process by persuading Izetbegovic to pull out is not likely to be true. Izetbegovic and his supporters were already highly uncomfortable with an agreement based on ethnic cantons, and U.S. support for an independent Bosnia was already clear going into the negotiations.

Subsequent peace negotiations followed a similar pattern in the sense that actors on the ground, rather than outside manipulators, played a much stronger role in blocking consensus. The Vance-Owen accord, for instance, was undone by the Bosnian Serbs, who voted in Assembly against ratification – enraging and humiliating Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, who had attempted to convince negotiators of his ability to deliver the Serbian vote.

Gibbs notes that "the stage was set for war" after the unraveling of the Cutileiro plan. But he ignores all the other preparations for war in Bosnia that preceded any of the EC efforts. There was, for instance, the infamous meeting at Karadjordjevo between Milosevic and Croatian President Franjo Tudjman. Although it cannot be definitely stated that the two leaders agreed at this meeting on March 25, 1991 on a joint plan to partition Bosnia – many high-ranking figures make this assertion, but no formal agreement has ever been found – certainly Tudjman acted as if such an agreement had been reached. Moreover, ethnic cleansing – "purifying" the government, public institutions like hospitals and universities, and the management of state-held enterprises – began in the predominantly Serbian region of Bosnia after the Serb Democratic Party won the first multi-party elections in 1990 in Banja Luka. A similar process took place in the predominantly Croatian region of Bosnia beginning after the proclamation of independence of the Croatian Community of Herzeg-Bosnia in November 1991. And, of course, the war between Serbia and Croatia sharpened the divisions between the two diaspora communities in Bosnia.

All of these preliminary actions set the stage for war in a much more substantial way than the failure of the Cutileiro plan. Even if all three sides had ultimately signed an agreement based on the cantonment plan, even if they had somehow agreed to the borders and the relative distribution of powers between the federal and canton-level authorities, the central tension between the desire of the Serbs and Croats for partition and the desire of the Bosniaks for a central state would have been merely papered over. It was just as likely that such a plan would have only delayed war rather than averted it.

Gibbs argues further that "prointerventionist forces" demanded a "military option" instead.<sup>19</sup> There were certainly such forces in the United States who supported military intervention. But they did not have much influence with the Bush administration before the war officially began in Bosnia. Gibbs has projected back into time the voices that emerged later, after the war in Bosnia broke out. The "lift and strike" option – lift the arms embargo on Bosnia and

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<sup>19</sup> [Note added by D. Gibbs: Feffer is referring to a sentence on pages 1-2 of my article, which could be read as implying that Bush administration hawks were supporting intervention before the Bosnian war began. This is of course incorrect, and I should have worded the sentence differently.]

strike at Bosnian Serb positions – didn't emerge until the summer of 1992. Clinton would embrace that strategy as president but backed off as a result of opposition from European allies. Gibbs also fails to distinguish between the positions of the Clinton administration (which supported, for instance, the "safe havens" strategy) and Congress (which favored a unilateral lifting of the arms embargo).

Finally, what lessons did the "foreign policy establishment" in the United States learn from the failure of these diplomatic initiatives? It's important to note that the foreign policy mandarins in the George H.W. Bush administration, including realists like James Baker, were extremely hesitant to become involved in Yugoslavia in the first place, preferring that the Europeans handle an issue so clearly in their backyard. The Clinton administration began to develop a rationale for humanitarian intervention that culminated in the decision to authorize NATO air strikes on Bosnian Serb positions. This was a military option, to be sure. But it was designed not to defeat the Bosnian Serbs. Rather, the strategy was to get the parties back to the negotiating table – a fundamentally different approach to military force compared to, for instance, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan or the air wars against Qaddafi and the Islamic State, the other examples Gibbs cites.

As I mentioned at the outset, I am predisposed to arguments in favor of diplomacy and against employing the military option. But those arguments must take into account the very real difficulties of bringing multiple adversaries to the table. Ascribing malign intent solely to outside parties – for instance, the United States – can be a useful tool for forging compromise among such adversaries at the negotiating table. But it's not a tactic I recommend for analysts trying to paint an accurate picture of a complex reality. As much as I would like to believe that diplomacy could have averted the war in Bosnia, I don't see much evidence of that, at least not the kind of diplomacy that was underway at the time.