

When their business is our business

Rory Stewart MP and his co-author ask when it is right to intervene in another country, and why it can all go disastrously wrong

DOMINIC LAWSON

CAN INTERVENTION WORK?

by RORY STEWART and GERALD KNAUS

Norton £14.99 pp268

In the days when Britain had an empire, Rory Stewart would have been exactly the sort of man to be sent out to help run it. Still, even in the absence of such a challenge, he hasn't hung about. A gap-year stint in the Black Watch; a short stint in the Foreign Office followed by a freelance trek on foot through Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan; then — at the age of 30 — back into the service of the crown as deputy governor of a province in Iraq. Now he's a Tory MP, but when I bumped into him a few weeks ago, he had just been nosing around in Libya.

This is as much to say that Stewart is a man whose knowledge of the more dangerous parts of the globe commands respect: and now, with the American Gerald Knaus — who was deeply involved on the ground during the stabilisation of Bosnia — he has turned that experience into what amounts to a polemic against our involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Actually, that's only the first half of this short book; his co-author has written the second half in defence of Nato's involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo. Can Intervention Work? thus consists of two essays, one showing how badly we got things wrong, and the other giving the West a straight "A".

However, Knaus concedes that the success of the Bosnian operation — the country has been demilitarised, 1m refugees have been returned, and the main instigators of ethnic cleansing were all rounded up and sent off to the International Criminal Court — was something exceptional. Like his British co-author, he has harsh words for the American style of seeing successful intervention as being just a question of numbers. The hugely influential Rand Corporation, America's biggest think tank, has since 1948 prepared the intellectual background for a series of interventions, including the Vietnam war. The Rand philosophy is essentially that if enough money and men are poured in, then intervention will be a success, regardless of the culture and political complexion of the nation undergoing this form of military-led

therapy. As Knaus points out, in their recent assessment of American interventions, going back to the stabilisation of Japan and Germany at the end of the second world war, Rand failed even to mention Vietnam. It's as if they had never heard of Robert McNamara, the US defence secretary who took the Rand line and then recanted with devastating effect, notably in the 2003 documentary *The Fog of War*.

Stewart, not surprisingly, levels most of his criticisms at the British experience, not so much in the invasion of Iraq (which he supported at the time but now regrets) but in our operations in Afghanistan. He is especially severe on the sheer ignorance of the political establishment, both in the Foreign Office and at the Ministry of Defence, of what exactly they were letting our troops in for. The former Foreign Office permanent secretary Sir Michael Jay is particularly culpable, in Stewart's view, for abandoning the organisation's previous emphasis on specialised expertise — even to the extent of regarding ability to speak the language of the region as a mere option, of no significance in the diplomatic selection process. Thus, writes Stewart, "in 2009, according to the Foreign Office's own assessment, the British required no Pashto speakers to work effectively in Afghanistan, even though it was the language of Helmand, where Britain was fighting".

British officials told the Afghans how they should 'empower' their womenfolk

The one language in which the Foreign Office did become fluent was that favoured by its then new Labour political bosses: thus our officials were thick on the ground telling the Afghans how they should "empower" their womenfolk and getting fatuous ticks in boxes when they got home, even as the toll among our soldiers rose inexorably. I for one have never forgotten an article by this newspaper's Christina Lamb, when she reported, after a particularly bloody week back in the summer of 2006, a meeting at which Susan Cronby from the Foreign Office and Wendy Phillips from the Department of International Development, accompanied by an exasperated military escort, insisted on showing a group of tribal elders extracts from the BBC's underwater series *The Blue Planet* — presumably as an example of the culture they were to emulate. ("An old man in white with a long beard got up and accused the women of being spies... The tribal leaders of Gereshk sat in utter bafflement as images of whales and dolphins were projected on the wall.")

Still, as Stewart admits, in a previous century infinitely better-informed Britons backed by a mighty empire also came a cropper. "Consider Gertrude Bell, Gerald Leachman and Bertram Thomas, in the British occupation of Iraq. All three were fluent and highly experienced Arabists... all three were greatly admired for their political work. They had an imperial confidence. They were dealing with a simpler Iraq and a smaller, more rural population... But they failed."

One obvious conclusion is not to intervene with troops on the ground in any country unless it truly is the case that your own national interest allows for no alternative. To those who say that on that basis we would never have got involved in saving the Muslims of Bosnia from further massacres, it is necessary to point out that while we bombed the Serbs, we didn't fight a land war against them — and thus not a single British or American died in combat. Our Libyan campaign (though Stewart had deep misgivings) seems to have been a second successful intervention on similarly limited lines; so this book will need an update.

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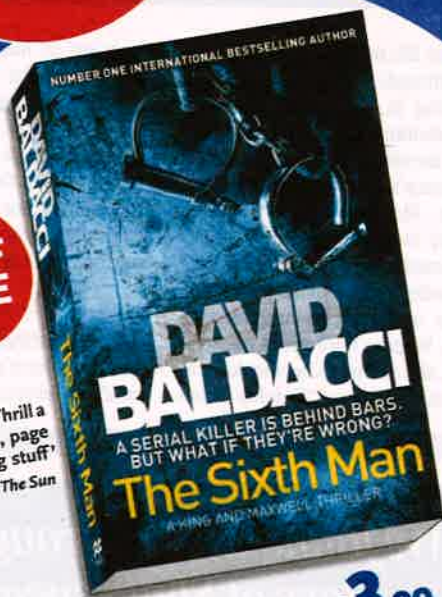
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