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The Limits of "No-Limit"

J. Peter Pham
James Madison University

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The Limits of “No-Limit”

Abstract

One must acknowledge and even admire the passion that writer and photographer Ann Jones brings to the different causes she embraces as she meanders along the paths of her rather eclectic career, now spanning over three decades. Her first book, *Uncle Tom’s Campus* (1973), examines how her students, in a predominantly African-American college, were being shortchanged by the system. In the late 1990s, she took off across Africa in search of a legendary tribe ruled by women and supposedly noted for its embrace of “feminine” principles of tolerance, diplomacy, and compromise, and returned to publish a travelogue-cum-utopian *Weltanschauung* set in an African Eden, *Looking for Lovedu: A Woman’s Journey through Africa* (2001).

Keywords

Human rights, Afghanistan, Taliban, NATO, Women's rights

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The Limits of “No-Limit”

by J. Peter Pham

One must acknowledge and even admire the passion that writer and photographer Ann Jones brings to the different causes she embraces as she meanders along the paths of her rather eclectic career, now spanning over three decades. Her first book, *Uncle Tom’s Campus* (1973), examines how her students, in a predominantly African-American college, were being shortchanged by the system. In the late 1990s, she took off across Africa in search of a legendary tribe ruled by women and supposedly noted for its embrace of “feminine” principles of tolerance, diplomacy, and compromise, and returned to publish a travelogue-cum-utopian *Weltanschauung* set in an African Eden, *Looking for Lovedu: A Woman’s Journey through Africa* (2001).

Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan by American-led coalition forces, Jones set off for Kabul. As she explained in her subsequent book [Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan](#) (2006):

I’d seen George W. Bush come to town to strut and bluster over among the ruins, and as I watched him lugged the stunned country to violence, my sorrow turned to anger and a bone-deep disappointment that hasn’t left me yet. Surely America was capable of something more creative than bombing a small, defenseless, pre-destroyed country on the other side of the world, or so I believed. Four thousand collateral civilian deaths in Kabul brought no consolation for the deaths of thousands, from around the world, in the fallen towers of the city that had for so long been my home. I thought America had lost its bearing too. So I left (Jones 2006: 3).

Returning to America after the Afghan situation also failed to live up to her ideal, Jones penned a number of pieces, in addition to the book, in which she gives expression to her frustration, including the [op-ed from Salon.com](#) (which was an adaptation of a longer piece published in the February *Marie Claire Brazil*). In particular, she worries—with cause—about the future of the gains made by women in Afghan society as the expected spring offensive by the apparently resurgent Taliban looms on the horizon. And she is unambiguous about who bears responsibility for this regression:

I blame George W. Bush, the “liberator” who looked the other way. In 2001, the United States military claimed responsibility for these provinces, the heart of Taliban country; but diverted to the adventures in the oilfields of Iraq, it failed for five years to provide the security international humanitarians needed to do the promised work of reconstruction (§16).

I agree with Jones insofar as I have [argued elsewhere](#) that the decision to go into Iraq in 2003 may indeed go down in history as a “dangerous distraction”—to borrow the terminology from Charles Peña’s [Winning the Un-War: A New Strategy for the War on Terrorism](#) (2006)—in America’s post-9/11 military campaign against the perpetrators of the attack on the U.S. homeland. Like her and others concerned about human rights, I also worry about the fate of women—and also Christian, Hindu, and other non-Muslim males—in the increasingly Islamist Afghan state. However, I diverge from both Jones’s search for the ideal “other” abroad and her faith that somehow she or other “international humanitarians” can bring about radical transformation that is both legitimate and self-sustaining.

Their project, however well-intentioned, is based on three questionable presuppositions. First, they presume there are no limits to our understanding of other peoples, cultures, and polities: we comprehend the obstacles and injustices which need to be removed, and the remedies which need to be prescribed. If successive U.S. administrations have suffered from “failure of intelligence,” here their critics suffer from “failure of intelligentsia.” David Kennedy has wisely observed in [The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism](#) (2004): “Policymakers can also overlook the dark sides of their work and treat initiatives which take a familiar humanitarian form as likely to have a humanitarian effect. It is always tempting to think some global humanitarian effort has got to be better than none” (Kennedy 2004: 112; also see my [review essay](#) of Kennedy’s book in *Human Rights & Human Welfare*, 2006).

Second, they presume there are no limits to our discourse. I [argued](#) in a *Human Right & Human Welfare* review essay on Antony Anghie’s [Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law](#) (2005), that whether it is in a revealed religion, the *mission civilisatrice*, law, human rights, or some other ordering principle of international society, the essential structure of discourse about the “other” is far from being as universal. Rather, it is historically-grounded and frequently politically expedient in its judgments.

Third, they presume there are no limits to our capabilities to affect transformation through interventions, military or otherwise, or the willingness of the objects of concern to absorb the changes brought to them. Thus the case made by Jones: if the Bush administration had dedicated sufficient forces to Afghanistan, and the NATO contingents in the [International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\)](#) had more effectively executed their mission, then expatriate do-gooders like herself could deliver the “promised work” of erecting their utopia amid the valleys of the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountains—and ensure that such structures would become legitimate.

In short, Jones and other have opted for a version of “[no-limit Texas hold’em](#).” In the card game, players may bet or raise any amount over the minimum raise, usually employing a strategy of “tight-aggression” (playing few hands, but betting and raising often with those that one does play). Likewise, while there is widespread consensus that certain minimum standards for international behavior exist, it is quite a leap from that starting point to an ambitious agenda for global transformation which predilection, ironically, Jones shares with the administration she criticizes rather extravagantly in her writings.

The United States and other countries with a liberal democratic tradition can and should support the efforts of men and women everywhere to secure for themselves the rights and freedoms we often take for granted. But we should also not be surprised that some societies will push back, sometimes even aggressively. Further, outside advocacy—to say nothing of external intervention—may lead to worsening conditions for those on whose behalf action was undertaken. In the end, the reality which must be recognized is that progress in human rights will be made not so much because outsiders, whether governmental or civil society actors, push it, but because individuals, cultures, and nations appropriate it for themselves.

I am concerned about the future of Afghanistan, especially the prospects for the most vulnerable members of Afghan society. Yet, I truly fear that both sides of our Western political spectrum have yet to learn to temper their idealism with a proper realist regard for the lessons of history

and culture, the verities of politics and logistics, and the limits of human nature. To that end, poker champion David Sklansky’s “fundamental theorem,” elaborated in [The Theory of Poker](#), represents good counsel on both the world stage and the card table: “ Every time you play a hand differently from the way you would have played it if you could see all your opponents’ cards, they gain; and every time you play your hand the same way you would have played it if you could see all their cards, they lose.”

*J. Peter Pham, Director of the Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs at James Madison University, served as an international diplomat in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, from 2001 through 2002. His research interest is the intersection of international relations, international law, political theory, and ethics, with particular concentrations on implications for United States foreign policy and African states as well as for religion and global politics. Among other works, Dr. Pham is the author of two recent books on African politics, *Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State* (Reed Press, 2004) and *Child Soldiers, Adult Interests: The Global Dimensions of the Sierra Leonean Tragedy* (Nova Science Publishers, 2005), as well as a chapter on “African Constitutionalism: Forging New Models for Multi-ethnic Governance and Self-Determination” in *Africa: Mapping New Boundaries in International Law*, edited by Jeremy I. Levitt (Hart Publishing, forthcoming 2007). He is also a member of the editorial board of *Human Rights & Human Welfare*.*