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Mission Creep: De-Militarizing Humanitarian Protection

Sonia Cardenas
Trinity College

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Mission Creep: De-Militarizing Humanitarian Protection

Abstract

Over a decade ago, the U.S. military was warning liberal internationalists about the dangers of "mission creep." Today it is doing the opposite, incorporating relief and development work into its operations. In the devastating aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in Burma, the U.S. military's newfound mission may seem compelling. Unfortunately, expanding the military's role into humanitarian work reflects a flawed logic that should be resisted. There are more promising ways to protect victims of humanitarian disaster.

Keywords

Human rights, War on terror, Humanitarian aid, Non-governmental organizations, Military

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Mission Creep: De-Militarizing Humanitarian Protection

by Sonia Cardenas

Over a decade ago, the U.S. military was warning liberal internationalists about the dangers of "mission creep." Today it is doing the opposite, incorporating relief and development work into its operations. In the devastating aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in Burma, the U.S. military's newfound mission may seem compelling. Unfortunately, expanding the military's role into humanitarian work reflects a flawed logic that should be resisted. There are more promising ways to protect victims of humanitarian disaster.

The term "mission creep" has been used to describe the gradual and unwanted expansion of the military's role into non-traditional areas, such as human rights. First mentioned in a 1993 [Washington Post article](#) by Jim Hoagland, warning against intervention in Somalia, mission creep has become part of the political lexicon. In 1994, President Clinton assured Congress that mission creep would not occur in Rwanda. In 1995, [Senator John McCain](#) and military officials warned of military creep in Bosnia. A decade later, [Paul Wolfowitz](#) applied the term to the World Bank, describing mission creep as the pursuit of "sweeping international causes that sound good without any evidence to show that they can be accomplished."

Post-September 11 th exigencies may have dissipated the military's anxiety about mission creep. The U.S. military now asserts that it is essential to engage in non-combat activities, which it dubs "[stability and support operations](#)." The goal is to stabilize volatile political situations, the potential breeding grounds for terrorism. For the military, one of the key lessons of Iraq is that brute force is insufficient to assure security. Humanitarianism-defined broadly to include relief, development, and nation-building-is also necessary.

While the U.S. military has long engaged in non-combat missions, the emphasis today is quite different. Humanitarian operations are to be considered a "core military mission" of comparable priority to traditional combat missions, according to a 2005 [Department of Defense Directive](#). The primary rationale for non-combat operations, moreover, is geo-strategic. An [Army Field Manual](#) in 2003 admits the goal is to "retain U.S. access or influence abroad." This is a new brand of militarized humanitarianism.

Not surprisingly, some observers are skeptical of this doctrinal shift and its practical implications. NGOs, which thrive on independence, worry about coordinating on-the-ground logistics with military forces and appearing politically partisan. Many critics of the war in Iraq (including some who supported humanitarian intervention in the heyday of the 1990s) have become broadly suspicious of U.S. motives, accepting what Madeleine Albright recently labeled "[the end of intervention](#)." Even the initial reluctance of the world community to intervene in Burma may be partly a backlash against the U.S. military's ostensible embrace of humanitarianism.

The expansion of the U.S. military into relief and development work should in fact be contested. First, unlike humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, which used force for humanitarian (and other) ends, non-combat operations today deploy humanitarian means mostly for military and economic ends. Yet as [Michael O'Neill of Save the Children](#) observes, "humanitarian work is based on need and need alone. It's valued for its own purposes." And it cannot be captive to prevailing military and economic interests, dictating which human beings are protected. When strategic calculations trump humanitarian concerns, human rights are likely to be compromised.

Second, insofar as the U.S. military's new humanitarian mission draws on its experience in Iraq, it has learned the wrong lessons. Even as Iraq reveals the limits of a military approach, the lesson of Iraq is not that the U.S. military needs to do more, adding humanitarian operations to its arsenal. The lesson of Iraq is that the military needs to do less, including desisting from forcible regime change.

Disengagement, however, is not the answer. In extreme cases, force should be used to protect human rights and the military should participate in the tactical delivery of humanitarian assistance. The 2001 [Responsibility to Protect](#) report offers concrete guidance for when and how to intervene. It invokes at least two criteria relevant for non-combat missions: the precautionary principle of right intent (even when states have mixed motives, the *primary* purpose must be to relieve human suffering); and the importance of a multilateral organization authorizing the intervention (i.e., the United Nations or a regional group like [ASEAN](#)).

Overall, the U.S. military's new humanitarianism is problematic. It is not humanitarian in intent, it is premised on faulty assumptions about failure in Iraq, and it disregards a global consensus about the value of multilateralism. More directly, it threatens to harm the work of humanitarian organizations. Jim Hoagland, who originally coined "mission creep," now warns against "[mission shrink](#)" in Iraq (or cutbacks in the military's democracy-building role). The terms of the military-humanitarian debate may have shifted, but the consequences for human rights are still largely negative.

Sonia Cardenas is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Human Rights Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is the author of numerous publications, including [Conflict and Compliance: State Responses to International Human Rights Pressure](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). She is currently completing two book projects, both for the University of Pennsylvania Press— [Chains of Justice: The Global Rise of State Institutions for Human Rights](#) and a textbook, [Terror and Hope: The Politics of Human Rights in Latin America](#).