

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

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Volume 8

Issue 10 *October Roundtable: An Annotation of  
"Making Intervention Work" by Morton  
Abramowitz and Thomas Pickering*

Article 5

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10-2008

## Reforming Humanitarian Rescue

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### Recommended Citation

Steele, Brent J. (2008) "Reforming Humanitarian Rescue," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 10, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss10/5>



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## Reforming Humanitarian Rescue

### Abstract

There is much to commend in Morton Abramowitz and Thomas Pickering's article "Making Intervention Work." They propose to reform the United Nations' capacity for intervention with the creation of an autonomous U.N. force largely constituted with forces contributed by the Security Council's member-states. If such a force were kept to a minimal operational mission, "a small rapid-deployment force with special engineering, logistical, medical, and police skills," as the authors suggest, then I think this is a good idea. If such a force would, however, become more than this—an autonomous army of military personnel meant to intervene with force into any humanitarian crisis in which it is needed or sanctioned—then I fear this would be a counter-productive entity.

### Keywords

Human rights, Humanitarian intervention, Human rights enforcement, United Nations

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## Reforming Humanitarian Rescue

by Brent J. Steele

There is much to commend in Morton Abramowitz and Thomas Pickering's article "Making Intervention Work." They propose to reform the United Nations' capacity for intervention with the creation of an autonomous U.N. force largely constituted with forces contributed by the Security Council's member-states. If such a force were kept to a minimal operational mission, "a small rapid-deployment force with special engineering, logistical, medical, and police skills," as the authors suggest, then I think this is a good idea. If such a force would, however, become more than this—an autonomous army of military personnel meant to intervene with force into any humanitarian crisis in which it is needed or sanctioned—then I fear this would be a counter-productive entity.

I do concur with the authors' important points on the obstacles inherent in democracies that make their propensity for intervention very rare indeed. This is a point that Samantha Power most stridently made in her seminal book [A Problem From Hell](#). Leaders in liberal democracies see all risks and no rewards in pursuing an intervention to stop a genocide, although Power also seemed to think that liberal democracies were still the most likely actors to recognize the horrors of genocide. Yet I'd even take Abramowitz and Pickering's argument further—perhaps the reason why liberal democracies are risk-averse when it comes to genocide is because they are liberal, in a classic philosophical sense. By focusing on the self-interest of individuals, and forming a government around those interests, such regimes are not meant to initiate any "other-regarding" sentiment in their populaces, even if they pay lip service to such a notion in speeches and ceremonies promoting the phrase "Never Again."

Had I read this proposal ten years ago, I would have been whole-heartedly behind its prescriptions. And still today I applaud the attempt by these authors to try and resolve a problem (humanitarian crisis) seemingly desperate for a systematic solution. But in 2008 I am less inclined to see this as anything more than another "top-down" one-size fits all solution to a "type" of crisis (humanitarian disasters) that is as diverse as it is urgent. In short, I do not see the U.N. resolving these crises—even an autonomous force of "first responders" would still be log-jammed with bureaucratic obstacles. The U.N. performs many functions very effectively—but armed humanitarian rescue has never been one of those. While the authors fully recognize the problems with the U.N. as it currently stands, in my view the main issue is the constitutive basis of the U.N. itself. The U.N. was created to promote sovereignty and stability. To paraphrase the tenor of many English School theorists, the U.N. is here to promote order, not justice. In a world of nation-states, such an entity constituted by states will not be able to transcend the Westphalian tension between national and international interests.

So I would suggest that in order to support humanitarian intervention we need to by-pass the nation-state as rescue's main instrument, and instead look towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even [private military firms](#) (PMFs). These come with costs, of course, but in humanitarian crises, debate and consensus-building cost precious time and lives. NGOs

and PMF's are quicker and more efficient. NGOs are most preferable—because as glorious as an armed intervention against a genocidal regime or militia may be, the most comprehensive way to save lives is still the well-organized distribution of medical and food aid. PMF's of course challenge the monopoly of violence that the sovereign state is supposed to have, but if sovereign states have no interest in intervention, then PMF's are a potentially prudent last resort, as Michael Walzer suggested in a recent article in *The New Republic*. Again, this is one of several possibilities that should be considered depending upon the context of the humanitarian crisis. Such a complex problem deserves a diverse array of solutions, but I am afraid that the solution proposed in “Making Intervention Work” would have limited feasibility, if it ever came to pass in the first place.

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*Brent J. Steele is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Kansas. His primary research interests cover a wide array of international relations topics, including international ethics, international political theory, United States foreign policy, Just War theory, ontological security theory and international security. In addition to his first book, Ontological Security in International Relations, he has published articles in journals such as International Relations, International Studies Review, International Studies Quarterly, Journal of International Relations and Development, Millennium and, Review of International Studies. Please visit Dr. Steele's website: [http://www2.ku.edu/~kups/people/Faculty/Steele\\_Brent.shtml](http://www2.ku.edu/~kups/people/Faculty/Steele_Brent.shtml).*