

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 12
Issue 3 *March Roundtable: Responding to Syria*

Article 4

3-1-2012

“Thinking Through, and Beyond, Triumphalism”

Matthew S. Weinert
University of Delaware

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Weinert, Matthew S. (2012) "Thinking Through, and Beyond, Triumphalism", *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 12: Iss. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol12/iss3/4>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, digitalcommons@du.edu.

“Thinking Through, and Beyond, Triumphalism”

Abstract

The humanitarian crisis in Syria has instigated calls to activate the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine to stop the Assad regime from its murderous rampage. Armed with a failed UN Security Council resolution that would have endorsed an Arab League peace plan, thanks to Russian and Chinese vetoes, David Rieff reproves widespread liberal consensus for intervention in a February 2012 Foreign Policy article.

Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Responsibility to protect, Intervention, Sovereignty

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

"Thinking Through, and Beyond, Triumphalism"

by Matthew S. Weinert

The humanitarian crisis in Syria has instigated calls to activate the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine to stop the Assad regime from its murderous rampage. Armed with a failed UN Security Council resolution that would have endorsed an Arab League peace plan, thanks to Russian and Chinese vetoes, David Rieff reproves widespread liberal consensus for intervention in a [February 2012 Foreign Policy article](#).

Rieff will surely irritate anyone in favor of halting the violence. But the core of his argument as I read it is not anti-humanitarian. Rather, his is an argument *against* triumphalism, and thus an argument *for* thinking. Triumphalism—whether of the end of history, battle of good versus evil, or of other sorts—substitutes simplicity for complexity, and predetermined outcomes for contextually derived options. Rieff provocatively drives the point home. For instance, drawing parallels with pre-Iraq invasion rhetoric, he exposes liberal hypocrisy (he does not use this word, however): "Nothing is wrong with intervention, it seems (just as there is nothing wrong with drone strikes), just as long as it is done by good UN-loving, multilateralism-oriented Democrats from the coasts, rather than by ignorant, war-worshipping, vulgarly nationalistic Republicans from flyover country."

Felicitous phrasing might alienate some. Surely, liberals must think that *they* are not like *them*. But Rieff has a point: triumphalism is a facile road to maneuver. Yet facts—all facts—must be considered and weighed. One must not dogmatically advocate a particular action, which Rieff impugns many for doing, even if it is done under the imprimatur of human rights; and we must be suspicious of those who do so. In the case of Syria, those championing intervention have conveniently marginalized or even ignored certain pertinent facts (as explicitly addressed in a 29 February *New York Times* [article](#)) that raise troubling questions about the contours of a post-Assad Syria. Some of the West's celebrated freedom-fighters are terrorists and jihadists. US officials have confirmed, pace Assad's assertion, that Al-Qaeda was responsible for an attack against a government building in Aleppo. Sectarian violence is beginning to appear with alarming frequency, and that has [prompted Israel](#) to make contingency plans for a potential influx of Alawites, fearing reprisal, should Assad be forced from power.

But that Rieff places his cautionary R2P tale in a particular context—the "looming victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the failure of the democratic project in Iraq," and the instability rendered by the Arab Spring—begs the question: has he triumphantly (pre)determined the "right" outcome?

It is painful to witness the ongoing assault on civilian areas. The appropriate ethical response seems rhetorical: "Shouldn't the ultimate concern be human life?" Some may agree that in the end, triumphalism only seems proper when its primary referent is the human being. But while this may make for good cosmopolitanism, it may not always make for good politics or outcomes, especially when crises are complex.

But as morally reprehensible as the Russian and Chinese vetoes are, their votes bought policy-makers and scholars time to think through options and consider various possible outcomes

(though sadly for the civilians caught up in the violence, time has become nothing but a tortuous, and for many, a murderous inferno). Government attacks on particular cities and neighborhoods are one thing; an acephalous country plunged into possible civil war is quite another, absent reliable commitments by others to fill any power vacuum. But after Iraq and Afghanistan, it appears occupation is a least favorite option. Without clear alternative internal leadership, is externally imposed governance, even if temporary, likely to win adherents on the ground?

So what are we to do? That question assumes there is both a "we" and, moreover, some kind of obligation (legal, moral, or otherwise) to do *something*. Rieff indicates why we should be wary of seemingly knee-jerk (liberal) interventionism. Ultimately, the real message comes down not on the side of unflinching commitment to principle, whether sovereignty/non-interference or R2P, but to thinking pragmatically and systematically through the issue.

The Arab League peace plan that Russia and China rejected but the UN General Assembly endorsed (though not under the Uniting for Peace procedure, which might have provided the foundation on which to argue for R2P), sought to replace the din of violence with the silence of ceasefire by requiring Assad to step down. That was improbable, given his Gaddafi-like assertions to maintain power. Now, concerned actors need to think more thoroughly through likely outcomes of responses to the crisis. But for the moment, we need less emphasis on imputing blame and more on humanitarian assistance, which the Chinese foreign minister [favors](#). A less dogmatic, more nuanced version of triumphalism might prove the only way to break the impasse between the non-interventionists and those who advocate nothing less than military involvement.

Matthew S. Weinert is Director of Graduate Studies and Associate Professor of Global Governance and International Law & Organization in the University of Delaware's Department of Political Science and International Relations. His research explores moral and legal dimensions of global change, which he locates in the tensions between, and possibilities inherent in, the relationship between the state (and a state-based international order) and the individual (and a cosmopolitan-conceived world society). He is nearing completion of a book, Making Human: International Organizations and the Global Governance of Human Dignity (University of Michigan Press, under contract), and is the author of Democratic Sovereignty: Authority, State, and Legitimacy in a Globalizing World (University College London, 2007), as well as numerous articles, essays, and book chapters.