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Losing Mogadishu: Testing U.S. Policy in Somalia

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

"The Origins of the Somalia Debacle"

Stevenson, Jonathan. *Losing Mogadishu: Testing U.S. Policy in Somalia.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 183pp. $24.95

THE BOOK JACKET OF *LOSING MOGADISHU* quotes the former U.S. ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hempstone, famous for his prediction of Somalia as America's next "tar baby," as saying that this book is "required reading of anyone interested in the origins of the Somalia debacle." I would go one step further: it should be required reading for anyone involved in a U.S. humanitarian effort overseas. Not only does this comprehensive, thoroughly researched book provide an honest appraisal of what went wrong in Somalia, it also spells out how the lessons learned from the experience should guide our foreign policy, the use of U.S. military force in humanitarian interventions, and our relationship with the United Nations. We would do well to heed its warning.

Although author Jonathan Stevenson cites numerous reasons for the United States' poor performance in Somalia, two stand out in particular: the failure to understand Somali culture and a fear of repeating Vietnam. To this reviewer, who was in Somalia at the time of Operation RESTORE HOPE, these factors are more important than others because their impact is so far-reaching. In addition, they are deceivingly benign, so it is important that others less familiar with Somalia understand them.

In his early chapters, Stevenson, a lawyer turned journalist, introduces us to Somali culture—a multifaceted society with one pervasive feature, the clan. One's clan affiliation determines everything in Somali life. This alone defies any notion of a centralized politic, a fact not appreciated by everyone determining American policy in the country. Stevenson further characterizes Somali culture as a series

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of "shifting loyalties and fluid allegiances." Loyalty extends only to the sub-clan, whose "collective alignment [rolls] with the moment."

The author also addresses America's patronage of Somalia during the Cold War, specifically with respect to how remote the United States was. Such distancing precluded any attempt to learn about Somali culture. America's interests in the country were focused instead on the port of Bardera, which in 1980 became the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force's base on the Indian Ocean. Over the next few years, the United States would pour more money into Somalia, not to help the Somalis shoulder up against Soviet-backed Ethiopian border excursions but rather to overhaul facilities intended to help expand American military power in the region.

Stevenson believes Vietnam was another reason why America kept its distance from Somalia. The United States' experience in Vietnam not only made it reluctant to insinuate its military into another country, it also "soured U.S. policy makers on the practice of intimately conditioning local governments to further American ideological interests." Thus another opportunity for a deepened understanding of Somali culture was lost.

The consequences of failing to understand Somali culture and of being a slave to Vietnam's memory come through loudly and clearly in Stevenson's analysis of Operation RESTORE HOPE and the subsequent debacle. He describes a force that could "put a very large bomb on a small target from very far away" yet could hardly utter a "hello" to a Somali, a task just as important to the success of the operation as dropping bombs. There are discussions about the bungled psychological operations (PSYOPS) messages, innocent encounters that got rough because of a language barrier, and potentially embarrassing situations resulting from the failure of many soldiers to realize that most Somalis are Muslim. Although Stevenson applauds a PSYOPS campaign that was designed to keep the Somali population informed about task force activities, he points out that Somalis did not want just to be informed, they wanted to be included.

He also describes how the original optimism slowly eroded with time. Marines became less friendly and more cautious. Somalis stopped perceiving Americans as saviors. As more time passed, the American forces simply "got cynical." There came to be two worlds in Mogadishu, one within the walls of the UN compound, equipped with most of the comforts of the Western world, and one outside the walls, with no running water, no sewerage, and no electric power.

With this sort of information provided as background, the reader is hardly surprised by the disaster of 3 October. It simply represented the unfortunate culmination of ignorance of who Somalis are, American arrogance (in assuming Aidid's militias were incompetent, unarmed, and unorganized), and, to quote Stevenson, America's falling victim to "an old Third World seduction: simple people, simple problems, simple solutions."

Stevenson's command of the facts and his intuitive understanding of the whole of Somalia make him well qualified to tell us how the U.S. experience there should guide the nation in the future, and he does so in the last few chapters of the book. His lessons run the gamut, from gentle reminders of things that should be obvious ("Military Intervention Is the Last Resort" and "Establish Tight Command and Control") to the less obvious ("Know Your Enemy" and "Keep Vietnam in Perspective"). He also has extensive sections on the U.S.-UN relationship and the moral impetus of American foreign policy in the post–Cold War world—which the United States may or may not want to have.

What makes this book so compelling is the author's ability to link the United States' poor performance in Somalia to such factors as ignorance and a fear of repeating the past. It is also compelling because of its timing. This book was published just as the United States was deciding to become involved in the Bosnia crisis. One can only hope those involved with Bosnia, either militarily or politically, had a chance to read this book before they took any action.

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The Aspen Institute. *The United States and the Use of Force in the Post–Cold War Era*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Publications, 1995. 289pp. $10.95

A product of the Aspen annual summer conference conducted in August 1994, *The United States and the Use of Force in the Post–Cold War Era* joins a mushrooming body of literature on intervention. This volume asks the right questions: When and how should the United States intervene in international situations that threaten global security or stability? What policy guidelines should underwrite decisions on intervention? What limits should constrain intervention? How should U.S. decisions be influenced by other countries and international organizations?

The debate on these issues in the United States is sharp because only that nation possesses the wherewithal to choose when, where, and to what extent to intervene. No other state in the world today has such interventionary capability. Consequently, struggling with the issues has become a major spiritual problem for America—the flesh is strong, but the spirit is hesitant.

The essays have been penned by first-class analysts, and their overall quality is comparatively high. The special strength of the book derives from its middle three essays; comprehensive and thought provoking, they focus on the constraints placed on intervention