Framing post-Cold War conflicts

The media and international intervention

Philip Hammond

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Philip Hammond

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For Nena, with love

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: post-Cold War conflicts and the media

The fall of the Berlin Wall brought to an end a well established way of looking at the world. Throughout the Cold War era, Western governments were generally clear about who their enemies were and whom they could count on as allies. For the 'free world', united under American leadership against the 'evil empire' in the East, anti-communism provided a stable framework for making sense of international conflict and cooperation. The first major post-Cold War conflict, the 1991 Gulf war, indicated how much had already changed. Saddam Hussein had enjoyed Western support in Iraq's war against Iran in the 1980s, but was abruptly cast as the 'new Hitler' after his invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Neither the erstwhile Soviet enemy nor Arab states raised any serious objections to a United Nations Security Council resolution authorising massive US-led military action in the Gulf; but whereas American leadership of the Cold War alliance was largely taken for granted, the temporary coalition of 1991 was assembled only through months of diplomacy, as the US persuaded other countries to participate in, or to fund, the war. Long-standing relationships between former friends and enemies were now open to question, the international order suddenly more fluid and uncertain.

The 1990s and early 2000s were characterised by a high level of activism on the part of the major Western powers. More than half of peacekeeping operations mounted by the United Nations (UN) since 1948 were set up in the decade after 1989, for example; at its peak in 1994, the number of troops deployed on such missions reached 72,000 (IISS 1999: 291). The Cold War Nato military alliance first saw action only after the fall of communism, bombing the Bosnian Serbs in 1994 and 1995 and again bombing Yugoslavia in 1999. Britain and France undertook unilateral military missions in former African colonies, and for the first time since 1945 Germany and Japan sent troops overseas on active duty. The rationale and justification for this activism, however, were necessarily different from the past.

This book is about how the media have interpreted conflict and international intervention in the years after the Cold War. By comparing press coverage of a number of different wars and crises, it seeks to establish which have been the dominant themes in explaining the post-Cold War international order and to discover how far the patterns established prior to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks have subsequently changed. Throughout, the key concern is with the legitimacy of Western intervention: the aim is to investigate the extent to which Western military action is represented in news reporting as justifiable and necessary. For journalists, charged with writing the first draft of history without benefit of hindsight, the work of interpretation and analysis must be direct and instantaneous. Yet reporters do not work in a vacuum: their writing will be influenced by the stock of ideas circulating in the culture in which they are working, particularly those which are taken up and promulgated by powerful sources. Below we first outline a number of key debates which have been influential in shaping how the post-Cold War world has been understood, before going on to examine the role played by the news media.

Explaining post-Cold War conflicts and interventions

Although the threat of nuclear war has receded, the post-Cold War world has not been peaceful. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), there were 57 different major armed conflicts in 45 different locations around the globe between 1990 and 2001. In any one year, there were on average around 27 ongoing major armed conflicts (SIPRI 2000: 17; SIPRI 2001: 66).[1] Both the dynamics of these conflicts and the Western response to them seemed to call for new explanations, but such explanations have been controversial, not least because how conflicts are understood would seem to have a bearing on how governments might react to them. As we shall see, much discussion of media coverage of recent crises has centred on whether the 'wrong' interpretation has sometimes inhibited an effective response.

Culture and anarchy

One of the most common ideas about post-Cold War conflicts is that the collapse of communism unleashed pent-up tensions. As the 1992 *SIPRI Yearbook* put it:

> The end of the Cold War … removed various restraints exercised over parties to ethnic conflicts during the Cold War.… The conflict in Yugoslavia followed the end of the Communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe. It brought to light old and unresolved animosities between, in particular, Serbs and Croats. The Communist regime had kept these animosities under control through repression. (SIPRI 1992: 420)

In this scenario, 'old animosities' based on ethnic or national identity had been simmering away under the surface only to burst forth once the restraint of communist repression was removed. Two influential variations of this idea were developed by Samuel Huntington and Robert Kaplan.

Huntington argued that the post-Cold War world was riven by a 'clash of civilisations': the motor of conflict was not political ideology but deep-seated ethnic antagonism. Hence, for example, one of the civilisational 'fault lines' which, he argued, divided the world ran 'almost exactly along the line now separating Croatia and Slovenia from the rest of Yugoslavia' (Huntington 1993: 30). Huntington's argument was clearly an attempt to recast the Cold War division: he suggested that 'the Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology as the most significant dividing line in Europe'. Those on the wrong side, according to Huntington (1993: 30–1), are 'Orthodox and Muslim' peoples, who are 'much less likely to develop stable democratic political systems'. As Diana Johnstone (2000: 155) notes, 'an oddity of these "cultural divide" projections is that they find the abyss between Eastern and Western Christianity far deeper and more unbridgeable than the difference between Christianity and Islam'. In trying to find a replacement for the Soviet threat, Huntington lumped Muslims together with Serbs and Russians, since Islamic fundamentalism was already an established propaganda enemy of the West. Such quirks began to look even more odd when, in Bosnia and Kosovo, the dividing line appeared to be between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, and Nato's first ever military engagements were justified as being in defence of Muslims.

The second strand of explanation encountered no such problem, since in this perspective ethnicity itself was the source of conflict. Kaplan (1994) drew on Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis but developed it to describe a collapse of civilisation in 'places where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated', places constantly threatened by 'cultural and racial war', places populated by 'reprimitivized man', including the Balkans and much of Africa. Where Huntington's argument emphasised competing civilisations in attempting to explain the break-up of states such as Yugoslavia, Kaplan's focused on the breakdown of order in 'failed' states such as Somalia.

The implications of these approaches can diverge significantly when applied to particular circumstances. Huntington's thesis suggests that local, Westernised 'goodies' may be found and that the old East–West boundary can be redrawn, for example between Croatia and Serbia. Illustrating how this perspective could function as a reworking of the Cold War divide, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman argued that 'The struggle here is the same that has been going on in Eastern Europe for the past three years: democracy against communism', and then in the same breath also suggested that Serbs and Croats were 'not just different peoples but different civilisations' (*European*, 18 August 1991). Local leaders thus sought to use the idea of a cultural divide to their advantage, sometimes exaggerating or inventing linguistic and other cultural differences (Rieff 1995: 67–9). Critics have identified similar ideas in media coverage. Peter Brock (1993–94: 162–3), for example, notes how, in US reporting of Yugoslavia, terms such as 'Eastern', 'Byzantine' and 'Orthodox' were often used pejoratively, to contrast Serbs with 'Westernised' Croats.

Kaplan's approach is less discriminating, tending to see entire regions as outside the civilisational fold. In this view, the resurgence of old antagonisms which had been held in check by the Cold War leads to a disintegration of order and a reversion to a more primitive condition. Military historian John Keegan (1993: xi), for example, argued that:

> The horrors of the war in Yugoslavia, as incomprehensible as they are revolting to the civilised mind, defy explanation in conventional military terms. The pattern of local hatreds they reveal are unfamiliar to anyone but the professional anthropologists who take the warfare of tribal and marginal peoples as their subject of study.… Most intelligent newspaper readers … will be struck by the parallels to be drawn with the behaviour of pre-state peoples.

Here, civilisation excludes everyone in the Balkans, since all are party to premodern, 'tribal' conflicts: rather than looking for local 'goodies and baddies', all sides are tarred with the brush of tribalism, in contrast to the modernity of the West. This approach also informed media reporting. During the Kosovo war, for example, one journalist recalled visiting Yugoslavia in the 1970s, when he had 'felt there was something intractably wild and backward about the people in these parts'. Of the present, he said:

> Here in the Balkans, although there is a veneer of civilised behaviour, the appearance of prosperity and the suggestion of a future, there is truly only history. Nothing else matters. Just history, hatred and ruin. (*Sunday Telegraph*, 4 April 1999)

The invocation of 'history', in this perspective, is not really about seeking historical explanations. Instead, it works as a coded suggestion that the region is beyond the pale of modernity and civilisation.

It is not difficult to see the appeal of these frameworks. Both offer new ways to make sense of the world, which involve a comforting sense of Western superiority. Although it has been subjected to much criticism, Huntington's view in particular has continued to be influential, attracting renewed interest after 9/11, when the concept of a 'clash of civilisations' seemed to describe the confrontation between the West and Islam. At least as important, however, has been the critique of such 'ethnic' explanations, and the elaboration of alternative accounts which view conflicts in terms of political violence and genocide.

Politics and morality

A major objection to explanatory frameworks which rest on the idea of 'ethnicity' is that the concept tends to be used in an essentialist way. In principle, 'ethnicity' is quite different from the notion of natural difference entailed in the concept of 'race'. As a matter of culture rather than biology, 'ethnicity' implies that identity and difference are socially constituted and susceptible to change. In use, however, the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are often confused or used interchangeably, in a way that implicitly understands 'ethnic' differences as fixed and innate. As Michael Ignatieff (1998: 56) notes, 'Ethnicity is sometimes described as if it were skin, a fate that cannot be changed'. Instead, he emphasises the 'plasticity' of identity. As against what he characterises as Huntington's notion of an 'eruption of ancient historical rivalries and antagonisms', Ignatieff (1998: 58) argues that, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, professed differences of religion and culture were inauthentic and shallow, even fraudulent. The conflict may have been 'about' ethnic identity but, rather than treating ethnicity as a given which causes conflict, Ignatieff suggests that an exclusivist politics of identity was deliberately encouraged and manipulated by local political leaders and the media.

This is a telling critique of 'ethnic' explanations. As noted above, adopting the framework of 'ethnic conflict' is really a refusal of explanation: the tendency is to down-play or ignore historical and political factors, except insofar as these are located in the distant past, and to suggest instead that conflict is somehow inevitable and incomprehensible. However, the critique is not an innocent one: it is tied to an argument about the necessity for the West to adopt a particular policy – that of 'ethical' intervention. Discussing Kaplan's ideas, Ignatieff (1998: 98) complains that portraying the world as anarchic discourages the West from intervening: 'If we could see a pattern in the chaos, or a chance of bringing some order here or there, the rationale for intervention and long-term ethical engagement would become plausible again'. Similarly, Mary Kaldor (1999: 147) rejects the 'essentialist assumptions about culture' shared by Huntington and Kaplan, but this is more than simply an analytical point. Her objection to their arguments is that they 'cannot envisage alternative forms of authority at a global level': Huntington remains wedded to what she sees as an outdated model of state-centric governance, while Kaplan's analysis implies helplessness before the rising tide of chaos. In contrast, Kaldor (1999: 124–5) advocates a system of 'cosmopolitan law-enforcement', whereby the international community would intervene to uphold 'international humanitarian and human rights law'.

The discussion of how to explain conflict is also a debate about how the West should respond. In David Keen's words: 'In so far as the causes of wars … remain poorly understood, it may be relatively easy for some analysts … to insist that a proper response is an isolationist one' (Keen 1999: 82). US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, for example, seemed close to Huntington's views when he argued in February 1993 that:

> The death of President Tito and the end of communist domination of the former Yugoslavia raised the lid on the cauldron of ancient hatreds. This is a land where at least three religions and a half-dozen ethnic groups have vied across the centuries. (Quoted in Allen and Seaton 1999: 1)

Kaplan's ideas are thought to have influenced US policy directly: his 1993 book, *Balkan Ghosts*, is 'credited with dissuading the Clinton administration from its initial interventionist line in Bosnia' (Allen 1999: 27). It seems logical that a view of post-Cold War conflicts as intractable 'ethnic wars' could act as an argument for non-involvement, or as an excuse when attempted interventions fail. Yet not all analysts make a connection between 'ethnic' explanations and Western isolationism. David Callahan (1997: 17), for example, argues that an upsurge of ethnic conflict since the end of the Cold War is a reason for greater activism, and suggests that 'Responding to ethnic conflict must be part of a broader strategy for reinvigorating US internationalism'. And despite having taken the view that conflict in Yugoslavia was caused by incomprehensible tribalism, Keegan nevertheless declared that Nato action in Kosovo was 'a victory for that New World Order which, proclaimed by George Bush in the aftermath of the Gulf war, has been so derided since' (quoted in Chomsky 1999: 120).

Furthermore, the argument that there is a connection between an inadequate explanation and a particular policy orientation on the part of Western governments could be turned around: the preference for intervention and 'ethical engagement' might be linked to a tendency to explain conflicts in equally simplistic, good-versus-evil terms. Kaldor (1999: 117–18), for instance, contends that 'Those who argued that [Bosnia] was a civil war were against intervention', asserting instead that 'This was a war of ethnic cleansing and genocide'. In this view of the Bosnian war, in which an analogy is drawn with the Nazi Holocaust, it is possible to identify clear villains and victims for whom the Western powers can intervene, to punish or protect. To explain a conflict as the product of 'ethnic hatred' implicitly treats all sides as equally guilty, but the concern of many commentators has been to suggest that one side is more to blame, or even exclusively to blame. This perspective also involves a selective and distorted understanding. While Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic was routinely condemned as an ultra-nationalist, for example, comparatively little attention was given to the political doctrines of Croatia's President Tudjman or Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegovic, both of whom had espoused an exclusivist nationalism prior to the conflict.

Ultimately, there may be less of a distinction than is usually assumed between a view of post-Cold War conflicts as a 'clash of civilisations' or an expression of 'anarchy' and an approach which instead divides the world between human rights abusers and victims. As Ignatieff (2000: 213) observes:

> While the language of the nation is particularistic – dividing human beings into us and them – human rights is universal. In theory, it will not lend itself to dividing human beings into higher and lower, superior and inferior, civilized and barbarian. Yet something very like a distinction between superior and inferior has been at work in the demonization of human rights violators.

While some analysts explain the superiority of the West in the vocabulary of 'ethnicity' and 'civilisation', the alternative framework of *moral* superiority produces similar results.

Ethical intervention and its critics

President George Bush Snr's proclamation of a 'New World Order' at the time of the 1991 Gulf war soon began to look over-optimistic. Yet the assumption persisted that the West was now in a stronger position to bring order to a chaotic world. The ending of the Cold War was said to have given the UN Security Council a new lease of life, since it was no longer hamstrung by the Soviet veto. As Mark Curtis (1998: 174–6) has shown, the idea that UN efficacy was blocked by the Soviet veto was a myth. Nevertheless, the fact that Western strategy was not now constrained by the need to counter the Soviet threat appeared to allow the possibility of a more principled foreign policy: no longer would it be necessary to support unsavoury regimes or to overlook human rights abuses because of the demands of Cold War *realpolitik*. Following the Gulf war, in April 1991 the US and its allies intervened again in Iraq to set up 'safe havens' for Kurds and other minorities. This was the first of a series of humanitarian interventions which – as Western military forces were sent to deliver food to the starving in Somalia, to protect aid and keep the peace in Bosnia, and to 'restore democracy' in Haiti – seemed to confirm the idea that foreign policy was increasingly driven by ethical and humanitarian concerns.

While mainstream assessments of the end of the Cold War have tended to see it as the start of a new era, however, radical critics have instead emphasised continuity, and have suggested that both the Cold War and the period since have basically been 'business as usual' for the major Western powers. John Pilger, for example, describes the post-Cold War era as a 'New Cold War', and writes of 'the unchanging nature of the 500-year Western imperial crusade' (1999: 38, 21). Pilger has also described the post-9/11 period as the 'Colder War', arguing that 'The parallels are striking' between the Cold War and the war on terrorism (*Daily Mirror*, 29 January 2002). Similarly, Noam Chomsky (1990) has argued that, for the US, the Cold War was 'largely a war against the third world, and a mechanism for retaining a degree of influence over its industrial rivals and, crucially, a mode of domestic social organisation. And nothing has changed in that respect. So the Cold War hasn't ended.' The sug-gestion of continuity is a useful corrective to official proclamations of a brave New World Order, but much radical criticism is open to the objection that it understates what has changed since 1989.

Of course, Great Power interference in weaker states, sometimes rhetorically justified in 'ethical' terms, is hardly a new phenomenon. Yet the 'ethical' interventions of the 1990s did represent something different from the Cold War era. Under the post-1945 UN system, the governing principle in international affairs, at least formally, was one of sovereign equality. The principle of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states meant that external intervention was widely understood as illegitimate, and when Western powers, chiefly the US, did intervene they tended to do so indirectly, through covert action or via proxy forces (Keeble 1997: 15–18). As David Chandler (2002) argues, a significant change since 1989 has been the erosion of the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference. From the 1991 Kurdish crisis onwards, the argument has been that sovereignty must not be a barrier to effective intervention to uphold human rights or humanitarian principles. As Javier Perez de Cuellar put it in 1991, when UN Secretary-General:

> We are clearly witnessing what is probably an irresistible shift in public attitudes toward the belief that the defense of the oppressed in the name of morality should prevail over frontiers and legal documents. (Quoted in Rieff 1999: 1)

Over the course of the 1990s, a growing consensus held that, in the words of the sometime French government minister and founder of Médecins Sans

Frontières Bernard Kouchner, 'a new morality can be codified in the "right to intervention" against abuses of national sovereignty' (*Los Angeles Times*, 18 October 1999).

In some respects, the most vociferous critics of actual policies have been the supporters of the ideal of ethical intervention. One frequent criticism is that concern to maintain domestic political support makes Western governments timid about sending their troops into action (Ignatieff 2000: 213–15; Shawcross 2000: 374). A second, related criticism is that this half-hearted commitment, coupled with what advocates of intervention view as an outmoded realist concern with stability and state sovereignty on the part of Western political leaders, has led to an over-emphasis on traditional ideas of neutrality. Rather than intervening to punish abusers and protect victims, humanitarian action has been ineffective, it is argued, because Western forces have been deployed as neutral peacekeepers or aid-givers. According to Kaldor (1999: 118), for instance, a position of neutrality is morally indefensible: 'The failure to protect the victims is a kind of tacit intervention on the side of those who are inflicting humanitarian or human rights abuses'. Similarly, Alex de Waal (1997: 189) argues that: 'international military intervention in Somalia and Bosnia was primarily aimed at protecting aid givers, rather than the populace in the area'. His main target of criticism is the international community's failure to intervene to prevent or halt genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The mistake of the 'humanitarian international', he argues, was 'to introduce and elevate the prin-ciple of neutrality' (1997: 192), by calling for a ceasefire and humanitarian access instead of forceful intervention.

Where proponents of ethical intervention tend to see self-interest as limiting the West's willingness to intervene consistently, radical critics have dismissed the claim that humanitarianism and human rights have become central to Western foreign policy as an ideological cover for the pursuit of hidden interests. Uwe-Jens Heuer and Gregor Schirmer (1998), for example, denounce 'human rights imperialism' on the grounds that, in many cases, 'the altruism of the intervening parties was a mere secondary phenomenon to crude self-interested efforts toward the expansion of political and military power, spheres of economic influence, and the like'. Yet it has not been easy for critics to make a convincing case about how interventions in, say, Somalia or Kosovo have furthered the 'crude self-interest' of Western powers. Furthermore, the radical critique is not always as sweeping as it first appears. One line of argument, for example, contrasts the claims made for cases of 'ethical' intervention with comparable cases where the West has not intervened or has actively supported or colluded in abuses (Chomsky 1999, 2000a, 2000b). Yet, while it is not intended as such, this could be taken as an argument for more intervention. Having held up the example of East Timor as one of the places where self-interest prevented Western states from making good on their proclaimed commitment to human rights, radical critics were somewhat wrong-footed when the West did intervene to establish a UN protectorate there in 1999. The underlying assumption of most criticism is that a real commitment to upholding human rights would be desirable, so the possibility of genuinely 'ethical' interventionism is kept open. Despite sharply criticising the role of the West in escalating conflict in former Yugoslavia, for example, Pilger (1993) argued that further intervention was necessary in the form of tightening sanctions against Serbia, extending sanctions to Croatia, arming the Bosnian Muslims, making better use of UN troops, and drawing up a new peace treaty.

Chandler's critique of the erosion of sovereign equality, in contrast, implies that there can be nothing progressive about ethical interventionism, since there is a contradiction between the promotion of human rights, and support for democracy and self-determination. From the perspective of the international community's 'right to intervene', the sovereignty of weaker states becomes conditional on their compliance with 'human rights norms': if a state is judged to be violating these norms the 'international community' has a responsibility to intervene. 'Conditional' sovereignty, of course, is by definition not sovereignty, since it is dependent on the approval of a higher authority. Similarly, human 'rights' are not really rights as traditionally understood. As Chandler (2002: 109) notes, for democratic rights theorists, 'If a right could not be protected, or exercised, by its bearers then it could no longer be a right, an expression of self-government'. Human rights, in contrast, depend not on autonomous self-governing subjects, but on external enforcement in support of victims who cannot exercise those 'rights' on their own behalf. Like 'conditional sovereignty', human rights are in the gift of the powerful. A view of (non-Western) sovereignty as a 'tyrant's charter' and of (non-Western) people as helpless victims implies an outlook which is just as elitist as that which sees the non-Western world as uncivilised and barbaric.

War on terrorism and the problem of legitimacy

Advocacy of 'ethical' interventionism in the 1990s rested on the assumption that 'might', in the form of military action by the most powerful states, broadly coincided with 'right', in that force was used to uphold humanitarian and human rights principles (Chandler 2004). In the war on terrorism, however, this assumption has looked increasingly questionable. Even supporters of American power acknowledge that it is 'suffering a crisis of international legitimacy' (Kagan 2004: 108). Almost immediately after taking office in 2000, George W. Bush's administration was accused of adopting an unacceptably unilateralist foreign policy stance, failing to respect international agreements on climate change and nuclear missiles, for instance. A particularly pertinent example is America's insistence on exemption from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) established on 1 July 2002. America's refusal to acknowledge any higher authority than its own national sovereignty threatened to expose the notion of an international community based on norms and values as a fiction. The problem came to a head in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when the US declared its intention to act regardless of whether it gained UN approval.

At first glance, the contrast between the liberal consensus in favour of humanitarian intervention and the division and controversy surrounding the invasion of Iraq could not be greater. Yet aspects of 'war on terror' interventions which have attracted criticism were pioneered in the 'ethical' 1990s. Richard Falk contrasts the 'golden age' of humanitarian intervention with the post-9/11 era, complaining that:

> the Bush Administration has been doing its best to wreck world order as it had been evolving, and … part of the wreckage is the abandonment of legal restraints on the use of international force, the heart and soul of the UN Charter.[2]

Yet the advocates of 'human rights intervention' themselves undermined the UN system by putting the moral duty to intervene above the principle of sovereign equality. Voicing the complaint of ethical interventionists throughout Falk's 'golden age', Ignatieff argues that upholding sovereign equality means 'defending tyranny and terror' (*New York Times*, 7 September 2003). This is what led many, including Falk himself, to approve the Kosovo bombing in 1999 as illegal but moral (see Chapter 5). Similarly, there were many objections to the Bush administration's willingness to use pre-emptive force, yet this idea had been advocated as part of the West's 'right to intervene' for humanitarian or human rights reasons. Kouchner, for example, argued after the Kosovo conflict that it was 'necessary to take the further step of using the right to intervention as a preventive measure to stop wars before they start and to stop murderers before they kill' *(Los Angeles Times*, 18 October 1999).

Many liberal supporters of humanitarianism and human rights, however, disliked the Bush administration, and sought to distinguish between the war on terrorism and the sort of 'moral' intervention they favour. Geoffrey Robertson, for example, whose 1999 book *Crimes Against Humanity* forcefully made the case for international intervention against human rights abuses, criticised US treatment of detainees from Afghanistan (*Independent*, 15 January 2002) and argued that the West was wrong to go to war with Iraq (*Observer*, 8 September 2002). Even Robin Cook, a key architect of Labour's 'ethical foreign policy' and Britain's hawkish Foreign Secretary during the Kosovo conflict, emerged as the 'standard-bearer of the Labour "doves"' over Iraq (*Mail*, 16 August 2002). Despite their attacks on Anglo-American policy, these critics were not against intervention as such. Cook's resignation from government in March 2003, for example, was prompted by the decision of the British and American governments to abandon their pursuit of a second UN resolution authorising force against Iraq, implying that he would have supported military action with such a mandate. Similarly, Robertson advocated using the framework of international human rights law in the war on terrorism and advised that, instead of using self-defence as justification for attacking Afghanistan, 'A more modern and more permissive legal justification for an armed response is provided by the emerging human rights rule that requires international action to prevent and to punish "crimes against humanity"' (*Independent*, 26 September 2001). Self-defence in Afghanistan or imperial ambition in Iraq seemed old-fashioned and illegitimate justifications for war, out of step with the liberal humanitarian consensus.

The question of how conflicts and threats, and the global responses to them, are understood and explained is of some importance, given that the legal and political framework of international relations often seems uncertain in the post-Cold War era. This uncertainty is particularly marked in the case of humanitarian or human rights intervention, where establishing the nature of conflicts and the legitimacy of international responses becomes a crucial but fluid process, in which, as the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) observed, 'media coverage … is a new element in determining military as well as political strategies' (ICISS 2001: 64). The Independent International Commission on Kosovo (IICK) described its proposals for guiding future intervention as 'situated in a gray zone of ambiguity between an extension of international law and a proposal for an international moral consensus', and concluded that 'this gray zone goes beyond strict ideas of *legality* to incorporate more flexible views of *legitimacy*' (IICK 2000: 164). Similarly, the ICISS (2001: 11, 63–4) suggested that a key objective of international actors must be 'to establish the legitimacy of military intervention when necessary', and highlighted the role of the news media in this process. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks, these issues have become more urgent, but the picture remains unclear. Some critics have continued to pursue themes which became prominent in discussion of post-1989 conflicts, such as imperialism, or the 'clash of civilisations' between the West and Islam (Ali 2002; Mahajan 2002). Yet it is evident that other themes, of international terrorism and weapons proliferation, have assumed new prominence, while humanitarian and human rights issues have arguably been neglected (Weiss et al. 2004) or compromised (Rieff 2002). It is also clear from the public debate surrounding the conflict with Iraq in 2003 that the legitimacy of intervention remains a crucial and controversial issue.

The role of the media

The role of the media in war and conflict has long been a topic of interest for academic researchers and others, with the most prominent issue being propaganda. However, propaganda has not been the main focus in studies of post-Cold War conflicts and interventions – at least as regards the Western media – with the exception of the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars and the partial exception of the Kosovo conflict. This is partly because, in many cases, the Western military has either not intervened directly or has been engaged in non-warlike operations, and partly because intervention has usually been per-ceived as desirable. Few studies of the post-1989 period have dealt directly with media content or examined themes and patterns of reporting across different conflicts. Where a comparative approach has been taken, attention has largely centred on other issues, such as: the place of recent conflicts in the history of war correspondence (Carruthers 2000; McLaughlin 2002); the relationships between the media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in humanitarian emergencies (Giradet 1995; Rotberg and Weiss 1996); or the effects of media coverage on government decision-making (Mermin 1999; Robinson 2002). Nevertheless, many of the issues examined above concerning how conflicts and interventions should be understood have also been raised in debates about the media.

The CNN effect

The idea developed in the early 1990s that Western foreign policy was being influenced by media coverage of international events: the so-called 'CNN effect'. Former US Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, for instance, wrote in 1992 that 'policies seem increasingly subject, especially in democracies, to the images flickering across the television screen', pointing to the Kurdish refugee crisis and Somalia as examples (quoted in Livingston 1997: 1). The attraction of the idea, subsequently elaborated and explored in a number of studies (Gowing 1994, 1996; Neuman 1996; Hudson and Stanier 1997; Strobel 1997), had much to do with the fact that Western foreign policy seemed difficult to explain in terms of conventional geo-strategic interests. Since decisions often appeared arbitrary, the notion of powerful but fickle media seemed to offer a plausible explanation for the selective attention paid to some crises rather than others. For policy-makers, the thought that the media were driving foreign policy was a disturbing one, as it implied a loss of elite control. For others, however, it seemed much more positive: the media were able, it was argued, to facilitate and promote humanitarian action (Giradet 1995; Minear et al. 1996; Rotberg and Weiss 1996; Shaw 1996).

Academic research into the CNN effect has generally warned against overestimating the power and influence of the media: studies have shown that in Somalia and other cases news coverage followed interest on the part of political leaders rather than leading it (Livingston and Eachus 1995; Livingston 1997; Mermin 1999). The most sustained and systematic study is Piers Robinson's *The CNN Effect* (2002), which suggests that there may be some media influence but only under specific circumstances: where policy is uncertain and where coverage is both supportive of Western policy and sympathetic to the victims of war. The present study is not concerned with the relationship between media reporting and foreign policy, except at the level of ideas. There is no attempt to assess the extent of media influence on particular decisions: rather, our interest is in the extent to which the ways that journalists explain conflicts and interventions follow the official script, and how far they help to write it. We have already seen an example of this in the portrayal of Saddam as the 'new Hitler', mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. As William Dorman and Steven Livingston (1994: 70) show, the comparison to Hitler actually originated with journalists, who used it before Saddam had invaded Kuwait, in reference to his bellicose attitude toward Israel. Just before the invasion, politicians began drawing the same analogy, and afterwards, once President Bush had made the comparison, it pervaded media reports as greater numbers of journalists took up and elaborated the idea.

Robinson's work is of particular interest because, unlike many other commentators on the CNN effect, he methodically examines the content of news reports, attempting to measure how far coverage adopts either 'empathy' or 'distance' framing in relation to victims, and the extent to which it presents Western policy as likely to succeed. This again raises the issue of the relationship between explanations of crisis and prescriptions for action: only the 'right' sort of reporting has the potential to encourage intervention. Furthermore, the idea of the CNN effect took a dramatic twist early on, when it seemed that graphic media reports of US casualties in October 1993 led to America's subsequent withdrawal from Somalia. This led many to conclude that adverse coverage of intervention could also have what Livingston (1997: 2) calls an 'impediment effect'. Following the decision to pull out of Somalia, the Clinton administration issued a presidential directive setting limits and conditions on any future military deployments, apparently demonstrating the way that fear of losing political support can make leaders reluctant to intervene. The widely publicised failure in Somalia is held to have played a large part in America's decision not to intervene in Rwanda the following year (Livingston and Eachus 2000). The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), an international study commissioned by the UN, also concluded that 'inadequate and inaccurate reporting by international media' had 'contributed to international indifference and inaction' (JEEAR 1996: study II, section 4.3). For those – including journalists – who wished to promote intervention, these developments accentuated the importance of explaining crises in such a way as to counter elite reluctance to pursue ethical policies.

Explanation and advocacy

Whether or not media coverage actually did pressure governments to adopt policies of 'humanitarian intervention' in the 1990s, it is certainly the case that many journalists began to understand their role in these terms. In Britain, the best-known proponent of this approach is the former BBC correspondent Martin Bell, who coined the phrase 'the journalism of attachment' to describe a style of journalism which 'cares as well as knows', and which 'will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor'. Bell rejected the 'dispassionate practices of the past', confessing that he was 'no longer sure what "objective" means' (Bell 1998: 16–18). In the US, a similar argument, in favour of 'advocacy journalism', is perhaps most prominently associated with CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour, who famously scolded President Clinton on live television in May 1994 for failing to articulate a tough policy on Bosnia (Ricchiardi 1996). Notwithstanding Bell's comments, the journalism of attachment does still entail some commitment to 'objectivity' in the sense of truthful, factually accurate reporting: what is rejected is moral neutrality. So, for example, Amanpour maintains that: 'In certain situations, the classic definition of objectivity can mean neutrality, and neutrality can mean you are an accomplice to all sorts of evil' (quoted in Ricchiardi 1996). This moral objection to 'neutral' journalism means that reporters feel compelled to take sides in the conflicts they cover. As Amanpour explains:

> Once you treat all sides the same in a case such as Bosnia, you are drawing a moral equivalence between victim and aggressor. And from here it is a short step to being neutral. And from there it's an even shorter step to becoming an accessory to all manners of evil. (Quoted in Hume 1997: 6)

This line of reasoning is reminiscent of Kaldor's argument that non-intervention is immoral. Journalists have argued that the neutrality of peacekeeping and traditional humanitarianism results at best in helplessness. BBC correspondent Fergal Keane (1995: 124, 186), for example, argues that UN troops in Rwanda 'had a mandate that turned them into little more than spectators to the slaughter', and suggests that the refugee camps which developed on Rwanda's borders in the wake of the mass killings of 1994 were a '"humanitarian haven" for the killers'. Similarly, Bell (1996: 135, 190) sympathises with UN troops in Bosnia, forced into the role of 'bystanders', and sardonically describes humanitarian aid as ensuring that victims 'should not be starving when they were shot'.

From this perspective, failing to report conflicts in the 'right' way is understood as complicity with 'evil'. Advocacy journalists have been highly critical of their fellow reporters for following the allegedly neutral agenda of Western governments. Ed Vulliamy (1999), who reported from Yugoslavia for the *Guardian*, contends that the 'neutrality' of the 'international community' has been 'nowhere more evident than in the media'. Similarly, the BBC's Allan Little (2001) describes how in the early 1990s he was 'bewildered' by what seemed to be the general consensus about Bosnia:

> That the Balkan tribes had been killing each other for centuries and that there was nothing that could be done. It was nobody's fault. It was just, somehow, the nature of the region. It was a lie that Western governments at that time liked. It got the Western world off the hook. When I and others argued that you could not blame all sides equally, the moral implications were that the world should – as it later did – take sides. We were denounced – derided even – by government ministers as laptop bombardiers.

Reporters have described a similar consensus about Rwanda. According to Keane (1995: 6–8):

> The mass of early reporting of the Rwandan killings conveyed the sense that the genocide was the result of some innate inter-ethnic loathing that had erupted into irrational violence.… several of the world's leading newspapers … bought the line, in the initial stages, that the killings were a straightforward 'tribal war'.

Advocacy journalists, in contrast, sought to identify clear human rights villains and victims, to explain conflicts in unambiguous moral terms and to encourage Western military intervention by bringing public pressure to bear through media reports.

Assessing the extent to which news coverage has indeed adopted an 'ethnic' or 'tribal' framework will be an important issue for this study. As we saw earlier, there is evidence of journalists portraying the break-up of Yugoslavia in terms of ancient 'ethnic' divisions. However, the issue is not clear-cut. Melissa Wall's comparative study of coverage of Bosnia and Rwanda in US news magazines, for example, found that, although in both cases the people of the region concerned were depicted as 'inferior to the more "advanced" civilizations of the West' (Wall 1997: 422), Rwanda was reported in terms of incomprehensible 'tribal' violence, while the conflict in Bosnia was explained in terms of logical, political and historical motivations. A similar study of US press coverage by Garth Myers et al. found that events in Bosnia were reported in terms of military strategy and tactics much more than those in Rwanda, and that, although both crises were understood in terms of 'ethnicity', in the case of Rwanda violence was also described as 'tribal', while that in Bosnia almost never was (Myers et al. 1996: 33). Both studies suggest that Rwanda was depicted as more 'distant' and different. Yet the terms in which these two studies explain the less distant representation of Bosnia – a greater emphasis on military strategy, political decisions and history – are the same as those which have led other critics to conclude that the reporting of Bosnia was also 'distancing'. Alison Preston (1996: 112, 115), for example, notes the existence of 'two co-existent narrative templates … in the coverage, based around the motifs of either distance or proximity'. The first was associated with 'an emphasis on the complicated or difficult', for example in coverage of political and diplomatic developments; the second accentuated stories of personal suffering. She concludes that 'the motif of "complication" dominated discourse about Bosnia'. It would appear that a style of reporting which seems 'distancing' in one instance may look quite different when compared with coverage of another conflict.

Referring to the journalism of attachment, Preston (1996: 113) notes that 'The wish to highlight emotional proximity is intrinsically bound to a wish to proselytise'. Some reporters 'deliberately emphasised the emotional in their reports in order to signal the extent of their commitment, and their belief that detachment, or distance, should not be inserted'. Critics have charged, however, that, in the process of encouraging empathy, advocacy journalists have been guilty of over-simplification. With regard to Bosnia, for example, *Washington Post* journalist Mary Battiata said that: 'There was only one story – a war of aggression against a largely defenseless, multi-ethnic population. It was very simple.' Similarly, for Amanpour: 'sometimes in life, there are clear examples of black and white … I think during the three-and-a-half-year war in Bosnia, there was a clear aggressor and clear victim' (quoted in Ricchiardi 1996). Commitment to a 'simple', 'black and white' view of a conflict may produce just as distorted a picture as the mystified notion of 'ethnic' or 'tribal' warfare.

Controversy and critique after 9/11

The vocabulary of 'good versus evil' which appealed to liberal advocates of ethical intervention in the 1990s began to seem crude and dangerous in the context of the war on terrorism. George W. Bush's declaration of war on 'evildoers', his