

Ride On, Cowboy

The world can't wait for the U.N.

July 11, 2006

By Joseph Loconte & Nile Gardiner

The ongoing crisis in Sudan has put many critics of U.S. foreign policy — particularly those who lament the Bush administration's "cowboy diplomacy" — in an untenable position. Recall that two years ago the United Nations concluded that "massive human rights violations" were being committed by the Sudanese government and its proxy militia against civilians in Darfur. What have two years of U.N. diplomacy and multilateralism accomplished for the people of Sudan?

The U.N. Security Council, unable to agree on sanctions, has passed several toothless resolutions. The Human Rights Commission, unwilling to criticize the Sudanese government, opted instead to renew Sudan's seat for another three-year term. African Union "peacekeepers" were deployed, but with no authority and too few troops to stop the killing. Just as the United States declared that genocide was under way, a U.N. reform panel met to discuss topics such as "Strengthening United Nations Capacity for Crisis Management." Even now, the government in Khartoum refuses to allow U.N. peacekeepers to enter the country: Earlier this month at a meeting of African leaders in Gambia, Sudan again rejected appeals to bring in a U.N. peacekeeping force of 15,000 troops, backed by NATO air support.

The end result of this standoff: At least 200,000 civilians have been killed and another 2.5 million displaced in the conflict. Government-backed militias continue to rape women and burn down entire villages. As Jan Egeland, U.N. undersecretary general, told the *New York Times*: "I think we're headed toward total chaos." Is this what the world is like when America fails to throw its weight around?

That's how many human-rights advocates, pundits, and public intellectuals seem to be arguing these days. At the recent "Save Darfur" rally in Washington, D.C., representatives from organizations such as Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group, and the National Council of Churches mostly ignored the U.N. Security Council. They know the blue helmets will not come to the rescue. Rather, the focus of their rage is the U.S. and the Bush administration—for not pushing the U.N. hard enough to resolve the crisis.

Editors at the liberal *New Republic* apparently have had an epiphany: "It defies belief that people of goodwill would turn to the United Nations for effective action," they wrote in a recent issue devoted to Sudan. "All these proposals for ending the genocide in Darfur are really proposals to prevent the United States from ending it." *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, winner of a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on Darfur, says it's time to "drop any fantasy that the U.N. is going to save the day as a genocide unfolds."

Yet the same establishment voices, angered by America's war on terrorism, have doggedly defended the U.N. as a check on American power. They've denounced the Bush White House for its "neocolonialism," "imperial hubris," and its "cowboy" approach to confronting threats to international security. Now they want the cowboy to ride into Darfur on a helicopter gunship (with U.N. approval, of course).

This is the corrosive logic of a political dogma: an almost religious devotion to a U.N. solution to human-rights abuses, despite the institution's repeated and spectacular failures. Under this doctrine, the Security Council alone retains credibility to confront genocidal regimes. The 15-nation body—a gaggle of dictatorships, theocracies, and democracies—is somehow expected to disown powerful economic and political interests to defend society's weakest members.

Behind this political creed lies a powerful illusion about human nature and human societies. It's the notion that skilled diplomats, armed with sweet reason, can tame the most barbaric of regimes.

The Judeo-Christian moral tradition, by contrast, holds no such illusion about the ambiguities of political life. The wise statesman, operating with a belief in the doctrine of original sin, realizes that even democratic governments will struggle to put moral principle above narrow self interest. "Even if every Athenian citizen had been a Socrates," quipped James Madison, "every Athenian assembly would have been a mob." This is moral realism, a way to avoid both cynicism and utopianism in international politics.

Under this view, the authority to intervene militarily to stop mass murder belongs not to U.N. elites, but to governments that share a set of democratic ideals. We need a serious debate about the formation of an alliance of democracies, working through NATO, which can act to prevent genocide when the United Nations refuses to act. Except for self defense, the U.N. Charter disallows military action without Security Council approval. Yet the architects of that document, the generation that survived the fires of the holocaust, could hardly have intended to create an international legalism to enable another one.

The many victims in Sudan — the women and children sleeping tonight in refugee camps, wondering if they'll be alive in the morning—have nothing to lose from such a venture, and everything to gain.

— Joseph Loconte is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a commentator for National Public Radio. Nile Gardiner is a fellow at the Heritage Foundation. Both served as experts on the Congressional Task Force on the United Nations.