

MARCH 4

Assuming the right to intervene

If Mark Twain were living now instead of a century ago – when he declared himself “an anti-imperialist” and proclaimed that “I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land” – the famous writer’s views would exist well outside the frame of today’s mainstream news media.

In the current era, it’s rare for much ink or air time to challenge the right of the U.S. government to directly intervene in other countries. Instead, the featured arguments are about whether – or how – it is wise to do so in a particular instance.

It’s not just a matter of American boots on the ground and bombs from the sky. Much more common than the range of overt violence from U.S. military actions is the process of deepening poverty from economic intervention. Outside the media glare, Washington’s routine policies involve pulling financial levers to penalize nations that have leaders who displease the world’s only superpower.

In Haiti, abominable poverty worsened during the first years of the 21st century while Uncle Sam blocked desperately needed assistance. A former leading zealot for economic shock therapy, Jeffrey Sachs, was insightful when he wrote in the March 1 edition of the *Financial Times*: “The crisis in Haiti is another case of brazen U.S. manipulation of a small, impoverished country with the truth unexplored by journalists.” Among the unilluminated realities: For years, the Bush administration has prevented aid from getting to one of the poorest nations on the planet.

“The U.S. maintained its aid freeze, and the opposition (in Haiti) maintained a veto over international aid,” wrote Sachs, now an economics professor at Columbia University. “Cut off from bilateral and multilateral financing, Haiti’s economy went into a tailspin.” With very little U.S. press coverage of such economic matters – and, likewise, scant attention to the collusion between the Bush administration and disreputable opponents of the Aristide regime – media acceptance of the current U.S. military intervention in Haiti was predictable.

Prominent editorial carping hardly makes up for spun-out news coverage. And in this case, the day after the coup that U.S. media typically refuse to call a coup, the New York

MEDIABEAT 2004 | NORMAN SOLOMON

Times ran a lead editorial about Haiti on March 1 that mostly let the Bush regime off the hook with a faint reproach.

The Bush administration, the Times editorialized, was "too willing to ignore democratic legitimacy in order to allow the removal of a leader it disliked and distrusted." The editorial faulted "Mr. Bush's hesitation" and went on to say "it is deplorable that President Bush stood by" while men such as two convicted murderers and an accused cocaine trafficker "took over much of Haiti." The editorial's last sentence muted the critical tone, referring merely to "mishandling of this crisis." Even at its most vehement, the Times editorial accused the Bush administration of inaction ("ignore" ... "hesitation" ... "stood by" ... "mishandling"), as though the gist of the problem was a kind of inept passivity – rather than calculated mendacity in the service of an interventionist agenda.

Meanwhile, also on March 1, the Times front page supplied an official story in the guise of journalism. Failing to attribute a key anecdotal flourish to any source – while providing Washington's version of instantly historic events – the newspaper of record reported that Aristide "meekly asked the American ambassador in Haiti through an aide whether his resignation would help the country." In the next day's edition of the Times, the front-page story about Haiti included Aristide's contention that he'd been overthrown by the United States. The headline over that article: "Haitian Rebels Enter Capital; Aristide Bitter."

Bitter!

Underneath such news and commentary runs powerful deference to Washington policymakers, reinforcing interventionist prerogatives even when criticizing their implementation. A basic underlying assumption that pervades media coverage has been consistent – the right to intervene. Not the wisdom of intervening, but the ultimate right to do so. In Port-au-Prince, on March 3, a long-unemployed plumber named Raymond Beausejour made a profound comment to a New York Times reporter about the U.S. Marines patrolling the city: "The last time they came they didn't do much. This is not the kind of aid we need. They should help us build schools and clinics and to get jobs."

It's customary for news media to ignore Americans who unequivocally oppose U.S. military interventions in – to use Twain's phrase – "any other land." Journalists are inclined to dismiss such views as "isolationism." But the choice is not between iron-fist actions and economic blackmail on the one hand and self-absorbed indifference on the other. A truly humanitarian foreign policy, offering no-strings assistance like food and medicine on a massive scale, is an option that deserves to be part of the media discourse in the United States.

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