Episode 569: Is Humanitarian Intervention a Good Idea?

Guest: Laurie Calhoun

WOODS: We generate a lot of controversy when you and I talk, and last time we talked about just war theory, and boy, did we make some people angry. We said that just war theory has been a failure, and people were very, very unhappy with that, kind of along the lines of telling people — and I don't want to implicate you in this view, but my own view — that the Constitution has been a failure. People say, oh no, no, no. Why, Woods, you are being impertinent to say that. The problem is that people have interpreted it wrong. Okay, but if it can be so easily misinterpreted, then it ain't so good. If we're resting our liberties on people's interpretations, those interpretations are going to be tendentious, and it's not going to work out.

Whereas, as I was mentioning to you before we went on, chess has not been a failure. The rules of chess are set in stone. You don't have 12 different schools of thought on it. You don't have major challenges to it. You don't have people who say, well, I think you should be able to move the pieces according to whatever you think is best for the general welfare, and whatever's best for the general welfare winds up being whatever's good for the white player. You know, it doesn't work that way. People just obey the rules of chess, and they're constant and consistent. So I would not say chess has failed, but I would say these other things haven't worked out particularly well.

Before we get into our topic for today, is there anything you want to say on that subject that you feel was maybe unsaid or that might be a response to some of these critics? Let me give you a chance to do that.

CALHOUN: Sure. One thing I would say is that the burden of proof about killing I think lies with the person who is going to kill. So if you want to say that just war theory is a sound framework, the burden is on you to explain why that is the case. And I don't see where that comes from. I mean, we talked about this at length before.

And I also believe that the premises that were held by Augustine and Aquinas and the other fathers of just war theory are no longer valid in the modern world. I respect those thinkers very much. I think they were excellent intellectuals for their day. I actually believe that they might agree with me if they were alive today, given the changes in the world and the way warfare is carried out. So I don't think — I think some of the people were angry because they thought we were disrespecting these honorable thinkers from history, but I don't think that's necessarily the case. I think

that given — if I believed what those men believed, I might have agreed with them, but I don't believe what those men believed, and I don't believe that most modern people do.

So that's one thing I would say to hopefully respond to some of the anger. I also think that it's natural to be angry when someone steps forward and criticizes a framework which has dominated normative thought about war for centuries. It's a natural response. You yourself had that response when you first heard about my —

WOODS: Oh yeah, I wanted to throw it on the floor. I was so angry. I just couldn't believe — the nerve of some people, was the way I thought at that time.

CALHOUN: That's right.

WOODS: All right, let's talk about humanitarian intervention. As soon as you suggested this, without even reading your article I said yes, and then I read it, so we'll talk about it, and we're going to link to it at TomWoods.com/569. I wanted to talk about this, because this is of course probably the case of the hard cases. This is the issue that I think people who are inclined to be against war have to address. It's easy to say you shouldn't fight a war for oil or you shouldn't fight a war for this or that imperial advantage. But when there are people being killed under some terrible circumstances, it's much harder to make the case that we shouldn't do it, because you find yourself saying, well, you know, it could become worse if we get involved, and a lot of these arguments seem not that persuasive, so we have to face this head on.

Let's start from the very beginning. When we deal with humanitarian intervention, what are the different — basically I'm not sure there is a well thought out — if there is a book or a school of thought that just takes a flat out, opposing view. I mean, libertarians take an opposing view of it, but I don't see like a full-scale moral evaluation of why it's good to stay out, even when there are cases — you cite the Rwanda case as an example — of just horrifying human carnage. Whereas I can think of schools of thought that say you do need to intervene. Utilitarians might say that, for example. I can think of people who would say that whatever losses you and your people might suffer in trying to intervene are surely pale in comparison to the good that we might be able to bring to a terrible situation.

CALHOUN: Well, that's the line of the humanitarian interventionist. But the first point I would like to make is that the very expression "humanitarian intervention" is misleading, because it sounds as though what you want to do is intervene in a human manner. In reality, as it's been carried out so far in history, and it is a new development in the history of warfare, it means military bombing carried out on behalf of people who appear to be victimized.

So why don't we just call it humanitarian bombing? Well, that sounds like a contradiction in terms, because bombing harms the people under bombing. It terrorizes them even if they're not going to be killed, but it also can exacerbate an already bad situation, galvanizing the enemy soldiers to fight even more viciously than

they were fighting before, as it did in 1999, when more Kosovars were killed by Serbian soldiers after the NATO bombing had commenced than before.

So it's, as I said, a new development in history. There are people, such as Samantha Power, who call themselves humanitarian hawks, and in a way they're acknowledging that what they advocate is bombing, but it's new in that we're not defending war on the grounds that we need to protect ourselves, as you said, and so it's very seductive to liberals in particular. So many people who opposed the 1991 Gulf War because they thought, oh, you know, it's blood for oil, actually lined up behind Clinton to support the 1999 bombing of NATO.

WOODS: Yeah, let's talk about the Kosovo case for a minute. And for listeners, FYI, I have a chapter on the Kosovo matter in my *33 Questions* book, so I'll link to that also at TomWoods.com/569. But there was a case in which — well, first of all, Bill Clinton is president, so he's a Democrat, that made it easier for liberals to support that intervention. And oddly, there were some conservatives who were against it on the grounds that it wasn't part of our national interest. I mean, you do still have conservatives who talk that way. Even Sean Hannity to my recollection was against that intervention. I don't look for consistency in the thought of Sean Hannity, but I'm just saying that's an interesting point.

CALHOUN: Yes.

WOODS: But there were certainly — I would be willing to stake my reputation on the idea that John McCain favored it, because, can I even say the words, "John McCain opposed the bombing of X?" I don't think those words fit together. It's like oil and water. So there certainly were — and there were neoconservatives who favored that intervention. And in that case, you had, unlike Rwanda, where the reality was just appallingly bad, here the reality was bad, but it was grossly exaggerated by propaganda, and only afterward did we find out, oh, the situation was not nearly as bad and was much more complicated than we were led to believe, but now we've already destroyed all their infrastructure and we're on to the next thing now.

CALHOUN: That's right. In fact, in all of these cases, the scenarios are much more complex than they're painted to be. The calls for humanitarian intervention invariably involve context where it's really false and misleading to suggest that these are Manichaean battles between good and evil. But what happens is humanitarian interventionists and warmongers more generally play the Hitler card, and so then suddenly it seems like it's a battle between good and evil. So Slobodan Milošević is compared to Hitler; therefore, we have to save the people whom he is victimizing.

In reality, these conflicts are always a part of lengthy chronologies through which all sides have been victimizing all sides, and to pretend that time begins at the moment of the latest atrocity is to wrong the people previously wronged, who, albeit misguided in their tactics, are often acting in what they take to be just retribution. So it's very complicated. We could compare the case in Syria as well. Super complicated. I mean, that's basically the definition of a quagmire. Or in Libya, also.

WOODS: But in some cases — okay, but let's take the Rwanda case, because there you have just — because it's such a hard case. And you see it, by the way — did you see that movie, *Hotel Rwanda*? Did you see that movie?

CALHOUN: I did, yes.

WOODS: I mean, that's a very interesting movie. It's very interesting the way that hotel manager is basically trying to hang on to some semblance of normal, you know, human interaction while this horrifying situation is unfolding. But there was a case where, in that movie, the main character is holding out hope that there will be some international intervention that will put a stop to that. Couldn't people say to you, okay, you're a moral philosopher of war, and it's wonderful that we have people who think through the moral implications of all this stuff, but let's face squarely the fact that you had mass slaughter going on, and it seems highly unlikely that military intervention would make that worse. At the very least, there's at least a chance, a roll of the dice, that it could improve things, given that sitting back and doing nothing is not improving things, so how can you sit back and say let's not even try, because in the past military solutions haven't always been effective. Well, sitting here obviously isn't effective, so why not try?

CALHOUN: Well, I think that in the case of Rwanda, bombing would not have improved the situation. It probably would have exacerbated the situation as much as it could have been exacerbated, I suppose. But the — you know, they were killing people with machetes. They were individual people out there slaughtering people one-on-one, and it was a very complicated situation. You're right that in *Hotel Rwanda* they depict some of the dilemmas. One thing that happened is that the white people were escorted out of the country, and the black Africans, begging to be taken along, were left behind. So that's one way where intervention could have involved transporting these people out of harm's way, and that was not done. I would have favored something like that. I would not have favored the bombing, because I don't think it would have been effective. I mean, you can't bomb every single person with a machete, and when you do, you're going to kill their prospective victims anyway. So I don't think bombing would have been effective.

But Rwanda was definitely the case that led to the momentum for the whole "responsibility to protect" movement. They even abbreviated this as R2P, which I guess is hashtag ready now. So the idea was that we have a responsibility to protect, and these people, the humanitarian interventionists, very popular among academics, wanted to say that the UN charter is somewhat faulty in its focus on the power of authority of war making belonging only to sovereign leaders. So they wanted to say that we need to have a system where states are actually required to intervene when people are being victimized by their own leader. So they wanted to actually expand the horizons for war, rather than just being limited by the UN charter and the provision of the right to wage war to leaders. They wanted to say there are cases where we need to intervene on behalf of these people who are being victimized.

WOODS: Let's take a — I'm going to give you an example that you use in the article, the case of Truman's dropping of the atomic bombs. Now, I would prefer to just do a whole episode on that with somebody at some point, and every August I mean to do it, and then the date creeps up on me, and I don't get it done. But I want to cover that, because it's the classic case of utilitarian theorizing, because — and let's not even go into is it really true that he saved a million lives and whatever, because that number has been disputed. But what people say is that it ended the war, and we all know the war was a terrible thing, and he ended the war by doing this. And if you say but all these children died in horrific ways, people look at you like you're a moral reprobate. Look, it ended the war, and so far more children would have died. "What, do you want more children or fewer to die?" would be the way they would put it. And it's not like that's not at all compelling, so how do you wrestle with that?

CALHOUN: Well, I think that utilitarianism is very relevant to the issue of humanitarian intervention, because just war theory alone does not suffice for what the humanitarian interventionists want. They want to say that we have a duty to intervene. Just war theory specifies conditions on the permissibility to wage war. So the humanitarian intervention position is actually much more hawkish than the just war theory position, and it needs something else, and that other thing is a utilitarian idea.

Utilitarianism, as you know, was authored by Jeremy Bentham and developed further by John Stuart Mill in the 19th century, and it specifies that the right action is the one which maximizes the utility of the greatest number. It's a very demanding normative theory, because only one action can maximize the outcomes. So according to utilitarianism, there's only one right action. All of the rest are wrong. This means that going to war is either prohibited or it's obligatory, and that's exactly what the humanitarian interventionists want to say. They want to say that war is obligatory. It's not a choice. You actually must go to war, according to them.

But at the same time, the interventionists want to embrace the just war theorists' view on intention. Intentions matter, according to just war theory, one of the requirements of which is that war be waged with right intention and for a just cause. Presumably, for example, waging a war to distract attention from a domestic political scandal would not qualify as right intention. But the humanitarian interventionists were standing by Clinton with a ready-made cause, a noble intention to save people from their evil dictator.

What is really curious about humanitarian interventionists is that they only seem intent on the obligatory and very demanding descriptions of utilitarianism in the build up to a bombing campaign. Once the bombing has come to an end, they go back to whatever they were doing and forget all about the mess left behind. So a very good recent example of this was the 2011 bombing of Libya. Okay, Obama was persuaded to hit Libya with hundreds of missiles by a group of, I suppose it was three or four women — Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice, Samantha Power, possibly Anne-Marie Slaughter — who claimed that if he failed to bomb Libya, then there would be a genocide — so a utilitarian argument. So all that it took was whipping out the "g" word for Obama to

sign off on military action, while claiming at the same time to the public that it was not really a war since he was not sending any soldiers into harm's way, and so he did not need the permission of Congress.

So the results were, as we know, Muammar Gaddafi was dead; Libya was in disarray. And what did the humanitarian interventionists say about the hundreds of refugees who drowned while attempting to escape the chaos and insecurity directly caused by the U.S. intervention and removal of the Libyan leader? Nothing. Remarkably, once the bombs have been dropped, these self-styled humanitarians go back to what they were doing and basically adduce the tried and true Rumsfeldian response: "Stuff happens." So they don't take any responsibility for what happens after the intervention. They drop all of their apparent commitment to the high-minded utilitarian principles after the bombing. So I find this all very suspicious. I mean, you can't say, both, I'm a utilitarian and I'm not a utilitarian. I'm only a utilitarian in the run up to the war, and then afterwards I'm just going to forget about what happened.

WOODS: All right, that leads me to — I do want to ask the genocide question in general, because that comes up all the time.

CALHOUN: Okay.

WOODS: The way genocide is used to justify intervention, or just to make a generic moral case for humanitarian intervention, genocide is mentioned. Let's just pause for a quick message, and then we're going to ask you that question.

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All right, so the genocide question comes up a lot. It certainly comes up in my circles, and I get emails all the time of people saying what would you say about intervening. We all know that it's dumb to intervene to overthrow Middle Eastern dictators. Every single time we do it, it winds up terrible. We get a worse guy or the situation is worse or whatever. And they'll say, look, we know the U.S. government lies about genocide. They use this word constantly, and it always turns out to be phony-baloney, but let's just imagine just for the sake of argument that one time in their lives they're telling us the truth, that there really is an ongoing case of genocide. How could you possibly say that intervening to at least try to stop a genocide would be worse than the genocide itself? How could it be worse?

CALHOUN: Well, that's how it's always painted. It's always doom and gloom. Things are going to be worse if you don't do something. You will have blood on your hands if you don't go stop this dictator. In fact, this position violates all sorts of principles we cling to in civil society.

One of those is killing versus letting die. We uphold this distinction in civil society. In consistency, we should uphold the same distinction abroad, which implies that we are never responsible for the acts of murder committed by other agents. We are, however, responsible for the direct consequences of our own actions. It does not

matter if our military intends only to kill bad guys. They are equally responsible for the innocent people whom they kill whenever and wherever they fire deadly weapons. But what happens during the run up to a war is people want to just relax this and say suddenly, oh, we don't hold on to this principle anymore, killing versus letting die; we now think letting die is just as bad as killing.

And closely related to that is the distinction between negative versus positive rights. Again, this is a distinction we uphold within civil society. We deem it wrong to directly cause harm to another person. We do not, however, hold ourselves responsible for the misery of other people caused by themselves or by other agents. Humanitarian interventionists want to say we have a duty to intervene, which arises out of a positive right of the victims to be saved. But such a duty and correlative right cannot be generalized, because, in a phrase — and this is the most fundamental principle of all — ought implies can. It cannot be the case that we are morally required to do what it is impossible to do. It would be impossible for us to save all of the people of the world currently being victimized, so it cannot be the case that we are morally obligated to do so.

And I believe that when humanitarian interventionists start talking in terms of genocide, it's very persuasive, because people are easily swayed to believe that they must join the war effort; otherwise they will somehow be responsible for what happens. In fact, it's not true. Even if you accept the just war theorists' doctrine of double effect, you are never obligated to go kill people to prevent them from being killed by other people.

And the best of understanding this I've found is that if you think about the intention of the war opponent or the pacifist, the intention of the pacifist who says I will not support bombing is to not kill people. The intention of the pacifist isn ot to allow a murderous dictator to kill people; it's to not kill people. So the very framework that these people base their calls to war on, usually just war theory amalgamated with some temporary principle of utilitarianism, implies that you do not have a moral obligation to carry out war or to bomb other lands. It doesn't matter what's happening on the ground, because it conflicts with all these other principles that we uphold within civil society.

WOODS: Well, they say that when they are — okay, so in other words, with double effect they would say it's true that civilians are going to die in these campaigns, but we have a good moral intention, and we are not directly intending this unfortunate outcome, so the morality of what we're doing is thereby vindicated. And so in other words, you're saying that there is an analog to this on the anti-war side, which is that I'm not intending any bad thing either.

CALHOUN: That's right.

WOODS: I'm simply intending the not direct killing of anybody and my involvement in the direct killing of anybody.

CALHOUN: That's correct, and I think if you want to gauge the sincerity of these various calls to war, for example, the 1999 bombing of NATO, you have to look at the bombers' views on other matters — for example, weapons exports. So if you really are concerned to prevent the murder of people in these countries, then what you really should support is withholding weapons from them. So don't provide them with weapons. Don't arm dictators.

But of course the same people who call for bombing in these cases are the ones who are ready and willing to arm everyone. John McCain's a good example. Let's just give them all weapons, even though we know from cases such as Saddam Hussein that there's a really good chance that once these people are in power, they're going to become murderous dictators. But the weapons keep flowing out to these places, which do not have the industrial capacity in most cases to produce their own weapons of war.

And then what happens is predictably use the weapons. They have the weapons, then they use the weapons, and then suddenly the humanitarian interventionists clamor for war again. They say we have to stop these people from using the weapons which were provided to them by the international community. My answer is stop spreading these weapons around. You know, if you want to have weapons to defend your own borders, fine, but shipping weapons to Bahrain, where the people are trying to democratize their land, shipping weapons to Saudi Arabia, which is now laying to waste Yemen, that's where the humanitarian interventionists, if genuinely concerned with humanity, should be working in my view.

WOODS: You have a section at the very end of the paper called "War Opponents as Long-Range Utilitarians." Can you elaborate on that?

CALHOUN: Sure. Every time you bomb some place you are saying that bombing is a sound means to resolve conflict. Every time you intervene militarily you are serving as an example for smaller groups and other nations to do the same.

Good example here, again, is Libya. You may have noticed that the situation in Syria became much, much worse after the 2011 intervention in Libya, and one reason for that may have been that the rebels on the ground said, hey, maybe we can get the United States to help us out here too, just as they did in Libya. So what happens is you get all sorts of reactions whenever you bomb of people who are motivated to kill more people faster, because they don't know what the future will bring, and also to play this sort of game where you provoke intervention.

So it's arguable that the KLA in 1999 provoked — must have been 1998 — provoked intervention by acting in a way that caused Slobodan Milošević to clamp down and look like this evil dictator at that moment in time, and of course the international community responded.

Some people have argued that the same thing happened in Syria, that it's possible that the chemical weapons were used by some of the rebels who were hoping that the

United States would come to their rescue. More detailed investigations into what happened in the chemical bombing suggest that both sides may have used chemical weapons, but in any event, this situation has worked many times throughout history.

It also worked in Britain, when the IRA provoked the Black and Tans to go on a killing spree, and the reaction was — well, they killed innocent people then, and that galvanized support for the IRA cause. So this provocation strategy works all the time.

In terms of the long-range utilitarian argument, once again, it's just that once you start bombing you are saying that this is a way to resolve conflict, and we see this with the United States all the time. I mean, Obama expresses concern about these mass shootings in the homeland. I want to say that some of these people are probably following his example. He is saying with his drone campaign, for example, that this is how you resolve conflict: you go out and kill people. And so from the perspective of long-range utilitarianism, it actually would be much better for humanity for us to stop these interventions, because then other countries and other groups and other factions would not follow our example.

WOODS: Before I let you go, what did I not get to that's central to the argument? This isn't a riddle, by the way; maybe we did cover everything.

CALHOUN: Uh, let's see. I do think that the Libyan example involved Hillary Clinton's support for intervention, and her husband was probably the first one to have supported humanitarian intervention in 1999, so I find that a little bit interesting, and I also think that it gives us some grounds for hypothesizing what another Clinton administration would be like, especially since she is very fond of saying that you get two for the price of one if you elect me, so we may have more intervention if Clinton is elected as president.

WOODS: Yeah, it's a very unfortunate situation that's unfolding before us, but on the other hand — and by the way, even if we had Bernie Sanders, he's been in favor of humanitarian intervention. He voted for the intervention back in 1999. I just saw some polling data for Hillary that is very, very bad in both New Hampshire and Iowa, and as a matter of fact, nationally her numbers are way down and his are shooting up.

CALHOUN: Mm hmm.

WOODS: I think she'll still hold onto it, but I think she's going to be really battered. At the same time, it's hard to know — it's just hard to predict these things. But even a battered Hillary, gosh, she and her husband, they are a vicious team, and even if I had a really, really strong platform and candidate, I would be intimidated going up against them.

CALHOUN: Yeah, they are a political force to be reckoned with, no doubt about it. I'm glad you brought up Bernie Sanders, because he's an example of one of these people who opposed the 1991 Gulf War but supported the 1999 NATO bombing, because, you know, they played the Hitler card. Oh, Hitler must be stopped. And so all of these

liberals came forward. Bernie Sanders I think is gaining favor now, because he seems to be more principled than Hillary. Hillary looks like a flip-flopper. She's changing her view on everything depending on the opinion polls. But you're right, people are afraid of something worse than Hillary (laughing), so she's very strengthened by the weak slate on the Republican side.

I did recently read that in Hillary's emails, there's some indication that there were these ulterior motives for bombing in Libya having to do with currency, and I haven't looked into that more deeply yet, but it's an interesting case, because it just illustrates what we all know, is that when people go to war, there are many different reasons for going to war and many different parties are involved and many different rationales. Only some of them look to be morally upright.

And what happens is whenever there's a group of humanitarian interventionists ready to support the war cause, that's the pretext that's offered to the populous. Okay, this is why we're really going to war. It's not because NATO needs to have a reason for continuing to exist after the Cold War. It's not because Bill Clinton wants to divert attention from his sex scandal. No, the reason why we're going to war is this noble reason to save these people from their evil Hitlerian dictator.

So it's a very, very seductive line, and people find it nearly irresistible. Of course, some people find it resistible, because they believe in the UN charter position on the authority of war being accorded only sovereign leaders of nations. But to liberals it's super seductive, and that's why you see people who ordinarily oppose war stepping forward to support efforts, such as the 1999 bombing of Kosovo by NATO.

WOODS: All right, well as I said, I'm going to link to the article on which this conversation has been based, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Alleged Necessity of Military Intervention." That'll be linked at TomWoods.com/569, as will all your stuff, your Twitter and blog, but for people who are going to break my heart by not visiting TomWoods.com/569, why don't you tell them the address of your blog?

CALHOUN: Sure, the blog is about the drone book, and it's TheDroneAge.wordpress.com. Also, I should say that the article that you're citing is found in an edited version in my book *One Delusion*; it's Chapter Nine; it's called "Bombs and Charity."

WOODS: Okay, we'll make note of that too. Well, as always, thanks for your time. It's great fun talking to you and always enlightening.

CALHOUN: Thank you so much, Tom.