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David Rieff: [Interview]

Author of *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* talks with Robert Birnbaum

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Rieff is a Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute at the New School, a Fellow at the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a board member of the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch and a board member of the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute. His books include *Going to Miami: Tourists, Exiles and Refugees in the New America*; *Los Angeles: Capitol of the Third World*; *The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami*; *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*; *Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know* (with Roy Gutman) and recently *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*. He is currently considering writing a book on the United States Army. While continuing to cover humanitarian emergencies around the world, David Rieff lives in Manhattan.

*A few people have a bed for the night
For a night the wind is kept from them
The snow meant for them falls on the roadway
But it won't change the world
It won't improve relations among men
It will not shorten the age of exploitation.*

-From *A Bed for the Night* by Bertolt Brecht

Robert Birnbaum: When did you decide to take the title of your book from the Bertolt Brecht poem, *A Bed for the Night*?

David Rieff: Very late. I came on it when the book was already in manuscript.

[...]

DR: Probably it was a mistake. But what the hell. I did not know the Brecht poem, but I always find writers from that period bracing because they were so unsentimental. And the poem does in some way recapitulate the arguments in the book. It says there's this wonderful thing, this fellow raising money to get homeless people a shelter for a night on a snowy evening and that's fantastic and at the same time it's not going to bring about some fundamental change in anything. The trouble is you have to read my book to see why the poem recapitulates the whole book.

RB: Well, somebody will read it. I don't want to dwell on this too long but what other titles were considered? *Humanitarianism in Crisis*?

DR: There was an article by Alex de Waal, a British critic of [humanitarian] aid, who is much more radical than I am—he's really a guy who has said more often than not, that aid actually does more harm than good. He would say much more often than I would that aid workers should withdraw. I'm not really of that view very often. De Waal wrote a very brilliant piece about the humanitarian aid work in Rwanda, which he knows very well, called *A Waste of Hope*. I suspect if I had had a second title, I might have had that with a question mark. That might have worked but it seemed like poaching on his preserves.

RB: This is not an arcane or difficult argument that you are putting forward here.

DR: I don't think it's a complicated argument. I'm actually quite surprised—I mean no writer is ever happy with the reception of their book and that's because we are all ghastly mewling children—but leaving aside this Woe-is-me, Why-am-I-not-understood?, Holden-Caulfield-on-methadone side to all of this, actually I'm a bit surprised by the reaction. Which is, "He poses all these problems and he has no solutions to them." First of all, I am surprised that everything has to have a solution. It would seem to me that any adult would know better. It's almost as if when people think about public policy there's this tendency to want to check your brains at the door. Nobody thinks that in the private life everything has a solution. At the same time, the other version of the response—even the very favorable response—is "Oh well, here's the pessimistic view." I think, "Yeah, pessimistic in a sense." But that's really not what it's about. It's true that I am somebody who doesn't share the kind of American view that it's all going to work out in the end. On the contrary, I think it probably isn't going to work out in the end. But again that, it seems to me, is a perfectly reasonable thing to think. It's a funny moment here, I guess, I am a little surprised at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York/Kennedy School of Government version in Boston—the kind of think tank view—that that's the only permissible view. It almost seems religious.

We can have a just war without there being a humanitarian emergency. Indeed the opposite is true. In this sense the Left is surely correct. Wars tend to exacerbate humanitarian crises, not improve them.

RB: It is religious.

That's the nature of war.

DR: As if I'm saying, "Your God is failing." And people don't much care for that. But I thought that's what intellectuals did. That's why there are all these quotes in the beginning... [From] all those Frankfurt School and '20s and '30s German Marxists. Even though I am not a Marxist myself—I always believe that they are the people who taught me to think, or rather reading them taught me to think (to the extent that I know how to think)—I've had a funny experience with this book. I wanted to talk about humanitarian action and everyone wants to talk about my critique of human rights. Yeah, I have a critique of human rights, which I have elaborated in essays and I hope to write about in a book of some kind. But this is really about what aid does. What it does well. What it can do and what it can't do. What it should expect of itself. What people who admire it should expect of it. What it shouldn't do. And that doesn't interest people. It's as if it's not millenarian it's of no use. I've gotten a lot of attention for this book. I can't say—by and large—that I've thought any of it was particularly brilliant. Although there are some interesting essays coming out in the *Journal of Human Rights* at Wellesley—they are not uncritical, I'm not asking to be flattered. When I am with humanitarian aid workers we can have a real conversation. What I consider absolutely legitimate criticism of what I do, "Yeah Doctors Without Borders is great, but they exist in a system where they can be the outlaws, but if they were the whole system they wouldn't have that luxury." That's a serious conversation. [The other] It's a bit like talking to people like Noam Chomsky. You talk to him about Bosnia and suddenly you are talking about the American intervention on behalf of the Greek right in 1947.

[...]

RB: Why do you think the presence of Doctors without Borders, CARE, Oxfam and others is reassuring to many Americans?

DR: I am talking about reassuring certain elites. People who live in Back Bay [Boston], Sausalito or Manhattan or Miami Beach. I'm not one of these people who get on his high horse about how nobody cares. I think it's amazing how much people care. I think this global stuff is crap. Yeah, we are exposed to all this stuff. But how much can you care about? It's unreasonable to ask people to care. First of all you need leisure to care. Most people don't have any leisure. Second, when Auden said that all good art comes from the rentier class. He was exaggerating, of course. You could think of 20 examples of working class writers, but he wasn't totally wrong. All he meant was that only people with some private incomes had time to really get it right. So if you're a working class writer you practically have to be a genius and be so good it almost doesn't matter — because if you are that good...maybe he should have said all middle grade...

RB: Having just watched *Big Bad Love*, which is a film based on Larry Brown (a working class Southern writer) stories, many of which have to do with his struggles to be published, I don't buy that Auden claim. Maybe it worked for a while?

DR: Maybe it's no longer true. Listen, I'm not married to the sentiment, all I mean to say is that there is a question of how much time you can put in, and I am more interested in terms of caring than artistic production. What I mean is, if you are working 12 hour days in a job that's not rewarding, you really have to be a saint not to just want to have a good time when you get home. And after a certain age, most people—I'm not one of them because I live this weird, bohemian mongrel existence—have a family and you are concerned about your family. And that's a huge amount of work and to do it properly and more people do do it properly, despite what you would think if you watched Fox News.

RB: That's very optimistic.

DR: If Fox News really represents this culture than not only are we doomed but we are doomed very quick. John Cleese said he would rather work for the state in Gomulka's Poland than take any employment from Rupert Murdoch (both laugh). And I am inclined to agree. At least you could have some psychic independence working in some communist bureaucracy as many, many generations of dissidents proved in the east. Fox News, you really feel like washing your hands after watching. I think that people try, a lot of people anyway. I am not a cynic in that sense.

If Fox News really represents this culture then not only are we doomed but we are doomed very quick. John Cleese said he would rather work for the state in Gomulka's Poland than take any employment from Rupert Murdoch... The problem isn't whether the NY Times covers Palestine correctly. The problem is that most people are getting their news from Fox or from daytime AM radio.

RB: Whatever happened to "compassion fatigue"?

DR: Of course, there is compassion fatigue and even with the elite. This is a country where most people get their news from TV. People in the Left in places like Cambridge love to attack the *NY Times* or the *Boston Globe*. Christ, if you got more people to read those newspapers, for all their faults, you'd have many fewer problems. The problem isn't whether the *NY Times* covers Palestine correctly. The problem is that most people are getting their news from Fox or from daytime AM radio. Of course, there is compassion fatigue, but I think the importance of the aid workers is that, again, they are these designated consciences. That people who do live in Manhattan and such other places do not feel comfortable turning on their televisions and seeing people dying in real time. And they do want something to be done. For all my differences with Michael Ignatieff—well-rehearsed in this city where we are sitting, Boston—in that very limited sense things have changed as a result of what's happened in the last decade. I do think the aid workers have a symbolic value. People want to say to themselves, "Well, if I send some money to Oxfam I'm going to help out here." I don't know if there was popular support for interventions in, say, Bosnia and Kosovo. Even though I was in the forefront of efforts to try to mobilize such support. I don't know if the country as a whole ever cared two cents for these questions. In elite circles it was big issue.

RB: It's a bit surprising that you view aid workers as symbols as a good thing. In *A Bed for the Night* you point out that while Rwandan genocidal maniacs were standing trial to some fanfare in Arusha; 2.6 million people were dying in eastern Congo.

DR: My book is in very large measure an attempt to separate relief work from human rights work. So that my criticism of (Rosie, the nosy Labrador walks in the room)—here's the queen of Newbury Street. My book is an effort to say that these things

shouldn't be mixed up. I am extremely skeptical of the role of human rights and what it can accomplish. I don't think it's as clear that this human rights revolution is doing anything more than changing laws that will never be enforced and never have any deterrent power. Aid workers aren't to be reproached for not having stopped the war in the Congo. When aid workers fancy themselves as human rights workers and start conflating their mission—which really does need to be impartial, needs based and as little involved with government as possible—when aid workers start saying, "Well we are really not just aid workers but human rights activists and peace builders." The way Quakers like Mary Anderson here in Boston has argued—then they are getting in over their heads. And to some extent there is something hubristic about it. But that's not the essential issue, which is they will end up compromising their ability to give relief in the name of an entirely stipulative better future. Human rights talk reminds me of that Leninist "radiant future" crap. There is this fundamental error that perhaps is influenced by the fact that so many of the people who subscribe to it are Americans who have in their heads the civil rights movement. That's the model. Brown vs. the Board of Education. Most white Southerners and probably a majority of the white people in the country are against integration or indifferent to it. These new norms are established despite what people, as Barry Goldwater said, felt in their hearts. Then slowly reality migrates toward the norm. That's the experience of the civil rights movement, for all its failures. When I talk to leaders of the American human rights movement like Aryeh Neier, they virtually come out and say it. Whereas I don't think international law and national law have nearly as much to do with each other as these people. And second, I'm not sure of the relevance of that example on the much tougher situation of trying to impose international law in the absence of international government. When the Little Rock School district refused to obey the federal order. The National Guard came in and the Guard was largely comprised of local white guys who were probably privately opposed to what they were doing. And yet the discipline or, if you will, to use a kind of old-fashioned Marxist language, a kind of consent that the state enjoyed from its citizenry the way in which people were loyal to the United States whatever their views meant you could have such a situation. Here you have these fancy laws passed devised by gaggles of eminent persons from the African National Congress to the Kennedy School and then everybody writes triumphantly that the norms have moved. But I say to myself, "Look, there are three possibilities. Either they are just charlatans who want to feel better and therefore really need these norms so they won't feel so bad about what's happening in the world. Or they are really closet imperialists and see the few interventions that have happened—Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone—as wars of altruism fought in the name of human rights by, in the minds of such people, not the United States but the so-called international community. Or the third possibility, they are in such despair that they think that we have to try this even though they know in their heart of hearts it's rubbish." Those are the only ways I can explain it. Otherwise it makes no sense unless the National Guard can occupy the Central High School in Little Rock this stuff even in the states wouldn't have worked. The court [International Criminal Court] is crap. It's a kangaroo court for petty thugs whom we've decided to get rid of. I have no sympathy for the petty thugs. Mr. Milosevic or the Rwandan leadership can rot in jail for all time.

RB: Aren't those courts ad hoc?

DR: Those are. Look, there is never going to be a judgement on an American, a Russian. Frenchman...

RB: (Laughs)

DR: A German, a Chinese. So what are we talking about?

RB: Henry Kissinger will not be brought to the bar?

DR: Henry Kissinger will never be brought to the bar. It will never happen. Already justice is only for the poor. Imagine if you translated these ideas and people who are for this concede the point—the Canadian study called *The Responsibility to Protect* argues this explicitly, "Well, we'll never do this." What kind of legal system says it's just for the weak? "Well, we'll have this legal system where murder will be forbidden to the weak and we are going to admit this in print and say this is great progress." That's a pretty poor system. Humanitarianism is an emblem of defeat. You send relief workers in when everything has gone to hell. Aid workers are frustrated by this. It's an incredibly difficult, frustrating, morally draining activity. And you dream of something—any aid worker who is being honest will tell you he or she dreams—of a solution. Not just of putting band-aids on cancer. So of course it's humanly understandable that relief workers would be tempted by Michael Ignatieff's *Revolution of Moral Concern*, by this historic alliance with the human rights movement and indeed by the dazzling prospect of American military intervention. Because in those situations of intervention you can do things. But do we really want a humanitarianism that's just an adjunct to state power? I think it's a terrible mistake. You don't have to be against these things to say that. It's perfectly possible as a citizen to have supported the American /NATO decision to move in Kosovo on really political grounds but totally rejected the rationale that it was a humanitarian war. When I was in Pakistan at the beginning of the bombing campaign in Afghanistan one of the first things that happened in one of the cities was that all UN warehouses were burned down, the relief warehouses. The people of western Pakistan were pro-Taliban and pro-Bin Laden of course, and they burned down UNHCR and World Food Program warehouses. I thought, "Aren't these people frightened, these humanitarians? Do they really want to be seen as sub contractors to the US government?" That's the way it's going. In fact, I actually think—this is one of the reasons people like Ignatieff are so angry at me—there is much more in common between the human rights activists and the Bush administration than either side is comfortable admitting. Fundamentally, they are revolutionaries from above, in the old Trotskyist sense and think they can change the world. [They] Think they know how to change the world and have no qualms or modesty about doing it. Of course, they regret the need. I'm being fair, of course. They know all wars are tragic. I'm not pretending that people are either stupid or unaware of the risks or the price. But in the end they feel confident that this is the best of all options. They may be right. Let me go out on a limb that I don't usually go out on and say, "Let's assume they are right." I don't believe necessarily that I'm right. I'm very torn on this subject. It's still better to have a humanitarianism that's independent of this. That doesn't get confused with this. It's still better to have a world in which General Powell does not say to a donor's conference at the time of the Afghan War, "Humanitarian aid is a tremendous force multiplier for us." I was at a conference at the Army War College in Carlyle, Pennsylvania and in one of the breaks a young Special Forces colonel came up to Nicholas de Torrente, the head of MSF USA, and he said, "Oh I'm really glad to meet you. We really have to talk privately, not just at this conference context because it would be really great if Special Forces and MSF could arrange modalities for when we hand over to you." I don't think this colonel was out on a limb. It's clear that in his mind, humanitarian action was just an adjunct to US power. And he just wanted to make it

work better. That's what this alliance with this stuff leads to and that's what I am appalled by. Humanitarians will say, "It's not US power, it's human rights. It's international law." I find all these concepts unbelievably unpersuasive.

RB: And muddy. Tell me does the definition of genocide in the Genocide Convention apply to the US government treatment of Native Americans?

DR: Yes.

RB: According to the current definition?

DR: Yes, it would have no retroactive force.

RB: I wonder if there was a point in time when the definition did not apply to US government treatment of Native Americans. It occurs to me the definition has been shifted and refined. It reminds me of the example **Samantha Power** quotes of a reporter asking a State Department official, "How many genocidal acts does it take to make a genocide?"

DR: The Genocide Convention, speaking of muddy, is an extremely weird document. It was of course a compromise in the UN in the late '40s. And there is all kinds of language that makes it unclear. For example, some legal people I've talked to say that what happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge was not a genocide. At that point you say, "If the Stalin terror famine and the Cambodian holocaust was not a genocide than what good is this term?" I'm quite skeptical of Samantha's view that—I am not skeptical of her anger, which I share and which I honor her for and that she has expressed in her book in a very noble way—I am skeptical of her idea which, again, I think is unbelievably naive and legalistic. That somehow if the United States government can be brought to its senses and understand its obligations under international law that somehow all will be well. It seems to me to be as naive and otherworldly as Chomsky's sense that the US is responsible for all the wickedness in the world. Samantha's conformist faith in the redemptive power of the US, if only it can be brought to its senses—because what does Samantha's book say? It says in a brilliant way, with incredible investigative power and literary force and moral passion, "The Americans have not done what they are obliged to do under international law and what the best traditions of United States would bid them do. And if we can some how get the United States to live up to its better nature the world will be a vastly better place." I would have welcomed an American intervention in Rwanda. I campaigned for one in Bosnia, though not on humanitarian grounds. That's a very important point for me. Neither in Kosovo or Rwanda could I share or participate in any kind of activism that involves saying that there were humanitarian reasons. For me that really did smack of racism. I didn't think Sarajevo was the worst place in the world in 1992 nor do I in retrospect. I certainly think on a humanitarian basis as opposed to a political basis, the intervention in Kosovo may have been quite counter productive. That was clear at the time, not just in retrospect. I think you can have just wars that don't have a humanitarian basis. One of the ways the conception of humanitarianism is being bent completely out of shape, losing, its specific gravity to use another image is that suddenly we talk about everything in humanitarian terms. My friend Ronnie Brauman at MSF France says if Auschwitz happened today they would call it a humanitarian emergency. We can have a just war without there being a humanitarian emergency. Indeed the opposite is true. In this sense the Left is surely correct. Wars tend to exacerbate humanitarian crises not improve them, that's the nature of war. So already it's a fantasy. In Samantha's case and people who think like her. I think they have a bad case of American exceptionalism. Maybe I missed civics class or something. (I did miss civics class, I went to French schools in New York, in point of fact, biographically). The United States is a fascinating country with many brilliant and remarkable qualities and also many ghastly qualities. And, it's another nation like other nations. I read Samantha's book, which I greatly admire on many levels. But was left with the strange impression at the end was that what she was really saying was, "If only the City on the Hill would muster it's legions and send them out to do good in the world that would really be redemptive."

RB: Early in the conversation we talked about the religious undertones. This is another triumph of hope over experience. People do want to believe that forces of good in the world will take up the battle against evils. Also, don't some of the people you call American exceptionalists assign this noble mission to the US by default?

DR: I am amazed by the ahistoricism of it. All of the justifications used by the people like Samantha and Michael Ignatieff have been used by all intellectual servants of empire. These are the justifications for British colonialism, French colonialism in the 19th century. Hell, they were even the justifications for Leopold's colonization of Congo. Of course it was a lie and a publicity stunt. Okay, then let them say then that they are liberal imperialists who want this new world order, an American raj that will put the fuzzy wuzzies in line who are doing such terrible things to their own people.

[...]

Interviewer: Robert Birnbaum (RB)
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