

# UC San Diego

## Policy Briefs

### **Title**

Policy Brief 08-2: Democratizing Foreign Policy (Part II of IV): The Big Stick Makes Few Friends

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3583t4sz>

### **Author**

Lake, David A

### **Publication Date**

1996-09-01

# IGCC Policy Brief

## Democratizing Foreign Policy

### Part II of IV:

## The Big Stick Makes Few Friends

David A. Lake

Why Somalia failed, and why we should have known it would.  
Guarding against self-defeating uses of force.

*Full Recommendations, page 4.*

---

**Summary:** Military force is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. There are and will continue to be situations that can be resolved only through the use of force. The United States is uniquely suited to act for itself or on behalf of the international community in such situations. But military force may now be too easy. The United States may resort to the

stick when carrots would work as well. If so, it will soon come to be perceived by others as an international bully, with as yet unappreciated consequences. Americans must remember that power repels more often than it attracts—and that military force alone does not build domestic political order and stability.

---

*Publication of this brief was made possible by the generosity of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, supporters of IGCC's Research Program on Building Regional Environmental Cooperation*

*IGCC is a multicampus research unit of the University of California, established in 1983 to conduct original research and inform public policy debate on the means of attenuating conflict and establishing cooperation in international relations. Policy Briefs provide recommendations based on the work of UC faculty and participants in institute programs. Authors' views are their own.*

---

## **The Force Advantage**

Despite all the widely noted changes in world affairs since the end of the Cold War., one constant in U.S. foreign policy remains: the use of force to resolve international problems. This stems not from America's cowboy or gun-slinger culture. Rather, it is the logical consequence of the considerable investment in military hardware, planning, and personnel that the United States made during the Cold War. While the United States has lost its competitive edge in many basic industries, it has built a comparative advantage in military force.

While the superpowers threatened each other in a constant nuclear standoff during the Cold War, they were actually quite restrained in their use of military force. Knowing that military action taken by one risked similar action by the other, each was—in the main, and with several noteworthy exceptions—deterred. Although they spent untold billions in preparation, the superpowers rarely fought, and never fought each other. Today, these restraints have been lifted. The United States could not have fought the Persian Gulf War or intervened in Somalia if the Soviet Union had remained in existence and ready to counter American moves. Unless another great power emerges to check the United States, we can only expect more of the same in the future.

As demonstrated in the Persian Gulf War, the United States can out-bomb and out-gun any potential enemy. Where other states can use economic and financial leverage nearly as well as the United States, none can match its military prowess. States rely upon that instrument of statecraft that is most effective and cheapest to use. For the United States, now and into the foreseeable future, that instrument will be military might. Although the public is deeply ambivalent about this trend, the United States will be inevitably drawn toward using force or the threat of force to resolve its international political challenges.

Military force is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. There are and will continue to be situations that can be resolved only through the use of force. The United States is uniquely suited to act for

itself or on behalf of the international community in such situations. But military force may now be too easy. The United States may resort to the stick when carrots would work as well. If so, it will soon come to be perceived by others as an international bully, with as yet unappreciated consequences.

---

## **Somalia**

The coercive nature of American foreign policy was exemplified in the humanitarian “rescue” of Somalia. Struck by images of starving children, Americans warmly accepted President Bush's decision, taken unilaterally in the last days of his administration, to intervene militarily in the violence-ravaged country. The military was dispatched to quell the fratricide and ensure that relief workers were able to run the gauntlet of armed clans to reach the starving populace. Upon meeting resistance from the local warlords, the scope of the operation was gradually expanded, especially after the Clinton Administration took office in January 1993. As American soldiers became targets, calls for immediate withdrawal grew—particularly from rival Republicans seeking to make political hay out of military disaster. Public support for the mission plummeted. The administration quickly abandoned the enterprise.

Americans are deeply moved by foreign tragedies. Both as private individuals and through our public agencies we have a long history of generous aid to disaster victims. But there is a big difference between natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions and floods, and the man-made disasters now occurring around the globe in northeast Africa, the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, Haiti and elsewhere.

The collapse of domestic political order does not occur by accident. Political systems fragment because powerful groups and individuals desire ends that cannot be met within existing rules and institutions. Outside intervention by itself does not change these ends or the political frustrations that gave rise to the internal conflict. It does lead to resentment, as the ambitions of these powerful groups and individuals are thwarted. Frustration leads to retaliation.

This process was played out fully in Somalia. It was an inter-clan struggle that led to the collapse of the political order and economic infrastructure necessary to sustain human life. The American military presence allowed food to be delivered where it was needed, but it did not solve the underlying clash of interests. As the United Nations dug in for the long haul, targeted warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid, and began the process of rebuilding the Somalian state, the clans struck back. American troops, told by their leaders that they were in Somalia strictly for humanitarian reasons, were bewildered when shot at. The public was surprised, confused, humiliated, and outraged when American servicemen, injured and killed in an ill-fated attempt to capture Aidid, were dragged past cheering crowds through the streets of Mogadishu. The surprise and confusion were unnecessary. It was all quite predictable.

---

### **The Big Stick**

We have forgotten the lessons from America's interventions in Latin America in the first decades of this century—a period and region in which the United States was as dominant and unconstrained then as it is on a global scale now. As an emerging world power in the first decades of this century, America's heavy-handed interventions in the domestic affairs of its neighbors produced only tremendous foreign resentment and opposition. These interventions also failed to produce the political stability in other countries sought by American leaders. Ultimately, the United States abandoned the big stick in favor of the Good Neighbor policy. Today, we must relearn these earlier lessons to provide a secure footing for a sustainable foreign policy, but our actions in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia suggest woeful historical ignorance.

On the heels of over 20 military interventions in Latin America between 1898 and 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt enunciated his now famous “corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine. He told Congress in December 1904 that “Chronic wrongdoing, or impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation... Flagrant cases of such

wrongdoing or impotence,” he concluded, may force the United States “to the exercise of an international police power.”

This broad rationale—a blank check, really—for intervention in countries not adhering to American standards of political, financial and moral rectitude quickly served to alienate its targets in Latin America. At the Inter-American Conference of 1928, a resolution declaring that “no state has a right to intervene in the internal affairs of another” received overwhelming support: only four Latin American countries joined the United States in opposition, and three of these states were then governed by American military forces.

Reconstructing order is a difficult task, as the earlier American experience also suggests. Between 1912 and 1934, U.S. marines became seemingly permanent fixtures on the Central American landscape. In the name of political order, the United States occupied Nicaragua from 1912–1925 and 1926–1933, Haiti from 1915–1934, and Honduras from 1912–1919 and 1924–1925. Indicating its utter failure to establish an effective indigenous government, the United States intervened in Cuba alone five times between 1898 and 1922. Restoring order requires a fundamental restructuring of the social and political conditions that created disorder in the first place. But the longer and more extensive the foreign intervention, the more resentful suppressed interests, neighbors, and other potential targets of the big stick become. Rather than creating grateful democracies on the U.S. model, our actions in Latin America only produced continuing instability and resentful dependencies that, sixty years later, continue to burden American foreign policy.

---

### **Guarding Against Excess**

Of course, the late twentieth century is not the early twentieth century. Africa, the Balkans, the Soviet successor states, even today's Haiti are not the Latin America of yore. It was and is hard not to be moved by images of starvation in Somalia, as it is hard not to feel for the victims of genocide in Bosnia or political repression in Haiti. But there is no reason to expect today that American military might will be welcomed any more eagerly in the world's trouble spots or that the state-building

process will be any easier than in Latin America decades ago. Americans must remember that power repels more often than it attracts—and that military power repels further than other instruments of statecraft. They must also remember that military force alone does not build domestic political order and stability.

8-1, “A Little Help from Our Friends;” PB 8-3, “The Perils of Principles;” and PB 8-4, “Presidential Leadership after the Cold War.” For related reading, see IGCC Policy Paper No. 12, *U.S. Intervention in Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Fred Wehling; and IGCC Policy Paper No. 27, *Preventive Diplomacy and Ethnic Conflict*, by Bruce W. Jentleson.

David A. Lake is IGCC’s research director for international relations and a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego. This is the second brief of a four-part series titled *Democratizing Foreign Policy*. See also PB

*To obtain additional copies of this brief, contact the Publications Coordinator or view at URL:*  
<http://www-igcc.ucsd.edu/igcc/igccmenu.html>  
*or*  
[gopher://irpsserv26.ucsd.edu](mailto:gopher://irpsserv26.ucsd.edu)

---

## How Not to Shoot Your Foot:

1. Don’t resort to the stick when carrots would work as well. Remember that power repels more often than it attracts—and that military power repels further than other instruments of statecraft.
2. Remember that military force alone does not build domestic political order and stability.
  - a. Don’t intervene in internal conflicts unless you can resolve the underlying clash of political interests that gave rise to the conflict in the first place.
  - b. Don’t intervene to “restore order” without planning for long-term fundamental restructuring of the social and political conditions that created disorder in the first place.

---

*p. 2: States rely upon that instrument of statecraft that is most effective and cheapest to use.*

*p. 2: The collapse of domestic political order does not occur by accident.*

*p. 3: Ultimately, the United States abandoned the big stick in favor of the Good Neighbor policy. Today, we must relearn these earlier lessons.*

*p. 3: Reconstructing order is a difficult task.*

---

University of California  
Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation  
9500 Gilman Drive  
La Jolla, CA 92093-0518 USA  
Phone: (858) 534-3352 FAX: (858) 534-7655 email: [igcc-cp@ucsd.edu](mailto:igcc-cp@ucsd.edu)