

Captain May – December 3, 1992 – published essay:

“Somalia intervention not as simple as it seems”

Houston Chronicle Outlook, by Captain Eric May

President Bush’s offer of 30,000 American troops to stymie the growing civil war and famine in Somalia has generated surprisingly little controversy. The political timing is masterful: Republican loyalists support the president in his twilight; Democrats, from President-elect Clinton himself to Jesse Jackson, have credited Bush with statesmanship in an area – the oppressed Third World – where it has long been lacking; the world community, itself impotent in bringing relief to Somalia, has few complaints about a U.S. gamble that could avert further starvation.

The mission of U.S. troops would probably be guarding the supply points where food and medicine are stored, and securing the main routes by which they are conveyed. Given the coordination and power U.S. forces showed in the Persian Gulf, accomplishing the mission – with only marauding irregular forces opposing them – would seem to be easy.

An optimist can look at the scenery and characters of the upcoming political drama and speculate that the world stage is set for a *Pax American* in which the sole remaining superpower takes the lead role in preserving the helpless and chastening the belligerent.

But history is a play that avoids pat plots. There are elements in the Somali scene that could render involvement in that country a tragedy for American soldiers.

The success of a U.S. intervention will be determined by whether the public believes that the suffering of the Somali people has been reduced. Bringing relief to a people without a government is a logistical nightmare. Without a reliable infrastructure, will U.S. troops have to parcel out supplies? Will they have to guard the various international agencies already trying to distribute supplies? If they adopt the latter course, then who will be in command of the effort? We must be clear that by inserting military forces into a foreign country we are conducting a military operation. Unity of command is a *sine qua non* for military operations.

And the heightened media presence that a U.S. military presence will cause will bring more attention to the misery of the Somalis. The result could be that the public becomes less aware of the limited good that 30,000 troops are doing than of the enormity of the task yet uncompleted. There could be pressure for an escalation.

Furthermore, U.S. troops in Somalia are bound to come under attack from partisan assailants who bring firepower to bear on vulnerable targets, then recede back into the anonymity of the general populace. As U.S. casualty lists lengthen, will we allow our small unit commanders – captains and lieutenants – to use their full power to respond. Troops under fire will certainly want to rely on the veteran’s dictum, “When in doubt, shoot.”

Non-combatants will die; partisans, many of them teen-agers, will die. Some Somalis will certainly be labeled as U.S. collaborators by warlords – there will be torture and assassinations. If such forecasts seem grim written on this opinion page, imagine the effect their realization could have when broadcast – in gory detail – on the television news.

Will the international community remain pro-U.S. if the Somali situation degenerates? The cry of “neo-colonialism” is likely from Third World nations that have a memory of interventions in their past.

European good will could quickly dissipate as European relief workers become casualties of partisan warfare.

The current harmony on the home front could break down if events in Africa turn sour. A newly installed Clinton administration could claim that a bad incursion was dumped in its lap by the Bush White House.

The Republican opposition could claim that then-President Clinton would be failing to follow up on a national commitment. The issue of the new commander in chief’s personal history and fitness to guide a military involvement would lurk perilously close to the surface.

In short, the attacks and counterattacks of Washington politicians could be devastating – especially to the American soldiers spilling their blood abroad.

These are the kinds of thoughts we should be pondering as we prepare to intervene in Somalia.

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