

*From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention*, by David Chandler. Pluto Press, 288pp. £45.00 (hb), £14.99 (pb).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and therewith any plausible pretext of self-defence, the ideology or ethic which David Chandler names 'Human Rights Discourse' (HRD) has opened up rich opportunities for voluptuous indignation. Perhaps the most notable voluptuary is Michael Ignatieff, who patrols the perimeter of Western power bellowing that Something Must Be Done to those whom he fingers. The Moving Finger bombs; and, having bombed, moves on. But it cannot point just anywhere, since there are no rights without power. A licence to intervene is issued only to the strong; in the last analysis, to the United States. So an 'ethical foreign policy' does not oblige us to desist from helping certain governments to oppress subject peoples. It does, apparently, entitle us to advance human rights by bombing or blockading certain other governments, sadly but bravely accepting 'as a price that was worth it' [Madeleine Albright] the inevitable suffering among the innocent. The voluptuaries readily persuade themselves that things would have been even worse if we had not bombed and blockaded; or that in some radiant future the surviving innocents—blessed with written constitutions and open economies—will live to be grateful, despite any amount of death and malnutrition.

Bombs and embargoes sufficiently explain why no honest man can behold Mr Ignatieff without emitting a shriek of agony; but there may be other reasons. Chandler argues that those interventions which purport to protect

oppressed people from bad rulers seriously undermine the international laws which were designed to protect weak states from strong powers. The UN was set up to prevent war by making self-defence (in the last resort) its only excuse; and it created a genuine covenant by outlawing intervention in internal affairs. The legal rights of sovereign states actually meant something, being enjoyed equally and enforced collectively. Outside utopia 'universal human rights' are so nebulous that only those who enforce them can define them. HRD is a downward step toward (selected) 'victims' rights'; to kangaroo courts disguised as impartial tribunals; to ethical protectorates in which whole peoples, judged guilty of complicity or backwardness, must pass through improving spell of Western tutelage.

This is an important and well-documented book, which should be on every list. Nobody will ever read it, mainly because its message is unwelcome. In addition, it is not very readable, being written in the dead language of academic 'discourse', and it hovers ambiguously between two different ideas. My readers will be wiser than I am if they can discern from this book whether HRD is a new pretext to cloak the same old behaviour, or whether it creates a new kind of behaviour with a 'counterproductive and irrational impact' born of intellectual confusion. Ed Herman, who actually is wiser than I am, contributes the sort of friendly preface that busy professors give to books of which they broadly approve. Twenty years ago Herman co-authored the thesis that Western liberal elites were servants of power, and was able to prove it quite conclusively, thanks to experimental controls obligingly provided by the governments of Indonesia, Turkey and Israel. It is always good to see the arguments of his *Manufacturing Consent* updated, because they have never been cogently answered. But I still do not know how far Herman believes that the new ethical imperialism is significantly motivated by well-intentioned confusion about rights.

Quarrels about 'rights' are quarrels about a word. To say that dogs cannot have rights (because they cannot claim them) is to say nothing of interest—unless it entails that I have no moral right to stop someone exercising a legal right to torture a dog. Chandler says that rights cannot be morally derived,

unlike duties. Very well; the voluptuaries need only rephrase: democratic powers have a duty to intervene against obvious human wrongs, such as torture and racial killings. Chandler even seems unhappy that the World Bank intervenes against female genital mutilation, and he regards the indictment of Pinochet as a piece of post-colonial Spanish meddling. One always admires a whole-hogger, even if he is just a rule utilitarian in deontologist's clothing. Many of us would find a bit of paternalism and illegality 'worth it' if the United States were to lever all its strength against, say, cruel and unusual punishments or rigged elections.

That will not happen; Uncle Sam does not have a moral agenda and is not a negotiating animal. Overwhelming asymmetry of power does make negotiations more possible, but it makes them less necessary. A rich Goliath can afford to walk softly and carry a big carrot; but why should he? Why, for example, should Sharon use the threat of force to negotiate safe 1967 borders, when by actual force he can clearly expect to rule King David's kingdom? Besides, violence shows who is boss. Admittedly, war is a race that is not always to the swift—although that's the way to bet—and in March 1999, for example, the West could not foresee that the Yugoslav army would be ready and eager after 78 days of pulverisation. Imagine that instead of deliberately humiliating Russia, of which Yugoslavia is a client state, the West had combined the threat of force with some guarantee against ethnic cleansing by the KLA, such as an international force containing a large Russian presence that was not in thrall to NATO. That was Denis Healey's plan. Imagine—against all likelihood—Milosevic had defied Russia by refusing to withdraw troops from Kosovo, where he was poised for a crackdown on a separatist guerrilla force which, if unimpeded, might arguably have become as bloody as anything in south-east Turkey. In those circumstances it might not have been 'counterproductive or irrational' to support violent intrusions by NATO, whether or not it had 'a right' to make them, and whatever its motives. Ordinary people did excusably support this human rights war, believing it to be an act of last resort. But ignorance can be no excuse for those whose business is to know.

George Brennan