

Intellectual Author: Michael Ignatieff's potent mix of imperialism and human rights

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Michael Ignatieff at a policy conference in 2007. "Imperialism doesn't stop being necessary just because it becomes politically incorrect," Ignatieff wrote in 2002. Photo: [Canada 2020](#)

HALIFAX—During his time as a professor of human rights at Harvard, Michael Ignatieff became something of a sensation in the US foreign policy establishment and elite circles. He wrote frequently for The New York Times Magazine, where his articles were featured on the cover no less than four times, with titles like "Could We Lose the War on Terror?," and "American Empire: The Burden."

Ignatieff's articles for the Times take the view that US military operations constitute an "Empire Lite," and "America's entire war on terror is an exercise in imperialism."

His written work strikes the tone of an unflinching observer, describing power relations in their stark reality. "The relationship between the locals and the internationals is inherently colonial," he writes of NGOs and troops in Afghanistan in "[Nation Building Lite](#)" in 2002.

"The unpleasant underside of nation-building is that the internationals' first priority is [...] increasing their budgets and giving themselves good jobs. The last priority is financing the Afghan government."

Following his usual pattern, after identifying the problem, Ignatieff goes on to endorse this reality as the only apparent recourse for "failed states."

"Imperialism used to be the white man's burden. This gave it a bad reputation. But imperialism doesn't stop being necessary just because it becomes politically incorrect," Ignatieff writes in the same article.

"Nations sometimes fail, and when they do, only outside help - imperial power - can get them back on their feet."

It is, he concludes, the "kind of imperialism you get in a human rights era."

At that time, Ignatieff backed the US bombing and invasion of Iraq, and repeatedly made the case for it by invoking human rights as a motivating factor.

In 2007, after he began his political career in Canada, and after close to a million people were killed in Iraq, he nominally [recanted](#) his views – again in the Times Magazine.

Concluding his *apologia*, Ignatieff recasted his support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a pitch for his political leadership. “Democratic peoples,” he writes, “should always be looking for something more than prudence in a leader: daring, vision and – what goes with both – a willingness to risk failure.”

During the same period, Ignatieff was intimately involved in developing the “[Responsibility to Protect](#)” (R2P), a doctrine guiding the use of “humanitarian intervention” in “failed states.” [According to one insider](#), Ignatieff was one of three who drafted the initial R2P report. In a [2008 promotional video](#), Ignatieff explains that R2P is “the idea that if a country is unwilling or unable to protect its own people, if it’s responsible for ethnic cleansing or massacres, or if it’s denying relief aid to its own people, then another country should step in and help.”

While R2P is theoretically intended to prevent genocidal massacres, critics maintain that giving powerful countries the go-ahead to invade “failed states” will inevitably be abused.

In a long exposé published by UpsideDownWorld.org, Researcher Anthony Fenton [makes the case](#) that the overthrow of Haiti’s democratically elected government was actually the first “test case” of R2P. Fenton points to a history of activities aimed at destabilizing Haiti’s government – which had resisted the excesses of externally imposed “reforms” – undertaken by US and Canadian governments. During the campaign of destabilization, Fenton notes, R2P was frequently invoked in discussions about Haiti.

In [memos sent](#) by the Canadian Embassy in Port-au-Prince in the weeks leading up to the coup acquired by Fenton via an access to information request, Ambassador Kenneth Cook speculated that the international community “will have to consider the options including whether a case can be made for [R2P].”

The government of Canada has refused to release uncensored memos from the time of the coup itself.

In February 2004, Canadian troops invaded Haiti while President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was physically removed from the country by US Special Forces. Most elected officials were forced into hiding. The violence that followed dwarfed even the most puffed-up human rights concerns cited to justify the coup.

A study by The Lancet, a top international medical journal, estimated 8,000 people were murdered and 35,000 were raped in the post-coup period. During the same time, Canada had been overseeing Haiti’s police force, which was a principle source of post-coup violence.

Since the 2004 coup, Haiti is seldom mentioned by R2P advocates. Fenton writes, “Dozens of papers, panels, symposiums, and conferences seem to have studiously avoided Haiti when discussing R2P [since the coup].”

[One exception](#) to the silence about R2P in Haiti stands out.

“Stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, Haiti and Iraq are testing grounds,” writes policy analyst and R2P advocate Stephen Baranyi, “for fourth generation peace operations and

approaches in fragile states.”

“One problem is that the strategic interests of major Western powers – and not R2P criteria like massive human rights violations – drove decisions to intervene in these cases.”

The credibility of R2P is “damaged,” writes Baranyi, by “*de facto* collaboration with paramilitary leaders” and a lack of “open debate.”

In calling for an “open debate,” Baranyi is alone.

Ignatieff has been applauded by some for [his candor](#) in examining the results of the Iraq invasion he once backed. In the case of Haiti, however, there has been none of the introspection or public self-questioning that have proven to be such an effective component of Ignatieff’s rhetorical arsenal.

As Liberal leader, Ignatieff continues to [advocate for R2P](#). He now mentions Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan as possible candidates for R2P interventions. The “test case” of Haiti is no longer cited.

Former Prime Minister Paul Martin [remarked of Ignatieff](#), with unwitting insight: “Michael has inherited both a very deep understanding of Canada’s role in the world and of, in fact, the kinds of upheavals that the world is capable of thrusting upon unsuspecting populations.”

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