

Liberal Democrats' Perverse Foreign Policy

By Charles Krauthammer

Friday, July 11, 2003; Page A21

It was the left that led the opposition to war in Iraq. Now it is the left that is most strenuous in urging intervention in Liberia. Curious.

No blood for oil, it seems, but blood for Liberia. And let us not automatically assume that Liberia will be an immaculate intervention. Sure, we may get lucky and suffer no casualties. But Liberia has three warring parties, tons of guns and legions of desperate fighters. Yet pressure is inexorably building to send American troops to enforce a peace.

There are the usual suspects, Jesse Jackson and the New York Times, but the most unapologetic proponent of the no-Iraq/yes-Liberia school is Howard Dean, Democratic flavor of the month. "I opposed the war in Iraq because it was the wrong war at the wrong time," says Dean, but "military intervention in Liberia represents an appropriate use of American power."

Why? In terms of brutality, systematic repression, number of killings, relish for torture and sum total of human misery caused, Charles Taylor is a piker next to Saddam Hussein. That is not to say that Taylor is a better man. It is only to say that in his tiny corner of the world with no oil resources and no scientific infrastructure for developing instruments of mass murder, Taylor has neither the reach nor the power to wreak Hussein-class havoc. What is it that makes liberals such as Dean, preening their humanitarianism, so antiwar in Iraq and so pro-intervention in Liberia?

The same question could be asked of the Democratic Party, which in the 1990s opposed the Persian Gulf War but overwhelmingly supported humanitarian interventions in places such as Haiti and Kosovo.

They all had a claim on the American conscience. What then was the real difference between, say, Haiti and Gulf War I, and between Liberia and Gulf War II? The Persian Gulf has deep strategic significance for the United States; Haiti and Liberia do not. In both gulf wars, critical American national interests were being defended and advanced. Yet it is precisely these interventions that liberals opposed.

The only conclusion one can draw is that for liberal Democrats, America's strategic interests are not just an irrelevance, but also a deterrent to intervention. This is a perversity born of moral vanity. For liberals, foreign policy is social work. National interest -- i.e., national selfishness -- is a taint. The only justified interventions, therefore, are those that are morally pristine, namely, those that are uncorrupted by any suggestion of national interest.

Hence the central axiom of left-liberal foreign policy: *The use of American force is always wrong, unless deployed in a region of no strategic significance to the United States.* The war in Afghanistan was an exception, but it doesn't count because it was retaliation against an overt attack, and not even liberals can oppose a counterattack in a war the other side started. Such bolts from the blue are rare, however. They come about every half-century, the last one being Pearl Harbor. In between one has to make decisions about going to war in less axiomatic circumstances. And that is when the liberal Democrats fall into their solipsism of righteousness.

This is the core lunacy of Democratic foreign policy. Either it has no criteria for intervening militarily -- after all, if we're going into Liberia, on what grounds are we not going into Congo? -- or it has a criterion, and its logic is that the U.S. Army is a missionary service rather than a defender of U.S. interests.

What *should* be our criteria for military intervention? The answer is simple: strategic *and* moral necessity. Foreign policy is not social work. Acting for purely humanitarian reasons is wanton and self-indulgent. You don't send U.S. soldiers to die to assuage troubled consciences at home. Their lives should be risked only in defense of their country.

Should we then do nothing elsewhere? In principle, we should help others by economic and diplomatic means and with appropriate relief agencies. Regarding Liberia, it is rather odd for the Europeans, who rail against U.S. arrogance, to claim that all the armies of France and Germany, of Europe and Africa, are powerless in the face of Charles Taylor -- unless the Americans ride to the rescue.

We should be telling them to do the job, with an offer of U.S. logistical help. We have quite enough on our plate in Iraq and Afghanistan and in chasing al Qaeda around the world.

If, nonetheless, the president finds the pressure irresistible to intervene in Liberia, he should send troops only under very clear conditions: America will share the burden with them if they share the burden with us where we need it. And that means peacekeepers in Iraq. The world cannot stand by watching us bleed in Iraq, and then expect us to bleed for it in Liberia.