"A few people have a bed for the night / For a night the wind is kept from them / The snow meant for them falls on the roadway / But it won't change the world / It won't improve relations among men / It will not shorten the age of exploitation."

These words by Bertolt Brecht are evocative, depressing, and, according to David Rieff, realistic. They offer a terse summary of the thesis of this new book on the paradoxes involved in providing aid to the dispossessed.

Rieff is a journalist and a perceptive sociologist. His earlier reports from the field include "Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World"; "Going to Miami: Exiles"; "Tourists and Refugees in the New America"; and a devastating critique of foreign policy, "Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West." Now, with the publication of A Bed for the Night, Rieff tackles the dilemmas of humanitarian assistance.

He begins by stating an unpleasant truth: No matter how pure their motives, aid workers, in trying to do good, may quite unwittingly do considerable harm. He asks his readers to ponder such questions as: "Are they [the aid givers] serving as logicians or medics for some warlord's war effort (as they probably are in the Sudan)? Are they creating a culture of dependency among their beneficiaries? And are they being used politically by virtue of the way government donors and UN agencies give them funds and direct them toward certain places while making it difficult for them to go to others?"

Such queries address the unintended consequences of social actions. Along these very lines, Rieff notes that many promoters of humanitarian intervention fail to realize that in their noble efforts they often inadvertently turn adult victims into children and then turn those infantilized adults into saints. This apotheosis is both misguided and disingenuous. As he rightly says, people fleeing from political conflict may be victims, but they are not necessarily innocent victims.

Rieff's book is set in the context of an old debate about the politics and morality of aid policy, in which realpolitik is often in conflict with altruistic proclivities. The dilemma is resolved only when the two converge, as in the recent response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and America's swift action in Afghanistan. Most of the time, however, politics and economics trump humanitarianism, or bend its agents to the will of politicians.

Rieff details the deep cultural roots of the notion of charity and the motivations for giving and helping, tied both to religious obligations and the sort of imperialistic sense of noblesse oblige so starkly stated by Kipling in "The White Man's Burden": "Fill full the mouth of Famine/ And bid the sickness cease/ Watch Sloth and Heathen Folly/ Bring all your hope to naught."

Modern efforts to bring succor, salvation, and enlightenment and, more recently, democracy to Asians and Africans in the postcolonial era indicate the still-operative legacy of intertwined ideologies.

The more recent history of refugee assistance dates back to the years after World War I and World War II, when floods of displaced survivors needed and received assistance from voluntary agencies, international organizations, and some governments. Over the past half century, many Europeans and many more Americans have responded to the call for money to assist those fleeing from persecution or caught in the crossfire of civil wars in places far from home. Increasingly, those in the business of caring have been using ever more sophisticated media techniques to advertise their missions, each year raising millions of dollars, pounds, euros, and yen for the cause.

Even without questioning their motivations or saying too much about what some have called "the aid game," the subject of considerable debate since the 1980s, Rieff raises serious questions about what is done with the money. (See Myles Harris's Breakfast in Hell; Scott Peterson's Me Against My Brother; and Alan Kuperman in The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention.)
He writes at length about some of the best-known organizations, beginning with the International Committee of the Red Cross. He mentions others who, like the ICRC, also claim neutrality in their activities—aiming only to do good and save lives under the mantra "Even the guilty need to be fed." Included in a long list is the British-founded Save the Children; Herbert Hoover's American Relief Committee; and more recently established agencies such as CARE, Catholic Relief Services, the evangelical World Vision, and the French organization Doctors Without Borders, most of which also claim to be apolitical. Also mentioned is an organization that is one of the best known and most effective agencies for rescue, relief, and resettlement—the International Rescue Committee. The IRC is one of the few NGOs that has never been neutral. It has had a clearly stated, politically motivated agenda from its beginnings in the 1930s: to oppose as well as assist those targeted by totalitarian tyrants and repressive regimes of the right (as in the case of its origins during the Nazi era) or the left.

Getting to the crux of his disheartening argument, Rieff contends that too often both the donors to many of the organizations he cites and those who carry out their missions respond viscerally and emotionally with hardly a clue to what is really going on. He uses Rwanda as a prime example. There, he notes, thousands of Rwandan murderers crossed the border and became refugees and the beneficiaries of all sorts of aid. He draws a harsh analogy in indicating that former Nazis were also accorded refugee status and given assistance in Paraguay and Argentina after World War II. Rieff devotes entire chapters to three other recent cases: Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

Throughout the pages of A Bed for a Night, David Rieff echoes the sentiments of the former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, who, after years of trying to provide protection and assistance to refugees, concluded: "There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems." There are only political ones.

Review by Peter Rose as printed in the Science Monitor.