by William Shawcross

Just after the war ended in Kosovo, I found myself at a party in Pristina talking to a diplomat who had followed the recent wars in the Balkans since their beginning. His view rejected the existing culture of armed humanitarian intervention by bodies such as the United Nations.

Instead, he had concluded, the best answer would have been for the war and ethnic cleansing to run their course, to separate out the ethnic factions like some vast, human refinery. And then - and only then - go in to mediate and pick up the pieces.

It is a refrain that was recently given a public persona by theorist Edward Luttwak writing about the Kosovo conflict in the journal Foreign Affairs. In an essay entitled 'Give War a Chance', quoted by William Shawcross in his new book on the past decade of peacekeeping operations, Luttwak argues that governments and the international community should resist 'the emotional impulse to intervene in other people's wars - not because they are indifferent to human suffering but precisely because they care about it and want to facilitate the advent of peace'.

As someone who would fit into the description of a 'cruise-missile liberal', I find Luttwak's view, and that of the diplomat, impossible to agree with, but it usefully underlines the emerging policy of 'armed humanitarianism' that has appeared in the past 10 years.

The doctrine of armed humanitarianism, as framed in UN Security Council resolution 794 in December 1992 to deal with the crisis in Somalia, was to define the post-Cold War landscape of the new world disorder.

But it was to be doctrine that was inconsistently applied and was as ill-conceived as it was often ill-considered in its application. And in its shortcomings, it was a policy that would lead to a series of disasters - in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, where the most powerful nation on Earth was humiliated and humbled by lightly-armed hoodlums in pick-up trucks, and in Rwanda, where more than 800,000 people died as the world sucked its collective thumb.

The case of Somalia is emblematic in Shawcross's book. For long before the United States was forced to confront the horror of its dead servicemen being dragged naked through the dusty streets of Mogadishu, 'the crossing of the Mogadishu line' came to be a test of the international community's resolve in dealing with intractable violence of the post-Cold War era. The belated response in Somalia, like so many of the crises described in this book, given impetus by the international media to 'do something', was summed up memorably by the then secretary general of the UN, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Comparing the response to Bosnia to that in Somalia, where thousands were dying from the starvation, to which the the collapse of civil order into tribalism had contributed, he accused the Security Council of 'fighting a rich man's war in Yugoslavia while not lifting a finger to Somalia'.

Shawcross does not leave it there, quoting Boutros Boutros-Ghali's complaint to the British ambassador to the United Nations that the crises in Bosnia and Somalia were similar, 'except for the fact that the parties in Somalia are not sophisticated and did not wish the UN to become involved, whereas those in Bosnia are sophisticated, welcome the UN, but violate the agreements the UN helps them conclude'.

In the end, it would turn out to be an important distinction as the belated - and largely US mission - trundled up Somalia's beaches and headed towards disaster. But Boutros Boutros-Ghali's point was - and remains - a crucial one, underlined more recently by the international community's attitude towards crises in East Timor, Chechnya, the Congo and Kosovo.
Put at its simplest, if you are white and living on the edge of Europe, the world is prepared to move mountains. If you are not, or live within the field of influence of a decrepit B-list superpower (Russia), then you can simply forget it.

And it is not just in the question of ‘armed humanitarianism’ that Shawcross finds the West apparently incapable of getting to grips with the contradictions of helping keep the peace. In post-conflict settlements, the West is found equally wanting. In Cambodia and in Sierra Leone, to mention two examples, the assistance of the international community in attempting to forge a new civic society after long periods of bloodletting also saw an insistence on the accommodation of those who, in the former Yugoslavia, would be indicted as war criminals.

Shawcross's book is long overdue, if demanding in attention, as he relates his series of nasty, murky wars. The case he makes is a good one, too. For with the best will in the world, it is difficult to ignore his conclusion - that the old pragmatism and partialism of the countries who claim moral leadership of the world lives on.

Review by Peter Beaumont as printed in the Guardian UK.