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What's Wrong With Black Hawk Down

BY BRENDAN SEXTON III

When I first read the script to Black Hawk Down, I didn't think it was the greatest thing in the world–far from it. But I thought the script at least raised some very important questions that are missing from the final product. I was misled to think that the release of the film would allow for forums like this one–where some of these questions could be answered. In certain scenes, U.S. soldiers–before they even entered the now-infamous firefights in Mogadishu–were asking whether the U.S. should be there, how effective the U.S. military presence was, and why the U.S. was targeting one specific warlord in Somalia, Gen. Mohammed Farah Aidid.

As we moved closer to actually filming the script, the script moved further and further away from the little that existed of its questioning character.

In February of last year, another actor and I flew down together to Georgia for our "Ranger Orientation Training" at a place many of you might know–Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia.

In Atlanta, we caught a shuttle plane to Columbus, and on our flight, there were a bunch of guys with Marine haircuts speaking Spanish. It took us a few moments to realize these guys were "students" of the School of the Americas, the U.S. Army's own terrorist training camp for Latin America, which is stationed at Fort Benning. That started to put things into perspective.

For the next five days, we received a crash course in military training at Fort Benning, and I learned a lot. The U.S. Army Rangers, who we were po

of soldiers that only number 1,500 or so. Their average age is 19. They're not Special Forces, but they carry out "Special Ops"–or Special Operations.

While they trace their history back to wars that helped to ethnically cleanse Native Americans and to their exploits in the Civil War fighting for the South, the modern-day Rangers were created to help rejuvenate a defeated and demoralized U.S. imperialism after the war in Vietnam. Since then, they've been used in all sorts of interventions–from Lebanon to Grenada to Panama, and, of course, Somalia.

The Rangers–whose motto is "Rangers lead the way"–are supposed to be the shining example of the Army. Their extreme training, tan berets and ugly haircuts are supposed to separate them from the hundreds of thousands of other soldiers.

Before you go to Rangers school, you go through the Rangers' own version of boot camp–which is called RIP, or the "Ranger Indoctrination Program." RIP is only about three weeks. In Rangers school, you get one meal a day and two hours sleep for about 10 weeks.

This is all meant to simulate the harsh conditions of war. But no matter how much you train and no matter how much you complete mock missions in life-sized mock cities at Fort Benning, it can't prepare you for actual combat, when the bullets are ripping past your head.

During the Cold War, Somalia was a client state of the former USSR, with the U.S. supporting the regime of King Haile Selassie in rival Ethiopia. When Haile Selassie was overthrown, the alliances switched, and the U.S. then backed the dictator Siad Barre in Somalia.

From the late 1970s onward, the U.S. sent about $50 million a year in arms to Barre's regime to help him keep a tight grip on the country. When repression wasn't enough, Barre exploited divisions among the different clans in Somalia. When Barre was overthrown, these clan rivalries exploded.

The civil war that followed caused a horrible famine that took 300,000 lives, as the warring factions took over the farms of rival clans and burned their crops.

Had the U.S. given Somalia constructive aid–like money for agriculture and infrastructure, instead of military aid–the famine most likely never would have happened. U.S. intervention was supposedly to stop this famine, but the reality is completely different.

The film Black Hawk Down paints the Somali people as wild savages. Elvis Mitchell, who reviewed the film for the New York Times when it opened in December, wrote: "The lack of characterization converts the Somalis into a pack of snarling dark-skinned beasts–intended or not, it reeks of glumly staged racism."

I think that's an accurate description. The Somalis are portrayed as if they don't know what's going on, as if they're trying to kill the Americans because they–like all other "evildoers"–will do anything to bite the hand that feeds them.

But the Somalis aren't a stupid people. In fact, many were upset because the U.S. military presence propped up people tied to the old, corrupt Barre regime. The United Nations wasn't too favored either–because the UN was run at the time by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a former Egyptian official who also supported Barre's regime.

The Somalis had plenty of reason to be upset with the U.S. presence, especially when the U.S. objective changed from "food distribution" to basically kidnapping Gen. Aidid. Aidid had climbed the ranks of Barre's regime, later helped to depose him and then became the U.S. government's "Public Enemy Number One."

There was nothing much different about Aidid from the other warlords vying for power. The main difference was that he wasn't yet ready to cut a deal with the U.S.

Warlords, dictators and terrorists are normally okay with the U.S., as long as they do the bidding of U.S. corporate interests. In fact, the U.S. promoted Aidid for a time. He belongs on that long list of former U.S. allies who commit atrocities with impunity, but once they step out of line are denounced as the "new Hitler"–a list that includes the likes of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic.

What the U.S. tried to accomplish in Somalia was nearly unprecedented. The goal was to travel thousands of miles to a different continent and literally kidnap someone who was surrounded by armed men.

The first few attempts to capture Aidid and his top lieutenants were disasters. First, U.S. troops attacked the wrong house, which turned out to be the office for the UN Development Program. Later, they attacked the offices of the charities World Concern and Doctors Without Borders.

Unfortunately, there's little information out there on Somalia. What happened in 1993 is probably the most under-researched U.S. intervention of the past 50 years.

This is unfortunate because there's much to learn from Somalia. For example, many people who were horrified by the destruction caused by U.S. bombs in Afghanistan called on the U.S. to use ground troops to minimize the killing.

Let's not forget that U.S. ground troops caused much more devastation in Mogadishu–killing close to 10,000 people in a matter of just a few weeks. Let's not forget that U.S. ground troops

turned whole neighborhoods of Panama City to rubble in 1989, while killing thousands of people.

We can't just question the tactics used by the U.S. military. We have to question the U.S. government's claim that it has the moral high ground to intervene anywhere, at any time, in any way it so chooses.

Somalia, in certain ways, represents a recurring theme with U.S. interventions abroad. It's one of the poorest countries in the world, coming face to face with the world's richest and most powerful–much like Afghanistan.

One of the true tragedies of the war in Somalia was the support that it received from liberals and even radicals.

When the world's biggest military attacked a struggle for national liberation in Vietnam, it was met with dissent at home. This created what was called the "Vietnam syndrome"–the reluctance of the U.S. to commit ground troops abroad.

The Vietnam syndrome was a good thing. It meant that the U.S. had to pull out of Indochina, and it meant that the world's biggest bully couldn't as easily go wherever it wanted, thus saving millions of lives.

The 1980s saw the restoration of U.S. imperialism–baby step by baby step–with covert and overt operations in Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Panama.

But the rehabilitation really took place in the 1990s, with the reinvention of U.S. imperialism through what became known as "humanitarian intervention"–operations like "Operation Restore Hope" in Somalia, "Operation Restore Democracy" in Haiti in 1994, and interventions in the former Yugoslavia in 1995 and 1999.

When the U.S. was attacking genuine national liberation movements, it was much clearer why U.S. intervention had to be opposed. But when the U.S. went up against the "evil dictators" in the interest of "helping people," it became more confusing.

U.S. officials used the cover of "humanitarian intervention" for missions abroad that actually worsened people's lives in those countries.

Afghanistan–bombing an already war-torn country, leaving more than 3,700 dead and hundreds of thousands more on the brink of starvation. Kosovo–2,000 dead in the 1999 bombing campaign, the war worsened the refugee crisis, and generations to come will grow up with high levels of cancer because of the U.S. use of depleted uranium. This is the "humanity" of U.S. humanitarian interventions.

This should teach us that, at best, the U.S. can only create a more violent, unstable world when it intervenes abroad.

Many people say that those of us who are against the war have no answers to the world's problems. They say that we advocate doing nothing. But hindering the U.S.'s ability to intervene is actually doing something–it's saving lives.

Plus, our movement can take up slogans and demands like "Money for jobs, not for war" and "U.S. out of the Middle East"–which, if won, could actually better millions of people's lives.

That's a project worth fighting for, and, if you're not involved with that fight already, I encourage you to get involved.

Brendan Sexton III, who has acted in Welcome to the Dollhouse and Boys Don't Cry, played the role of "Alphabet" in Black Hawk Down. This is the text of a February 11 speech he gave at a Columbia University forum on the war.

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