



GEOPOLITICAL, DOMESTIC, OR HUMANITARIAN? THEORY-TESTING FOR THE UNITED STATES' 1995 BOSNIA INTERVENTION

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RESEARCH QUESTION

In revisiting the United States' 1995 intervention into the Bosnian War, which are the most compelling theoretical explanations for why the US chose to intervene?

ABSTRACT

The multilateral, US-led intervention in Bosnia in 1995 is often upheld as a quintessential example of humanitarian intervention. However, essential questions remain about the precise reasons for US involvement, and this paper hence investigates three different explanatory theories that seek to provide answers. The first theory, that the US acted on geopolitical interests, is discussed across three dimensions — achieving relative gains over Europe, enforcing national security and Bush's "New World Order," and mitigating the threat of war spreading. The second theory involves domestic influences that prompted President Clinton to intervene: the upcoming election cycle paired with public opinion polls, and then the media's "CNN effect." The third theory, humanitarianism, uses measurements of popular opinion and Finnemore's (2003) norms of intervention to test whether alleviation of human suffering was the dominant motivation. Ultimately, this article determines the geopolitical rationale to be an intriguing exposition of *realpolitik* but holistically the least compelling. However, the latter two theories — domestic factors and humanitarian motives — both provide substantial and evidence-based rationales for contextualizing US decision-making. Through evaluating these theories across a wide range of evidence and utilizing elements of process-tracing methodology, this article strives to illuminate the rationale behind this instance of intervention and underline the power of analytical tools in understanding US foreign policy.

THEORIES

- 1 Geopolitical Interests**
 - A Potential for relative gains over Europe
 - B National security and "New World Order"
 - C Concern over war spreading
- 2 Domestic Influences**
 - A Popular opinion polls and election year
 - B Media and the "CNN effect"
- 3 Humanitarian Motives**
 - A US public opinion
 - B Finnemore's (2003) norms of humanitarian intervention

1995 REGIONAL MAP



Source: United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Dayton Agreement, 24 November: Bosnia and Herzegovina*, [Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1995] Map, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2009584228/>.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

Geopolitical Interests

- A US bid for relative power over Europe is *realpolitik* to extremes, with only sparse logic to support that the US could have predominantly intervened to undercut established allies.
- Concern over US credibility and NATO's reputation had a formidable impact on US decision-making, specifically in protecting the "omnipotent superpower" image and American vision for a New World Order of prosperity. Anxiety over the conflict spreading — the war threatening stability in the rest of Europe (and hence US security interests) — remains the most powerful lens of analysis.

Domestic Influences

- There is strong evidence that public polls, the upcoming election, and media coverage of atrocities directly prompted Clinton to intervene. Directionality of correlation issues remain, and the CNN effect is contentious. However, this theory effectively answers *Why then?* with a shift in popular thought (a partial result of media coverage) combined with Clinton's presidential aspirations.

Humanitarian Motives

- US popular support for a humanitarian intervention in Bosnia solidified after the reveal of cleansing campaign, and with the strong link between public polls and Clinton's Bosnia stance, this section of the theory is exceptionally compelling.
- Holistically, this theory is strongest, effectively matching the Bosnia intervention's multilateralism, approval by international organizations, and non-Christian subjects of aid to Finnemore's (2003) norms of humanitarian intervention.

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