

'Doing God's Work' in Somalia

by Murray N. Rothbard

And so to every sailor, soldier, airman, and marine who is involved in this mission, let me say you're doing God's work.

~ President George Bush December 1992

In his scintillating article on the Somalian incursion, *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham, one of the few left-liberals who remains staunchly anti-foreign intervention, quotes the above words from our recent president. (Lewis H. Lapham, "God's Gunboats," *Harpers Magazine*, February) Lapham notes that Bush issued his "prelate's benediction" to the troops even though lacking "both the miter and the shepherd's staff." He also notes – in a timely reminder to those conservatives who have not yet re-examined their devotion to the preceding president – that on that very same December day Ronnie Reagan, speaking at Oxford University, urged the United Nations to develop "an army of conscience" to confront the "evil (that) still stalks the planet" even after the death of the Soviet Union. Since it is difficult to imagine evil stamped out from the world very quickly, this presumably implies a permanent standing world army to vanquish and keep down evil and sin in whatever quarter of the globe they might raise their ugly heads. In short, a permanent global Crusade.

The *real* evil – this crusading spirit itself – first swept over America in the late 1820s in the form of what is technically called "post-millennial pietism" (PMP). In the dominant "evangelical" form that PMP assumed in the "Yankee" communities of the North (New Englanders and their transplanted kin in upstate New York, northern Ohio, northern Indiana, etc.), this meant that every man had the bounden and overriding duty to maximize the salvation of his fellowmen, by stamping out sin and the temptations thereto. In short, he was bound to work his darndest to establish a Christian Commonwealth, a Kingdom of God on Earth. It very quickly became clear that sin was not going to be stamped out very quickly by purely voluntary means, and so the PMPers rapidly turned to government to do the stamping out and the creating and the uplifting. In short, as one historian perceptively put it, for the PMPers, "government became God's major instrument of

salvation."

This turn to government was facilitated by the "pietist" part of the PMP doctrine, for this meant that the old Puritan emphasis on creed and God's Law, much less the Catholic or Lutheran emphasis on liturgy or the sacramental Church, was swept aside. Christianity became totally focused in a vaguely pietist, "born again," mood on the part of each basically creedless and Church-less individual soul. Shorn of Church or creed, the individual PMPer was necessarily forced to lean upon government as his staff and shield.

Slowly but surely over the decades since 1830, this mainstream Yankee Protestantism became secularized into an only vaguely Christian but passionately held Social Gospel. After all, with this sort of mindset, it was easy for God to gradually drop from sight, and for government to assume a quasi-divine role. It was left to the monster Woodrow Wilson, a PMPer to his very bones and a Ph.D. as well, to take this domestic creed and extend it to foreign policy. It was essentially a "today the U.S., tomorrow the world" credo. Once the PMPers took over the U.S. government and imposed a Kingdom of God at home, their religious duty got raised to the planetary level. As the historian James Timberlake put it, once the Kingdom of God was being established in the United States, it became "America's mission to spread these ideals and institutions abroad so that the Kingdom could be established throughout the world. American Protestants were accordingly not content merely to work for the kingdom of God in America, but felt compelled to assist in the reformation of the rest of the world." (James Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement, 1900–1920*, New York, Atheneum, 1970, pp. 37–38)

Since Woodrow Wilson, every American president has followed faithfully in the footsteps of the Wilsonian creed. The content of the Kingdom of God to be imposed on other nations may have changed slightly (from alcohol prohibition and coerced global "democracy" in Wilson's day to smoking prohibition, free condoms, and global democracy in our own) but the form and the spirit remain all too much the same.

In the February *Triple R*, we blasted the Somalian invasion and cited Isabel Paterson's perceptive and prophetic denunciation of the "Humanitarian with the Guillotine." Now, in an uncanny, unconscious echo of Paterson, Michael Maren writes a chilling and significant article in the leftist *Village Voice* ("Manna from Heaven: Somalia Pays the Price for Years of Aid," Jan. 19) about his own experiences as an American aid worker in Somalia in the early 1980s. Before that, Maren had spent four years as a leading relief worker in Kenya. From his African experience, Maren learned a crucial fact about the African polity: that the urban technocratic and bureaucratic ruling class in the African countries (generally educated in Marxism in the imperial motherland) has nothing but total contempt for the productive peasant classes off whom this ruling elite battens. To the ruling elite, which taxes, controls, and coerces the peasantry, the peasantry are scum to be "modernized"; particularly scorned are the often prosperous tribal,

cattle-raising nomads, whose nomadic way of life seems to be a constant reproach to Marxoid technocrats intent on emulating Stalin and forcing their rural populace into the "twentieth century." Maren had seen thousands of the nomadic Turkana tribe starve in Kenya, largely due to the policies of the Kenyan officialdom, who would "exploit the starving (Turkanas) by offering to trade small amounts of donated relief food for the hides of their animals, the last remaining things of value the refugees owned...Ultimately it dawned on me that the suit-wearing, tea-sipping, Europhile politicians in Nairobi didn't really give a s__t about the 'primitive' nomadic people in the north."

Maren, who shifted from Kenyan to Somalian relief in early 1981, then gives us a good, concise history of the Somalian polity. Somalia became an independent state in 1960, as the British and the Italians pulled out of their respective Somalian colonies and the two joined into one nation. From the beginning, the Somalian government was obsessed with fulfilling the promise of the five-pointed star of the new Somali flag: to incorporate a Greater Somalia uniting all five groups of ethnic Somalis. Two of those points: Italian Somaliland in the east and British Somaliland in the north, had already been achieved, but there were (and still are) three remaining: little Djibouti in the northwest, formerly French Somaliland and still a client state of France and containing 5,000 French troops; northeastern Kenya, to the southwest of Somalia, which is 60 percent Somali; and the Ogaden desert, to the west of Somalia, which is called Western Somalia by the Somalis but happens to be groaning under Ethiopian tyranny.

Not much could be done about combating French imperialism in Djibouti, but the other two goals were considered achievable. Kenya attained independence a bit later than Somalia, in December 1963, and Somalia had hoped to lop off northeastern Kenya for its own (called in Kenya the Northern Frontier District (NFD)). When the Kenyan government insisted on keeping the NFD, the Kenyan Somalis, egged on by Somalia, began a long guerrilla war against Kenya, an as yet futile war that still continues, out of sight and out of mind of the United Nations.

More explosive was the Ogaden, where Somalia and Ogaden Somalis launched a guerrilla war against Ethiopia, but stood no chance against the superior American-trained Ethiopian army under the "freedom-loving, pro-Western" yet slave-holding Emperor, Haile Selassie, the Lion of Judah. In 1967, the Somalian government, led by Prime Minister Mohammed Egal, decided to succumb to reality, and to make peace with their more powerful neighbors. Egal's peace process had the merit of facing reality, but it angered the Somali military, who accused Egal of selling out Greater Somalia and betraying the five-pointed star; a military coup, led by Major General Mohammed Siad Barre, ousted Egal and established a dictatorship in October 1969.

Barre promptly threw in his lot with "scientific socialism," and he and his Supreme Revolutionary Council established an alliance with the Soviet Union, happy to welcome another "Marxist-Leninist" state and to ship arms to a useful enemy of the "pro-American" Haile Selassie.

A massive Soviet arms buildup, and thousands of Soviet military advisers training the Somali army, led Ethiopians and Kenyans to become even more ardent in their "pro-American" passions.

Five years later, however, came the great sea-change in the Horn of Africa: a military coup of Marxist-Leninist army officers overthrew the Lion of Judah in 1974 and established a Marxist-Leninist military dictatorship under the junta, the Dergue, led by Colonel Meriam. The Soviets embraced the new military junta, and amidst the turmoil, General Barre took advantage of the Ethiopian crisis and invaded and conquered the Ogaden in 1977. Another point in that star!

The Soviets, however, poured arms and the Cubans sent troops to aid Ethiopia, at which point Barre turned to the United States, playing down his Marxism-Leninism and undoubtedly discovering a new commitment to "freedom" and "democracy." But the Carter administration was slow in delivering aid, and the Soviet-aided Ethiopian army drove the Somali army out of Ogaden in the spring of 1978.

Barre's popularity was plummeting in Somalia; the hero of the Ogaden had become the loser. And so Barre stepped up his dictatorship in Somalia, increasingly narrowing the ruling clique to his own Marehan tribesmen and within that to his own relatives. Impervious to any of this development, the new Reagan administration sent none other than Dr. Henry Kissinger to Mogadishu in early 1982 to assure the despot Barre of our eternal support for this "scientific socialist" dictator, all of course in the name of anti-Communism and the Cold War. As Maren puts it, "From Washington, the barren wastes of Somalia suddenly looked like downtown Berlin."

Enter Michael Maren into Somalia as a food monitor for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Maren was in charge of tracking the relief food from Mogadishu to the Hiran desert district in the north, which contained nine refugee camps near the Ethiopian border. Maren quickly found that fully two-thirds of the U.S. food to the refugees was being stolen, most of the theft being conducted by the refugee camp commanders, Somali army officers who sold the food, or else it was just taken by the soldiers, or by the Somali-supported Ogaden guerrillas of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). The WSLF also systematically raided the refugee camps for able-bodied young men, whom they would conscript into their continuing guerrilla warfare against Ethiopia in the Ogaden.

What about the refugees in the nine camps? Why were they there, and were they really starving? Maren discovered the truth: in the first place, the refugees were there because they were nomads fleeing the Ogaden, where they had been caught between the Ethiopian army and WSLF. Second, the number of refugees was deliberately highly inflated by the Somali government, in order to sucker Americans into sending aid. Barre was claiming two million refugees when there were far less (he had originally claimed half a million). Thus, Maren found that one camp, Amalow, which was supposed to have 18,503 refugees,

and had food allotted for that many, really had only about 3,500. As a result, *far too much food* was being shipped into Somalia and into the camps by the bamboozled Americans.

Not only that: just as occurred eleven years later, the American excess of food was inspired by duplicitous journalists, "who took pictures of the sick and the hungry, and the relief agencies arrived on the scene with food. And the food was being stolen."

Moreover, Maren reveals, despite the massive theft, "no one was starving to death in the refugee camps." Oh, there was plenty of death all right, but the death was caused by disease: malaria, measles, dysentery, diphtheria, pneumonia, river blindness. But food, though not the problem, kept pouring in and being stolen.

There was more method to this madness than simply providing free American food for Barre's army and for the Ogaden guerrillas. As Maren perceptively points out, the Somalian government, like the Kenyan government, hates nomads. Even though the nomadic Somali refugees weren't starving, they were attracted to settling in the refugee camps by the promise of free food. After all, it's easier to sit in a camp and receive food for free than to have to hunt and work for it. As Maren puts it:

"Somalis are nomads who spend most of their time looking for food. If you put a pile of food in the desert they will come and get it...The famine camps were set up and they came."

And so the American food unwittingly played into the hands of Barre and later Somali rulers: helping to build a modern socialist state by settling nomads. Maren puts the point trenchantly:

"African leaders like to settle nomads. Nomads make it hard to build a modern state, and even harder to build a socialist state. Nomads can't be taxed, they can't be drafted, and they can't be controlled. They also can't be used to attract foreign aid, unless you can get them to stay in one place.

"In addition, many African leaders, trying hard to be modern, view nomads as an embarrassment and a nuisance. Anything 'primitive' is an embarrassment and a nuisance. From Bamko to Nairobi I've listened to Africa's elite discuss nomads as if they were vermin."

Maren then concludes about the American relief program of the early 1980s:

"So not only was the refugee relief program feeding Barre's army, it was settling his population of nomads...And all this was happening with the assistance

of energetic young foreigners who were helping to build the infrastructure of those new, refugee-populated towns, setting up clinics, drilling wells, trying to teach the former nomads how to settle down and grow food."

What had happened to the cattle of the nomad refugees? Some was lost to drought; the rest was left behind with family members. Traditionally, nomads who had lost their cattle to drought got assistance from relatives and other clan members; but now, in 1981, they had another option: free food in the refugee camps.

But, as Maren points out, the Ogaden desert is sparsely settled: one family would have eight to ten square miles of desert for grazing their camels and goats. But the refugee camps played hob with, you should excuse the expression, the nomad's eco-system. Now each family was packed into a few square yards. There is no need to learn about sanitation when you've always got ten square miles of desert to roam around in. But sanitation became a big problem in the refugee camps: hence, rampant disease and death.

After monitoring the relief situation in the Hiran district, Maren and his colleague Doug Grice, who was performing the same task in the Bardera region and near the Kenyan border, sat down and wrote reports to their bosses in the USAID program. The reports concluded that the relief program was killing at least as many people as it was saving, and that the net result was to ship food to Somali soldiers who added to their income by selling food, and to enable the WSLF to use the food as rations to conduct the guerrilla war in the Ogaden. Their boss rejected the report, saying: "You guys know you can't write this stuff. Stick to the facts," i.e., to the amount of food missing and stolen. And, too, keep the reports technical and boring, so that no critics of the program might figure out what's going on.

In his final report to his bosses before quitting the program, Michael Maren pointed out an economic absurdity created by the program: people in the towns wanted to know why they were not entitled to the food and health care handed out free to those refugees who had settled in the camps. A man in the town of Belet Huen – the headquarters town in the Hiran region – working for the very high salary of 800 shillings a month, could not supply his family with the amount of food the refugees in the camp received for free.

Maren concluded his report with a prophetic insight into the future: he noted that the American Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) were submitting hundreds of proposals to improve services to the refugees. But Maren warned:

"Expanded services to the refugees will only aggravate the problem by encouraging them to stay, and more refugees to arrive. It will spread more thinly the resource base leaving the door open for a real emergency situation in the future. The future for refugees in the camps holds only years of relief."

Instead, Maren declared, the efforts of the international community should be to get the refugees out of the camps, not to attract more.

A study of the Somali economy at the time discovered that the relief industry constituted no less than *two-thirds* of the Somalian economy. No way that the Somali government would give that up. And now, twelve years later, the 1981 camps are still there, "the residents of those camps are still dependent on relief food and still have no way to earn a living on their own."

So the question is: how could Somalia, a land that used to be self-sufficient in food, have gotten to the point where virtually everyone seems to be dependent on U.S. and other outside relief? Michael Maren was succeeded in Somalia by one Chris Cassidy, who spent seven years there with USAID, Save the Children, and FAO. Cassidy told Maren recently:

"One of the things that got Barre and his henchmen p__d off was when you wrote reports saying that Somalia was self-sufficient in food. That was because free food is what controls the place. The mentality is, 'Why should we let people produce their own food and control their own lives when we can keep them under our thumbs and under the gun? We claim famine, flood, and refugees and get the food shipped in here for free. Now we'll tell you when to eat and when you can't eat!'"

In short, the food "crisis" has been deliberately created by the Somalian government – by Barre and his successors – in order to exert control over the Somali population, to tell them when and who shall or shall not eat. The humanitarian, said Isabel Paterson, is only happy when a country is filled with breadlines and hospitals. The humanitarian with the guillotine!

During the Reagan and Bush administrations, and until 1988, the Barre regime received the phenomenal sum of \$100 million a year in military and economic aid from the United States. Finally, in May 1988, the major opposition to Barre, the Somali National Movement of the Issaq tribe in northern Somalia, seized a few towns; the Barre regime replied hysterically, bombing, shelling, and gassing their opposition, killing at least 50,000 people. The regime proceeded to search for, and execute, unarmed Issaqs, and the result was a civil war that raged until Barre was finally toppled in the fall of 1990. By the fall of 1989, Barre's massacres could no longer be overlooked, and the U.S. cut off its aid to his regime.

Maren's analysis of the current situation is that this is simply more of the same ills that have created the problem. The U.S. marines are handing everything over to the PVOs, the relief people, who aggravate the problem still more by pouring in more free food. And what do the PVOs get out of it? Fat government contracts, as well as fat donations by deluded humanitarians who think that these reliefers are doing

good and helping to solve the problem. Journalists help the PVOs by getting their information from them and featuring these heads of CARE, Catholic Relief Services, and World Vision on television. The press assumes "that these are humanitarian agencies whose only goal is to help people." In fact, warns Maren, "they are organizations that stand to reap huge benefits in the form of lucrative contracts to deliver food."

These are the do-good relief organizations that have only made all the problems worse: "These are the same organizations that have failed for the past 10 years in Somalia and all over Africa. (Hundreds of billions of dollars of aid in Africa over the last thirty years have left the continent more famine-prone and dependent on outside relief than ever.) They had thousands of refugees in camps in 1981, and they failed to get them out of the camps. They didn't get them their cattle back. They didn't teach them to grow food and to be independent. They just delivered food and collected grants for development projects." These relief agencies, Maren declares, *want* to fail, for "failure means a chance to try again with new grants, new film footage for fundraising campaigns, and fresh new volunteers who haven't learned yet that aid kills."

For the real objective of these agencies, Maren has concluded, is to raise money. These outfits are essentially rackets. Even though sending food hasn't really helped, what these agencies can do best is to raise money. "Aid," Maren declares, "is a business. It is a business in which people make careers, earn a good living, get to see interesting places, and have great stories to tell when they get stateside. It's a business that has to earn money to pay its executives, pay for retreats and for officials to attend conferences in Rome, buy four-wheel drive vehicles, buy advertising time on television. It's a business that makes money by attracting clients, i.e., starving, needy people."

Maren declares that he has among his friends several dozen long-time workers for these African relief agencies. All of them "thought they could do some good while enjoying the adventure." And not one of them thinks that the years of work and millions of dollars have helped, have done more good than harm. "All of them are convinced that whatever the original intentions of an aid agency, inevitably raising money becomes the primary objective." That money consists of funds raised among the American public, but primarily from U.S. government contracts. Cooking up more projects means getting more funds, which also means expanding the relief agency. Expanding the agency means more power for the top executives, and the more money it gets the more people the agency can claim to be helping.

The crucial point, Maren concludes, is that "reckless use of food aid causes famine. It depresses local market prices and provides disincentive for farmers to grow crops." All this makes the food shortage worse, and causes greater calls for food relief; and so the well-meaning foreign intervention grows and cumulates, fueled by agency venality, and causes the spiral of famine-aid-famine to get worse and worse. Until finally the marines land to try to solve the

problem. The humanitarian with the guillotine.

The only way to solve the problem, Maren declares, "is a way that may seem cruel": it is to *stop the food* – to "wean Somalia from dependence on donated food." And then, Maren states, "all of them – the marines and the relief agencies – should get out as soon as possible." All in all, Maren concludes, "in the fragile political and environmental ecosystem of Somalia it is much easier to screw things up than it is to set them straight...the longer they (the marines), stay, the worse it will get." No paleolibertarian could have put it better.

Meanwhile, some rationality seems to have burst into the pages of the *New York Times*, not usually a place receptive to paleolibertarian concerns. "Does Free Food Hurt?" cries a headline (Jan. 13), and it turns out that there is a "paradox" of famine relief: food charity has just about ruined the previously prosperous farm population of Somalia. For who will buy food from local farmers when they can get food free from international suckers?

The "paradox" that so confused the *Times* correspondents is actually natural law – economic law – at work. It is a law that decrees: government intervention, out! In Somalia, or, for that matter, anywhere else.