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Black Hawk Down and the Framing of Somalia: Pop Culture as News and News as Pop Fiction

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Abstract

Barely one month before leaving office, President George H. W. Bush ordered 28,000 American troops into Somalia. It was the largest American humanitarian operation in many years. The operation was intended to halt the starvation of thousands of Somali civilians caught in the crossfire of warring factions jockeying for power following the collapse of the country's central government. In the end, the operation failed. This paper seeks first, to examine the basis and nature of the framing of this event by American news and entertainment media during the American adventure in Somalia and in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, and second, to explore the image of the Somali created in the American public mind by this framing.

Key Terms: Pop Culture, Pop Fiction, Operation Restore Hope, Media, Television, Framing

Résumé

A un mois à peine de la fin de son mandat à la tête des États-Unis, le président H.W. Bush a ordonné l'envoi de 28 000 marines en Somalie. Il s'agissait là de la plus vaste opération humanitaire menée par l'Amérique depuis un certain nombre d'années. Cette opération avait pour but de sauver des milliers de civils somaliens pris entre les feux croisés de factions rivales engagées dans la poursuite du pouvoir à la faveur de la chute du gouvernement central. Cette entreprise s'est soldée par un échec. Ce présent article se propose, dans un premier temps, d'analyser le fondement et la nature de la projection par les médias américains d'information et de divertissement de cet événement pendant l'aventure américaine en Somalie et après les événements du 11 septembre 2001, et

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dans un deuxième temps, d'examiner l'image de la Somalie telle que créée dans l'esprit du public américain par la couverture médiatique de cet événement.

Mots clés : Culture populaire, Imagination populaire, Opération Restorer l'Espoir, Media, Télévision, Perception.

Introduction

Television images told the grim story. The land: barren, sucked dry by scorching sun, buzzards gnawing at decaying carcasses of camels and goats strewn over the landscape. The people: malnourished children with flies in their noses and open mouths, adults with bloated stomachs, shriveled skin and wasted flesh. Human corpses rotting in the street, food for stray dogs. And men and boys with AK47s shooting at vehicles delivering food to the dying.

These media images which relentlessly bombarded the American people at prime time provided the backdrop for the U.S. response to one of the worst global humanitarian crises of the early 1990s. In December 1992, barely one month before leaving office, President George H. W. Bush ordered 28,000 American troops into Somalia. The stated mission of this military adventure, code-named Operation Restore Hope, was to intervene in a conflict involving armed factions jockeying for power in the eastern African country following the collapse of the country's central government, a conflict that left thousands of Somalis starving to death. One year later, President Bill Clinton, responding to public opinion, recalled the troops. The mission had failed and had cost American taxpayers more than \$850 million.

The operation, intended to help Somalis, had turned into a shooting war between U.S. troops and Somali civilians one fateful day in October 1993. Nineteen Americans and more than 1,000 Somalis were killed. The failed operation became the basis for the movie *Black Hawk Down*. Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer and directed by Ridley Scott, *Black Hawk Down* stars Josh Hartnett, Ewan McGregor, Tom Sizemore and Sam Shepard as American soldiers who find themselves trapped in a bloodbath when U.S. helicopters crash in Somalia during a shoot-out with Somalis. A book of the same title was serialized in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and a video documentary was also broadcast on CNN the week the movie was released. We seek here: first, to examine the basis and nature of the framing of this event by American news and entertainment media during the American adventure in Somalia and in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001; and second, to explore the image of the Somali created in the American public mind by this framing.

Conceptual Framework

The Somalia expedition was the largest concentration of American troops on African soil in history. Despite the fact that the earliest attempts by both the administration and the media were to cast the operation in non-military terms, the coverage of the operation was at par with that of other recent American military operations abroad in such places as Beirut, the Persian Gulf War, Panama and Grenada. Somalia received more coverage in American media in the space of one year than any other African country in history – more than the Congo crisis of the 1960s, more than South Africa at the height of apartheid and more than the Nigerian civil war in the early 1970s.

It is argued here that American media coverage of Somalia during those twelve months from December 1992 to December 1993, like the mission itself, had little to do with the reality of the plight of Somalis. Both had little to do with the problems confronting Somali society and how to address them. Rather, the American mission, in this author's view, had to do with serving the objectives of American foreign policy. We argue that the way the American news media framed their coverage helped mask the real objective of the mission and thus legitimize the government's stated intention.

Even though stories about Somalia flowed from every conceivable media outlet in the United States, the actual sources of coverage were the Associated Press (AP), Cable News Network (CNN) [in that order] and a handful of network television and print media correspondents. Also, in Somalia, the foreign correspondents lived in the same quarters and traveled around in packs. They maintained close and cordial relations with the military establishment in Mogadishu, unlike in past military operations where relations were often strained.¹ These factors imposed a general uniformity on the stories, whether print or electronic, flowing out of the media outlets to the media audiences. For the purpose of this essay, it serves little or no purpose to cite sources of specific stories since practically all the sources played more or less the same story lines. Instead, the discussion centers on general story categories representative of the images American audiences developed about Somalia from watching and reading the news.

Western journalism, and especially American journalism, continues to operate under the theory of deductive reasoning. It fancies itself as driven by objectivity. In Western 'newspeak', objectivity is taken to mean that news stories are selected against a universal set of news values or news characteristics that exist independently of the journalists and the news organizations they work for. This notion of objectivity assumes that news

stories are free of reporters' and editors' biases or the prejudices of journalists or their pre-existing attitudes and ideologies.

Other than timeliness (today's news may be stale tomorrow) and the expectation that the subject will interest a broad cross-section of media audience, news by Western standards is defined in terms of proximity, impact, prominence, novelty and conflict. Proximity means the same happening is bigger if it happens in your area than if it is 1,000 miles away. Thus the floods in the Midwest become bigger news in the United States than the floods in Bangladesh, even though the devastation and loss of human life were far greater in Bangladesh than in the Midwest. Impact refers to the number of people an event or idea affects, whether positively or negatively, and the extent of that effect. Thus, Bill Clinton's health plan becomes bigger news than his administration's crime bill. Prominence implies that happenings involving well-known personalities or institutions are more interesting, if not more important, than those involving less-known personalities or institutions. Thus, a child abuse allegation against Michael Jackson is bigger news than demands by 100,000 IBM employees for better wages and working conditions – unless, of course, the workers strike against IBM. The unusual makes news. Novelty, then, implies that the consternation of a traditional Maasai herdsman trying to understand the 'simple' process of opening a savings bank account for the first time is bigger news than the successful effort of a village co-operative in Kambaland diverting some of the waters of the Tana River for 26 miles in order to create an irrigation scheme for growing fruit and vegetables to sell to the local tourism industry.

Western journalists argue that these news values are universal. The differences in treatment of the same news event in different 'professional' or 'independent' media, they argue, is largely a function of the geographical location of the particular media outlet, not of human judgment. This, and this alone, accounts for why two American tourists dead in Gaborone is bigger news in the U.S. media than 100 Pakistanis killed in a rail accident in Islamabad.

A fundamental premise for this view of journalism is that news is an objective truth or reality somewhere out there waiting to be observed or gathered by the journalists, and not something that reporters and editors create. Once observed, it is subjected to the test of news values (proximity, impact, etc) to determine how worthy or unworthy it is to devote any newspaper space or air time to it, and how much of such space or air time to devote, i.e. how prominently it should be treated, if at all.

The more modest proponents of this view of objectivity, such as Howe (1968) admit that, like most human theories and practices, it is not perfect. For instance, Howe admits that there are times reporters have to dig up information when they suspect something is happening. Even then, he argues, the reporters largely uncover facts that had been previously concealed and are not making up or creating new facts. He concedes that in such situations the story may be affected by the reporter's judgment, but emphasizes that when it comes to the news, such cases are the exception rather than the rule because 'the biggest news stories are not "dug up", they just happen in God's good time' (14).

Not so, says Griffith (1974). Some news 'happens', the rest is discerned (1974:19). Griffith (1974) argues that 'facts' such as stock market closings and batting averages can and do pass as 'straight' reporting. He argues, 'Much else and that which matters most, requires selection and judgment' (1974:17). For Griffith, the real question of bias or slant begins much earlier - in the decision about what is pursued, or not pursued, as news. Think of all that is said aloud daily the world over. Then think of every child, prince or pauper, who fell off his bicycle, measured against every other accident, great or small. When confronted with this enormity of detail, we may question a journalist's choice, but not his need to choose.

But how does a journalist choose from all this? According to Gitlin, media frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters. They are 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual' (Gitlin 1980:7). While largely unspoken and unacknowledged, media frames organize the world both for journalists who report it and, to some important degree, for us who rely on their reports.

Frames, Gitlin argues, enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences. In a world of increasingly consolidated corporate media, audiences become more dependent on journalists to provide them with the representations, the signs, of the world by which they can encounter the world's reality. 'People find themselves relying on the media for concepts, for images of their heroes, for guiding information, for emotional charges, for recognition of public values, for symbols in general, even for language.' (Gitlin 1980:1).

According to Gitlin (1980:239) media framing can best be explained by the Gramscian theory of hegemony – a historical process in which one picture of the world is systematically preferred over others, usually through practical routines and at times through extraordinary measures. Normally the dominant frames are taken for granted by journalists and reproduced and defended by them for reasons, and through practices, that the journalists do not consider as either ideological or hegemonic (Hall 1973:237-239).

For years, both before and after the Cold War, American media have tended to frame their coverage of the rest of the world in ways that reflect the desire of the U.S. government – and, through it, the American citizen – to be seen as committed to alleviating suffering in the world. American media framing – both in the news and in other popular culture productions, especially cinema – also often reflects the American desire for the U.S. military to be seen as a force for good in the world. These ideological underpinnings, largely commonsensical to the American journalists, would work to routinely shape the coverage of the American intervention in Somalia. Also at work would be the dominant frames American journalists routinely appealed to in covering such subjects as poverty, crime race relations and urban crises at home.

In American media practices, the representations produced by this framing of the news routinely loop back through other forms of cultural productions, such as the entertainment media, where they are extracted, reframed and recast as reflections of social reality. At an even deeper level, the social knowledge created by these entertainment media shapes the manner in which journalists interpret and report the world and the ways in which their audiences understand the news.

This circular process characterized the American media's coverage of Somalia. Reporting from Mogadishu was driven not by the plight of the Somali, but by the perceptions of the American journalists about the world, the perceived desires of American audiences and the associated need of American media corporations for audience ratings, and by the interests of American policy. At the first level, the American reporters relied on the 'routine knowledge of social structures' already produced and reproduced in the American public mind to shape the Somalia story in a manner that would 'produce recognitions of the world' in the ways that their audiences in America had 'already learned to appropriate it' (Hall 1973:239). At the second level, American journalists framed the Somalia story to reflect the psychological desires of the American audience. At the third level, they framed the story to reflect the objectives of American foreign policy and to appeal to that aspect of American society that high-

lighted imperialism's central place in American politics and culture (Williams 1982).

Somalia's History and Structure of Somali Society

A fascinating aspect of recent Somali history – which we have no space to expound fully in the scope of this article – is the contribution of American foreign policy to the plight of the Somalis and to the events leading to the American intervention in 1992. Somalia's misery and despair, so often and vividly depicted on American television, are the result of centuries of intense competition by powerful forces, internal and external, over the control of the Somali. This competition displaced and divided the people, destroyed their traditional lifestyle and cultural balance with the land, and made a mockery of peaceful existence and development. In the past 300 years, the Somali have been colonized by five foreign powers and betrayed by the United Nations, the United States and the former Soviet Union. This history of betrayal explains the suspicion with which Somalis view foreign intervention in their country and the Somalis' reluctance to cooperate with international organizations.

Despite this history, the Somalis have come to exhibit considerable cultural unity and great pride in their nationalism. Somali society is organized on the basis of large self-contained kinship groups or clans called *rer*. The *rer* usually consist of a number of families claiming a common descent from a male ancestor. Somalis owe strong loyalty and obligations to their *rer*. However, European colonialism threatened Somali cultural cohesion and insulted their national pride.

Modern Somali nationalism is a combination of Islam and anti-imperialism and has struggled to transcend clan divisions and make all Somalis aware of a shared language, religion and way of life; and to sensitize them about their potential for unity and a common destiny. This dream for a 'Greater Somalia' has stood in stark contrast to the concrete realities of the legacy of colonialism which left the Somali people divided among several nations states outside of Somalia: the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, the Northeastern Province of Kenya and Djibouti.

Responding to growing Soviet influence in Egypt in the 1960s, the United States decided to provide Ethiopia with military and economic aid and helped Ethiopia rebuff a Somali attempt to annex the disputed Ogaden region in 1963. After that brief war between Ethiopia and Somalia, Washington became Ethiopia's main supplier of capital, expertise, and technology, as well as munitions. This relationship ultimately drove Somalia into an alliance with the Soviets. The socialist revolution in Ethiopia in 1974

ended the U.S. alliance with Ethiopia. It was also followed by internal strife and large-scale famine. Somalia took advantage of this in a series of fierce attacks in 1977 against Ethiopian garrisons in a bid to recapture the Ogaden. Within three months, Somali victory seemed certain. The tide turned in spring 1978. However, with the support of Soviet equipment and Cuban troops, Ethiopia pushed back the Somali assault, leaving hundreds of thousands of Somali refugees in its wake.

The terrible reversal placed great strain upon the stability of the regime in Mogadishu as President Mohammed Siad Barre faced a surge of clan pressures. Somalia broke relations with the Soviets and turned to Washington. The U.S. negotiated to take over the former Soviet base at Berbera and to build a new base at Kismayu. So cozy was the relationship between Washington and Mogadishu that at one moment Barre agreed to allow U.S. firms to dump their toxic waste in the country's vast desert, a project that was torpedoed by protests from governments in the region and international environmental groups (Weekly Review 1980; Sunday Standard 1980).

For the next decade, the United States supplied Somalia with military equipment and training. Western aid flowed into Somalia. The gross national product, while remaining one of the lowest in the world, grew faster than the population. While this growth helped mollify the clans, it also had negative side effects. By the mid-1980s, external food assistance had completely sabotaged domestic agricultural production by undermining the price structure. Somalia became a refugee economy totally dependent on external aid (World Bank 1988:356).

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev and the decline of communism cost Somalia its strategic importance to the United States. Western aid declined and virtually stopped at a time when the region was also faced with severe drought. The economy collapsed totally. Somalis starved and internal strife intensified. President Barre signed a formal peace protocol with Ethiopia, but anti-government guerillas, expelled from bases in Ethiopia, began attacking government posts inside Somalia. Somalis from refugee camps, who had been absorbed into Barre's army and militia, felt betrayed by the peace agreement with Ethiopia and began deserting and attacking Barre's own clansmen. Barre's government finally collapsed in January 1991. He fled to Kenya where he eventually died, leaving Somalia torn between feuding clans. Somali's history and structure provide an important context for understanding U.S. response to the humanitarian crisis in the region.

The American Objective in Somalia in 1992

When George H.W. Bush ordered American troops into Somalia in December 1992, the stated objective was to subdue the warring factions, open supply lines for international relief agencies and help distribute food and medicine. The troops would help end the suffering in Somalia where 350,000 had died in the inter-clan fighting following the overthrow of President Barre in January 1991 and where millions more were threatened with starvation and disease. It was a simple and convincing story, given the pitiful images of starving Somali children carried on prime time TV news programs in the weeks prior to the decision.

There were indicators, however, that the United States had other more compelling reasons for sending American troops into Somalia. Following the collapse of state communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, President Bush had declared the beginning of a 'new world order'. By building the international coalition against Iraq in the Persian Gulf War, he had shown America's ability to organize a global consensus to contain aggression. In an August 1993 cover story titled 'Globo-Cop: Does America Have the Will to Fight', *Newsweek* reported that with tribal warfare spreading in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, the U.S., as the only remaining superpower needed to demonstrate its ability to manage such instability in the new order – a kind of global cop. It would be difficult, the magazine wrote, for the U.S. to extend the values of market capitalism in a world torn by internal conflicts. In Bush's 'new world order', there was also the need to define a new role for the U.S. military and to justify continued American military adventurism abroad. The last point is important given the death of Soviet communism and the end of the Cold War.

In an earlier story on June 28, 1993, *Time* magazine reported that while the mission to Somalia was expected to pioneer a new kind of American intervention, the later multinational operation under the United Nations was to be a forerunner of a new kind of UN intervention. This intervention would be undertaken without the traditional invitation from a host government and carried out not by the usually lightly armed peace-keepers, but by forces carrying enough weapons to fight a serious battle. But why Somalia? Why not send troops to stop the killing in Bosnia, Colombia or southern Sudan?

In a December 7, 1992 article 'Somalia's Agony: Time to Send in the Troops', *Newsweek* reported that the U.S. administration believed that military intervention in Somalia might actually work for several reasons. First, Somalia had no government to oppose such an intervention and no

allies to help resist it. Second, Somalia had no jungle, swamps or forested hills from which guerrillas could ambush foreign troops. Third, Somalia had no functioning air force and no real army. Fourth, the American foreign policy establishment considered Somalia a nearly ideal laboratory in which to test the theory that the application of force can right some of the world's wrongs.²

Whatever the reasons for the U.S. adventure into Somalia, there was a striking absence of historical perspective or context in the coverage of the Somali problem in American media news especially on television. Such historical perspective was especially relevant given that it was U.S. foreign policy that contributed directly to the collapse of Somalia.

By the time President Bush ordered U.S. troops into Somalia, nearly all the smaller clans had aligned themselves with either of the two most powerful leaders in conflict, Mohammed Farrah Aidi and Ali Mahdi. The two had more or less divided the country between them, and life was beginning to return to normal in the territories under their respective control. The Somali nation-state, as previously recognized by the international community, had ceased to exist, and it appeared eventually to split permanently into two different countries (*The Independent* 1993).

Most of the deaths in Somalia were caused not by war but by famine. In addition to the collapsed economy, there had been little rain in the country for three consecutive years from 1989 to 1991. Indeed by 1991, international relief organizations and the UN estimated that more than one million people were likely to die of starvation in the country (*The Economist* 1990:64; see also, World Bank 1989). But governments, international organizations and private relief agencies worldwide lacked the political will to respond to the crisis.

At the height of the Somali crisis, governments and the media in the West were preoccupied with the situation in the Persian Gulf. The suddenness and magnitude of the Kurdish refugee crisis caught them off guard at a time when a Western coalition was congratulating itself for what it considered a clean conclusion to the war with Iraq. The scale of the cyclone disaster in Bangladesh and the swiftness with which it followed the Kurdish crisis were even more devastating. Western governments and the media had time for little else, and the impression given at the time was that the world could not accommodate another major crisis.

The Somali situation was even sadder, because unlike the Kurdish crisis and the Bangladesh disaster, it was predicted and could, therefore, have been prevented. Early in 1989, the United Nations estimated that 250,000 people had died in the country the previous year when the rains

failed. It warned that should the rains fail another year, the situation in the country could quickly escalate from manageable to disaster levels. In 1989, the rains failed again.

By early 1990, international organizations operating in the region, such as Oxfam, were sending out urgent appeals for action by the international community. The World Health Organization predicted malnutrition on a massive scale. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization estimated that at least 650,000 tons of food was required to feed those at immediate risk (*Africa Recovery* 1989:2). The U.S. State Department and the European Community issued separate reports early in 1990 citing similar figures (U.S. State Department 1990).

Despite the international consensus on the extent of the problem and levels of external assistance required, little was done to alleviate the situation. By the time the Gulf War erupted in August 1990, less than 100,000 tons of food had been pledged, and only about 50,000 tons had been delivered (African Medical Research Foundation 1991). A few months later, President Barre was overthrown and Somalia was plunged into anarchy.

Conflict in Television News

Discussion of how U.S. media represented Somalia is informed by the author's assessment of television coverage given the medium's special relationship to violent conflict. As a medium developed primarily for entertainment, television thrives on drama, and television news is largely concerned with the immediate story. As such, television news assumes that conflicts have no history. In this view, television news has to be shown, not told. As a medium, television loves conflict: the drama of violence, cities burning and foreigners killing each other in distant lands. But history requires narration and is, therefore, not dramatic enough for the medium.

While TV loves conflict, it also hates confusion. This compels TV to organize news into story formats presumed most capable of holding the attention of viewers regardless of the subject or content. If conflicts have any history, TV assumes that such history is either too distant to be relevant or too complicated for the audiences to understand. So it uses simple modes of exposition to frame complex conflict situations into simple issues involving two or so easily identifiable adversaries, and a narrative structure involving a simple progression of events towards the resolution of conflict.

A common format for achieving this simplicity is to present stories as if they were related. Sometimes the stories are connected by cause and effect relationship. Epstein (1973) argues that 'where the nexus between different

events occurring in different places is problematic, if existent at all, a relationship can always be inferred by an interpreter of events' (239-240), usually some 'authority' interviewed by the journalists for this purpose.

Indeed, any two stories can be related by placing them in a more general category, just as in geometry any two points may be connected with a line. The relationship between such stories is not ineluctably drawn; it exists in the eye of the interpreter and is shaped by the range and limits of his or her vision (Epstein 1973:240).

Another common form is to cast each event, which in itself might not be immediately relevant to the lives of those watching, into conflict stories that presumably have universal appeal. With only limited time for background explanation, the dilemma is resolved by selecting news pictures that have 'instant meaning'. To meet this requirement 'news stories are illustrated with certain kinds of readily identifiable images with emotional appeal' (Epstein 1973:242).

Throughout this creative process, the media profess the objectivity of the news they produce, claiming that reporters largely uncover facts that may have been previously concealed but do not create new facts, as is the case with Hollywood. In the case of Somalia, as is often the case with much of the news, the media not only created new facts, but created them out of fiction.

Framing Somalia

In this section, we discuss some of the formats used by the American print and electronic media to frame the U.S./UN mission in Somalia and the representations that emerged as a result of this framing. The very earliest images after the Americans landed in Somalia were those of the *GI as Mother Teresa*. These images focused on legitimizing the stated mission of the U.S. military and its codename, Operation Restore Hope. American soldiers were splashed on newspaper front pages and prime-time television screens dishing out candy bars and biscuits to adoring Somali children. Grateful Somali women were pictured offering flowers to the GIs. To put the story in perspective, archive clips were used showing armed Somali guards chasing the hungry away from feeding stations before the arrival of the U.S. troops, women and children weeping or bleeding after scuffles over food and shiploads of Somali refugees arriving in Yemen. Over and over, the world watched images of GIs giving immunization shots to Somalis, giving piggy-back rides to smiling Somali children, showing rag-tag units of laughing Somali youngsters how to march to songs of U.S. Marines or teaching them to sing 'Jingle Bells'.

These powerful images not only helped U.S. audiences understand the need for the presence of troops in Somalia, they also helped break down public resistance in the United States to the plan of turning the humanitarian operation into a thinly veiled attempt at nation building. To further reduce public resistance to the American adventure in Somalia, the U.S. invited the UN to take over operation of the humanitarian mission, but military control remained in the hands of the United States. From then, the humanitarian mission quickly turned into a nation-building project.

The shift in focus from humanitarian mission to nation building presented the problem of how to explain the role of a heavily armed foreign army on foreign soil. To address this problem, it was important to cast the problem of Somalia as largely one of a breakdown in law and order. In this context, the media's coverage shifted to framing the Somalia crisis as a *gang war*. The media stressed the homogeneity of Somali society in terms of one people, one language, no tribal divisions and one faith (Islam). They emphasized the absence of the kinds of divisions that had led to political conflicts elsewhere, including race, nationalism, tribe, religion, even ideology. This was no Nicaragua or El Salvador. Communism was dead. It was not Northern Ireland or Bosnia. Having ignored the complexity of Somali history and politics, the unfolding story frame claimed the forces at work in the Somali conflict were greed and cruelty. This story frame even adopted the language of crime or gang wars, and leaders of the various political factions were called warlords.

Contrary to this framing, there were complex political issues at stake in Somalia. Among them was the nature and objective of the U.S. intervention itself. One of the earliest criticisms of the U.S./UN intervention in Somalia was that it had ignored Somali cultural structure. The U.S. attitude seemed to be that social structure could only exist under a functioning nation state. Contrary to such belief, traditional Somali social institutions had survived 500 years of different forms of colonialism and continued to do so even under the terror of factional warfare. American disregard for these institutions and their leaders was seen as a breach of etiquette and a display of arrogance and was even criticized by some of the strongest supporters of the U.S. within Somali society. The then United Nations' envoy to Somalia, Mohammad Sahnoun, was fired for voicing such criticism within the UN itself.

An Africa Watch (an affiliate of the New York based Human Rights Watch) report that the troops 'had engaged in abuses of human rights, including killing of civilians, physical abuse, theft' and that 'many UNOSOM soldiers had also displayed unacceptable levels of racism toward Somalis'

was ignored. The report concluded, 'UNOSOM has become an army of occupation' (Human Rights Watch: 1993). Following that criticism, Rokia Omar, herself a Somali, was fired as director of Africa Watch.

One of the most powerful representations used in the early coverage of the Somali mission was that of *Mogadishu as a black ghetto*. This frame provided American viewers with images familiar to them in domestic news: black neighborhoods in inner city projects infested with crime and drugs and young adults who were out of control. The media carried accounts of armed young Somali males on the streets of Mogadishu who were ready to kill at little or no provocation. The young Somali males were reported as always high on what the media said was 'a local narcotic' called *khat* in very much the same way American urban black youths were depicted as often high on crack. Media audiences in other parts of the world were amused, because *khat* (locally known as *miraa*) is a widely used and socially accepted mild stimulant in eastern Africa and is no stronger than coffee. For decades, American news organizations such as AP, New York Times and Los Angeles Times have maintained correspondents in Kenya, from where most of the *miraa* consumed in Somalia is imported. When the realization of the inaccuracies of this story line finally dawned on the rest of the American media, the story line was quietly abandoned without any correction. The image had served its purpose of justifying the law-and-order approach to nation building.

Once the Somali mission shifted from relief objective to nation building, the stage had been set for a confrontation between what was perceived in Somalia as the insensitivity and arrogance of U.S./UN forces and an affront on Somali national pride and cultural tradition. On June 5, 1993, the escalating tension resulted in Somalis killing twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers. U.S./UN command blamed Mohammed Farrah Aidid, the most powerful of the factional leaders in Mogadishu. Very quickly, the media's representation of the American GI as an angel of mercy became the *GI as John Wayne*.

The media cast Aidid in the image of paramount gang leader who put out contracts on cops and rival gangs, a kind of modern day Al Capone. A massive hunt was launched and flyers for a \$250,000 award – 'Wanted Dead or Alive' – were posted on street corners all over Mogadishu. From that moment, the Somalia story focused on the hunt for Aidid: the Special Forces brought in to track and capture him and the sophisticated equipment used in the operation. Each small U.S./UN success was reported in great detail. The media did not question the diversion of resources and

public attention from the original mission of feeding the hungry to the hunt for a single individual.

Then disaster struck. On October 3, 1993, a bungled U.S. effort to capture Aidid ended with 19 Americans killed and 78 wounded. Two U.S. helicopters were shot down and one American GI was taken hostage. But it was the image of a dead American soldier being dragged naked along the streets of Mogadishu by jeering crowds that turned American stomachs at home and shifted public opinion about the American efforts in Somalia.

When President Bush first sent troops to Somalia, the American public was led to understand that the troops would not have to fight a war. With so many Americans killed in one day on foreign soil, media representation shifted to *Mogadishu as Beirut or Vietnam*. There was talk of quagmire. Apparently, Somalis had learned the power of the visual image and had used it well. They took the videotape of the gruesome scene and made it available to the American media, knowing it would get maximum publicity. The image of captured army pilot Michael Durant, held hostage and later released, invoked memories of Beirut and Tehran. There was a public outcry to get the American troops out of Somalia. There were also new questions about why America was there in the first place.

The media, in their quest for simple modes of exposition and in their complicity to legitimate official policy, had failed to provide the American public with enough information to confront questions about American objectives in Somalia. The media spotlight moved from Mogadishu to the domestic debate in and outside Congress.

The U.S. military with considerable support from the media had based its policies on fundamental misunderstandings about Somali society. Their efforts were guided by the idea that factional leader General Aidid personally was the problem and removing him from the equation was the solution. They ignored Aidid's legitimacy as a leader among his own people, despite the repeated demonstrations by women, children and old men of their willingness to die to protect Aidid. Much of the rest of the world kept telling the U.S. that it was in Somalia for the wrong reasons. Many Somalis said so consistently. The American media was not paying attention, and the American public never became informed about the depth and extent of Somali resentment toward American paternalism. When Somalis killed Americans in an effort to drive the point home, Americans turned around and accused Somalis of being ungrateful and of not appreciating the help the U.S. had extended to them. There is often the illusion that the victims' values are the same as the values of those who come to the victims' aid. When this is later proven not to be the case, those who came

to the victims' aid complain of the ingratitude of the victims. This is what is called 'the noble victim fallacy'. This fallacy turned out to be the case with the American adventure in Somalia.

This framing of the ungrateful Somali had considerable advantages for both an embattled Clinton administration's decision-making about his predecessor's adventure and for the American national psyche. It provided the opportunity for America to save face by not looking like it had been kicked out of Somalia by Aidid. Media reports, to prove the folly of Somalis, now focused on how the situation could go back to the chaos that reigned before American intervention, or worse.

Setting the Record Straight

What really happened in Somalia in the one year the U.S. troops were there? On December 9, 1993, ABC's Ted Koppel reported on *Nightline* that while \$851 million had been spent on the Somali mission, it was hard to see what gains Washington had made toward 'cleaning up' Somalia. Schools, hospitals and rural clinics were not rebuilt. Food shortages continued. The conflicts in the country had destroyed roads and water sources, including underground wells in the largely semi-desert countryside. And drought had killed virtually all livestock. Funds were needed to rebuild the wells and to help farmers restock their herds.

Indeed, the process of reclaiming the infrastructure had begun before the arrival of U.S./UN forces, although this process was being carried out in a deeply divided country. The presence of foreign troops however, diverted attention and resources to the conflict in the capital, Mogadishu, and away from the rural areas where reconstruction efforts were most needed. So, where did \$850 million go? Much of the money went not to feeding Somalis but to financing the transportation and maintenance of U.S./UN troops and equipment in Somalia. For instance, Koppel reported that more than \$70 million was spent to build a modern mini-city within the UN compound in Mogadishu. At least \$9 million was spent to construct a sewerage and water supply facility in this compound, compared to only \$7 million spent on water resources in the rest of Somalia.

American media coverage focused on the activities of U.S./UN forces rather than on the realities of life for Somalis. The media also focused on U.S./UN casualties and ignored Somali casualties in the conflict. Every U.S./UN casualty was accounted for. The entire U.S./UN force took 79 combat deaths and 327 wounded. Pakistan suffered the most combat deaths, 32. The U.S. suffered 25 deaths and 128 wounded. UN and U.S. officials steadfastly said they had no way of knowing how many Somalis

had died during the operation. America's top official in Somalia, special envoy James Oakley, however, estimated that between 6,000 and 10,000 Somalis were killed by coalition forces and feuding Somali warlords during the hunt for Aidid between June and December 1993. The Red Cross International and Somali estimates ran as high as 20,000 Somalis killed and hundreds of thousands injured (Lippman 1993b and 1993b). That figure did not include destroyed property and lost homes.

Black Hawk Down

Against this backdrop and the intense patriotism following the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the movie *Black Hawk Down* was released. Focusing on that fateful day of October 3, 1993 when Somalis shot down the American helicopters, the movie – like television news before it - ignored the history that led to that confrontation and focused on the more urgent need for America to respond to the events of September 11 and redefine America's position in the world. This silence on history is significant, given the timing of the movie's release, as the U.S. was engaged in a 'war on terrorism'.

Mark Bowden's book, *Black Hawk Down*, on which the movie was based, was published in 1997. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* serialized twenty-six of the book's twenty-eight chapters through the month of November 1997. The newspaper also produced a 56 minute video documentary in the same year as a companion to the book. Unlike the book which contained some of the historical background leading to the downing of Black Hawk, the documentary dwelt mainly on interviews with soldiers and on dramatic military video clips and radio transmissions of the battle that were released by the Pentagon to the newspaper. The documentary was broadcast on CNN in February 2001, long before September 11, 2001. The making of the movie-version was almost complete on September 11. Here the coincidence ends.

After September 11, CNN and other TV stations broadcast the documentary on numerous occasions, especially during the military build-up leading to the military strikes in Afghanistan. The title of the original documentary *Somalia: Good Intentions, Deadly Results* was supplanted by network banner headlines with catchy phrases like 'Lessons in Modern Warfare', which was the subtitle of Bowden's book, or 'War Lessons From Somalia'. Military experts appeared on practically every news channel to talk about how the lessons from Somalia would serve the U.S. military well in the coming war in Afghanistan and how those lessons had been incorporated into the training of U.S. Special Forces. Suddenly, Somalia

had ceased to exist as a humanitarian mission that went wrong and had been transformed almost overnight into an unfinished military operation.

The movie *Black Hawk Down* was scheduled for release in October 2001, but the release was delayed by the carnage of September 11. Weeks before the release of *Black Hawk Down*, the Motion Picture Association of America held a private screening for senior White House advisers and reportedly allowed them to make changes. It was not clear what those changes were. However, shortly before the movie was released, U.S. officials began expressing concern that members of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda, now on the run in Afghanistan, could attempt to regroup in Somalia. The officials were contemplating targeting Somalia for possible strikes in the war against terrorism. By the time of the movie's release, nearly every major news outlet in the United States was emphatically stating that the movie was about how U.S. Special Forces were ambushed by al Qaeda-trained fighters in Somalia in 1993. The movie itself never made this claim. The nexus, fictional as it was, had, however, already been established by this media framing. At a time when American emotions were running high, the representations of the Somali in the movie were difficult to distinguish from the representations in the news of the al Qaeda terrorists. American troops were already battling in Afghanistan. The movie had become the medium for the latest media framing of Somalia, *the Somali as a Terrorist*.

There is no doubt Somalia would have been an ideal place for a bin Laden operation, especially before September 11. The country has no real central authority, similar to Afghanistan under the Taliban, and it has 900 miles of an unsupervised coastline. Its interior is remote and hostile enough to evade casual observation. However, the Somali transitional government had strenuously denied that there were any al-Qaeda cells within Somalia's borders, a stance strongly backed by the United Nations' country representatives and regional experts at the time.

During *Black Hawk Down*'s premiere in Washington DC, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Oliver North, among others, appeared to pose for pictures with the movie's director, producer and main actors. Rumsfeld called the movie a moving tribute to America's heroes. His appearance and remarks added credence to reports that Somalia was part of the international terrorism network. More importantly, the movie fed the public support for the 'war on terrorism' in general and for a military strike against Somalia in particular.

There have been some minority voices in the media who argue that the representations in *Black Hawk Down* are not only inaccurate but dangerous. CNN reviewer Paul Tatara called the movie 'one of the most violent

films ever produced by a major studio' (Tatara 2001). In his words 'What the viewer sees are "brave and innocent young American boys" being shot at and killed for no reason by "crazy black Islamists"' (Tatara 2001). *Black Hawk Down*, in Tatara's eye, was 'gorefest disguised as patriotic hymnal' (Cook 2002). He concludes 'Many who have seen the movie report leaving the theater feeling angry, itching to "kick some ass."' In short, 'the film is dangerous' (Tatara 2001). *New York Times* movie reviewer Elvis Mitchell (2001) wrote that the movie 'converts the Somali into a pack of snarling dark-skinned beasts'. His conclusion is that the movie 'reeks of glumly staged racism' (Mitchell 2001). Erick Hamburg, co-writer of the *Pentagon Papers* and producer of the documentary *Nixon*, in an interview with CNN said he, too, saw the movie as a thinly veiled exploitation of the mood of patriotism in the country to punish Somalia for humiliating the United States. In Hamburg's words, 'Somalia is where this whole conflict began and now they are talking about going back there again.... We were humiliated before, and now we're trying to regain our honor. Now we're triumphant. And it's like USA, we're back! We are number one' (*cnn.com.2001* and Wells 2002). *Black Hawk Down* had turned what had been one of America's darkest hours into America's brightest hour.

Conclusion

In the era of global capitalism, U.S. global media conglomerates create history under the guise of objective reporting. The world will remember the images of a scared U.S. Marine Michael Durant held hostage in Somalia and an unnamed dead American soldier being dragged naked through the streets of Mogadishu in much the same way as the photograph of a Vietnamese police chief blowing the brains off a suspect. The world will also remember the images transmitted all over the globe of the American dead being buried in solemn ceremonies, their coffins draped in the national flag. But the world will not remember the 10,000 to 20,000 Somalis killed in the conflict, and it will never mourn them.

Notes

1. It should be remembered that the Somali expedition occurred before the U.S. military conceived of 'media pools' for the First Gulf War and 'embedded' reporting for the Iraq War.
2. See also, *Time* 1993, 'Somalia: The Messy Future of War', June 28.

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