

# Book Review: Today We Drop Bombs, Tomorrow We Build Bridges: How Foreign Aid Became a Casualty of War by Peter Gill

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*In Today We Drop Bombs, Tomorrow We Build Bridges: How Foreign Aid Became a Casualty of War*, Peter Gill examines the increasing politicisation of the provision of foreign aid and the devastating consequences for civilians in war-torn countries and aid workers themselves. Gill's examination of the nefarious intent that can lurk behind humanitarian interventions is an evocative, exacting and indispensable inquiry into the costs of the 'organized ethical confusion' surrounding foreign aid, writes Joanna Rozpedowski.

If you are interested in this book review, you may also like to listen to [a podcast](#) of Peter Gill's lecture at LSE, recorded on 27 April 2016.

**Today We Drop Bombs, Tomorrow We Build Bridges: How Foreign Aid Became a Casualty of War**. Peter Gill. Zed Books. 2016.

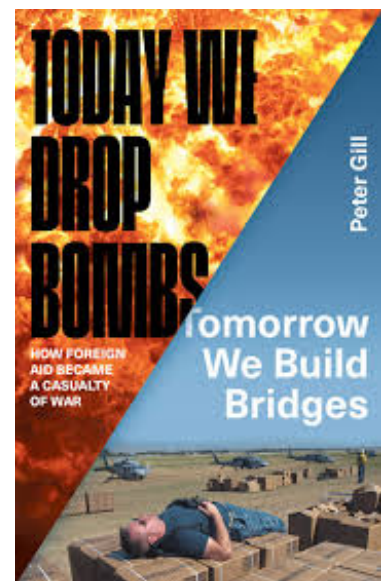
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*The Syrian civil war has presented an overwhelming challenge to the humanitarian aid world. The scale of the suffering numbs the senses. By late 2015, after four and a half years of conflict, the death toll exceeded 250,000. According to opposition monitors, the number of children killed, including those shot by snipers, was more than 12,000. Four million Syrians had fled to neighboring countries (21)*

According to the [United Nations High Commission for Refugees Global Trends Report](#), some 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution in 2015 alone. Of those, 21.3 million are refugees; 3.2 million are asylum-seekers; while one in five people today continue to live in conflict-affected areas.

These heart-wrenching statistics set the scene for the narrative account of the relationship between international aid and the gruesome reality of war, which Peter Gill, a foreign affairs journalist, competently analyses in *Today We Drop Bombs: Tomorrow We Build Bridges: How Foreign Aid Became a Casualty of War*. Gill's striking introductory remark, which he tenaciously litigates, contends that 'everyone is a humanitarian now'. This could not have come at a more relevant time in this unusually violent decade of the twenty-first century, where 'brutality and callous disregard for human life' and a 'vicious mix of poverty, poor governance and violence that sustain conflicts' (131) challenge the authority of international bodies and the efficacy of their response mechanisms. A call to humanitarianism for Gill, however, can also mask nefarious intent, especially when invoked and inevitably co-opted by actors not traditionally associated with humanitarian objectives i.e. the military or dictators and autocrats.

The book is a well-researched and evocative, at times sympathetic but exacting, portrayal of the inner workings of the indefatigable international humanitarian aid industry tasked with operating in a world torn by the unfettered



prerogatives of twenty-first century realpolitik. Gill ably shows the collusions of interests, overlaps and redundancies in humanitarian aid and its often inevitable, albeit resisted, politicisation, which imposes significant risks on the personnel of non-governmental organisations, whose single-minded purpose is to make good on the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality in delivering relief to the most disadvantaged regions of the globe – ranging from al-Shabaab-dominated Somalia, war-torn Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, to draught- and famine-affected Ethiopia and regions of Pakistan touched by natural disasters.



**Image Credit: US Soldiers with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 17th Regiment unload Humanitarian aid for distribution to the town of Rajan Kala, Afghanistan, 2009 (US Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Francisco V. Govea II/Released, Wikipedia Public Domain)**

Novices on the literature on humanitarianism will discover the topography of international aid to be both concentrated by specialisation and variegated on account of the breadth of human need and suffering. Well-established organisations such as the Red Cross, Oxfam or Doctors Without Borders constitute the unsung heroes in the resource-stricken climate of humanitarian assistance complicated by ongoing government scrutiny of funding sources in the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ environment. Gill finds Western governments distrustful of supporting relief agencies whose work may assume more vernacular or traditionally Islamic character.

Tensions also arise when new players in this overpopulated field – such as Turkey, donor countries of Kuwait and Qatar, Doctors Worldwide or Islamic Relief – are accused of being ‘reluctant to coordinate their efforts with mainstream agencies’ (146), leading to ‘duplication and confusion’ (146). Despite this, the cost-effectiveness of their direct-assistance programmes, cultural proficiency and dynamism cannot be discounted as ‘the conduct and character of international humanitarianism are changing’ (152) due to the pervasiveness and geographical dislocation of conflicts.

Gill notes that while a large proportion of humanitarian workers, who as ‘soft-targets’ risk kidnappings or even death in the field, provide assistance out of moral and largely altruistic principles enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, others find bottomless business opportunities. Former mercenaries, retired military personnel, the well-connected consulting classes and private investors – thanks to the endeavours of hybrid actors such as Bancroft Global Investments, coupled with its non-profit NGO Bancroft Global Development – are happily employed in the pursuit of development-for-profit initiatives, which promise to deliver on the company’s speculative allocations of capital in the

'mighty, money-spinning industry' (212) of modern aid.

The military, too, is fast becoming an instrumental element in the execution of two, often contradictory, strategies of performing in the theatre of war and providing 'humanitarian' aid in order to 'win hearts and minds' of those whose livelihoods have been levelled by military strategies. [Rosa Brooks](#) in *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything* underscores Gill's point. This round-the-clock military bulwark of US foreign policy and the government's 'contractor of choice' can simultaneously launch 'raids and agricultural reform projects, plan airstrikes and small-business development initiatives, train parliamentarians and produce TV soap operas. They patrol for pirates, vaccinate cows, monitor global email communications, and design programs to prevent human trafficking.'

Traditional humanitarianism and a new breed of NGO and military contractors or 'aid corporations' (boasting high overhead costs and competitive salaries) readily employed by Australia, the UK and the US, Gill warns, can lead to divisions and tensions, diminish the capacity of traditional humanitarian NGOs to operate independently and put not-for-profit relief agencies in direct competition over scarce resources and operational funds. This may also imply that neutral and formerly non-affiliated relief agencies become the military's very own 'force multipliers' (38) and willing associates of the intelligence-gathering community – an implication that the humanitarian agencies resent.

It is this blurring of lines – as implied by the book's title – between war and peace, civilian versus military prerogatives and humanitarianism versus developmentalism that has 'forced the wider humanitarian movement into retreat in the war on terror' (267) and imperilled the safety of aid and medical personnel in the field. Recent bombings of hospitals in Aleppo, [where a medical facility is attacked every seventeen hours](#), attest to the frequency and seeming normalisation of the practice of violating the near-sacrosanct humanitarian space and inviolability of human life protected by International Law of Armed Conflict/International Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Conventions. 'Neutrality of humanitarian works is at risk of being undermined and neglected' (135), while the 'only weapons in the United Nations armory in New York' are 'words' 'betraying frustration and impotence in the face of this enormous crisis' (268).

*Today We Drop Bombs* is a difficult and challenging book but an essential and timely one, which makes us rethink the true motivations behind so-called 'humanitarian' interventions, the arbitrary application of the 'responsibility to protect' norm, the skewed international response and purposive ineptitude of large international organisations and their neglect of the letter and spirit of their fundamental founding charters and international laws of engagement. We are confronted by hazy sources of funding and even hazier objectives behind development projects; we are asked to question policies and foreign entanglements of governments and their all-too-ready conscription of military forces.

While the book strikes a good balance between historical context and present-day developments, it can also become mired in fragmentary and repetitive detail as in its coverage of the Mercy Corps or *Medicins Sans Frontieres*. Gill's journalistic objectivity is much appreciated and for the most part he shies away from any outright criticism of the modern architecture of humanitarian assistance. Yet, the subject matter cannot but elicit a well-calibrated set of moral assessments and critical responses in the most circumspect of readers, and that is why his more incisive chapters – 7, 8, 11 and 15 – do not fail to offer a fastidious autopsy of the problem.

In the Western world where a good portion of the civilian population is mobilised faster and with more vigour by Pokémon Go or the impending release of the new iPhone, concern for millions of displaced refugees and levelled towns of Syria is sadly confined to the margins of short attention spans and discombobulated lists of priorities. Perhaps this is why *Today We Drop Bombs* is also an indispensable inquiry into our moral health and humanity. Gill's account will leave scholars and practitioners of international law, international relations and the lay public with an interest in current affairs wondering whether our ineptitude is this great and our corruption this stark to do any tangible good in a world suffering from the ceaseless agonies of war. We are richer for knowing that in the midst of modern-day chaos, the book's undaunted protagonists – the international humanitarian organisations – will battle on despite 'this organized ethical confusion' (283) and the all-but-forgotten commitment to peace, security and well-being of the very least of us.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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