

Spring 1995

Response to Lefever

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Recommended Citation

Beutel, Erin (1995) "Response to Lefever," *Macalester International*: Vol. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol1/iss1/13>

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Response

Erin Beutel

I. Introduction

A strong belief in ethics and ideals for the future, together with confidence in one's heritage, is important, commendable, and, to some extent, part of the reason for our gathering. I believe that Dr. Lefever has found this for himself. He is right, "Values Have Consequences."¹ Dr. Lefever's main points reflect the stance that tribalism and ideology are the greatest enemies to peace; that the United States and democracy are the beacons of hope in a turbulent world; and that the United Nations is a "symbol of the world we would like"² but whose actual actions do not reflect this; and that it is the "intent and consequences of political action that matter — not the instruments through which the action takes place."³ All of Dr. Lefever's points reflect an underlying belief in a set of values and ideals aimed at the greater good as well as his belief that these values are best represented by the United States. This focus on values in the name of a new and better world for all people is the strongest portion of his paper. One cannot deny the strength of Dr. Lefever's convictions nor doubt his good intent. Unfortunately, just because a person, culture, or nation, states a given set of values, ethics, or beliefs does not necessarily mean that actions imitate words.

II. Tribalism and Ideology

In the first part of this presentation, I will challenge two of Dr. Lefever's basic assumptions: that tribalism and ideology are the root of all problems in the world, and that the United States is a magnificent model, representing all that is good and right in the world. I believe that these two assumptions are at the core of all of his arguments, including that of the United Nations' role in the world's future.

Let us begin by examining Dr. Lefever's statement that "the two greatest enemies of peace, justice, and freedom are crusading ideologies and rampant tribalism," followed at the end of his

paper by the statement that “the major powers — America, Japan, Germany, Britain, and France—are not bewitched by ideology.” These statements clearly point out two assumptions: (a) that “tribalism” and ideology are bad, and (b) that the major world powers are not infected by them.

Before any real progress can be made in challenging these assumptions, what exactly Dr. Lefever means by these terms must be determined. While he never defines the term precisely, tribalism, as he intimates, appears to be “rooted in the tribal ethic that limits loyalty to and respect for one’s own tribe.” Let us examine this in light of the assumptions stated above. First, is this true? What about “tribal” customs that are aimed at improving the livelihoods of the people and encouraging respect, as in the resurgence of the Mossi custom of Naam. In Naam, village youth from the ages of eight to thirty-five are brought together in groups to work on projects under the supervision of their elders. Everyone in the village is required to participate and everyone in Naam is equal — all ages and both sexes. This tradition not only fosters respect and sharing but also helps to solidify a “tribal” identity, that of living together and sharing with others. This does not strike me as an inherently evil thing.

Secondly, as Dr. Lefever defines tribalism, are the world powers, especially the United States, free from this sometime vice? Remember that to Dr. Lefever, tribal affinity “limits loyalty to and respect for one’s own tribe.” In this formulation, the United States along with the former Soviet Union could be defined as one of the largest “tribal” societies in the world. Zaire is a good example of how this form of tribalism affects others. Early in the 1960s, Patrice Lumumba was *elected* the first prime minister of Zaire. Soon, his brutal assassination was arranged by the CIA, who feared he was a nationalist resistant to neocolonialism. In 1965, Mobutu Sese Seko, currently one of the most corrupt dictators in Africa, was put in power.⁴ No respect was shown for the Zairian people’s choice of government, and loyalty to democracy was sacrificed to the greater logic of capitalism and U.S. economic interests. Even worse, this type of big power “tribalism” has been exercised blindly, as in Socialist Angola, where, in 1986, Cuban troops were described as guarding the U.S. corporation Chevron from U.S.- and South African – backed rebels.⁵

This clearly exhibits the United States' tendency to engage in its own brand of what Dr. Lefever decries as "tribalism." Lappe et al., in trying to understand U.S. foreign policies toward emerging Third World nations, speculate on a scenario that, if true, clearly demonstrates the United States' tribalistic tendencies, as defined by Dr. Lefever.

Insurgencies in the third world do not challenge U.S. Military security or even, ultimately, investments by U.S. corporations. What they represent is the possibility that the United States might not be the last word in democracy, freedom, and opportunity.⁶

In other words, the United States has respect for and loyalty to the forms of democracy and capitalism exercised in the United States; and, therefore, I quote Dr. Lefever, "The tears of a stranger are only water.'"

If tribalism is rampant in the United States' outlook, then what of ideology? According to Dr. Lefever, aggression was "carried out in the name of a crusading ideology, a utopian dream, a missionary impulse linked to race, religion, or a vague historic destiny." He tells us that the United States and its powerful allies are not "bewitched by ideology." If this were true, what were we doing in Korea, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Kuwait, and now Haiti?

In the next section, I will address both the issue of American ideology and the image of "America the Savior," postulating that the United States has neither an "enlightened self-interest" nor "a live-and-let-live approach." The best way to examine this issue is simply to look at some of the international actions of the United States in the last forty years.

III. Contradictions of U.S. Foreign Policy

Perhaps the most blatant act of United States tribalism and ideology occurred not far south of the U.S. border in Guatemala. In 1944, Guatemala underwent a nearly bloodless democratic revolution. In the first peaceful transfer of power, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was elected president. At that time, 2 percent of the population owned 70 percent of the land. Much of this land was

left fallow, and in 1952, Arbenz decided to do something about the critical issues of landlessness and hunger. He instituted a land reform law that would take uncultivated land from the biggest farms and redistribute it to the people; the previous owners would be compensated for the worth of the land listed on the tax records. During the course of this program, 1.6 million acres were expropriated and redistributed to 87,000 peasants, most of them Mayan. Unfortunately for Arbenz, the largest landholder in Guatemala was the United Fruit Company, which owned 550,000 acres, only 15 percent of which was under cultivation. Despite protests, the government proceeded with the expropriation of the fallow land and offered United Fruit the exact amount the land was listed on the tax records as being worth—\$1.18 million, far less than the land was actually worth; but United Fruit had been evading taxes for many years and so had underreported the value of its holdings. Faced with this dilemma, United Fruit chose to lobby Washington, claiming that the Arbenz government was “communist.” It succeeded, and in June of 1954 the CIA organized the direct overthrow of the democratically elected government of Guatemala, providing planes, radios, and, most damaging of all, a media ploy used to misinform not only Arbenz but the entire world about the state of Guatemala and the “red tide” that had to be stemmed. In the end, the CIA also provided a new leader, Castillo Armas. Within three months, he returned 99 percent of United Fruit’s land and almost all of the other confiscated land to its former owners—forcibly removing those who had since occupied it. He then purged Guatemala of all signs of the revolution, imprisoning followers of Arbenz and, when the cages were full, building concentration camps.

There never was any evidence that Arbenz was “communist”; he was simply trying to address the chronic poverty, hopelessness, authoritarianism, and foreign domination that keep so many of the world’s people in wretched conditions. Unfortunately, he did so in a manner that did not please the U.S. In one swift move, the U.S. snuffed out the only democratic Central American government of the time, all in the name of some peculiar democracy known only to the leaders of the United States.

In 1985, the United States gave five million dollars in aid to the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front and to a group

led by Prince Sihanouk, both belonging to the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, were responsible for the greatest human atrocity in recent history—the torture and death of more than two million Cambodians. They were also a self-proclaimed bulwark against communism.⁸ As of 1987, the United States had given more than thirty million dollars in aid to the South African-backed rebels in Angola. Angola is a country that used to be a net food exporter; now it is crippled and, therefore, survives on food aid.⁹ When José Napoleón Duarte was elected president of El Salvador, the United States applauded the democratic change taking place. What some officials failed to mention or realize was that the United States had poured more than two million dollars into his campaign. By insuring his election, the U.S. was able to ignore the fact that most of Duarte's opposition had been either killed or driven into exile and the opposition press silenced.

Of 113 countries receiving U.S. aid in 1985, 43 were ruled by the military. Of that 43, more than *half* frequently committed official acts of violence. One study even found that in the 1970s, twenty-six of the thirty-five governments using systematic torture were receiving U.S. aid. As if that fact alone were not terrifying enough, the U.S. helped train many of these militaries. Since 1950, more than 500,000 foreign military personnel from eighty-five countries have been trained in the United States. Graduates of these programs include Chile's General Pinochet; the former dictator of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza, whose human rights violations are legendary; and the Guatemalan military government responsible for more than 100,000 deaths. Also in the 1970s, the CIA and Green Berets set up paramilitary counterintelligence forces in Guatemala and El Salvador. We know them as the Latin American death squads. Not only did the U.S. train them to be efficient counterintelligence groups, it also taught them how to identify a good target.

In 1983 a CIA manual—*Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*—surfaced in Central America, revealing that the CIA encourages the killing of civilians in its war against the Nicaraguan government. [This includes] the targeting of teachers, health and agricultural workers for assassination...¹⁰

The United States backed all of these governments and countless others like them in the name of democracy and capitalism, believing that all countries should be like the United States, and if not exactly like the United States, very definitely not like the Soviet Union. This was carried out to the point of crushing human rights and supporting exactly the kind of totalitarian cruelty that Dr. Lefever decries as ideological. Consequently, the idea that in the last fifty years the U.S. has had any thought of following a “live-and-let-live” attitude is outrageous. In fact, I would say that U.S. foreign policy more closely follows that stated by former Secretary of State George Shultz, that military assistance has shifted from primarily deterring Soviet expansion to being “primarily intended to deter or defeat aggression and subversion by Soviet surrogates or that of other unfriendly states having their own agenda. . . . In other words, just about any government whose agenda the United States decides it does not like is now fair game.”¹¹ The Cold War is over, but the premise remains the same. Thus, it is obvious that ideology is strong in the United States and that the missionary impulse, the utopian dream (whether you call it a transcendent vision or not), and “manifest destiny” are rampant. The United States is not free from Dr. Lefever’s tribalism or ideology, and it certainly is in no position to be the savior of the world. I think it has done enough already.

IV. Cultural Values

I believe that cultural identity is important and that it will continue to grow in significance in the coming epoch. As the world becomes more and more interconnected through cultural exchange, communication, and integration of economies, the pull of local identities of the people could become very strong. A very simple example of this is something we are all familiar with, meeting new people. In the first awkward few minutes of conversation, one of the first things that invariably gets asked is, “So, where are you from?” and a short exchange on the merits of one’s hometown usually follows. Why? Because it gives us roots, it is part of our identity; and when meeting people, we not only want to establish our identity, but to place the other person as well. There is nothing wrong with this. In fact, one of the

issues today in the United States is the loss of community — blamed for everything from teenage delinquency to a rise in violence. And, as we have seen with the return of the Mossi custom of Naam, tribal or cultural identity can be a very positive thing.

I see no conflict between the vision of a world closely connected and intricately bound and that of a world made up of small communities, of tribes, so to speak. I would not say that this will happen easily or that it will happen at all, but I do believe that as the world becomes smaller, we will continue to see the resurgence of many of the traditional communities, and, unfortunately, I do not believe that this will happen without violence as the world restructures. But, before the world can become intimately connected, a few important changes need to take place; otherwise, the peace we are looking for will never be found.

V. Policy Changes

A. Nonmilitary Aid

One of the major forms of nonmilitary aid the United States gives is in the form of food aid. That is, surplus grain from the United States is either sold to the Third World at an incredibly reduced price or simply given away. Certainly this is good for the U.S., as it creates a demand for U.S. products as well as ridding us of the cost of storing the grain at a cost of well over \$1.5 million a day. However, free grain lowers the price of grain grown within the recipient country and also insures that many small farmers will not be able to compete and may even lose the little land they have. If people lose their means of livelihood, their ability to buy grain at any price is severely diminished. Many of the countries receiving food aid do not even need it. For instance, in 1984, Tanzania produced enough food to feed the entire country and provide a surplus of more than 100,000 tons,¹² but, because of low prices within the country, farmers smuggled much of it out into neighboring countries where they could receive three times the price. To keep prices low and to meet consumer demand, the government asked aid agencies for 200,000 tons of wheat, despite the knowledge that their harvest would more than meet the demands of the country.

Even when food aid is needed, it is, like other forms of development aid, often misrouted because of Western policies and beliefs about development. For years, the Western world has been pouring billions of dollars of aid into the Southern Hemisphere, most of it going to business groups and to governments in order to encourage imports from the U.S. This is part of the so-called trickle-down theory. There is a serious problem with this theory, however, as it “expresses the fundamental contradiction within U.S. development assistance: it’s impossible to go through the powerful to reach the powerless.”¹³ In many countries, the money is simply reinvested outside of the country or the food sold in special stores set up for the elite.

B. Development Aid

For the last thirty years, the United States has been working to alleviate hunger in the Third World not only through food aid but also through development programs. Despite these efforts, poverty and human suffering continue, if not worsen, in those countries receiving aid. Sometimes, it is a simple matter of oversight followed by a corporate *coup de grâce*, as in the Haitian pig crisis. Prior to 1978, pigs provided many Haitians with a source of ready cash and a backup system against crop failure. Almost every household owned a pig, which could be bought for \$1 as a piglet and later sold for as much as \$180. The pigs ate human waste and other refuse that would have otherwise accumulated, they rooted in the fields readying them for planting, and they ate harmful bugs. In 1978, one-third of the pig population contracted African Swine fever, one-third were killed by frightened officials, and the remaining one-third were killed by Agency for International Development (AID) officials out of fear that the disease would spread to the United States. The pigs were then replaced by Iowa pigs that required cement corrals, showers, and imported foods — far more than most Haitians have for themselves. No one in AID thought about this minor flaw in their plan. However, it soon became evident to the World Bank that there was now a potential poultry market. It made its first loan in Haiti. Instead of setting up a poultry program for peasants, however, the loan was intended for large-scale production in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. The effect

of this on the peasant population of Haiti was immediate. As some observers noted, “the promotion of agro-industrial poultry production has effectively blocked small farmers from being able to replace their lost income by producing poultry.”¹⁴ In another context, when tractors were distributed throughout Gambia, no visible improvement was seen in production or living conditions for the majority. Instead, a very few elite, who owned enough land for tractors to be of any real use and had the purchasing power for upkeep, benefited. The rest sat in tractor graveyards when people no longer had the funds to buy fuel for them and when parts within the country were exhausted; importing parts is almost too costly for even the very rich. U.S. dollars were converted into piles of rusting metal and precious Gambian dollars were wasted on long-gone gas and parts.

Often, too, works that make sense on paper in terms of direct aid, such as roads, water, and medical help, end up hurting the poorest people, whom they are trying to help. Roads can actually hurt the smallest farmers, who have no means of transporting their goods along roads, because when larger farmers in the area find their income suddenly boosted, they are able to cut the smaller farmers completely out of the profit loop, and this sometimes results in the smaller farmers losing their land. Water and even medical aid can be withheld by those in power (i.e., those with money) as a form of extortion.

It is not just that the powerful intercept; it is also that the price [often a bribe] demanded for passing on benefits can exclude many of the poor... We have... seen treatment for a broken leg withheld because the sum illegally demanded could not be raised.¹⁵

C. Structural Adjustment

Recently, the IMF and World Bank have proposed a new plan to help Southern Hemisphere countries deal with their long-term debt and the apparent stagnation and decline of their economies. Called structural adjustment, the plan calls for huge government cutbacks to reduce the national debt and the privatization of most government-run agencies. Mexico was the first country to implement this plan after it announced it would not

be able to pay back its loans. Public expenditures were cut nine full GNP points in three years and inflation was brought down to 20 percent. Import licenses were eliminated and import tariffs were reduced from as much as 290 percent to just 9 percent. Initially, local businesses were hurt, but in just four years non-oil exports had risen 300 percent and constituted 70 percent of all exports. Over 900 government-owned businesses were either sold back into privatization or closed down completely. In 1989, Mexico saw the doubling of new investments over the previous year. Real economic growth climbed 3.5 percent in 1990. What effect, though, has this had on the poor, the ones most in need of help? In 1990, the official Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) report stated that "the adjustment process had had an uneven impact on different segments of society, falling disproportionately on the poor, the young, the aged, and the women."¹⁶ Today, one hears about the horror of the slums around Mexico City and the steady rate at which they are increasing as people flee the countryside. In recent months, the uprising by Chiapas peasants has gained international attention in its fight against the current government. One has to wonder if the peasants feel as if they are bearing the weight of the adjustment process.

In 1977, Sri Lanka adopted its own version of the structural adjustment process, privatizing government agencies, reducing trade barriers, and dismantling the social safety net that had made Sri Lanka a leader among poor countries in life expectancy, infant survival, and nutrition. Between 1977 and 1985, the economic growth rate doubled; and between 1970 and 1980, the caloric intake of the poorest 10 percent of the population was cut in half to less than 1,200 calories a day.

Programs that are generally held to provide long-term economic growth tend to have a reverse effect on the poor. Exchange rate rationalization designed to spur exports makes imports, including food and medicines, more expensive. Higher interest rates to encourage domestic savings discourage plant investment and reduce the availability of affordable loans to small farmers and businesspersons. Social programs and subsidies are cut. Monocrop export reliance makes the country highly vulnerable to swings in the commodities market. Less technologically advanced local companies can be overrun by foreign

high-tech companies, and everything is made worse when, despite the poor country's new openness to rich countries, they do not reciprocate the favor and continue to block the import of Third World goods. The former minister of labor in Honduras, where the U.S. continues to pressure the government to privatize government agencies, discussed the idea that the privatization will automatically bring economic improvement for everybody.

This idea of privatization is nutty. They're touting it as if they've discovered something new. What do they think has been the predominant system here for the past century? How do they think we got in this mess to begin with? There is nothing more inefficient and corrupt in Honduras than private enterprise.¹⁷

VI. An Alternative Approach

One of the key factors in the poverty problem is unequal distribution of resources, and the single most needed resource is fertile land. Nearly a billion people are without land in the Third World, the United Nations estimates. Even in Africa, where absolute landlessness is often not the problem, "many small farmers have been pushed onto plots that are too small and infertile to support them."¹⁸ Land reform, much like Arbenz's, in which fallow land would be redistributed from large landholders to those people without land, would help to ease this problem somewhat and reduce the burden of providing for those who had little or nothing.

A. Minimum Wage

For those poor who are not farmers, fair wages are critical to maintaining a decent livelihood, and as long as there are countries that offer no wage restrictions, companies will continue to migrate away from developed and developing countries toward those where their contribution to the local economy in terms of wages is minimal. A good example of this is the Nike company's migration first to South Korea from Oregon and Maine, and then to Indonesia. There, workers are paid just under 14 cents an hour, which is less than the government's figure for "minimum

physical need.”¹⁹ More than 88 percent of the women earning this wage are malnourished and live in shacks with no running water or electricity. While implementing standard wages for its workers, a country may not be attracting companies in the short run; however, those workers who do have work will have more money to spend, thus attracting companies with their demand for goods. The Western world could also benefit greatly from this, as the situation will discourage the departure of Western capital from its home countries.

B. State Intervention

My stance on aid and U.S. involvement is very different from what both Dr. Lefever and traditional Western aid agencies propose. However, for the last forty years, the West has been practicing basically the same policy toward the Third World, encouraging governments to cut spending, increase exports, and allow foreign investors. The result has been absolute poverty for billions, destructive wars funded by Western money in the name of capitalism, the squandering of resources, and the discontent and occasional uprising by the majority of the Third World populations. The struggle against poverty and vulnerability includes a strong and active state. Such has been the case for every successful modern society.

AID’s simplistic belief that the answer lies in ending the government’s role in the economy ignores the history of industrialist capitalist countries like the United States, England, and Japan. They achieved their current levels of development with extensive government intervention in markets. Similarly, AID ignores lessons from third-world countries that have enjoyed rapid economic growth — countries as different as South Korea, Taiwan, and Brazil — where governments have intervened heavily in the economy.²⁰

I also believe that industrialized countries need to take some responsibility for their own actions in other countries and to impose regulations on the behavior of companies owned by their citizens. If these suggestions are made as part of a new approach to transnational life, it is possible to set in place some of the features necessary for a new history in the Third World.

VII. Conclusion

The United Nations is supposed to be a vehicle for world peace and has the potential to solve many of the world's disputes, but, instead, it has become a bureaucratic nightmare and, as B. Zane-gin of Russia said, "The new world order... basically amounts to a 'U.S. dictatorship or hegemony' that is exercised through the Security Council."²¹ In such a situation, the United Nations will never become a genuine peacekeeper of the world or a credible global forum for great issues of human well-being. The reconstitution and empowerment of the U.N. depends upon a new configuration and sharing of decision-making. Like many of the other resources in this world, the U.N. authority and power simply need to be more equally distributed.

In the end, the United States is not the savior of the rest of the world as Ernest Lefever would have it. It is not free from those aspects of tribalism and ideology that he sees as negative—limited "loyalty and respect to one's own tribe"—and the country's "enlightened self-interest" and a "live-and-let-live attitude" is highly exaggerated. The United States has meddled in other countries' affairs in the name of instrumentalist democracy and freedom for the last forty years, often destroying those very things it says it is promoting. Moreover, one cannot categorically decry the resurgence of tribal ethos and cultural identities as totally negative. As I have demonstrated, they can provide a base from which strong communities can grow. The key is to uphold one's own identity without imposing it upon others, which is what I believe that Dr. Lefever's greatest assumption is—that is, that the ideals and beliefs of the United States are in everyone's best interests. When the United States and other Western countries cease to insist that their own economic and political interests are tantamount to the well-being of everyone else, then we will have taken the first step toward a more equal and, therefore, peaceful world. I do not think that there will ever be absolute peace in this world, but I do believe that, given the direction that the world is heading today, there exists the potential for a closely aligned world society made of hundreds of smaller communities bound by a mutual respect for one another's values and mindful of one another's welfare. This may be too idealistic, but if no one dares to entertain that hope, the

new world order will certainly turn into a new disorder of frightening proportions.

Notes

1. Ernest Lefever, "How New Is the New World Order?" *Macalester International* 1 (1995), 83.
2. *Ibid.*, 78.
3. *Ibid.*, 80.
4. Frances M. Lappe, Rachel Shurman, and Kevin Danaher, *Betraying the National Interest* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 23.
5. *Ibid.*, 155.
6. *Ibid.*, 158.
7. Lefever, 76.
8. Lappe, Sherman, and Danaher, *Betraying the National Interest*, 39.
9. *Ibid.*, 39.
10. *Ibid.*, 49.
11. *Ibid.*, 37.
12. *Ibid.*, 92.
13. *Ibid.*, 65.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.
15. *Ibid.*, 64.
16. Robert M. Jackson, ed., *Annual Editions: Global Issues 93/94*. (Guilford, Conn.: Dushkin Publishing Group, 1993), 120.
17. Lappe, Sherman, and Danaher, *Betraying the National Interest*, 68.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Jeffrey Ballinger, "The New-Free Trade Heel" in *Harper's*. August 1992.
20. Lappe, Sherman, and Danaher, *Betraying the National Interest*, 68.
21. Tad Daley, "Can the U.N. Stretch to Fit Its Future?" in *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (April 1992).