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ABSTRACT
In 1992, the United States faced simultaneous humanitarian crises produced by civil wars in Bosnia and Somalia. The administration of President George H. W. Bush decided to intervene in Somalia by a humanitarian airlift and then sending 30,000 troops, but consistently refused to intervene militarily in Bosnia. This selective pattern of intervention poses a puzzle for conventional global governance theories. Explanations relying on national interests, media, and elite engagement all fail to explain why the US intervened in Somalia but not Bosnia in 1992. Even the argument that Bush chose to intervene in Somalia as a way to deflect pressure for intervention in Bosnia fails to explain the sudden transformation of the administration elites’ opposition to military intervention in Somalia. In fact, the Bush administration was drawn into military intervention in Somalia by its decision to launch the airlift. Though it was intended to deflect both domestic criticism regarding inaction in Bosnia and international criticism for neglecting the suffering of Muslims and Africans, the airlift’s clear inadequacy created a strong set of pressures from the media, NGO community, and bureaucracy for a more effective intervention. These factors, combined with the norm-driven national interest of the US to appear that it cared about third world problems, drove the Bush administration to send troops to Somalia to ensure US credibility and respond to foreign and domestic pressures. This case study thus constitutes evidence against the conventional argument that great powers intervene selectively owing simply to clear national interests and strong domestic pressures.

RESEARCH QUESTION
In 1992, the United States faced simultaneous humanitarian crises produced by civil wars in Bosnia and Somalia. The administration of President George H. W. Bush decided to intervene in Somalia first via the Operation Provide Relief aid airlift and then by sending 30,000 troops in Operation Restore Hope, but consistently refused to intervene militarily in Bosnia. This selective pattern of intervention poses a puzzle for global governance theories, and constitutes a profound knowledge gap. Bosnia was located in a more strategically significant region for the US, and many foreign policy elites within the Bush administration thought that key US interests were at stake in Bosnia. The Bosnian War consistently received more media attention than the crisis in Somalia throughout the course of 1992. Moreover, there are numerous other similarities between Bosnia and Somalia. In both cases, the US military leadership strongly opposed military intervention throughout the course of 1992, fearing that it would lead to a quagmire reminiscent of the Vietnam War. By examining US national interest, media attention, and elite and intra-governmental pressure, US intervention in Bosnia would have seemed much more likely than in Somalia.

This essay will address the specific question of why did the Bush administration intervene militarily in Somalia but not in Bosnia. In addition, it will use these case studies to provide insight into the general question as to what factors explain the United States and the international community’s selective pattern of humanitarian military intervention.

WHY INTERESTING?
The question of why the US intervened in Somalia and not Bosnia is not novel. Numerous scholars, particularly Jon Western, David Gibbs, and Samantha Power, have studied Somalia and Bosnia in comparison, and media scholars have devoted substantial attention to exploring the impact of the so-called “CNN effect” on the decision to intervene in Somalia.
However, the answers provided by the various schools of thought on Somalia are largely unsatisfactory. Numerous explanations or the rationale for intervention in Somalia do not make sense because they apply equally well to Bosnia. For instance, the argument that media pressure drove the intervention is hard to accept because Western media devoted much more coverage to the Bosnian War. Likewise, however important President Bush’s personal devotion to human rights and a “New World Order,” this commitment on its own does not explain why he chose to intervene in Somalia and not Bosnia. Furthermore, claims that US intervention was a product of a grave worsening of humanitarian conditions in Somalia are discredited by the fact that the humanitarian conditions had been dire since the beginning of 1992, and were also poor in Bosnia. Western and Gibbs argue that US intervention in Somalia was driven by intra-elite policy debate and national interests respectively, but they fail to adequately explain the administration’s sudden shift from reluctance to military intervention, and also neglect the power of norms in driving US decisions and perceptions of the national interest.

WHY IMPORTANT?

The US decision to intervene in Somalia but not Bosnia carried immense significance for US foreign policy in the 1990s, and is very relevant to the contemporary debate on humanitarian military intervention. US intervention in Somalia served to manifest Bush’s vision of a “new world order” with a reinvigorated United Nations and human rights for all, and was intended to show that the US would intervene when conditions were favourable.1 However, the confrontation between US forces and the militia of leading warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed that culminated in the Black Hawk Down incident reversed support in both public and elite circles for humanitarian intervention with boots on the ground. Following Somalia, the US kept its ground forces out of the worst humanitarian conflicts for force protection reasons, and only put boots on the ground in both Bosnia and Kosovo following a comprehensive peace agreement.2 Most notably, the decisions undertaken by the Clinton administration to avoid future “Somalias” ensured a very weak US policy response to the Rwandan genocide that produced 800,000 deaths and generated refugee flows that seriously destabilized the eastern Congo.3 Moreover, the question of selectivity is highly relevant to contemporary debate on humanitarian intervention. As Paul Williams and Alex Bellamy note, selectivity is one of a trio of principled moral objections to humanitarian military intervention.4 It is also frequently employed by contemporary state critics of the Responsibility to Protect principle.5 Generally, critics charge that great powers intervene selectively to promote their interests, while ignoring conflicts where their core interests are not at stake or even militate against intervention. However, the Somalia and Bosnia case studies seem to show the opposite, as the US intervened not in strategically-important Bosnia but instead in strategically-insignificant Somalia.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most popular explanations for US military intervention in Somalia is that it was a response to the deteriorating situation on the ground. Former US officials John Hirsch and Robert Oakley both argue that the humanitarian situation in Somalia had become “completely untenable,” pointing to the inability of aid agencies to deliver aid to desperate, starving Somalis.6 Likewise, Nicholas Wheeler points out that the UN Security Council acted on the advice of the UN Secretariat that two million Somalis could die of starvation if security conditions to allow aid distribution were not established.7 However, the argument that intervention was produced by a dramatic worsening of conditions in Somalia is unpersuasive. In fact, by the time of the August airlift Operation Provide Relief, little had changed on the ground in Somalia, which had been suffering famine since the beginning of 1992.8 Furthermore, the US and the UN had almost totally ignored Somalia since the end of the Cold War, and the humanitarian situation towards the end of 1992 may have been slightly better than it was in summer 1992.9 Moreover, humanitarian conditions in Bosnia were also quite poor at this time, as Serb forces continued their campaign of ethnic cleansing and the siege of Sarajevo, undeterred by weak US policy responses.10

In contrast to this humanitarian justification, David Gibbs offers a realist explanation for US intervention in Somalia, maintaining that the intervention was aimed at reaffirming US credibility in light of its inaction in Bosnia and advancing key US national interests. The United States had strongly encouraged the pro-American Bosnian government to declare independence and offered it US recognition. However, once the Bosnian War began, the US was clearly unwilling to intervene militarily to protect the Bosnian Muslims from the Serb ethnic cleansing campaign, since Bush and Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Colin Powell feared high casualties and unclear mission objectives.11 Gibbs argues that non-intervention jeopardized US credibility, endangered the US military’s push for continued high spending on defence, and made the NATO Alliance seem irrelevant in responding to security crises. As a result, the US intervention in Somalia was designed to show America’s will to intervene militarily around the world, reaffirm its credibility, and demonstrate its dominance in conjunction with its NATO allies.12 Gibbs also suggests that the US still valued Somalia’s strategic location dominating the Bab-el-Mendeb chokepoint.13

Gibbs’ argument has a certain plausibility. Indeed, it is certainly true that what Power termed the Bush administration’s “policy of disapproval” in Bosnia endangered US credibility.14 However, it fails to account for the sudden disappearance of the longstanding opposition to

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8 Jeffrey Clark, “Debacle in Somalia,” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993), p. 120.
12 Gibbs, *First Do No Harm*, pp. 136-137.
intervention in Somalia by the US military and policy elites. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) had long opposed military intervention in Somalia just as they did in Bosnia, because the combatants were not easily distinguishable and the military feared being entangled in an ethnic civil war with no clear mission or exit strategy. Smith Hempstone, the respected US Ambassador to Kenya, warned Bush that Mogadishu was a second “Beirut” and called for non-involvement with the “Somalia tarbaby.” Likewise, contrary to Gibbs, the Bush administration appeared unconvinced of Somalia’s strategic value, as evidenced by its concern to make Operation Restore Hope a quick intervention in which US troops would quickly turn over control to UN peacekeepers.

Jon Western explains the US policy response to Bosnia as the product of an intra-elite policy debate, in which Bush and Powell intervened in Somalia to deflect attention from and prevent intervention in Bosnia. Relying heavily on interviews with Bush administration officials, Western argues that Bush’s decision to launch Operation Provide Relief was driven by an attempt to show that the administration was not indifferent to suffering while maintaining the policy of non-intervention in Bosnia out of fears of entanglement in a “second Vietnam.” Likewise, the US decision to launch Operation Restore Hope occurred only shortly after President-elect Clinton met with both Bush and Powell and pressed them for a tougher stance on Bosnia. For the Bush administration’s cautious realists who were determined to avoid US entanglement in an ethnic civil war, Western argues, Somalia was preferable to Bosnia because it was an easier and less costly mission. Western is certainly right to point out that the Somalia intervention served to deflect attention from Bosnia. At the same time, however, it is difficult to account for this transformation in attitudes given that the military had conceptualized both Somalia and Bosnia as wars driven by irrational “ancient hatreds.” Moreover, it is unclear how intervening in Somalia would have prevented Clinton from intervening in Bosnia, given that he had advocated airstrikes rather than a ground invasion. Indeed, Bush told Clinton that he wanted to wind up the Somalia intervention as soon as possible, meaning that it would not constrain Clinton for long.

Andrew Natsios, Warren Strobel, and John Sommer emphasize the importance of President Bush’s personal experiences and political will in the decision to intervene in Somalia. Relying on Bush’s personal interest in African problems as shown by his numerous visits there as Vice-President and recognizing his vision of a New World Order in which US leadership could make a difference for human rights, they argue that Presidential will was the key factor in the decision to intervene. This is supported by general literature on humanitarian intervention.

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18 Western, Selling Intervention and War, pp. 160-163.
19 Ibid, pp. 171-172.
20 Valentino, “Perils of Limited Humanitarian Intervention,” pp. 725-726; Western, Selling Intervention and War, p. 155.
21 Power, Problem from Hell, p. 273.
22 Sommer, Hope Restored, p. 32.
23 Andrew Natsios, “Illusions of Influence: The CNN Effect in Complex Emergencies,” in From Massacres to Genocide: The Media, Public Policy, and Humanitarian Crises, eds. Robert Rotberg and Thomas Weiss,
as both Simon Chesterman and Alex Bellamy argue that the key factor determining intervention is a leader’s political will. Nevertheless, the individual determinant was clearly not decisive, as Bush was consistently unwilling to intervene militarily in Bosnia despite his numerous visits to Europe and US interests in preserving European peace.

One of the most enduring explanations for US intervention is the power of media coverage, frequently termed the “CNN effect.” Wheeler argues that media coverage exercised “social power” over Bush, citing Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger’s statement that “Television had a great deal to do with President Bush’s decision to go.”

Likewise, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse maintain that the Western media narrative of “helpless, starving victims” oppressed by “cruel gunmen and warlords” pushed the US and the UN towards a more confrontational approach. While media did clearly play a role in the Bush administration’s calculations, its importance should not be exaggerated. First, as Piers Robinson points out, media coverage of complex humanitarian emergencies has been associated with both humanitarian intervention and non-intervention, as occurred in Somalia and Bosnia respectively. Second, compared to Bosnia media coverage of Somalia was relatively limited. In fact, the policies of the Bush administration and the actions of its officials tended to drive media coverage of Somalia, rather than vice versa, a marked contrast to Bosnia where the administration scrambled in response to public and press criticism.

Finally, Martha Finnemore argues for the importance of normative developments in driving the US intervention in Somalia. She argues that accusations of racism at Western states for focusing on Bosnia while ignoring Somalia played a key role in prodding the US to intervene in Somalia, in what was an essentially defensive response to criticism from UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and others. Finnemore is right to emphasize the power of norms, particularly as Bush was personally impacted by Boutros’ charge of racism and Powell was conscious of the Congressional Black Caucus’ demand for action in Somalia. However, she goes too far in charging that the US intervened in Somalia “without obvious interests.” In fact, as National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft emphasized, the US had a national interest in intervening, because to be considered a “world leader,” the US needed to convince Third World leaders that it cared about their problems. This suggests that instead of producing a “disinterested intervention,” norms transformed US decision-makers’ perceptions of national interests.

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27 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, p. 131.
29 Gibbs, First Do No Harm, p. 138.
30 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, pp. 132, 135-136; Power, Problem from Hell, pp. 273-283.
31 Finnemore, Purpose of Intervention, pp. 69, 83.
32 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, p. 138; Sommer, Hope Restored, p. 30.
33 Finnemore, Purpose of Intervention, p. 55.
34 Power, Problem from Hell, p. 293.
ARGUMENT AND ANALYSIS

This paper will argue that the Bush administration decided to launch the airlift to deflect domestic and international pressures, but this move triggered further pressure from NGOs and the media, while mobilizing an interventionist consensus within the federal bureaucracy and putting US credibility at stake. While the Bush administration initially engaged in Somalia to deflect pressures for intervention in Bosnia, as a result of these pressures its engagement in Somalia escalated far beyond what decision-makers had been willing to countenance in August.

To understand the Bush administration’s decision to launch Operation Provide Relief in August 1992, it is necessary to consider the political context provided by Bosnia. Ever since the Bosnian War began in April 1992, the US government had avoided calls for intervention. Bush did not see the breakup of Yugoslavia as a threat to the democratization of Eastern Europe, and his primary concern was to prevent the conflict in Bosnia from spreading to Kosovo, where it could affect NATO members.35 Likewise, thanks to public and media ignorance of Bosnia, Bush and his officials were initially successful in framing the conflict in terms of ancient irrational ethnic hatreds.36 However, by August the administration was losing control of the public debate. Officials were caught trying to conceal the existence of Serb concentration camps from the public, and media coverage combined with the use of Holocaust analogies in public commentary caused public opinion to shift in favour of intervention.37 Clinton, Bush’s opponent in the upcoming November Presidential elections, supported airstrikes in Bosnia and this stance received positive coverage compared to Bush’s.38 Even within the administration itself, high-ranking neoconservatives in the Defense Department advocated for intervention in Bosnia because they believed the war endangered US interests in Europe.39

Despite this pressure, Bush and Powell were firmly determined to avoid intervention. As Bush told his NSC team, “We are not going to get bogged down in some guerrilla warfare.”40 Meanwhile, the President had become increasingly aware of the problems in Somalia. This was not primarily due to media coverage, which devoted scant attention to Somalia while lavishing coverage on Bosnia.41 Instead, Bush received a cable from Hempstone entitled “A Day in Hell” about the famine in Somalia, on which he wrote in the margin “Let’s do everything we can to help.”42 Similarly, Bush brooded on Boutros’ charge that the Security Council was “fighting a rich man’s war in Yugoslavia while not lifting a finger to save Somalia.”43 At the same time, he was conscious of criticism from the Islamic world, which increasingly charged the US with hypocritically going to war to defend its oil interests in the Persian Gulf while ignoring the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia and Somalia.44 The decision to launch Operation Provide Relief thus represented a complex mix of domestic political calculations, the President’s political will to act, and the normative pressures for intervention stemming from accusations of racism and hypocrisy. However, the airlift decision was clearly a very limited step, with military

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35 Gompert, “The United States and Yugoslavia’s Wars.”
36 Western, Selling Intervention and War, pp. 149-151; Valentino, “The Perils of Limited Humanitarian Intervention,” pp. 725-726.
37 Power, Problem from Hell, pp. 276-279.
38 Western, Selling Intervention and War, p. 158.
39 Ibid, pp. 146, 158-159; Gibbs, First Do No Harm, p. 113.
40 Western, Selling Intervention and War, p. 160.
41 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, pp. 131-132.
43 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, p. 138.
44 Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, Humanitarian Intervention, pp. 173, 177.
intervention definitely off the table. Top officials favoured an airlift because while it showed the administration had a heart, it was also a safe non-combat mission and seemingly easy to disengage from. As a sign of the political motivations that drove the airlift, Bush decided to launch the operation without consulting top USAID officials, who in fact knew that it could never provide enough food.

While the administration’s decision to launch the airlift was very limited and handicapped by strong policy constraints against military intervention, it created pressures that drew the US into deeper engagement in Somalia. As Bush intended, the airlift diverted media attention away from Bosnia and produced a wave of coverage on Somalia, which was further facilitated by the influx of Western NGOs. Admittedly, the media’s interest in Somalia did not last long. Nevertheless, media framing of the conflict facilitated intervention. Reflecting media reluctance to cover “just another African war,” Western media portrayed Somalia as a famine, dramatizing the efforts of noble foreign aid workers to save defenceless African victims from starvation, while vilifying cruel warlords who were preventing the distribution of aid. Media attention thus exposed the ineffectiveness of the US airlift, while presenting the conflict not in terms of ancient ethnic hatreds, but as a simplistic morality play in which US military intervention could turn the tide and save lives. Media pressure was soon joined by pressure from certain NGOs, including Philip Johnstone of CARE-US, who knew Bush personally. Some members of the NGO community in Somalia lobbied heavily for military intervention, conscious that their presence in Somalia had attracted looters who were preventing the delivery of aid.

Similarly, the airlift unleashed forces within the US government that pushed for intervention. Prior to August, interventionist sentiment within the government had been restricted to USAID and the Africa Bureau of the State Department, both relatively marginal actors within the administration as a whole. As Natsios noted, humanitarian intervention lacked a strong constituency in State, Defence, or the NSC. However, just as the airlift opened the administration to media pressure, so too did it create what Sommer terms an “activist consensus” in the bureaucracy. Tasked with making the US policy towards Somalia successful, officials in both State and Defence were increasingly conscious of the failure of Operation Provide Relief, as the bulk of the influx of aid was stolen by militia groups and served to fuel the civil conflict.

Certainly, the Joint Chiefs and some top officials continued to resist US military intervention in Somalia. However, officials were increasingly conscious of the risk that the operation would jeopardize US credibility. Given that Bush launched the airlift in part to deflect criticism from Boutros and the Islamic world that the US did not care about the suffering of poor non-white

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45 Western, Selling Intervention and War, pp. 171-172.
46 Ibid, p. 163.
47 Ibid, p. 163; Sommer, Hope Restored, p. 28.
48 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, pp. 136-137.
50 Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, Humanitarian Intervention, p. 206.
51 Hirsch and Oakley, Somalia and Operation Restore Hope, pp. 39-40; Sommer, Hope Restored, pp. 28-29.
Muslims, failure would be politically costly. As Scowcroft said, “We were faced with acknowledging defeat…or do[ing] something.”

In short, by committing itself to a limited airlift in Somalia whose ineffectiveness was soon exposed by the media, NGOs, and career bureaucrats, the Bush administration had put itself in a situation where it had to either make the intervention work or suffer a serious loss of face. Moreover, while the cautious realists within the administration continued to oppose intervention in Bosnia due to fears of a quagmire, as Eagleburger said, he and other elites were “damn uncomfortable” with inaction. Especially as the media and decision-makers had framed Somalia in terms of a humanitarian crisis, rather than ethnic warfare, US military intervention appeared to officials to be capable of providing aid without becoming entangled in irrational civil conflict. Pressure from the media and from within the bureaucracy reinforced each other, as Eagleburger admitted. Administration officials, confronted with calls for intervention in both Bosnia and Somalia, rejected Bosnia on military grounds but felt more inclined to give attention to Somalia to appear to be acting rightly. Thus, in response to a subordinate’s memo calling for intervention in both Bosnia and Somalia, Eagleburger told its author he was wrong about Bosnia but correct on Somalia. Intervention in Somalia was indeed intended to deflect calls for intervention in Bosnia, but also reflected the desire of Bush and his top officials to be perceived as acting in accordance with humanitarian norms and the principles of the “New World Order” that Bush had proclaimed. As Eagleburger said, the US intervened because Somalia was a tragedy of ‘massive proportions” and, unlike Bosnia, the US “could do something” about it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the twin case studies of Somalia and Bosnia reveal a clear knowledge gap in explaining why humanitarian intervention is selective. Conventional explanations relying on national interests, media, and elite engagement all fail to explain why the US intervened in Somalia but not Bosnia in 1992. Even the argument that Bush chose to intervene in Somalia as a way to deflect pressure for intervention in Bosnia, while compelling, is incomplete and fails to explain the sudden transformation of the administration elites’ opposition to military intervention in Somalia. In fact, the Bush administration was drawn into military intervention in Somalia by its decision to launch the airlift. Though Operation Provide Relief was intended to deflect both domestic criticism regarding inaction in Bosnia and international criticism for neglecting the suffering of Muslims and Africans, its clear inadequacy created a strong set of pressures from the media, NGO community, and bureaucracy for a more effective intervention. These factors, combined with the norm-driven national interest of the US to appear like it cared about third world problems, drove the Bush administration to intervene in Somalia to ensure US credibility and respond to foreign and domestic pressures. While it would be imprudent to draw broad conclusions from a single pair of case studies, Somalia and Bosnia do constitute evidence against the conventional argument that great powers intervene selectively owing simply to clear national

55 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, p. 139.
56 Western, Selling Intervention and War, p. 160.
57 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, pp. 139, 142; Terence Lyons and Ahmed Samatar, Somalia: State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction, (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1995), p. 34.
58 Strobel, Late-Breaking Foreign Policy, p. 142.
60 Natsios, “Illusions of Influence,” p. 161;
61 Lyons and Samatar, Somalia, p. 32.
interests and strong media and public pressures. Clearly, further research is needed to investigate the many complex and ever-shifting factors that drive patterns of selective intervention and remedy the current knowledge gap.

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