



War without end? Military humanitarianism and the limits of biopolitical approaches to security in Central America and the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the U.S. Southern Command launched Operation Continuing Promise as an ongoing mission to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to vulnerable populations in the Caribbean and Latin America. Conceived as a means of fostering regional security, the Operation's humanitarian aim was designed to improve regional security by ensuring life against the risk of a range of disasters. Much as that mission reflects biopolitical analyses of humanitarianism that emphasize the ability to protect life as the basis for sovereignty, closer attention to the timing and location of SOUTHCOM's efforts offers a more contextual understanding. That approach is developed here through an analysis of Operation Continuing Promise's stop in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, contrasting SOUTHCOM's focus on biophysical vulnerability with intended recipients' sense of their condition as a historical and political outcome. That contrast frames a contextual understanding of Operation Continuing Promise, placing it within broader efforts to construct Puerto Cabezas as vulnerable. That approach also points up the limits of biopolitical analyses of humanitarianism, suggesting the ways in which vulnerability is never merely a biological condition. The narrow humanitarian focus of Operation Continuing Promise can therefore be assessed in terms of its inability to address political and historical factors shaping vulnerability. So long as vulnerability persists, the potential for intervention persists indefinitely, making humanitarianism into a means of waging war without end.

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Introduction

U.S. military involvement in humanitarianism is often rationalized in terms of a universal moral duty to preserve life and prevent suffering (Barnett, 2010; Fassin & Pandolfi, 2010; Kennedy, 2005; Weiss, 2012). Once confined to disaster areas, the military has now expanded its humanitarian role to include proactive efforts to deliver aid to populations disproportionately at risk to disaster. The expansion signals the military's ongoing commitment to humanitarianism as a means of advancing U.S. national security interests, identifying vulnerable populations as a threat to international security (Dillon, 2008; Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero, 2008; Duffield, 2007; Hyndman, 2007; Seshadri, 2008). In the eyes of the military, vulnerability equates with a lack

of effective state presence exposed by everything from disasters to lack of access to basic medical care and political marginalization. By helping these populations, the U.S. military has further sought to present itself as a “global force for good,” protecting human life as the basis for an international geopolitical order. Military thus typically targets the biophysical health of vulnerable populations by delivering medical care. The approach serves a strategic military purpose, invoking humanitarianism's moral imperative to protect life to assert the apolitical nature of these interventions. And who, after all, can oppose the delivery of care to populations badly in need?

That question was on the minds of many as the USS *Kearsarge* neared the town of Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua in early August 2008. The massive gray-hulled ship cut a decidedly military profile. A *Wasp*-class amphibious assault ship designed to land an expeditionary force of Marines, the ship resembled a small aircraft carrier. Its flight deck bristled with cannons and helicopter rotors. But the *Kearsarge* was not there to invade in any conventional sense. Instead its arrival in Puerto Cabezas marked

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the first stop on the ship's five-month deployment as part of Operation Continuing Promise, a military humanitarianism mission directed by the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). The mission's stated task was to build regional security through the delivery of basic medical assistance to vulnerable populations in Latin America and the Caribbean. The relative obscurity of Puerto Cabezas fit the purpose of the mission. A remote town on the Caribbean coast of Central America, Puerto Cabezas serves as the port of entry to one of the poorest regions in Nicaragua, itself one of the poorest countries in the Americas (CIA, 2014; PNUD, 2005). Equating chronic poverty with vulnerability to disaster, the *Kearsarge* promised to deliver badly needed medical care.

As the ship prepared to send landing craft and helicopters ashore with humanitarian supplies, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega wasted no time in voicing his skepticism of the *Kearsarge's* mission. "We welcome the humanitarian assistance," he asserted, "but of course we cannot welcome the intelligence work" (Axe, 2009; Silva, 2008d). Ortega's comment referenced the historical significance of Puerto Cabezas in the long and conflict history of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua (McPherson, 2014; Whisnant, 1995). The most recent chapter in that history targeted Ortega directly. During the Contra War 1980s, the Reagan Administration in the U.S. trained and equipped a litany of counter-revolutionary proxy forces to remove Ortega's Sandinista Party from power. Among the proxy forces backed by the U.S. government during the Contra War were a number of indigenous Miskito-led groups demanding recognition of their rights to territory and autonomy over the eastern half of Nicaragua, including Puerto Cabezas. Commonly referred to as "excombatants," veterans of these armed groups are now a prominent political and social force in the region. Like Ortega the excombatants also saw the *Kearsarge's* arrival through the history U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. To many of them the *Kearsarge's* arrival brought the possibility that the U.S. would finally recognize their historic role in defeating Sandinismo, offering relief from chronic unemployment that followed the end of the Contra War. To them, Ortega's accusations of espionage were theater. As one of the heads of the last Miskito force to demobilize at the end of the Contra War put it, Ortega "had yet to learn what to do when the enemy holds out his hand" (Silva, 2008d).

Aboard the *Kearsarge*, the ship's command did its best to dispel any hint of controversy by insisting on the apolitical nature of their humanitarian mission. In regular press briefings, they draw comparisons between Operation Continuing Promise's benevolent purpose and military involvement in disaster relief efforts like the one that followed the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean (Silva, 2008a). To add a further degree of transparency to the mission, SOUTHCOM had arranged for a group of U.S.-based journalists to sail with the *Kearsarge* and report on its humanitarian efforts (Albon, 2008). They were not the only civilians aboard either. They were joined by representatives from charitable organizations like Operation Smile, invited to assist the ship's delivery of medical care. Onshore, skepticism about the *Kearsarge's* real purpose persisted, much to the consternation of the ship's commands. In a moment of frustration, the ship's top commander banned his crew from referring to themselves as "troops" (Axe, 2008b). Not that it disguised the military nature of the mission. The ship's crew still wore military uniforms and relied on military helicopters, landing crafts, and the *Kearsarge* to carry out their mission. As one of the journalists aboard the *Kearsarge*, David Axe (2008a), noted, Operation Continuing Promise was "still a military operation, albeit one that's giving out free medicine instead of free ass-kickings." Posting to *Wired* magazine's "Danger Room" blog on national security, Axe continued on:

The *Kearsarge* isn't sailing to Puert[o] Cabezas for the crew's health or for fun. She's going to gradually, subtly shape the world in ways we Americans and our allies want it shaped. This is war by radically different means.

The controversy sparked by the *Kearsarge* in Puerto Cabezas captures the paradox of military humanitarianism. Its emphasis on protecting life obscures underlying strategic questions about which lives are worth saving. Rather than demonstrating a universal commitment to life, that question is answered in terms of U.S. national security. That predicament is not confined to military humanitarianism. It reflects a general paradox of humanitarianism as caught between a desire to "do good" and its propensity to ignore and even reinforce the inequalities that make some populations more likely to need aid, and others more capable of delivering it (Fassin, 2012; Weizman, 2012). Analytically, this predicament is often grasped in terms of biopolitics, tracing the ways in which operations of power are intertwined with the biological health and well-being of populations. That approach has been productively used to address the politics of humanitarianism, attending to its far-reaching implications for which forms of life are made to live, and which are allowed to die (Dillon, 2008; Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero, 2008; Duffield, 2010; Fassin, 2007; Pandolfi, 2003; Seshadri, 2008).

But vulnerability, as the controversy that greeted the *Kearsarge's* arrival in Puerto Cabezas makes clear, is never simply a biological condition. It is a politically and historically induced condition that leaves certain people in particular places more vulnerable than others (Butler, 2009). Accordingly, while its political salience may well hinge on a narrow, biological understanding of that condition, its broader implications require a more contextual understanding of the factors that shape it to say nothing of its recognition as a threat to security. It also provides a means of understanding how the narrow focus on biophysical health of efforts like Operation Continuing Promise are ultimately ineffective at altering conditions of vulnerability. At best, their medical focus offers triage for a chronic condition. At worst the delivery of aid merely perpetuates that condition, arbitrarily delivering care to individuals with little to no effect on the condition of the larger population. So long as vulnerability remains, the need for intervention extends indefinitely. Worse than war by other means, humanitarianism becomes a means waging war without end (Evans, 2011; Weizman, 2012).

The *Kearsarge's* stop in Puerto Cabezas brings the analytical importance of understanding vulnerability contextually into focus, counterposing SOUTHCOM's focus on biophysical health with Puerto Cabezas residents' understanding of their condition as political and historical outcome. To appreciate that contrast, it is first necessary to understand how SOUTHCOM has come to view vulnerability as a concern in response to new assessments security risks in Latin America and the Caribbean. Without disputing the abject conditions found in Puerto Cabezas, SOUTHCOM's selection of the region as a target for 2008's Operation Continuing Promise underscores how political concerns shape the recognition of vulnerability. Cables from the U.S. Embassy in Managua and released by WikiLeaks document the concerted political effort that went in to making Puerto Cabezas a stop on the *Kearsarge's* deployment. Puerto Cabezas residents' own account of their vulnerability draws out the political nature of vulnerability, highlighting the ways that their condition has been shaped by their racialized marginalization by the Nicaraguan state and the history of U.S. interventions, military and otherwise, in the region. Taken together, these elements provide a broader context for analyzing Operation Continuing Promise's use of humanitarianism as war by other means.

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