

This argument suggests that the loose cannon of international media were firing all their guns *for* intervention (if loose cannon can fire), whipping up their publics to drive governments into action.

While that was the initial wave in Somalia, and perhaps in Bosnia, another wave followed in reaction. As television watched the United Nations mission in Somalia appear to founder in violence and as the casualties—particularly American—mounted, the political barometer swung quickly toward withdrawal, forcing President Clinton to articulate his goals more precisely, and to set a time limit on the U.S. presence.

In Bosnia, the ghastly images of suffering provoked not a clarion call for decisive intervention, but a creeping sense of impotence and resignation, as the complexities and moral relativities became more apparent to the public and government alike.

As Roger Rosenblatt, an essayist on our program, noted recently:

Too much may be made of the power of pictures. They often give a quick rush, like a dose of sugar, but the rush also wears off quickly, leaving the mind with facts to sort out and self-interest. And people seem to understand that this is true. Otherwise, all anyone would ever need to get us into a war would be a TV camera, and that has not been the case. It has not even been the case in Somalia. Every picture is one side of an event, often the outside. Sometimes we want to see it, only it. Sometimes we want to see through it.

American presidents used the rush of sugar for different purposes. Of George Bush's intervention in Somalia, George Kennan observed:

... one must assume the reasons lay largely in his memories of the political success of the move into the Persian Gulf, and in the hope that another venture of this nature would arouse a similar public enthusiasm, permitting him to leave his Presidential office with a certain halo of glory. ...

In Bosnia, it suited Bill Clinton's purposes as a candidate to chide Mr. Bush for inaction and to promise stronger measures if elected. Those measures—air strikes on Serbian gunners and arms for the Bosnians—proved to have no international support, so he settled on relative inaction. To say that either Bush or Clinton was the prisoner of a popular cry for action generated by television pictures is to ignore political calculation; that is, their wish to harness the occasion for political, as well as humanitarian purposes.