

Preface

DOING BAD BY DOING GOOD builds on my previous book, *After War: The Political Economy of Exporting Democracy*.¹ In *After War*, I developed the economics of reconstruction to analyze the ability of foreign occupiers to establish liberal democratic political and economic institutions in post-conflict situations. My analysis excluded broader notions of humanitarianism (short and long-term aid and assistance, peacekeeping and security, and so on) to assist and protect those in need. Given my focus, I made only passing mention of state-led humanitarian action, when I noted that the implications of my analysis did not “necessarily preclude the use of military force . . . for humanitarian reasons abroad.”² The purpose of *Doing Bad by Doing Good* is to pick up where *After War* left off by exploring the economics of state-led humanitarianism. The topics in the two books are clearly related, especially as humanitarian action has over time become increasingly intertwined with the broader military and foreign policy objectives of governments. Therefore, the two books should be read as complements for a broad understanding of the viability of state-led foreign interventions.

I should provide a few caveats so as not to mislead the reader. For those looking for either a “how to” guide for carrying out humanitarian action or steadfast rules of when governments should, or should not, assist others, this is not the book for you. Instead, the purpose of this book is to explore the ability of governments to assist those in need. Many discussions of state-led humanitarian action, especially those by politicians, focus on the moral responsibilities of governments to proactively aid those who are perceived to be in need. Consider, for example, the following from President John F. Kennedy in 1961: “[T]here is no escaping our obligations: our moral obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent community of free nations—our economic obligations as the wealthiest people in a world of largely poor people . . . and

our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom.”³ More recently, in 2007, former British prime minister Tony Blair reiterated his belief in “the moral power of political action to make the world better and the moral obligation to use it.”⁴ And, in 2010, at the G-8 Summit in Italy, U.S. President Barack Obama stated, “We’ve got 100 million people who dropped into further dire poverty as a consequence of this recession; we estimate that a billion people are hungry around the globe. And so wealthier nations have a moral obligation as well as a national security interest in providing assistance.”⁵

However, in focusing on the normative aspects of the issue—what governments *ought to do*—the positive aspects—what *can be* done—of state-led humanitarian action are often neglected. This is unfortunate, since understanding the feasibility of humanitarian action, as well as its limits, in practice ultimately requires positive analysis. Indeed, once we consider the relevant constraints and incentives at work it may turn out that governments lack the ability to actually deliver on what are determined to be their moral obligations. So while economics cannot provide normative answers regarding the moral responsibility to help others, it can provide crucial insights into whether state-led humanitarian action can succeed and, perhaps more important, avoid causing unintended harms to those in need. These insights can then inform subsequent moral discussions because unrealistic “oughts” can result not just in frustration, but worse yet in the very opposite of what was intended. When this happens, obligations that initially may appear to have moral weight actually do not. In this regard, my hope is that the analysis that follows can contribute to our understanding of humanitarianism by delineating the limits of state-led humanitarian action to remove suffering and improve the human condition.