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March 11, 2012

In Defense of 'R2P'

The 'responsibility to protect' principle which Alex de Waal lambasts ("How to end mass atrocities," Views, March 10) — and me and Samantha Power with it — is not and never has been old "humanitarian intervention" wine in a new bottle. Nor is "R2P" about mindless moralizing, or prioritizing democracy or the achievement of longer-term justice, at the expense of effective action to stop mass killing in its tracks.

Of course it is preferable for political negotiations to stop mass violence before it burns out for want of further victims, if this can possibly be achieved. That is exactly what Kofi Annan did in Kenya in early 2008, while invoking the 'R2P' norm, and what he is trying to achieve now in Syria. I have no quarrel with Mr. de Waal characterizing Darfur and South Sudan, among other cases, as inappropriate for coercive military intervention. And I for one would have been willing to explore a cease-fire and soft-landing settlement with Muammar el-Qaddafi after the initial threat of massacre in Benghazi had been averted — by timely and decisive Security Council action of the kind which would have saved 8,000 lives in Srebrenica, or 800,000 in Rwanda.

The whole point of the R2P doctrine is simply to generate a reflex international response that occurring or imminent mass atrocities are everybody's business, not nobody's. What the appropriate response can and should be — including diplomatic persuasion, non-military pressure like sanctions or International Criminal Court action, or (in extreme and exceptional cases) military intervention — depends entirely on the circumstances of each individual case.

Gareth Evans, Melbourne

Former foreign minister of Australia, co-chairman of the New York-based Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, and author of "The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All."