

ALL THE TROUBLE IN THE WORLD

The Lighter Side of Overpopulation,

Famine, Ecological Disaster,

Ethnic Hatred, Plague, and Poverty

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THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS
NEW YORK

3 FAMINE

All Guns, No Butter

■
We do not, in the modern world, have famine, plague, and war caused by a population crisis; we just have famine, plague, and war. Of these, war is the easiest to condemn, plague is the most frightening, but it's famine that makes us squirm.

Famine is too close to dieting. We snap at our spouses, jiggle on the scale, and finish other people's cheesecake. If we're turned into angry, lying thieves by a mere forgoing of dessert, what must real hunger be like? Imagine a weight-loss program at the end of which, instead of better health, good looks, and hot romantic prospects, you die. Somalia had become just this kind of spa. I went there in December 1992, shortly after U.S. troops had landed in Mogadishu.

I was hoping famine would prove to be a simpler issue than overpopulation. Population alarmists have forgotten that each numeral in a census represents an individual human with as much interest in living and as much right to do so as a population alarmist. Hunger alarmists are professional worriers, too, but they don't wish the rest of

humanity dead. Quite the contrary. And in Somalia the good intentions that professional worriers forever profess were being combined with—how rare this mixture is—good deeds. Food was being shipped to the country and international peacekeepers were being sent to deliver the food.

“Feed the hungry” is one of the first principles of morality. Here it was in operation. So where *were* the starving children of Mogadishu? Where were the pitiable little fellows with the gone-away expressions, faces already turned to some less painful world, limbs as thin as the lines of type in a newspaper obit column and bellies gravid with death? A glance at these tykes racks the soul. They are the emblem of Third World misery, the inevitable cover of news magazines, the constant subject of videotape on *Eyewitness News*. I half-expected to be met by a delegation of them at the Mogadishu airport.

What I met with instead were guns. Arrayed around the landing strip were U.S. guns, UN guns, guns from around the world. Trucks full of Somalis with guns came to get the luggage. These were my guns, hired to protect me from the other Somalis with guns, and they all had them. And I thought I might get a gun of my own besides, since none of these gunmen—local, foreign, or supranational—looked like they’d mind shooting me.

Everything that guns can accomplish had been achieved in Mogadishu. For two years the residents had been joining, dividing, subdividing, and rejoining in a pixilation of clan feuds and alliances. Previously Somalia had been held together by the loathsome but stable twenty-two-year reign of dictator Siad Barre. But Barre gained loathsomeness and lost stability, and when he took a walkout powder in January 1991, all and sundry began fighting each other with rifles, machine guns, mortars, cannons, and—to judge by the look of the town—wads of filth.

No building was untouched, and plenty were demolished. It was a rare wall that wasn’t stippled with bullet holes and a peculiar acre that lacked shell damage. Hardly a pane of glass was left in the city.

There was no potable water and no electricity. At night the only illumination was from tracer bullets. Mogadishu’s modern downtown was gone, the steel and concrete architecture bombarded into collapse. The old city was deserted rubble, a no-man’s-land between two envenomed clan factions. Rubbish was dumped atop wreckage everywhere and goats grazed on the offal. Mounds of sand had blown through the streets. Sewage welled up through what pavement was left.

The destruction had squeezed people into the roads, where they built market stalls from pieces of scrap wood and flattened olive-oil cans—market stalls which seemed to sell mostly pieces of scrap wood and flattened olive-oil cans. Young men waving AK-47 assault rifles pushed among the crowds. Rusted, dent-covered, windshieldless pickup trucks with gun mounts welded into their beds sputtered down what remained of the right-of-way, outnumbered by donkey carts and overtopped by pack camels.

It was a scene of Paleolithic ruin except for the modern weapons. The Somalis used to paint the outside walls of their shops with crude pictures of canned goods, television sets, photocopiers, and the like. Cartoon murals on abandoned storefronts were the only evidence that the twentieth century had produced anything pleasant.

Compared to Mogadishu, starving children would be cute. In fact, somewhere in the psychic basement of the sob-sister sorority house, in the darkest recesses of the bleeding heart, starving children *are* cute. Note the big Muppet Baby eyes, the etiolated features as unthreatening as Michael Jackson’s were before the molestation charges, the elfin incorporeity of the bodies. Steven Spielberg’s E.T. owes a lot to the Biafran-Bangladeshi-Ethiopian model of adorable suffering.

It’s easier to advertise our compassion for innocents in misery than it is to face up to what happened in a place like Somalia. What happened was not just famine but the complete breakdown of everything decent and worthwhile. I spent two weeks in Somalia and never saw a starving child, not because they didn’t exist but because they

were off somewhere dying, pushed into marginal spaces and territories' by people with guns. Going to Somalia was like visiting the scene of a crime and finding that the murderer was still there but the body had fled.

II

The world has enough food. In 1990 the World Hunger Program at Brown University published a book, *Hunger in History*, edited by Lucile F. Newman. World Hunger is the kind of program (and Brown, the kind of university) that would, I think, be eager to tell us if the world didn't have enough food. But they don't tell us this. In the book's final article, "On Ending Hunger: The Lessons of History," Robert W. Kates and Sara Millman say that "global food sufficiency" was reached in the 1960s and that, as of the mid-1980s, the world was "nearing diet sufficiency," by which they mean the earth has enough protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and whatever else is currently supposed to be good for us to go around.

Hunger in History's penultimate article, "Organization, Information, and Entitlement in the Emerging Global Food System," was written by six experts in the hunger field. They conclude, "If food were distributed equitably, current supplies would be more than adequate to provide an ample diet to all." Though these experts cannot resist a dig at us gluttonous bourgeoisie who've climbed way up on the food chain where we don't belong. The *Hunger in History* idea of equitable distribution would require a cuisine "in which animal products are considerably less abundant than they are in the diets of the developed countries." If I don't eat this steak, the cow will come back to life, vomit its corn and silage, and these can be fed to people in Chad.

But never mind, the world has enough food—enough food, according to Kates and Millman, to provide 120 percent of global needs on a "near vegetarian" regimen and more than half of what's necessary for everyone to eat like an American and get fat.

Plus there's more food where that came from. Only 2.7 percent of the U.S. labor force is employed in agriculture, versus 60 percent in China and 43 percent in Russia. Yet the United States exports forty thousand metric tons of wheat a year, enough to supply China and Russia with all the wheat those two countries need to import despite their hordes of farmworkers. Nor is this just a matter of America being a big, lush country. Cramped, industrialized Japan produces as much rice as Burma, which is twice Japan's size and utterly rural. And dumpy little France grows more wheat than Argentina and Australia combined.

In most of the world, food production has well outpaced the growth of population. In the 1930s American wheat growers had an average yield of thirteen bushels per acre. By 1970 the yield was thirty-one bushels. In the same period the corn yield went from twenty-six bushels per acre to seventy-seven. And the distribution of food has also improved. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, almost a quarter of the people on earth went hungry in 1950 while only 10 percent do now.

The modern era has witnessed an enormous increase in food, an enormous increase in people being fed—and an enormous increase in famine. This would seem to defy physical law. William A. Dando, in his 1980 book *The Geography of Famine*, estimates that, worldwide, about two million people died of starvation in the seventeenth century, ten million in the eighteenth, and twenty-five million in the nineteenth. Then comes the twentieth century. Between 1958 and 1961 as many as thirty million people starved in just one famine in China. At least five million more starved in the Ukraine during the 1930s. Three million starved in another Chinese famine in 1928–29, three million in Bengal in 1943, a million in Cambodia in the late 1970s, and uncounted millions more in Biafra in 1967–68, Ethiopia in 1973, Bangladesh in 1974, and sub-Saharan Africa in 1983–84.

When a thing defies physical law, there's usually politics involved. Drought, floods, crop failures, and insect pests played a part in

some of the disasters listed above, but not one of these famines was *caused* by nature. The Chinese famine of 1958–61, the worst famine in history, had nothing to do with weather or “acts of God.” In fact, it could be said to have resulted, literally, from an act of Godlessness—the imposition of Marxist theory on traditional peasant agriculture. The same thing caused the Ukrainian famine of 1932–34 and the Cambodian famine of 1975–79.

Some famines were deliberately created. The Nigerian government used starvation as a weapon of war against the Biafrans. The Ethiopians did the same thing to the Eritreans, and the Muslim Sudanese are doing it now to their Christian and animist countrymen.

Some famines came not from political organization but from lack thereof. A government can’t very well provide famine relief when there is no government, as there was none in China in the late 1920s.

And some famines have political causes of maddening complexity. The British in Bengal in 1943 had no weird ideas or evil designs. But they wanted to keep rice supplies out of the hands of possible Japanese invaders, and they wanted to feed the masses in Calcutta and keep the vital industries there running. So the British confiscated rice that was stored in rural Bengal. This set off a price panic, and mass starvation followed, even though there was no great scarcity of food.

Indeed, famine can occur when and where there’s a food surplus. Sylvia Nasar, in an article on the political causes of famine in the January 17, 1993, *New York Times*, says, “one of the worst recent famines—Bangladesh’s in 1974—took place in a year of unusually high rice production.” Unfounded rumors of a rice shortage caused prices to double. Then the government of the “People’s Republic of Bangladesh,” led by self-styled socialist Mujibur Rahman, set about making things worse. The army was sent to arrest hoarders, “convincing people,” says Ms. Nasar, “that [Mujibur] had lost control and fueling the price surge.” The price surge led to a huge black market. Black marketeering exacerbated the already-wonderful corruption of the

Mujibur regime. And people starved for no reason. Ms. Nasar adds, “The United States contributed by announcing that it would withhold food aid to punish Bangladesh for, of all things, selling jute to Cuba.” And there’s that damn jute again.

Plenty is no guarantee against famine, but neither does scarcity guarantee that famine will happen. Indian economist Amartya Sen was one of the first scholars to argue against regarding famine as a natural disaster. His 1981 book *Poverty and Famines* was, in academic circles, whatever the academic-circle equivalent is of a new animated Disney feature. Using the 1943 Bengal famine as his principal example, Sen proved (as well as anything can be said to be proved in the social sciences) the political nature of food distribution in modern society.

Later Professor Sen studied the 1983–84 drought in sub-Saharan Africa. He found that Sudan and Ethiopia had experienced, respectively, 11 percent and 12 percent declines in food production. Those countries suffered severe famines. But Botswana had a 17 percent decline in food production, and Zimbabwe had a 37 percent decline, and there wasn’t any famine in either place. The reason was that Sudan and Ethiopia didn’t mind if certain troublesome portions of their populations starved to death while Botswana and Zimbabwe did mind.

If famines are now political, how long has this been true? How far back in history can we go and find human privation caused by human folly?

The Great Hunger in Ireland, 1846–51, was started by potato blight, which can’t be blamed on the British (though don’t try telling that to certain members of my family). But England’s Corn Laws made other sources of food in Ireland expensive, so expensive, in fact, that Ireland was still exporting grain during the worst of the famine years. And the British-imposed system of absentee landlords let the gentry keep a comfortably distant perspective on the suffering of their tenants.

David Arnold, author of the 1988 book *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*, argues that the persistent famines of nineteenth-century China were the result of a corrupt and listless Manchu Dy-

nasty's failure to maintain the infrastructure of peasant agriculture. He cites evidence that, for over a thousand years, more vigorous Chinese governments had practiced various famine-control measures including relief provisions of food and money, subsidized grain sales, encouragement of imports into stricken areas, tax abatements, refugee resettlement, water conservation, pest eradication, land reclamation, and employment of the impoverished on public works such as roads and canals. During the famine of 1493, Ming Dynasty officials gave aid to more than two million people.

Dando, in *The Geography of Famine*, claims to have studied the entire long and gruesome history of Russian hunger and says, "All of the famines which have occurred in Russia from 971–1970 can be predominately attributed to human factors."

University of Chicago economist Robert Fogel examined five hundred years of food records from Britain and France and concluded that, although there have been a number of famines in those countries since 1500, not one of those famines coincided with empty national granaries.

Decent governments and worthwhile citizenries have known, for a long time, how to deal with famine. Peter Garnsey, in his book *Famine und Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World*, avers that in the classical age "while food crises were frequent, famine was rare." He notes that the three best-attested famines in ancient Athens were siege-induced and gives examples of famine relief such as the Emperor Augustus dispensing aid to two hundred thousand people in A.D. 6.

Garnsey also quotes the Roman physician Galen's second-century treatise *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*, where Galen describes the resourcefulness of the Roman peasantry: "Often when forced by hunger people eat pyethrum, sia, alexander, fennel, wild chervil, chicory, gum soccory, gingidium, wild carrot, and the tender shoots of a great many shrubs and trees." Thus the more elaborate kinds of modern salad owe their existence to ancient famines.

No disagreement seems to exist among experts about the polit-

ical—or, at least, social—nature of famine. Amartya Sen says famine "is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough to eat." William A. Dando says, "Natural factors cause crop failures, but humans cause famines." And Andrew B. Appleby, in an article, "Epidemics and Famine in the Little Ice Age" in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, says, "The crucial variable in the elimination of famine was not the weather but the ability to adapt to the weather."

Some would even go so far as to argue that before mankind became politically organized people didn't starve to death, or at least not in heaps and piles. Mark Nathan Cohen, in his article "Prehistoric Patterns of Hunger" in the Brown University *Hunger in History* book, says, "Early human groups were relatively well nourished and well buffered against starvation."

Mr. Cohen maintains that archeological evidence "suggests that qualitative nutrition was relatively good in the earliest hunter-gatherer populations in any region, more commonly declining than improving with agriculture. The effects of civilization appear to be mixed and patchy."

Too true. Nonetheless, for someone who has been to Somalia, Mr. Cohen's views sail precariously close to Romantic primitivism. Mogadishu is no place to argue in favor of Rousseau's ideas about "natural man." Attribute superior virtues to simple natives, if you will, but the Somalis are about as untainted by civilization as they could be, and no one who's met the Somalis is calling them noble savages.

111

In order to go to Somalia, I took a job as a radio reporter for ABC news. It wasn't someplace I could go by myself. News organizations had to create fortresses for themselves in Mogadishu and man those forts with armies.

ABC sent in its most experienced fixers, men known in the

news business (and not without respect) as “combat accountants.” The accountants hired forty gunmen and found a large walled house that used to belong to an Arab ambassador. The house was almost intact and close to the ruins of the American embassy, which—the accountants hoped—would soon be occupied by U.S. Marines.

Satellite dishes, telephone uplinks, editing equipment, half a dozen generators, fuel, food, water, beer, toilet paper, soap, sheets, towels, and mattresses all had to be flown in on charter planes from Nairobi. For some reason we wound up with five hundred boxes of a Kenyan chocolate chip cookie that tasted like bunion pads. Cooks, cleaning people, and laundry men were employed, as well as translators—dazed-looking academic types from the long-destroyed Somali National University.

Some thirty of us—journalists, camera crews, editors, producers, money men, and technicians—were housed in this compound, bedded down in shifts on the floor of the old audience hall while our mercenaries camped in the courtyard.

It was impossible to go outside our walls without “security” (“security” being what the Somali gunmen—gunboys, really—liked to be called). Even with the gunmen along, there were always people mobbing up to importune or gape. Hands tugging at wallet pockets. Fingers nipping at wristwatch bands. No foreigner could make a move without setting off a bee’s nest of attention—demanding, grasping, pushing crowds of cursing, whining, sneering people with more and worse Somalis skulhng on the fringes of the pack.

One of the first things I saw, besides guns, when I arrived in Mogadishu was a pack of thieves creeping through the wreckage of the airport, sizing up our charter cargo. And the last thing I saw as I left was the self-appointed Somali “ground crew” running beside our taxiing plane, jamming their hands through the window hatch, trying to grab money from the pilot.

A trip from our compound to Mogadishu’s main market required two kids with AK-47s plus a driver and a translator who were

usually armed as well. The market was walking distance but you wanted a car or truck to show your status. That there was a market at all in Mogadishu was testimony to something in the human spirit, though not necessarily something nice, since what was for sale was mostly food that had been donated to Somalia’s famine victims. **CONTRIBUÉ PAR LES ENFANTS DE FRANCE** said the stenciled letters on all the rice sacks. (Every French school child had been urged to bring to class a kilo of rice for Somalia.)

Meat was also available, though not immediately recognizable as such. A side of beef looked like fifty pounds of flies on a hook. And milk, being carried around in wooden jugs in the hundred-degree heat, had a smell that was worse than the look of the meat. But all of life’s staples, in some more or less awful form, were there in the market. If you had the money to get them. That is, if you had a gun to get the money. And a whole section of the market was devoted to retailing guns.

I wanted to buy a basket or something, just to see how the ordinary aspects of life worked in Somalia in the midst of total anarchy and also, frankly, to see if having my own gunmen was any help in price haggling. I was thinkng I could get used to a pair of guys with AKs, one clearing a path for me and one covering my back. I’d be less worried about crime in the States, not to mention asking for a raise. And, if I happened to decide to go to a shrink, I’ll bet it would be remarkable how fast my emotions would mature, how quickly my insights would grow, how soon I’d be declared absolutely cured with two glowering Somali teens and their automatic weapons beside me on the couch.

They were, however, useless at bargaining for baskets. Nobody gets the best of a Somali market woman. Not only did the basket weaver soak me, but fifteen minutes after the deal had been concluded she chased me halfway across the marketplace screaming that she’d changed her mind. My bodyguards cringed and I gave up another three dollars—a sort of Third World adjustable basket mortgage.

She was a frightening lady. Ugly, too, though this was an exception. Somali women are mainly beautiful: tall, fine-featured, and thin even in fatter times than these. They are not overbothered with Muslim prudery. Their bright-colored scarves are used only for shade and not to cover elaborate cornrows and amazing smiles. Loud cotton print sarongs are worn with one shoulder bare and wrapped with purposeful imperfection of concealment. There is an Iman doppelganger carrying every milk jug. You could do terrific business with modeling agencies hiring these girls by the pound in Somalia and renting them by the yard in New York.

The men, perhaps because I am one, are another matter. They're cleaver-faced and jumpy and given to mirthless grins decorated with the dribble from endless chewing of qat leaves. Some wear the traditional *tobe* kilt. Others dress in Mork and Mindy-era American leisure wear. The old clothes that you give to charity are sold in bulk to dealers and wind up mostly in Africa. If you want to do something for the dignity of the people in sub-Saharan countries, you can quit donating bell-bottom pants to Goodwill.

When we emerged from the market our driver was standing next to the car with a look on his face like you or I might have if we'd gotten a parking ticket just seconds before we made it to the meter with the dime. Shards of glass were all over the front seat. The driver had been sitting behind the wheel when a spent bullet had come out of somewhere and shattered the window beside his head.

Mogadishu is almost on the equator. The sun sets at six, prompt. After that, unless we wanted to mount a reconnaissance in force, we were stuck inside our walls. We ate well. We had our canned goods from Kenya, and the Somalis baked us fresh bread (made from famine-relief flour, no doubt) and served us a hot meal every night—fresh vegetables, stuffed peppers, pasta, lobsters caught in the Mogadishu harbor and local beef. I tried not to think about the beef. Only a few of us got sick. We had a little bit of whiskey, lots of cigarettes, and the pain pills from the medical kits. We sat out on the flat tile roof

of the big stucco house and listened to the intermittent artillery and small-arms fire.

Down in the courtyard our gunmen and drivers were chewing qat. The plant looks like watercress and tastes like a handful of something pulled at random from the flower garden. You have to chew a lot of it, a bundle the size of a whisk broom, and you have to chew it for a long time. It made my mouth numb and gave me a little bit of a stomachache, that's all. Maybe qat is very subtle. I remember thinking cocaine was subtle, too, until I noticed I'd been awake for three weeks and didn't know any of the naked people passed out around me. The Somalis seemed to get off. They start chewing before lunch but the high didn't luck in until about three in the afternoon. Suddenly our drivers would start to drive straight into potholes at full speed. Straight into pedestrians and livestock, too. We called it "the qat hour." The gunmen would all begin talking at once, and the chatter would increase in speed, volume, and intensity until, by dusk, frantic arguments and violent gesticulations had broken out all over the compound. That was when one of the combat accountants would have to go outside and give everybody his daily pay in big stacks of dirty Somali shilling notes worth four thousand to the dollar. Then the yelling really started.

Qat is grown in Kenya. "The Somalis can chew twenty planes a day!" said a woman who worked in the Nairobi airport. According to the Kenyan charter pilots some twenty loads of qat are indeed flown into Mogadishu each morning. Payloads are normally about a ton per flight. Qat is sold by the bunch, called a *maduf*, which retails for \$3.75 and weighs about half a pound. Thus \$300,000 worth of qat arrives in Somalia every day. But it takes U.S. Marines to deliver a sack of wheat.

IV

I went to the Marine Corps encampment at Mogadishu Port on the day before Christmas. The docks and quays and warehouses had been so heaped with wreckage and muck that the first pieces of military equip-

ment the marines landed were bulldozers. The marines plowed away the debris and sprayed the wharves with firefighting equipment from the US Navy ships. It took three scraggings and hosing before Mogadishu was only as dirty as an ordinary seaport. Then the marines built a twenty-foot wall of cargo containers around the space they'd cleared, not so much for military reasons but to make a sort of citadel of hygiene.

Only one of the port's warehouses had enough corrugated tin left on top to provide shelter, and this was pinked with galaxies of bullet holes. Somalis must have stood inside and fired through the roof for the sheer noise of it. Seven or eight hundred marines were sleeping here, their mosquito net-draped cots in rows as close as auditorium chairs. It was 100, 110, 115 degrees every day in Mogadishu, with air so humid that the wind felt like shaving lather. Even in our thick-walled, shaded house the only way I could sleep was to lie naked on the mattress with an electric fan pointed at me. There were no fans in the warehouse and not even much of that hot, sopping breeze.

A branch of some reasonably firlike plant had been set up by the warehouse doors, its needles decorated with miniature Tabasco bottles, Chiclets, and other of the less-esteemed items from the MRE ("Meal Ready to Eat") ration packs. In place of a star was a plastic envelope of beef stew. The navy claimed it would try, the next day, to get some turkey in from the ships' galleys. And satiric carols had been composed:

*On the first day of Christmas,
The Marine Corps gave to me
Forty injections for tropical disease . . .*

The troops were crabbier than they'd been in the Gulf War. They were sticky and dirty and bored. They had no showers, no hot meals, and, even with female military personnel all over, no private place to take a crap. But all these conditions had existed in Saudi Arabia

and for months on end. The problem in Somalia was more abstract. This was the first large-scale military operation in history to be launched for purely altruistic reasons. Nobody knew how to go about such a thing. In a war against hunger, what do you do? Shoot lunch?

I went out on patrol with a squad of marines. I borrowed one of the flak vests that make jogging around in the Mogadishu weather truly miserable. I skipped the Kevlar helmet, which feels like a hollowed-out bowling ball. Neither the jacket nor the helmet will stop an AK-47 round, just slow it down, and I didn't want any slow bullets in my head.

The patrols were being run because the marines, when they weren't unloading boats or guarding aid convoys, couldn't think what else to do. We went in open Humvee trucks to the most battle-frayed parts of town. The idea was, I guess, to look for snipers and goons, and people too blatantly displaying arms and to see if anyone wanted to shoot marines and to shoot them first. Hard to say what the average Somali—the man-in-the-gutter, if you will—thought about this. There was a large group hanging out at the entrance to the port, begging. Sometimes they tired of begging and threw stones until a few marines rushed out and beat them with truncheons, then they'd beg again. But when we stopped our trucks in the ravaged downtown a solitary old man said, in a carefully enunciated shout, "Shoot everybody who makes trouble! We like peace! Long life to America!" This was in front of the city's only Christian church. Someone had tried to brick up the doors and windows. Someone else had pillaged the place.

Schools had long ago disappeared in Mogadishu, and the streets were filled with kids, not starving but good and dirty. The kids would put things out in the road when they saw us coming—bricks, stones, pieces of pipe. Then, when we drove closer, they'd run out and snatch this stuff back. They were playing "roadblock." They liked to try out their English. Earlier that day, when I was driving to the port, a little boy had leaned in my window, flashed an enormous winning smile, and said, "I will kill you." The kids seemed to like the marines,

however. Sometimes a marine would open an MRE packet and scatter its contents. In return the kids would point to certain buildings and yell to the effect that snipers were inside.

The marines said the kids were sometimes right. We gave a Humvee-ride reward to one ten-year-old who, a couple days before, had shown the mannes where a machine-gun-equipped Toyota pickup—a “technical,” as it’s called—was hidden. The marines had shot its occupants.

The kids would run in packs behind the speeding Humvees, their sandals flapping like applause. If there’s ever a ten-kilometer-in-shower-flipflops Olympic event, it will be won by a prepubescent Somali.

The kids also act as mine canaries. Suddenly they *aren’t* running behind the Humvees, suddenly they all disappear, then the marines know they’re in a conclusively dangerous place. For instance, the “Green Line,” so called after the famous boundary in Beirut, though Mogadishu’s Green Line isn’t a line but a whole area so fought over that there’s nothing left to fight over. Then there’s the “Bridge of Death” (actually a culvert) and “Bermuda,” for the triangle of the same name, because if you go in there you’ll never come out.

Like many people with a mean streak the Somalis have a way with nicknames. A thoroughgoing bad hat may be called *Mattukaday*—“man who’s never been seen in a mosque.” There is a warlord yclept “Fuji” for inscrutability and a doctor who goes by “Cholera.” A particularly hasty defeat of one subclan is remembered as “Kuwait.” The most congested intersection in the city is named “Kamakazi Corner” not from the driving but because of suicidal quarrels that break out among the gunmen there. Siad Barre was known as “Big Mouth” due to his speeches, and his cronies were called “Four Pockets” in honor of their ability to line same.

We got out of the Humvees and began to patrol on foot. Mogadishu has a sort of Capitol Hill from when there used to be a government. The way the marines said the kids sometimes vanished,

the kids vanished that way here. The marines went down the street in a hollow rectangle, the men on one side checking the walls and windows above the men across the way. One man was walking backward in the rear. One man was darting ahead, his M-16 preceding him around corners.

A minibus full of young Somali men nosed into an intersection in front of us. There was a big grinding of gears and the Somalis sped backwards at cartoon speed.

We went into a ruined government office. Two marines flopped in the doorway behind us and sealed the entrance. Two men went up the steps, scanned the hallways, and pressed back against the walls. Two more men shouted, “Coming up!” and went on to the next floor, the patrol leap-frogging thus until we were on the roof.

The whole mess of Mogadishu spread below us. The place probably never did amount to much, though it’s more than a thousand years old. In the distance the blue and yellow stripes of desert meeting surf were pretty enough, albeit the land was covered with thornbushes and the ocean infested with sharks. Wide strips of dirt with tree stumps were visible where handsome avenues might once have been. Maybe the narrow Omani stone houses near the port used to evoke the charm of *Arabian Nights*, if you didn’t mind that they were built by slave-trading elephant murderers. They were slums now. And the rest of Mogadishu, what was left of it, was a joke. The taller buildings, nearly all of them abandoned, were built in that ever-present Third World *wog moderne* style, cement puns on Le Corbusier. Siad Barre had constructed an immense reviewing stand for himself, but its grandeur was foiled by its perfect resemblance to a parking garage. The Italians, who were the colonial power in southern Somalia from the 1880s until 1960, had put up a fake Middle Eastern castle on a bluff above the harbor, giving the old part of town a “Seven Package Tours of Sinbad” look. Here and there were bogus classical monuments from when Mussolini was in charge, notably a vaulted gateway to nowhere with dumpy proportions and lots of fasces on it. The postimperialist Somalis

had done as well as they could to better this item, and in the center of a roundabout near the airport stood a huge, ill-crafted, out-of-plumb, Taco Bell-façade concrete thing with peeling white paint and big blue letters reading ARCH OF POPULAR TRIUMPH. Somalia is a civilization in ruins but not grand ones.

The marines came down from the roof of the government building, retracting their pickets like a coiling snake. You don't realize how much paper there is in a government until you see it all busted out of its filing cabinets and spread in drifts down floors and through courtyards. Then it seems as though government must be nothing but paper, and I suspect the Somali government wasn't much more than that. Paper and, of course, guns—the guns are still in working order.

Our patrol went on up the hill to the parliament building. This had been subjected to something more like evisceration than looting. The very marble of the floors had been pulled up, and the electrical fixtures had been yanked with such vehemence that the wires were pulled right out through the plaster, leaving vertical trenches in the walls. The National Assembly chamber had been stripped of carpet and décor. Its floor was covered with human excrement. *All* the chairs and desks had been torn from their mountings. Somalia's seat of government had been wholly, soundly trashed. How many people in how many countries have wanted to do this? Somalis gave in to the temptation.

V

Where did this strange nation come from? The Somalis have a joke: God was bored. So He created the universe. But that was boring, too. So God created Adam and Eve. But He was still bored. So God created the rest of the human race. And even then He was bored. So God created the Somalis. He hasn't stopped laughing since.

As with all nomads, Somalis come basically from nowhere. Roving, quarreling, pillaging bands of Somalis show up in the Horn of

Africa—the biblical land of Punt—about the same time that roving, quarreling, pillaging bands of Normans show up for the Battle of Hastings. The Somalis are, and seemingly always have been, divided into clan families. There are six of these: Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye, Darod, Digil, and Rahanweyn. They hate each other. Not that those are their only hatreds. The two worst Somali warlords extant at the time of my visit, Mohammed Farah Aidid and Ali Mahdi Muhammad, were both Hawiye. Each clan family is divided into numerous subclans. They hate each other, too. And each subclan is likewise split and irked. The first Europeans, visiting Mogadishu in the sixteenth century, found the then-tiny city already riven into warring clan sectors.

Back when one culture could say what it thought of another without risking a massive Donna Shalala explosion, the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (the only reference work I really trust) opined, “The Somali are a fighting race and all go armed. . . . They are great talkers, keenly sensitive to ridicule, and quick tempered . . . love display . . . are inordinately vain and avaricious. . . .” And, said *Britannica*, “The Somali have very little political or social cohesion.” In fact, the basic unit of Somali society is something called the “*diya*-paying group,” *diya* being the Arabic word for blood money.

Besides the members of the six clan families, there are other nonclan Somalis known as *sub*, or “low.” These are hunters, barbers, leather-workers, metalsmiths, and other productive citizens much looked down upon by nomads. Noble camel thieves think *sub* vacations are degrading. The six clans themselves are divided in prestige according to degree of idleness. The Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye, and Darod call themselves “Samale,” from whence comes the name of the country. The Samale clans consider themselves to be strictly nomads—fighters and herdsman. They call the Digil and the Rahanweyn “Sab clans,” and *Rahanweyn*, in Somali, means merely “large crowd.” The Sab are farmers, and nomads regard farms with the same violent distaste I have for law offices.

The gunmen who are currently destroying Somalia, who are

wrecking the livelihoods of innocent Somalis and robbing them of their sustenance, are largely Samale. And many of the people who are starving are Sab. It is one of Somalia's plentiful supply of grim ironies that the victims of its famine are the people who grow its food.

Of course the nomad clansmen doing the wreclung and robbing aren't traditional nomads any more than a Toyota pickup truck with a machine gun mounted in its bed is a traditional element of a caravan. But the Samale don't need to go on any Robert Bly wildman weekends to get in touch with their inner warrior. Somali became a written language only in 1972. Just a few miles from the main towns you see itinerant families of Darod and Dir who could pass for Mary and Joseph on their flight into Egypt. Here all the men are dressed in *tobe* kilts, with sword-length daggers in the waistbands, and the women are wrapped in homespun instead of Kenyan chintz. The camel bridles, donkey blankets, pannier baskets, and milk jugs have been made by hand. The nomad life is possessed of almost as much honest, natural, rough-hewn folksiness as a New England crafts fair. Only the occasional flash of a bright yellow plastic wash bucket tells you what millennium you're in.

I have a friend, Carlos Mavroleon, who works as a freelance TV reporter for ABC and who has spent a lot of time among nomads in the Muslim world. Carlos found a very good translator and went off with a minimum of security and baggage to the far parts of the Somali desert to talk to the real Samale. They were shy of strangers—given current events in Somalia, they'd be crazy if they weren't—and it took Carlos several days of lolling around making gifts of tea and tobacco before the nomads would chat. Finally they invited him into their camp, and, when a suitable length of pleasantries had been exchanged, Carlos asked the nomads, "How has this war affected you?"

"Oh, the war is terrible!" they replied. And they told Carlos that just last week some goats had been stolen and a month before a valuable camel was lost. It was a very horrible war indeed. More goats might be lost at any time and only a couple of years ago a wife had been carried away.

Carlos said he didn't realize for a while that the war the nomads were talking about was the war they had been conducting, time out of mind, with the next subclan down the wadi. "No, no, no," said Carlos, "I mean the big war in Mogadishu."

"Oh, *that* war," said the nomads, and there were shrugs all around.

Carlos liked the Somalis. "Men in skirts killing each other over matters of clan," he said. "People call it barbaric savagery. Add bagpipes and a golf course, and they call it Scotland."

And, like good Scots Presbyterians, the Somalis can be religious fanatics when they feel like it. Sayyid Muhammad 'Abdille Hassan, known as the "Mad Mullah," fought the British Empire to a standstill in northern Somalia in the Dervish Wars of 1900 to 1920. The British were forced to withdraw to coastal garrisons, causing famine among the Somali clans who were not allied with the Mullah. An estimated one-third of the population of British Somaliland died during the Dervish Wars, a period that Somalis call "The Time of Eating Filth."

The British never intended to rule Somalia but found themselves continually forced to intervene in Somali affairs to ensure the supply line to their strategic outpost at Aden. In the words of I. M. Lewis in his *A History of Modern Somalia*, "The problem of the future status of these areas was complicated; no one friendly or fully acceptable . . . seemed to want them." And they still don't. Various internationalist schemes were attempted, which is where Italian Somaliland came from. The Mad Mullah was unimpressed. During World War I he wrote a letter to the British Commissioner at Berbera:

You . . . have joined with all the peoples of the world, with wastrels, and with slaves, because you are so weak. But if you were strong you would have stood by yourself as we do, independent and free. It is a sign of your weakness, this alliance of yours with Somali, menials, and Arabs, and Sudanese, and Kafirs, and Perverts, and Yemenis, and Nubians, and Indians, and Russians, and

Americans, and Italians, and Serbians, and Portuguese, and Japanese, and Greeks, and cannibals, and Sikhs, and Banyans, and Moors, and Afgans, and Egyptians . . . it is because of your weakness that you have to solicit as does a prostitute.

Seventy-five years before the fact, Sayyid Muhammad was able to accurately predict the composition, effectiveness, and moral stature of today's UN.

The Mullah is still revered in Somalia. And the day I arrived in Mogadishu a flyer was being distributed in the local mosques showing a servile Somali rolling out a carpet for a pair of armed men mounted tandem on a horse. One man was marked with a cross and the other with a Star of David. Two fighting men on one horse was the seal of the Knights Templars, a Christian military order formed in the twelfth century to fight Muslims in the crusades. Sense may be short in these parts, but memories are long.

VI

So here we were on another crusade, this time one of compassion (though Richard the Lionhearted thought his cause was compassionate too). Enormous stores of food aid were arriving in Mogadishu, food donated by international governments and by private charities. Armed convoys were being formed to deliver that food. It takes a lot of weapons to do good works (as Richard the Lionhearted could have told us). And this is not just a Somali problem. We have poverty and deprivation in our own country. Try standing unarmed on a street corner in Compton handing out twenty-dollar bills and see how long you last.

I went with an ABC camera crew on the first convoy to Jalaalqi, 120 miles north of Mogadishu up the Shebeli river. For the sake of making America's allies look less worthless, the Italian army was given the escort job. A company of Italians in Fiat jeeps and troop

carriers led a dozen aid-agency food trucks. Two U.S. Army platoons in Humvees brought up the rear.

The convoy was not a work of logistical genius. It left town a day late because (my American military sources swear this is true) the Italians lingered too long over lunch. Then the Italians, who in their own country are homicidally fast drivers, insisted on a twenty-mile-per-hour convoy speed. They also took three meal breaks. Then one of the Italian drivers fell asleep at the wheel and ran into practically the only tree in the Somali desert. After the sun went down, the convoy got off course somehow. I'm not exactly sure what happened, but I believe the lead driver saw what he thought were the lights at the Jalaalqi airstrip and headed toward them, but those were actually the lights of the last vehicles in the convoy. Anyway, we wound up with an enormous merry-go-round of trucks, jeeps, and Humvees circling in the desert.

The trip took fourteen hours. Then, with thousands of square miles of parched sand in every direction, the Italians found a mudflat for us to camp in.

The Somalis had been busy, too. Before we even left Mogadishu, the Italian colonel in charge of the convoy had caught one of the Somali drivers draining the radiator of his own truck. That way he'd have a "breakdown" en route and his cargo would be "stolen." A number of other such sabotages were detected. The Somalis were also quarreling with each other, and their qat-addled driving was bad even by Italian standards. Then, during meal break three, the Somalis decided they couldn't eat Italian rations and they couldn't eat American MREs. They would have to leave the convoy, go to a local village, and get Somali food.

"This is a famine, goddamnit," said an American sergeant. "There *isn't* any Somali food. If there *was* any Somali food, we wouldn't have to fucking *be* here."

The Italian colonel said he wanted to shoot all the Somali drivers.

An American lieutenant commented, "I'm quitting the army.

I'm going on welfare. I'll sell the cars to my folks, sell the house to my sister, and get benefits. This thing sucks—helping people who don't give a shit.”

ABC's Somali employees had also claimed they needed special food. The Kenyan canned goods we were going to pack for them might have pork inside. They wanted a million shillings. Which they got. But they didn't buy any food with it. And, when we weren't looking, they ate all of ours. We had to get the ABC satellite phone out, set it up in the mudflat, and trade soldiers long-distance calls to Mom for MREs.

We didn't have any camping gear either, and when we got ready to go sleep in our trucks, we found our gunmen already stretched out on all the seats, roofs, and hoods. I took three Halcion tablets and lay down in the mud, and I understand the entire U.S. military presence in Jalaalqi was kept awake all night by my snoring.

When the sun came up, we could see a refugee squatter camp stretching for a mile along the Shebela river. These people were not starving; that is, they weren't starving *to death*. Their misery had not quite reached the photogenic stage. But they were living in huts no bigger than the houses children make by putting a blanket over a card table. These homes weren't even hovels, just little humps in the landscape formed with sticks bent in half-circle hoops and covered with grain sacks and pieces of scrap cloth.

The refugees had none of the proud shyness that Carlos had found among the nomads. You could approach these people at random, and they were only too glad to talk. They had nothing to do but talk.

I talked to a woman named Habiba Osman. She had fled from the fighting in someplace called “Burrui,” which I cannot find on a map. She was a Hawiye, a member of the Hawadli subclan, and had been chased away from her home by other Hawiye, members of the Abgaal subclan. She had nine children, she said, holding up four fingers, and she was forty-five. Her husband, Muhammad, stood in the

background. They were getting one portion of coarse cornmeal a day. It was hard to eat. They made it into porridge.

I counted her possessions: a wooden bowl, a long pestle for cracking grain, an empty two-gallon olive-oil can, an aluminum pot, a few aluminum dishes. The goats and camels had been stolen.

I went to watch one of our convoy trucks unload food for the Save the Children charity in Jalaalqi. The town itself hardly existed anymore, though it hadn't been ruined by the war or abandoned by its population. It was just—like the rest of the Somali nation, citizenship, and culture—a neglected, entropic, crumbling mess. The Save the Children headquarters was a tumbledown school sitting in a small yard inside the high walls with which everything needs to be surrounded in Somalia. The food we'd brought to them was something called Unimix, a sort of Purina Famine Chow made of 50 percent corn, 30 percent beans, 10 percent sugar, and 10 percent oil, all ground together. It makes a nourishing gruel when stirred into water, if you can find clean water. A great number of Somalis had to be hired to unload the food: some to carry the fifty-pound sacks, more to stand around yelling commands, and even more, armed with long switches, to argue with the others and take swipes at townspeople who gathered in a nosy cluster around the truck.

Save the Children had managed to keep some food coming into Jalaalqi. In the midst of the worst chaos they had eight kitchens operating to feed kids. They were able to do this, they said, because they worked closely with clan elders. More importantly, there isn't much of a thieves' market for Unimix. Save the Children was losing only 10 percent of its food shipments. But, even so, as many as ten children a day were dying in the refugee camp where I talked to Habiba Osman.

Several reporters were interviewing a Save the Children aid worker. One of the reporters must have flunked journalism school because he asked a question that went straight to the point. “Who cares?” he said, looking around at the wretchedness, squalor, muddle,

and despair. “Back in the United States, in the rest of the world, who really cares about these people?” The man from Save the Children started to laugh. He was possessed of Christian charity—or Muslim or Jewish or whatever. The idea that someone could look at this suffering and *not* care was absurd to the aid worker, utterly ridiculous. So he laughed, the only laugh of kindness I’ve ever heard.

Much uglier jokes were available. About food., for instance. It was all over the place. In fourteen hours of travel the previous day, we’d never been out of sight of the stuff. The American sergeant yelling at the Somalis for trying to grocery-shop in a famine was wrong. Just as I’d been wrong about parched sands when I’d seen our bivouac area. The Shebeli river valley is wet and fecund and contains the richest farmland in Somalia. The road from Mogadishu traversed miles of corn and sorghum, the fields marked out with animal skulls set on stakes. (Scarecrows, maybe, or scarepeoples. I saw a human skeleton beside the pavement.) Even in the drier areas, away from the river, there were herds of cows and goats. We’d been carrying thousands of pounds of food relief through thousands of acres of food.

It was not a supply-side problem they had in Somalia, as our drivers and gunmen pointed out to us that afternoon when they refused to take us back to Mogadishu. They said they’d be robbed and shot. “But,” we said, “you knew we were coming to Jalaaqsi, and you knew we’d have to go home. We talked about this before we left. We asked for volunteers. You weren’t afraid then,” we said. They said they’d changed their minds.

So we left the little army that our corporation had hired with the larger army that our tax dollars pay for and hitched a ride to Mogadishu on a relief agency plane.

Somalia is amazingly roofless. Almost every building we flew over had its ceiling off. How much of this was from neglect and artillery and how much from looting of corrugated tin sheets I don’t know, but you could look right down into the rooms and hallways, and it made the entire country seem like a gigantic game board of Clue. Probable correct answer: Everybody. In the toilet. With an AK-47.

Beautiful beaches, however. As we came into Mogadishu we could see miles of tawny sand with not a hotel or time-share condominium in sight. At this very minute some real estate developer is probably saying, “We got your two baby-boom major obsessions here: oceanfront property and weight loss. Bingo, it’s the new Hilton Head.”

VII

On New Year’s Eve I went with another convoy west a hundred miles to Baidoa, this time with U.S. Marines in the lead. We made the trip in three hours despite long sections of road that weren’t there anymore. Marines drive like qat-influenced Somalis except they don’t litter. American troops in Somalia were scrupulous about not tossing empty water bottles out Humvee windows or scattering MRE trash on patrol. They policed their areas and always left the campground cleaner than they found it. We tried to explain to the marines that the locals *wanted* those water bottles and MRE scraps. Somalia is so bad that making a mess improves the place.

The land was less fertile here than in Jalaaqsi. Western Somalia is one great thorn scrub savannah gradually rising toward the mountains of Ethiopia and utterly featureless except for two gigantic limestone rocks, Bur Acaba and Bur Eibi, which jut out of the surrounding plain as big and steep and out of place as ski resorts. But, although this was desert, it had wells and irrigated fields, and between the fields was grazing land dotted with cows, goats, and camels. Again, we were never out of the sight of food. And never out of the sight of hunger either.

Children were begging frantically by the roadside, pointing to their bellies and making terrible faces. Older boys twirled rags to attract attention. That they had enough energy for theatrics meant they were among the better-off. We weren’t going to stop for them anyway. The road was famous for bandits.

On New Year’s Day we would come back down this highway

without marines. The beggars were gone, and in their place were a dozen freelance roadblocks. These were lengths of iron pipe, each balanced on an oil drum and counterweighted with a chunk of concrete. Half a dozen armed creeps lurked in the thornbush shade while one harmless-looking fellow squatted by the drum, ready to raise the pipe and obsequiously wave you through—unless you looked as harmless as he did, in which case you'd be robbed and shot. We'd found some doughtier gunmen than the Jalaqsi bunch, and we had a dozen of them with us in three trucks. We drove fast right at the blockades with much scowling and bristling of gun barrels, and we were unmolested.

We went on the trip to Baidoa to see George Bush, who was making the kind of high-speed kiss-and-promise tour of Somalia that seemed, I thought, indistinguishable from presidential campaigning—as though the man had suffered complete memory loss, forgot he was beaten the previous November, and forgot he was in the wrong country besides.

Baidoa had been completely destroyed: “Somollified,” as we'd taken to calling it. And it stank with the same smell poverty has around the world—stale smoke and fresh shit. The only buildings left intact were the fortified charity offices. The charities also had the only vehicles left running, all filled with gunmen and sporting the flags and logos of various relief agencies. A total innocent, set down in these environs, would say by the look of things that Baidoa had been conquered and pillaged by the Red Cross, OxFam, and CARE.

We found lodgings of a sort in Baidoa at the Bikiin Hotel, named not after the bathing suit but, very approximately and very unaccountably, after the capital of China. The Bikiin was a disintegrating thatch-and-cement establishment that served dirty plates of spaghetti and warm Kenyan beer. But it had the one thing you want most in Somalia—a high wall. It also had an anti-aircraft gun and a howitzer outside the front gate.

No rooms were to be had, not that we wanted one of the dank

little cubicles. And there were no bathrooms that we would go into more than once voluntarily. We commandeered an empty hut at the back of the compound, made pallets on the floor, and draped mosquito nets around as best we could. We got our gunmen squared away, fed on the spaghetti and staked out around our trucks. Then we found a table and some chairs and set these out under a palm tree.

There were four of us ABC employees: a reporter from New York, a South African soundman, a cameraman from Cairo, and me. We'd requisitioned two bottles of scotch from the ABC emergency larder. Huge red clouds rolled through at sunset like blood pouring into water. The sky turned ruby then maroon then mahogany then black. A breeze came up. The temperature went down to only ninety degrees. The clouds blew away again and there was a moonless equatorial sky undimmed by the lights of civilization or anything resembling it. The sky was so clear that the starlight cast shadows, and so many sparkles and glitters and glints appeared above us that it looked like something really expensive had been dropped and shattered in heaven—God's Steuben ashtray, maybe.

We began to drink and think big thoughts. What the hell were we doing here? We thought that, for instance. And we thought, well, at least some little bit of good is being done in Somalia. The director of the Baidoa orphanage had told us only one child died in December. Before the marines came, the children were dying like . . . “Dying like flies” is not a simile you'd use in Somalia. The flies wax prosperous and lead full lives. Before the marines came, the children were dying like children. Would this last? No, we thought. Everything will slip back into chaos as soon as the marines are gone. But to do some good briefly is better than doing no good ever. Or is it always? Somalia was being flooded with food aid. The only way to overcome the problem of theft was to make food too cheap to be worth stealing. Rice was selling for ten cents a pound in Somalia, the cheapest rice in the world. But what, we thought, did that mean to the people with the fields of corn and sorghum and the herds of goats and cattle? Are those now worth

nothing, too? Had we come to a Somalia where some people sometimes starved only to leave a Somalia where everybody always would?

We had some more to drink and smoked as many cigars and cigarettes as we could to keep the mosquitoes away—mosquitoes which carry yellow fever, dengue, lymphatic filariasis, and four kinds of malaria, one of which is almost instantly fatal. Was this the worst place we'd ever covered? We thought it was. We had, among the four of us, nearly forty years' experience of journalism in wretched spots. But Somalia . . . tiresome discomfort, irritating danger, amazing dirt, prolific disease, humdrum scenery (not counting this night sky), ugly food (especially the MREs we were chewing), rum weather, bum natives, and, everywhere you looked, suffering innocents and thriving swine. True, the women were beautiful, but all their fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands, and, for that matter, male children over twelve were armed.

Still, we thought, this wasn't the worst New Year's Eve we'd ever spent. We had a couple more drinks. We certainly weren't worried about ecological ruin, shrinking white-collar job market, or fear of intimacy. All that "modern era anomie" disappears with a dose of Somalia. Fear cures anxiety. The genuinely alien banishes alienation. It's hard for existential despair to flourish where actual existence is being snuffed out at every turn. Real *Schmerz* trumps *Weltschmerz*. If you have enough to drink.

But what do you do about Somalia? We had even more to drink and reasoned as hard as we could.

Professor Amartya Sen says, "There has never been a famine in any country that's been a democracy with a relatively free press. I know of no exception. It applies to very poor countries with democratic systems as well as to rich ones."

And in the *New York Times* article featuring that quote from Professor Sen, Sylvia Nasar says, "Modern transportation has made it easy to move relief supplies. But far more important are the incentives governments have to save their own people. It's no accident that the

familiar horror stories . . . occurred in one-party states, dictatorships or colonies: China, British India, Stalin's Russia." She notes that India has had no famine since independence even though the country suffered severe food shortages in 1967, 1973, 1979, and 1987.

Says Professor Sen, "My point really is that if famine is about to develop, democracy can guarantee that it won't." And he goes on to say that when there is no free press "it's amazing how ignorant and immune from pressure the government can be."

Well, for the moment at least, Somalia certainly had a free press. The four of us were so free nobody even knew where we were. But how do you get Somalia one of those democratic systems Amartya Sen is so fond of? How, indeed, do you get it any system at all? Provisional government by clan elders? Permanent international occupation? UN Trusteeship? Neo-colonialism? Sell the place to Microsoft? Or . . . Or . . . Or . . .

We were deep into the second bottle of scotch now, and boozy frustration was rising in our gorges along with the MRE entrées. It's all well and good to talk about what can be done to end famine in general. But what can be done about famine specifically? About this famine in particular? About a place as screwed-up as Somalia? What the fucking goddamn hell do you do?

There's one ugly thought that has occurred to almost everyone who's been to Somalia. I heard a marine private in the Baidoa convoy put it succinctly. He said, "Somalis—give them better arms and training and seal the borders."