Book Review: Jonathan Carroll. Beyond Black Hawk Down: Intervention, Nation-Building, and Insurgency in Somalia, 1992–1995[1][2]

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Jonathan Carroll's *Beyond Black Hawk Down* represents a bold and thoroughly researched revaluation of the international intervention in Somalia from 1992 to 1995. By moving well beyond the limited temporal and analytical focus on the Battle of Mogadishu in October 1993, Carroll provides the first extensive scholarly military history of the entire intervention. He places it within the context of Somalia's political disintegration, the dynamics of international bureaucracy and the shifting post-Cold War principles of humanitarian intervention and nation-building. For those engaged in African studies, this book is especially significant due to its persistent effort to highlight Somali political figures and local dynamics, while still being rooted in the conventions of military history.

The central intervention in Somalia has historically held a contradictory status within both academic discourse and collective memory. It is regarded as one of the most commonly referenced instances of unsuccessful humanitarian intervention, yet it remains one of the least thoroughly analysed in its entirety. Most current evaluations of Somalia are conducted through the frameworks of international relations theory, peacekeeping principles or critiques of policy, frequently addressing events in a selective and teleological manner, with October 1993 acting as both the peak moment and the conclusive explanatory point. Carroll disputes this interpretive simplification. His primary argument is that the course of the intervention cannot be comprehended through detached incidents, doctrinal generalizations or a sense of retrospective inevitability. Rather, Somalia should be viewed as a drawn-out, uneven and internally varied process where violence occurred sporadically rather than continuously, consent was often contested yet frequently present and failure developed gradually due to bureaucratic misalignment and political miscalculations, rather than stemming from an intrinsic Somali resistance or unchangeable structural deficiencies.

The book is structured in a chronological manner, spanning eleven chapters and is framed by both an introduction and an epilogue. It is further enhanced by

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[2] Jonathan Carroll, *Beyond Black Hawk Down: Intervention, Nation-Building, and Insurgency in Somalia, 1992–1995* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2025.), Modern War Studies series. ISBN 978-0-7006-3888-8. 463 pp.
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comprehensive notes, maps, appendices and a significant bibliography. One of the most remarkable aspects of this volume is Carroll's mastery of archival resources. By utilizing archives from the United Nations, military records from the United States, materials from the Irish Defence Forces and conducting interviews with participants from various national contingents, he meticulously reconstructs the decision-making processes with remarkable detail. This extensive archival research enables him to challenge long-held beliefs, especially those related to consent, impartiality and the so-called „Mogadishu Line", which have influenced both academic and public perceptions of the intervention.

From the perspective of African studies, one of the most important contributions of the book is its ongoing critique of the inclination to depict Somalia as either a passive or uniformly antagonistic environment. Carroll contests the portrayals of Somali political figures as irrational disruptors or typical warlords, advocating instead for a more nuanced understanding of factional politics. His analysis of Mohamed Farah Aidid is particularly remarkable. Instead of reiterating the traditional image of Aidid as a solely power-driven adversary, Carroll places him within a fragmented political context influenced by clan alliances, fluctuating legitimacy claims and international involvement. In doing so, the author creates an analytical framework that allows for a revaluation of agency, accountability and causation in the intensification of violence during 1993.

Equally intriguing is Carroll's revaluation of consent. Existing scholarship frequently presumes that the lack of consent condemned the mission from the very beginning. The author challenges this notion by illustrating that significant portions of the Somali populace and political elite initially embraced international engagement, particularly during the UNITAF phase. The book meticulously records how consent was formed, negotiated and diminished over time, highlighting that it was not a fixed state but rather a dynamic process influenced by perceptions of fairness, effectiveness and political inclusion. This understanding is particularly pertinent for scholars in African studies who are interested in the relationship between external interventions and local political legitimacy.

Carroll showcases an exceptional talent for dissecting the internal dynamics of international actors. One of the book's most convincing arguments pertains to the fragmentation of authority within the United Nations and its relationship with the United States. Rather than perceiving the UN as a unified entity, Carroll uncovers the competing national priorities, bureaucratic rivalries and decisions driven by individual personalities that have influenced policy on the ground. This methodology usefully complicates narratives that attribute failures solely to abstract institutional weaknesses. The author posits that the disintegration of the intervention was less a result of doctrinal overreach and more a product of the cumulative effects of inconsistent mandates, poor coordination and escalating coercion that was detached from a political strategy.

The sections addressing the shift from UNITAF to UNOSOM II are notably compelling. Carroll illustrates how the relative achievements of UNITAF created unrealistic anticipations regarding the viability of swift nation-building under the auspices of the United Nations. The broadening of the mission's mandate took place

without an adequate adjustment of resources, authority or political influence. From the perspective of African studies, this examination highlights a persistent trend in external interventions on the continent: the belief that the provision of security can replace political resolution and that institutional frameworks can be enforced in environments characterized by historical disunity and disputed sovereignty.

The book's examination of the summer of 1993 constitutes a significant historiographical contribution. The author contests the prevailing narrative that depicts the onset of hostilities as an unavoidable result of Somali obstinacy or Aidid's aspirations. Rather, he attributes the escalation to a sequence of policy choices and operational errors, particularly by U.S. officials involved in UNOSOM II. The assertion that violence arose from misinterpretation, miscommunication and reactive decision-making, rather than a calculated Somali strategy, is both thought-provoking and well substantiated. Although some readers might perceive this revaluation as contentious, Carroll's thorough documentation and measured approach provide it with substantial credibility.

Despite its numerous strengths, *Beyond Black Hawk Down* does have its shortcomings. The text is predominantly rooted in military history and this disciplinary focus influences both its analytical priorities and the aspects it overlooks. Although the author makes notable attempts to include Somali perspectives, these narratives are primarily filtered through elite political figures and international records. The daily realities of civilians, the gendered aspects of intervention and violence as well as the socio-economic repercussions of extended displacement receive relatively scant attention. Consequently, scholars who are interested in social history or anthropological perspectives on Somalia may perceive the scope of the book as more limited than its title implies.

Furthermore, although Carroll successfully deconstructs numerous myths related to the intervention, his focus on contingency and bureaucratic shortcomings sometimes tends to minimize the significance of more profound structural elements. While he recognizes the colonial histories of Somalia, Cold War involvements and enduring political economy, these aspects are not examined thoroughly. For Africanists who are mindful of long-term processes, this could be seen as a lost chance to better incorporate the intervention within the wider historical context of the East African country.

Nonetheless, these criticisms ought to be interpreted as manifestations of disciplinary limits rather than as genuine deficiencies. The author does not assert that he is composing a social or cultural history of Somalia, nor does he position his work as an authoritative narrative of Somali society. Caroll's aim is to reconstruct the intervention as it occurred, contest simplistic interpretations and reintroduce complexity to a case that has frequently been oversimplified. In this regard, the book achieves its goals exceptionally well.

The epilogue serves as a particularly effective tool for placing Somalia within broader discussions regarding post-Cold War interventionism. The author avoids the easy temptation to extract simplistic lessons, instead emphasizing how the Somali experience was later misrepresented and utilized within policy discussions. The assertion that

Somalia transformed into a cautionary tale not due to the actual events that transpired, but rather because of the selective recollection of those events, stands as a compelling reminder of the politics surrounding memory in international relations.

In conclusion, *Beyond Black Hawk Down* represents a significant advancement in the examination of international intervention in Africa. It presents a thoroughly researched, analytically refined, and refreshingly non-deterministic narrative of one of the most pivotal events of the post-Cold War period. For those engaged in African studies, the book offers crucial perspectives on the dynamics between external influence and local governance, the precariousness of consent and the risks associated with oversimplifying intricate societies into mere policy case studies. Although its main focus is on military history, the ramifications of its findings reach far beyond that discipline. Carroll's scholarship will be essential for historians, political scientists and anyone interested in African affairs who aim to comprehend not only the failures experienced in Somalia but also the ways in which such interventions are often misinterpreted from the outset.