Letters to the Editor
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In “The Death of a Good Idea” (May 10, 1999) commentator David Rieff writes, “The bitter lesson of Kosovo is that there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems.” But contrary to Rieff’s assertion that Kosovo is teaching aid agencies about the limits of humanitarianism, Doctors Without Borders has always known that the presence of medical aid is not enough to stop the forces of oppression. Solutions to man-made humanitarian crises are always political, never humanitarian. Realizing this nearly 30 years ago, Doctors Without Borders helped usher in an era of witnessing and advocacy combined with the provision of aid. During the war in Bosnia, for example, our doctors provided what assistance they could to the victims of the conflict, all the while denouncing the lack of international protection for those who faced the massacres.

Rieff is wrong in concluding that only military powers like NATO can now provide effective humanitarian aid. The “humanitarian” goals of NATO’s war on Yugoslavia and subsequent assistance to refugees should not be confused with the independent human-to-human aid provided by groups like Doctors Without Borders. NATO’s eagerness to provide relief to Kosovar refugees, often to the point of muscling independent aid agencies to the wayside, must be seen as a part of an insidious trend toward the involvement of military bodies in humanitarian work. In embracing the cause of the refugees, NATO is overstepping its military mandate, and betraying its leaders’ lack of political solutions to the original problems facing the Kosovar population.

Contrary to Rieff, aid is working successfully around the globe, but usually takes place away from television cameras. Even today, more than half of the Kosovar refugees have taken shelter in private homes, where only private agencies are reaching them. Most of the world’s current war victims—from Sudan to Sri Lanka—depend on impartial humanitarian aid for their survival.