



Interviewee: Mark Bowden
Title: What went wrong in Mogadishu
Duration: 8 minutes, 15 seconds

About this transcript

Each Bookpod transcript is an edited version of a longer conversation recorded in person or over the phone. It is not a formal essay. To gain a better appreciation of the text, below, please listen to the podcast episode.

Introduction

It was the last decade of the twentieth century and the Cold War was over. The makers of U.S. foreign policy finally could turn their attention to humanitarian intervention. Somalia in the Horn of Africa was a country in disarray and looked as if it needed rescue from itself.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, Mark Bowden talks about *Black Hawk Down*, his minute-by-minute account of the failed U.S. effort to help the United Nations bring stability to the Somali city of Mogadishu.

Presentation

The specific mission on October 3rd of 1993 was to capture two top lieutenants of a Somali warlord named Mohamed Farrah Aidid. The American task force in Mogadishu had been dismantling Farrah Aidid's organization at the behest of the U.N. for several months. So they were systematically



tracking down key members of his organization and arresting them.

And they would perform these arrests in a variety of ways. On this day, the method was to helicopter in and rope down to a house in the middle of Mogadishu where these two key people were going to be located and to arrest them and drive them back to base.

The mission, I think, had a high probability of success, if you can judge by the previous six that they had done, which had gone off fairly smoothly.

If you look back over what happened on that day in Mogadishu, Todd Blackburn falling out of the helicopter didn't necessarily set in motion all of the events that would follow. But there were a cascading series of failures, delays that proceeded from that moment and that grew increasingly out of control.

I think that other than intelligence efforts targeted very narrowly at identifying and locating key members of Mohamed Farrah Aidid's organization, Task Force Ranger, which was the military force that I wrote about in *Black Hawk Down*,



had very little contact or understanding of the place where they were operating or the people they were after.

#

Mogadishu had fallen into anarchy. The city itself was roughly divided into sectors controlled by warring factions headed by people that, you know, they would call tribal chiefs, that we would call warlords. Basically, the country had devolved into civil war after overthrowing the dictator who had ruled there for many years.

And the various factions that had united to overthrow the dictator had failed to reach any kind of consensus for what would follow. And so what you had were various powerful factions, well armed, battling with each other for preeminence, and none of them powerful enough to prevail.

So the civil war, the anarchic conditions in the country had essentially broken down all normal civil society. And what happens then is that people start to starve.

So the U.N. had initially intervened in Somalia with American forces to alleviate a terrible famine, and then



had set about trying to work out some kind of a coalition government with the warring factions to prevent conditions from just deteriorating once more when American forces were withdrawn.

Mohamed Farrah Aidid, who I think was probably the most powerful of the warring factions, had resisted these efforts to cooperate with the other war lords, and felt that he was being pressured by, you know, his enemies essentially working through the U.N., to surrender what he felt was his rightful prize, which was the rule of Somalia.

So he went to war against the U.N. forces. That's what brought in, in particular, Task Force Ranger, which was tasked with targeting Aidid in particular and removing him from the scene.

So Mogadishu was a battle zone. It had been for some time. The city itself had been reduced to rubble in most places. There were refugees living in every open space and, you know, in battered shells of old buildings. Other than a few neighborhoods with compounds that were owned and defended by these various powerful war lords, the city was in a really disastrous state.



President Clinton literally called off the mission against Aidid. You know, if Clinton hadn't done it, Congress would have forced him to do it. There was a resolution that passed Congress to begin the immediate withdrawal of American forces. It was a resolution sponsored by John McCain which gives you an idea of how united, you know, the United States was politically against any further involvement in Somalia.

And I think one of the reasons for that was that it was, I think, a substantial departure for the United States to use its military for purely humanitarian reasons.

Traditionally, a nation's army and navy is [sic] used to defend its borders and to defend itself against its own enemies. We intervened in Somalia with absolutely no national interest at stake whatsoever. There was simply a desire on the part of America to assist the U.N. in ending a famine in Somalia, saving lives and creating some kind of stability there.

We became as a country extremely reluctant to introduce our troops, particularly on the ground, anywhere in the world.



So that willingness to intervene for humanitarian reasons with no national interest at stake dried up very quickly. And it's one of the reasons the United States did nothing when the genocide in Rwanda was launched. Because you simply could not marshal support in Congress or popular support for that kind of military action.

#

You know, if I had to describe –and I have – a short sentence what the story of *Black Hawk Down* is about, it's about a group of young men who desperately want to experience combat and who get their wish.

And it is a terrible thing and I think it is universal.

I think once you have seen the random terror and death and destruction of battle, you know, the next time you go out is a true act of courage because you have a much better sense of what you're getting into.

That's not to say that there are not causes that I think compel you to surmount your fears, that make you feel that, you know, what you're doing is necessary or important



enough to risk your life and the lives of others and your buddies.

But I think that those of us who had sons and daughters who served in the military are understandably reluctant to sacrifice their lives or put them at great risk for some cause that has no real meaning in our own country.

Valedictory

Despite the good intentions on the part of the U.S. and the U.N., the mission to abduct two of Aidid's lieutenants resulted in the deaths of eighteen U.S. soldiers and 300 Somalis.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.