David Rieff began his remarks by asking the audience to assume that we can agree on three things: 1) There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems; 2) There is a crisis in humanitarianism, even if we don’t agree on what that crisis is; 3) This crisis can be summarized in different ways. Rieff then explained that humanitarianism was originally conceived as aid given neutrally and partially – a pioneering tradition based on the medical model where those giving aid do not allow the judgments they make about people to effect how they treat those people. Help is given without favor, where a doctor must treat a murderer the same way that he or she would treat the victim. This moral stance defines the original idea of humanitarian action in its pre-modern origin. Rieff believes that this model of humanitarianism is in crisis.

He explained that if you went out into the field in past years, you wouldn’t have found much self-criticism from humanitarian organizations. People would have said that to be a humanitarian was to do good. Up until the 1990’s, with the exception of certain Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) workers, people would take the view that despite failures and the inability to answer all challenges, humanitarian organizations were providing relief to those in need. Rieff challenged that few believe this today. He described a crisis where moral and operational activity has become mixed and where humanitarianism can do more harm than good – as in Bosnia and Rwanda.

Rieff argued that there is a sense that humanitarianism is being misused by states. For example, the military was used in Bosnia as a solution to reverse the course of events already taking place at the time. Governments felt that they had to do something – enter humanitarianism. Although in this case, humanitarian aid as a solution came after the failure to prevent genocide in the first place. In Sudan, UN agencies increasingly asked themselves – are we not logisticians to the war agent? Are we acting as social welfare agents for the government of Sudan or are we not looking after these people so that they can spend money on making war? There was the realization that while providing them with goods and services could help supply the local economy, this aid could be used for good or ill. Rieff believes that what has emerged from this is a crisis of humanitarian confidence. This humanitarianism that emerged from the Balkans and southern central Africa in the early 1990’s has been wondering what it’s role is – is it making things better or worse?

Rieff believes that this is the situation that all humanitarian organizations now find themselves in. It is not new to say that humanitarianism can do harm as well as good. The question is, what effect the further distortions of state sponsored humanitarian efforts – such as in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and possibly Iraq - will have on this ongoing crisis of humanitarianism.
Rieff argued that there are a number of things that have made the crisis worse. Humanitarianism – as it was originally intended – allowed for a situation where agencies did their work without any alignment with governments in either action or thought. That independence was integral to the successful operation and implementation of humanitarian work. Independence gave these organizations a kind of different dispensation in these emergencies – though he noted differences with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This view was challenged by events in Kosovo and Afghanistan. In both cases, most humanitarian NGOs became the implementing partner of one side of a war. One can still support war yet believe that the integrity and future viability of independence for humanitarian organizations was injured - perhaps mortally – in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Humanitarianism became an adjunct of state power. NATO was the boss in Kosovo and the humanitarian organizations were implementing partners.

Rieff continued that some people ask, why not? Shouldn’t we all work together? He acknowledged that NGOs can sometimes work with the government as well as on opposite sides from the government depending on the situation. Yet he argued that there are such things as humanitarian principles and “we alter them to our peril”. He stated, “This is a system of politics and money”, where private humanitarian organizations depend on global powers for money, resulting in certain sections of humanitarian organizations no longer being truly independent of governments. Rieff pointed out that only MSF has ever refused to take NATO funds, calling it inappropriate in Kosovo.

Rieff stated that this marriage of humanitarianism and state power may be very effective in operational terms. There is no reason why US forces or other states cannot deliver humanitarian aid. Relief organizations do not have a monopoly on this. Yet Rieff argued that there is a greater reason for aid agencies to maintain their independence. He cited an example of relief organizations in Pakistan during the bombing in Afghanistan, where outraged sympathizers of Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban burned the offices of these organizations. These citizens made no distinction between the private aid agencies and the US Air force and NATO. This example illustrated Rieff’s belief that it is very dangerous for both aid workers and aid recipients to be associated with governments. Rieff argued that we can support intervention by western governments and still say that independent humanitarian organizations are a good thing. Although we must realize that in some cases there will be no state powers to protect aid workers and it is in these situations where the question of independence can be a matter of life or death for aid workers and aid recipients.

Rieff emphasized that he is not blaming individual humanitarians. Rather, he is critical of certain headquarters and how the old ethos has been corrupted by business ideas and the concept of aid agencies as being part of the “market share”, a view that Rieff believes some people share within humanitarian circles. He acknowledged that difficulties do exist in an age where humanitarian operations are so expensive, where it is often dangerous for workers to function in the field, and where our moral expectations for humanitarianism are so high. Yet Rieff has serious concerns and he pointed to a comment by Secretary of State Colin Powell, where Powell referred to independent
humanitarian actors as part of the government’s assets by stating, “Humanitarian action is a tremendous force multiplier for us”. Rieff does not believe that this represents the vision that the founders of humanitarianism intended.

Rieff also argued that there is an increasing movement toward an historic compromise between humanitarian organizations and the human rights movement, where charity is being transformed into a law-based system. In this situation, aid recipients have clearly defined rights and aid organizations have to honor these rights. Rieff explained that while some may believe the comments of people such as Michael Ignatieff, who argues that we have experienced a revolution of moral concern where the human rights views of the west will be expanded to the world, Rieff sees no evidence of this and he believes that there is no way that human rights norms can be effectively imposed.

Rieff concluded that humanitarian organizations must resist this current crisis and adopt a much starker and reduced sense of what they can accomplish. He believes that humanitarian organizations need to go back to their original concepts of relief and independent charity.