

Genocide and America
By Samantha Power

1.

Over the course of the last century, the United States has made modest progress in its responses to genocide, the deliberate destruction of ethnic, national, or religious groups. The persistence and proliferation of dissenters within the US government and human rights advocates outside it have made a policy of silence in the face of genocide more difficult to sustain. As Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic learned, state sovereignty no longer necessarily shields a perpetrator of genocide from either military intervention or courtroom punishment.

But such advances have been eclipsed by America's toleration of unspeakable atrocities, often committed in clear view. The personalities and geopolitical constraints influencing US decision-making have shifted with time, but the United States has consistently refused to take risks in order to suppress genocide. The United States is not alone. The states bordering genocidal societies and the European powers have looked away as well. Despite broad public consensus that genocide should "never again" be allowed, and a good deal of triumphalism about the ascent of liberal democratic values, the last decade of the twentieth century was one of the most deadly in the grimmest century on record. Rwandan Hutus in 1994 could freely, joyfully, and systematically slaughter some eight thousand Tutsi a day for one hundred days without any foreign interference. Genocide occurred after the cold war; after the growth of human rights groups; after the advent of technology that allowed for instant communication; after the erection of the Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Perversely, America's public awareness of the Holocaust often seemed to set the bar for concern so high that we were able to tell ourselves that contemporary genocides were not measuring up. As the writer David Rieff noted, "never again" might best be defined as "Never again would Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s." [1] Either by averting their eyes or attending to more pressing conventional strategic and political concerns, US leaders who have denounced the Holocaust have themselves allowed genocide.

What is most shocking about America's reaction to Turkey's killing of close to a million Armenians, the Holocaust, Pol Pot's reign of terror in which some two million died, Iraq's slaughter of more than one hundred thousand Kurds, Bosnian Serbs' mass murder of some two hundred thousand Muslims and Croats, and the Hutu attempt to eliminate the Tutsi is not that the United States refused to deploy its ground forces to combat the atrocities. For much of the century, even the most ardent interventionists did not lobby for US ground invasions. What is most shocking is that Washington's policymakers did almost nothing to deter the crime. Because America's "vital national interests" were not considered imperiled by mere genocide, senior US officials did not give genocide the

moral attention it warranted. Instead of undertaking steps along a continuum of intervention—from condemning the culprits or cutting off US aid to bombing or rallying a multinational combat force —US officials tended to trust in negotiation, cling to diplomatic niceties and "neutrality," and ship humanitarian aid.

Indeed, on occasion the United States directly or indirectly aided those committing genocide. In 1979 the Carter administration orchestrated the vote in the UN Credentials Committee to favor the Khmer Rouge, enabling the barbarous radicals to occupy Cambodia's UN seat for a decade after their overthrow. In 1987–1988 the Reagan administration supplied more than \$500 million worth of annual US agricultural and manufacturing credits to Iraq while Saddam Hussein was attempting to wipe out the country's rural Kurds. Between 1992 and 1995, along with their European allies, the Bush and Clinton administrations maintained an arms embargo against the Bosnian Muslims even after it was clear that the arms ban prevented the Muslims from defending themselves. Reluctant to "Americanize" the war or to "take sides," they froze in place a gross arms disparity that benefited the aggressor. In April 1994, while the Bosnian war still continued, the Clinton administration used its influence on the UN Security Council to mandate the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from Rwanda and block efforts to redeploy there. To the people of Bosnia and Rwanda, the United States and its allies on the UN Security Council held out the promise of protection—a promise that they were not prepared to keep.

The crucial question, after a century of false promises, is, Why does the United States stand so idly by?

The most common response is, "We didn't know." This is not true. To be sure, the information emanating from countries wracked by genocide was imperfect. Embassy personnel were withdrawn, intelligence assets on the ground were scarce, editors were typically reluctant to assign their reporters to places where neither US interests nor American readers were engaged, and journalists who attempted to report the atrocities were limited in their mobility. For example, the Khmer Rouge sealed off Cambodia completely, forcing concerned reporters to camp out at the Thai border to debrief those Cambodians lucky enough to have escaped. The handful of brave Western reporters who remained in Rwanda during the genocide were rarely able to leave the capital city of Kigali. As a result, survivors' claims were difficult to confirm and body counts notoriously hard to establish. Because genocide is usually veiled under the cover of war, some US officials at first had genuine difficulty distinguishing the deliberate massacre of civilians from the casualties incurred in conventional conflict.

But although US officials did not know all there was to know about the nature and scale of the violence, they knew a remarkable amount. From Henry Morgenthau Sr., the well-connected US ambassador in Constantinople in 1915, to Charles Twining, the Cambodia expert at the US embassy in Bangkok in 1976 and 1977, or Jon Western, a junior intelligence analyst who gathered atrocity reports on Bosnia in 1993, US officials have pumped a steady stream of information up the chain to senior decision-makers—both

early warnings ahead of genocide and vivid documentation during it. Much of the best intelligence appeared in the morning papers. Back in 1915, when communications were primitive, The New York Times managed to publish 145 stories about the Turkish massacre of Armenians. Nearly eighty years later, the same paper reported just four days after the beginning of the Rwanda genocide that "tens of thousands" of Rwandans had already been murdered. It devoted more column inches to the horrors of Bosnia between 1992 and 1995 than it did to any other single foreign story.

In an age of instant information, US officials have gone from claiming that they "didn't know" to suggesting—as President Clinton did in his 1998 Rwanda apology—that they "didn't fully appreciate" the crime underway. This, too, is misleading. It is true that the atrocities that were known remained abstract and remote, rarely acquiring the status of knee-buckling knowledge among ordinary Americans. Because the savagery of genocide so defies our everyday experience, many of us failed to wrap our minds around it. We gradually came to accept the depravity of the Holocaust, but then slotted it in our consciousness as "history"; we resisted acknowledging that genocide was occurring in the present. Survivors and witnesses had trouble making the unbelievable believable. Bystanders were thus able to retreat to the "twilight between knowing and not knowing."^[2]

But this is not an alibi. We are responsible for our incredulity. The stories that emerge from genocidal societies are by definition incredible. That was the lesson the Holocaust should have taught us. In case after case of genocide, accounts that sounded farfetched and that could not be independently verified repeatedly proved true. With so much wishful thinking debunked, we should long ago have shifted the burden of proof away from the refugees and to the skeptics, who should be required to offer persuasive reasons for disputing eyewitness claims. A bias toward belief would do less harm than a bias toward disbelief.

US officials have been reluctant to imagine the unimaginable because of the implications. To believe that Saddam Hussein was gassing Kurdish civilians would have required US officials to rethink their "strategic" partnership with him. To accept that Muslim refugees from Srebrenica had in fact spotted piles of bodies stacked on the side of the road would have forced US officials to confront either General Mladic's Serb forces or their own consciences. Thus, instead of aggressively hunting for deeper knowledge or publicizing what was already known, US officials have consistently taken shelter in the fog of plausible deniability. They have used the search for certainty as an excuse for paralysis and postponement. In the cases of genocide documented in my book 'A Problem from Hell',^[3] US officials who "did not know" or "did not fully appreciate" usually chose not to.

A second response to the question of why the United States did so little is that it could not have done much to stop the horrors. The only way to ascertain the consequences of US diplomatic, economic, or military measures would have been to undertake them. We do know, however, that those responsible for genocide were quick studies who were

remarkably attuned both to the tactics of their murderous predecessors and to the world's response. From their brutal forerunners, they learned lessons in everything from dehumanizing their victims and deploying euphemisms to constructing concentration camps and lying about and covering up their crimes. And from the outside world they learned the lesson of impunity.

If anything testifies to the US capacity for influence, it is the extent to which the plotters of genocide kept an eye trained on Washington and other Western capitals as they decided how to proceed. Talaat Pasha, the Turkish minister of the interior, frequently observed that no one had prevented Sultan Abdul Hamid from murdering Armenians. Hitler was emboldened by the fact that absolutely nobody "remembered the Armenians." Saddam Hussein, noting the international community's relaxed response to his chemical weapons attacks against Iran and his bulldozing of Kurdish villages, rightly assumed he would not be punished for using poison gases against the Kurds. Rwandan gunmen deliberately targeted Belgian peacekeepers at the start of their genocide because they knew from the US reaction to the deaths of eighteen US soldiers in Somalia in 1993 that the murder of Western troops would likely precipitate their withdrawal. The Bosnian Serbs publicly celebrated the Mogadishu casualties, flush with a new confidence that they would never have to do battle with US ground forces. Milosevic saw that he got away with the brutal suppression of an independence movement in Croatia in 1991 and reasoned he would pay no price for committing genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Because so many people were killing for the first time and deciding daily how far they would go, the United States and its allies had critical opportunities to try to deter them, and failed to do so. When they ignored genocide around the world, US officials certainly did not intend to give the go-ahead to those who were committing it. But since at least some killers thought they were doing the world a favor by "cleansing" the "undesirables," they likely interpreted silence as consent or even support.

Although it is impossible to prove the outcome of actions never tried, the best testament to what the United States might have achieved is what the United States did achieve. For all the talk of the likely futility of US involvement, in the rare instances that the United States did act, it made a difference. After Secretary of State George Shultz's condemnations of Saddam Hussein's use of poison gas against the Kurds and Senator Claiborne Pell's abortive effort to impose sanctions in 1988, Saddam Hussein did not use gas again. After the appeals of the Turkish government and the personal encounter of Secretary of State James Baker with Kurdish refugees, the United States, in 1991, joined its allies in creating a safe haven in northern Iraq, enabling more than a million Kurds to return to their homes. On a smaller scale, a Rwandan hotel owner credits one US diplomat's phone calls with helping to convince militias not to attack the Tutsi inhabitants of his hotel during the genocide.

NATO bombing in Bosnia, when it finally came in 1995, rapidly brought that three-and-a-half-year war to a close. NATO bombing in Kosovo in 1999 ended up liberating 1.7 million Albanians from tyrannical Serb rule. And a handful of NATO arrests in the former Yugoslavia has caused dozens of suspected war criminals to turn themselves in.

One cannot assume that every measure contemplated by US officials or nongovernmental advocates would have been effective, but there is no doubt that even these small or belated steps saved hundreds of thousands of lives. If the United States had made genocide prevention a priority it could have saved countless more.

2.

The real reason the United States did not do what it could and should have done to stop genocide was not a lack of knowledge or influence but a lack of will. Simply put, American leaders did not act because they did not want to. They believed that genocide was wrong, but they were not prepared to invest the military, financial, diplomatic, or domestic political capital needed to stop it. The US policies formulated in response to the twentieth century's genocides were not the accidental products of neglect. They were concrete choices made by this country's most influential decision-makers after unspoken and explicit weighing of costs and benefits.

In each case, US policymakers in the executive branch (usually with the passive backing of most members of Congress) had two objectives. First, they wanted to avoid engagement in conflicts that posed little threat to American interests, narrowly defined. And second, they hoped to contain the political costs and avoid the moral stigma associated with allowing genocide. By and large, they achieved both aims. In order to contain the political fallout, US officials overemphasized the ambiguity of the facts. They played up the likely futility, perversity, and jeopardy of any proposed intervention. They steadfastly avoided use of the word "genocide," which they believed carried with it a legal and moral (and thus political) imperative to act. And they took solace in the normal operations of the foreign policy bureaucracy, which permitted an illusion of continual deliberation, complex activity, and intense concern. One of the most important conclusions I have reached, therefore, is that the US record is not one of failure. It is one of success. Troubling though it is to acknowledge, US officials worked the system and the system worked.

To understand why the United States did not do more to stem genocide, it is not enough, of course, to concentrate on the actions of presidents or their foreign policy teams. In a democracy even an administration disinclined to act can be pressured into doing so. This pressure can come from inside or outside. Bureaucrats within the system who grasp the stakes can patiently lobby or brazenly agitate in the hope of forcing their bosses to entertain a full range of options. Unfortunately, although every genocide generated some activism within the US foreign policy establishment, civil and foreign servants typically heeded what they took to be presidential indifference and public apathy. They assumed US policy was immutable, that their concerns were already understood by their superiors, and that speaking (or walking) out would only reduce their capacity to improve the US response. Bosnia was the sole genocide of the twentieth century that generated a wave of resignations from the US government. Four foreign service officers resigned from the State Department in 1992 and 1993. It is not coincidental that Bosnia was the one case

where the protests of the foreign servants were bolstered daily by sustained public and press activism outside Foggy Bottom.

The executive branch has also felt no pressure from the second possible source: the home front. American leaders have been able to persist in turning away because genocide in distant lands has not captivated senators, congressional caucuses, Washington lobbyists, elite opinion shapers, grassroots groups, or individual citizens. Although isolated voices have protested the slaughter, Americans outside the executive branch were largely mute when it mattered. As a result of this society-wide silence, officials at all levels of government calculated that the domestic political costs of getting involved in genocide prevention far exceeded any possible costs of remaining uninvolved. The exceptions that have proven the rule were Ronald Reagan's decision in 1985 to press for the ratification of the genocide convention only after his visit to SS graves at Bitburg had provoked a wave of domestic outrage, and Bill Clinton's determination to launch NATO bombing in Bosnia only after Senate majority leader (and future presidential challenger) Bob Dole united with elite and grassroots activists to make President Clinton feel he was "getting creamed" for allowing Serb atrocities.

With foreign policy crises all over the world affecting more traditional US interests, genocide has never secured top-level attention on its own merits. It takes political pressure to put genocide on the map in Washington. When Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch met with national security adviser Anthony Lake two weeks into the Rwanda genocide, he informed her that the phones were not ringing. "Make more noise!" he urged. Because so little noise has been made about genocide, US decision-makers have opposed US intervention, telling themselves that they were doing all they could—and, most important, all they should—in light of competing American interests and a highly circumscribed understanding of what was domestically "possible" for the United States to do.

In the end, however, the inertia of the governed cannot be disentangled from the indifference of the government. American leaders have both a circular and a deliberate relationship to public opinion. It is circular because their constituencies are rarely if ever aroused by foreign crises, even genocidal ones, in the absence of political leadership, and yet at the same time US officials continually cite the absence of public support as grounds for inaction. The relationship is deliberate because American leadership has not been absent in such circumstances: it has been present but devoted mainly to minimizing public outrage.

One mechanism for altering the calculation of US leaders would be to make them publicly or professionally accountable for inaction. US officials have been conditioned to fear repercussions for their sins of commission—for decisions they make and policies they shape that go wrong. But none fear they will pay a price for their sins of omission. If everyone within the government is motivated to avoid "another Somalia" or "another Vietnam," few think twice about playing a role in allowing "another Rwanda."

Other countries and institutions whose personnel were actually present when genocide was committed have undertaken at least some introspection. The Netherlands, France, and the UN have staged inquiries into their responsibility for the fall of Srebrenica and the massacres that followed. But when the UN's investigators approached the US mission in New York for assistance, their phone calls were not returned. In the end the UN team was forbidden to make any independent contact with US government employees. The investigators were granted access to a group of handpicked junior and midlevel officials who revealed next to nothing about what US officials knew during the Srebrenica massacres.

The French, the Belgians, the UN, and the Organization of African Unity have sponsored inquiries into responsibility for the Rwanda genocide. But in the United States, when some disgruntled members of the Congressional Black Caucus attempted to stage hearings on the part the US played (or failed to play), they were rebuffed. Two officials in the Clinton administration, one at the National Security Council, the other at the State Department, conducted internal studies on the administration's response to the Rwanda slaughter. But they examined only the paper trail and did not publicly disclose their findings. The United States needs congressional inquiries with the power to subpoena documents and US officials of all ranks in the executive and legislative branches. Without meaningful disclosure, public awareness, and official shame, it is hard to imagine the US response improving the next time around.

Even nongovernmental attempts at accountability might make a difference. In September 2001, the Atlantic Monthly published the results of my three-year investigation into the Clinton administration's response to the genocide in Rwanda. A few weeks later, according to officials on the National Security Council, a memo made its way to the desk of President George W. Bush on the subject of genocide prevention. The memo summarized the findings of the Atlantic article and warned of the likely outbreak of ethnic violence in Burundi. During the presidential campaign the previous year, Bush had said stopping genocide was not America's business. "I don't like genocide and I don't like ethnic cleansing," Bush had told Sam Donaldson of ABC, "but I would not send our troops." After being elected and being presented with an account of the Clinton administration's failure, however, Bush wrote in firm letters in the margin of the memo: "NOT ON MY WATCH." While he was commander in chief, he was saying, genocide would not recur.

Bush's note certainly constituted a welcome statement of intent, but the president was in fact falling back into line with the other American presidents who pledged "never again." In order to put the sentiment into action, he would have to make meaningful public and bureaucratic commitments to stop genocide. He and his top foreign policy aides would need to issue an explicit presidential decision directive, rally support in their speeches, consult with their allies, and demand the preparation of "off-the-shelf" contingency military planning. Otherwise, it is highly unlikely that US officials or citizens would behave differently the next time ethnic chauvinists begin systematically wiping out a minority group. In any event, on September 11, 2001, just days after the President jotted down his marginalia, Islamic terrorists turned four American civilian airliners into human

fuel bombs, murdering more than three thousand civilians, shattering the nation's sense of invulnerability, and causing the President to focus US resources on a long-term "war on terrorism."

3.

The September 11 attack on the United States will profoundly alter US foreign policy. The attack might make Americans inside and outside government more empathetic toward the victims of genocide. The fanatics who target the United States resemble the perpetrators of genocide in their espousal of collective responsibility of the most savage kind. They attack civilians not because of anything they do personally but because of who they are. To earn a death sentence, it was enough in the twentieth century to be an Armenian, a Jew, or a Tutsi. On September 11, it was enough to be an American. In 1994 Rwanda, a country of just eight million, experienced the numerical equivalent of more than two World Trade Center attacks every single day for one hundred days. On an American scale this would mean twenty-three million people murdered in three months. When, on September 12, 2001, the United States turned for help to its friends around the world, Americans were gratified by the overwhelming response. When the Tutsi cried out, by contrast, every country in the world turned away.

Even if Americans become better able to imagine slaughter and identify with its victims, the US government is likely to view genocide prevention as an undertaking it cannot afford as it sets out to strengthen its protection of Americans. Many are now arguing that fighting terrorism means husbanding the country's resources and avoiding humanitarian intervention, which is said to harm US "readiness." The Kosovo intervention and the Milosevic trial, once thought to mark important precedents, may come to represent high-water marks in genocide prevention and punishment.

This would be a tragic and ultimately self-defeating mistake. The United States should make opposing genocide a priority for two reasons. The first and most compelling reason is moral. When innocent life is being taken on such a scale and the United States has the power to stop the killing at reasonable risk, it has a duty to act. It is this belief that motivates most of those who seek intervention. But history has shown that the suffering of victims alone has rarely mobilized the United States.

Thus, even those driven by a sense of America's moral responsibility have tried to make the case by appealing to the second reason: enlightened self-interest. They warned that allowing genocide undermined regional and international security, created militant refugees, and gave tyrants a signal that hate and murder were permissible tools of statecraft. Because these threats to US interests were long-term dangers and not immediately apparent, however, they rarely swayed top US policymakers. Thus humanitarian intervention came about only on the rare occasions when the shorter-term political interests of US policymakers were at stake.

If it was difficult before September 11 to get US decision-makers to see the long-term costs of allowing genocide, it will be even harder today when US security needs are so

acute and visible. But security for Americans at home and abroad is contingent on international stability, and there is perhaps no greater source of havoc than a group of well-armed extremists bent on wiping out whole communities on ethnic, national, or religious grounds.

Western governments have generally tried to contain genocide by appeasing its architects. But the sad record of the last century shows that the walls the United States tries to build around genocidal societies almost inevitably break down. States that murder and torment their own citizens target citizens elsewhere. Their appetites become insatiable. Hitler began by persecuting his own citizens and then waged war on the rest of Europe and, in time, the United States. Saddam Hussein wiped out rural Kurdish life and then turned on Kuwait, sending his genocidal henchman Ali Hassan al-Majid to govern the newly occupied country. The United States now has reason to fear that the poisonous weapons Hussein tried out on the Kurds will be used next on Americans. Milosevic took his wars from Slovenia and Croatia to Bosnia and then Kosovo. The United States and its European allies are still paying for their earlier neglect of the Balkans, where violence in Macedonia threatens to undermine the stability of southeastern Europe.

People victimized by genocide or abandoned by the international community do not make good neighbors, as their thirst for vengeance, their irredentism, and their acceptance of violence as a means of generating change can turn them into future threats. In Bosnia, where the United States and Europe maintained an arms embargo against the Muslims, extremist Islamic fighters and proselytizers eventually turned up to offer support. Some secular Muslim citizens became radicalized by the partnership, and the failed state of Bosnia became a haven for Islamic terrorists shunned elsewhere in the world. It appears that one of the organizations that infiltrated Bosnia and used it as a training base was Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

The United States should not frame its policy choices as between doing nothing or unilaterally sending in the marines. Given the immensity of the harm caused by genocide, its prevention is a task that must be shared. America's leadership will be indispensable in encouraging US allies and regional and international institutions to step up their commitments and military capacities. At the same time, the United States must respond to genocide with a far greater sense of urgency, publicly identifying and threatening to prosecute those who commit genocide, demanding the expulsion of representatives of genocidal regimes from international institutions such as the United Nations, closing their embassies in the United States, and calling upon countries aligned with them to use their influence to try to end the killings.

When the situation warrants it, the United States might establish economic sanctions, freeze a murderous government's foreign assets, or use US technical resources to deprive the killers of their radio transmitters or other means of propagating hate. With its allies, the US might set up safe areas to house refugees and civilians, and protect them with well-armed and robustly mandated peacekeepers, air power, or both. When America's

most cherished values and its interests are endangered—as they are in cases where entire peoples are threatened with destruction—the United States must also be prepared to risk the lives of its soldiers in the service of stopping this monstrous crime.

Notes

[1] David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 27.

[2] W.A. Visser't Hooft, a Protestant theologian and first general secretary of the World Council of Churches who lived in Switzerland during the Holocaust, used this phrase in his *Memoirs* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 166.

[3] To be published by Basic Books in March.