

## Never Say “Never Again”: The Confrontation of Genocide

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Look back on the twentieth century: while many people have prospered, others have faced unimaginable perils. Many of the world's most horrific genocides have taken place in the past century, without much response from the world. In Cambodia the Khmer Rouge systematically killed 1.7 million people, or one-fifth of the population, between 1975 and 1979 (O'Connor). Despite reports of torture and mass murder, powerful nations stood by and watched, including the United States. There are countless cases of this “turning of the head” attitude: in the Stalin regime, the Holocaust, North Korea, China under Mao, Iran, Rwanda, Uganda, and so many more. Each time genocide occurred we vowed never to let it happen again, yet it kept on occurring, making the twentieth century one of the bloodiest. Are we going to continue this trend into the twenty-first century?

Genocide officially became a crime just over fifty years ago. In 1948 the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted by the United Nations; it was put into action in 1951 after two-thirds of the U.N. member parties ratified it (O'Connor). This convention defines and outlaws the crime of genocide; the United States, however, did not ratify the Convention until 1988, and it only did so under the proviso that it would be immune from the prosecution of genocide without consent (O'Connor). If the United States prides itself on maintaining its humanitarian ideals, one wonders why we attempt to exempt ourselves from the Convention.

During the forty years that it took for the United States to come to its senses, genocidal acts continued to occur in Cambodia and other places, yet the U.N. took no action. In Samantha Power's 2002 book, *A Problem from Hell*, she argues that American presidents from F.D.R. to

Clinton have been reluctant to intervene in ethnic massacres abroad unless they perceived them to be in their political interest (qtd. Glazer). This is the harsh reality that we must face. When our country's leaders are put to the test, it often seems as if they would prefer to win more votes than to save millions of lives. Our priorities have become so confused and they are not becoming any clearer with George Bush leading the way.

In 2004 fifty-five world governments, including the United States, released the Stockholm Declaration on Genocide Prevention, the conclusion of an intergovernmental conference on genocide prevention (O'Connor). Though the provisions were outlined thoroughly and the declaration speaks very strongly about the measures that will be taken to prevent genocide, the world has to remember that historically we have not been quick to act. Genocide has killed more than 20 million people worldwide since the U.N.'s founding in 1945, and critics have questioned the organization's ability to enforce its own treaty outlawing genocide (Masci). It is not the U.N.'s fault alone for not acting on genocide and mass murder before the killings escalate, According to the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, 129 countries are required to intervene to halt genocide if they determine that it is occurring (Masci). We all know that President Clinton was hesitant to act during the genocide in Rwanda because of what happened in Bosnia, but what about the other 128 nations?

There is a theory in sociology called the bystander effect, a psychological phenomenon in which someone is less likely to intervene in an emergency situation when others are present than when he or she is alone (Latane and Darley). This theory can also apply to genocide and the world's historic lack of action. With so many other countries and so many people realizing that genocide is occurring right under their noses, everyone assumes that someone else is going to act. Help is less likely to be given when more people are present, diminishing a sense of personal

responsibility for others in need. Similarly, as millions die in ethnic cleansings, too often the rest of the world waits to see who is going to offer help first. We do not live in a passive society and therefore cannot afford to act like one.

Some critics blame international inaction against genocide on the fact that the Security Council must approve the mobilization of U.N. peacekeepers. Anyone of the five permanent members - including nations like Russia and China, which have themselves been accused of human-rights abuses - can veto a resolution. Sudan may be the test to see how much, if anything, the United States has learned about combating genocide. Many critics, however, have already decided that if the United States had learned something from the atrocity of the Rwanda killings that the Bush administration would have taken action early when the crimes were relatively minor and had not escalated to genocide (Masci).

Racism has plagued our country for many generations and in many places is still present. Both in attitudes and actions, many people have been slow to change their outlook on prejudice. According to some experts, these attitudes could possibly extend far beyond the borders of our country, or even our continent. Some suggest that Americans tend to be far less sympathetic to genocide in remote countries in Africa where black people are victims, than to similar events in Europe where white people are victimized (Glazer). For example, in 1999 an American-backed bombing campaign to end the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo came after enormous media attention and political pressure, compared to the little press given to the travesty that occurred in Rwanda (Glazer).

Five years later, in the summer of 2004 then Secretary of State Powell refused to call the massive killings in the Sudan genocide. "Why would we call it a genocide when the genocide definition has to meet certain legal tests?" he told NPR on June 30, 2004. "And based on what

we have seen, there were some indicators but there was certainly no full accounting of all indicators that lead to a legal definition of genocide” (Chadwick). By formally calling the killings in the Sudan genocide in 2004 the United Nations Security Council would have been more comfortable in authorizing countries like Germany, France, and Spain, who didn't have troops in Iraq, to go to the Sudan and help stop the fighting and mass murder. However, a formal declaration is not needed to trigger military action by the United Nations, or the United States for that matter, under the International Genocide Convention. The United Nations Charter empowers the Security Council to order military forces abroad to protect civilians, under its mission of protecting peace and security (Glazer). Why then did this not happen? Taking the lead is a big commitment but once there is a leader, there are bound to be many followers.

A forgotten aspect of the International Convention is the obligation of nations to make genocidal leaders accountable for their crimes. Many people see the International Criminal Court as a crucial ingredient in preventing future genocides (Glazer). “It has tremendous potential to deter future killing,” says Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. “If these killers do see their day in court, tomorrow's potential killers will think twice before resuming the slaughter” (Jost). The United States, however, has refused to join the court and has sought exemptions from the court's jurisdiction for U.S. troops and officials. There are many incidents, not of genocide, but of war crimes that our government has hidden in order to save face. For example, there was the horrible My Lai massacre of 1968 in Vietnam. United States citizens did not find out about this brutal massacre of hundreds of innocent Vietnamese women and children until many years later. There are also new instances of war crimes that are coming to light in Iraq. If the court system is going to work effectively the United States must be willing to take responsibility for its actions and be subject to the rulings of the International Court just like

everyone else.

The twenty-first century has not been off to a great start in ending genocide. The crisis in the Sudan still rages on, as well as the millions of “invisible children” who are being persecuted in Uganda. We can sit securely in our country and look out at the war-torn world and question why others don't do something to stop the killings and restore peace. However, we must lead by example if we want anything to be done for the millions who are dying. We are supposed to be a great country, one that others look up to, and one whose citizens are proud to be a part of. However, if we persist in faltering in the face of genocide, these ideals, and our world respect, will continue to be compromised.

#### Works Cited

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