

MASS GRAVES, MASS DENIAL

Reviewed by Rob Ponce

“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide

Samantha Power

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610 pp.

When the first report reached Jon Western’s desk that Serb militants had raped a 9-year-old Muslim girl and then left her to die while her parents looked on helplessly from behind a fence, the U.S. State Department analyst calmed himself by remembering that he was “taught to be objective.” Like so many “unbelievable” reports of systematic torture and death, other sources would later confirm this one. Western’s initial skepticism was not mere insensitivity, rather, it is quite humane to believe that no human being could be capable of committing such a ghastly atrocity. Unfortunately, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Christians, Africans, Asians and Caucasians have been subject to these types of crimes so frequently in the 20th century due to their race, religion, or other “undesirable” characteristics, that a special name has been given to this type of persecution: genocide. For the millions of victims of genocide, death did not always come quickly. On the long road to death was misery consisting of humiliation, torture, rape, beatings, and other cruel punishments.

America’s complacency in the face of genocides spanning Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa is the subject of Samantha Power’s provocative book, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*. The book surveys genocides from the Turkish slaughter of the Armenians during World War I to the Hutu campaign to annihilate the Tutsi minority in Rwanda in the spring of 1994. Power concludes that genocide “rages on” because American inaction gives perpetrators a green light to wage relentless war against innocent civilians in deliberate attempts to wipe out a whole or part of a targeted population. Power notes that perpetrators of genocide kept “an eye trained on Washington and other Western capitals as they decided how to proceed.” For instance,

Saddam Hussein “rightly assumed that he would not be punished” for using poison gas against his own people. (Hussein is the only leader ever to have done so). Likewise, from his infamous declaration that no one “remembers the Armenians,” Hitler concluded that no foreign power would stop him from exterminating the Jews. Perpetrators of other genocides followed a similar pattern.

In the arena of international affairs, those who get too bogged down in human rights are often thought to be “flaky” or “too emotional” to make sound political decisions. Instead, “policy is made by the ‘tough-minded,’ or the ‘rational’ people” says former National Security Adviser Anthony Lake. “To talk of suffering” according to Lake, “is to lose ‘effectiveness,’ almost to lose one’s grip.”

Though her 610-page book depicts quite possibly the worst “suffering” known to man, Samantha Power is not charged solely by emotion. She demonstrates a clear understanding of the realist paradigm of power defined by “national interest.” In *“A Problem from Hell,”* genocide accounts are intertwined with remarkably well-documented reportage of Washington’s responses to the crimes. It would be irresponsible and inaccurate for foreign policy makers to dismiss this book as quixotic.

Perhaps the most riveting section displaying the utter inaction of U.S. officials is her detailed account of Rwanda, originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* last September. The Rwandan genocide moved forward with full force, leaving over 800,000 dead in just 100

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days because America has always considered Africa to be outside the “national interest.” One of the few active proponents of military intervention in Rwanda was Canadian Major General Romeo Dallaire, commander of UN peacekeeping forces in Rwanda. Dallaire meticulously calculated that he would need only 5,000 UN troops to stop the genocide. Even if America had sent the bulk of the troops for this mission, the number would not have exceeded 3,000 (an incredibly modest request to a country whose military is larger than the rest of the world’s combined). Instead, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher rejected Dallaire’s request. The problem was not that America did not have the resources to stop the horrific atrocities. Rather, politics governed the Clinton administration’s Rwanda policy (or lack thereof). As one U.S. official noted, “anytime you mentioned peacekeeping in Africa the crucifixes and the garlic would come up on every door.” The question of intervening in Africa has never scored favourable ratings with the American public.

The influence of oversimplified public opinion polls on all presidents’ intervention decisions has cost the lives of millions across the world. Most historians agree, however,

that while mediocre presidents follow polls, great presidents shape them. To follow a poll, as every U.S. president since Jimmy Carter has done where genocide is concerned, requires nothing more than complacency and inaction. By contrast, to shape polls, as former President George Bush did to rally Americans behind the Persian Gulf War, is far more risky, yet quite possible. Power points out that “a week after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, a majority of Americans opposed invading Iraq or even staging air strikes against Iraqi military bases.” A 62 percent majority of Americans feared war with Iraq could become “another Vietnam.” Yet, after Bush mobilized American forces against Iraq, “more than 80 percent backed Bush’s decision to fight.”

The Gulf War proved a quick, decisive victory for the United States and, although Bush boasted the “Vietnam syndrome” was finally “over,” he ignored the fact that very few Americans had lost their lives while freeing Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Since the Gulf War, three genocides, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo, have taken place and American leaders and citizens alike refused to risk American lives for a “humanitarian” cause.

Today, the “we must never forget” mantra finds itself embedded in two very different legacies: Vietnam and the Holocaust. While the first has effectively shaped foreign policy, the latter continues to shape only museums and other monuments. Masses of outspoken Americans successfully influenced foreign policy in the later stages of the Vietnam War. The antiwar faction or the “doves” were horrified when they saw televised images of the

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brutal war America was waging on a country as far away from home as geography permits. News stations reported murders of innocent civilians, allegations of rape, and burnings of villages nearly every day during the war. The circumstances are not all that different from genocide. Ironically, after the wave of such spirited and widespread political activism that defined American culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when “our nation’s long nightmare” finally ended in 1975, the legacy the war extolled was in sharp contrast to the immediate activism that the war had fueled. Instead of continuing to engage in politics and challenge the government, the antiwar generation assumed an apathetic disengagement from foreign affairs. That was Vietnam’s long-lasting legacy.

During Vietnam, Americans took an active interest in the treatment of human beings way off in Southeast Asia. So much so that Richard Lemkin, the Polish lobbyist who introduced the word genocide—meaning “mass killing”—to the world in 1945, would have considered the American response to the war major progress in his own cause to



Samantha Powers proves the U.S. stood by knowingly while the Rwandan Genocide was taking place. Soldiers watch as skulls are exhumed from a massacre site for a reburial ceremony.
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wake people up to the horrors of genocide. Lemkin once asked a group of Americans, “If women, children, and old people would be murdered a hundred miles from here, wouldn’t you run to help? Then why do you stop this decision of your heart when the distance is 3,000 miles instead of a hundred?”

It is much easier not to act or to ignore than to do the opposite. While Vietnam’s “never forget” legacy has been one of inaction, to take on the legacy of the Holocaust would call for decisive action as well as human sacrifice.

And although many people still empathize with Anne Frank’s moving conclusion over 50 years ago that “in spite of everything...people are really good at heart,” it takes something more than inherent kindness to stop the rise of genocide. It takes courage. The “vital interests” of a hegemon are often defined by economic opportunity. Power argues, however, that genocide is such a ghastly crime that it not only inflicts death upon mass amounts of people, it also galvanizes everyone in its periphery and therefore must be an exception where “vital interests” and humanitarianism converge. As Lemkin himself once wrote, “Certainly human beings are more important than a ship and its cargo.”

Samantha Power’s book *“A Problem from Hell”* is remarkable in both its personal style as well as its well-thought-out arguments proving why America could, and should, stop genocide. She has written a book addressing what may well be the most important crisis of the 20th century. She attempts to fold genocide—the worst crime any single individual could possibly commit—into the “vital interest.” Perhaps most alarming is that at this writing, no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for neglecting the millions of victims of genocide. This shames not only the leaders who knew and did nothing, but also citizens who did not want to know, and remained as complacent as the majority of Germans did during the Third Reich.

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