

Stephen Holmes, Review of Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell" - America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002)

I.

Power was motivated to study the history of disappointing U.S. responses to genocide by her indignation at the Clinton administration's belated reaction to mass killings in Bosnia, where she worked in the early nineties as a young freelance reporter. She was understandably appalled by what happened after the carnage began in 1992: "despite unprecedented public outcry about foreign brutality, for the next three and a half years the United States, Europe, and the United Nations stood by while some 200,000 Bosnians were killed." The book's bitterly ironic title distills her feelings about this period of inaction. It was Warren Christopher who called genocide "a problem from hell," implying basically that butchery in the Balkans was a public-relations fiasco for the administration. Cynically or not, the West sat on its hands, refusing to undertake even relatively costless gestures, such as knocking out the emplacements around Sarajevo. This particular lapse reminds Power of the Allies' refusal to bomb the rail lines into Auschwitz during WW2. The analogy is meant to sting. For the Western countries that did nothing between 1992 and 1995 were the same ones that, with great solemnity, had opened museums to memorialize the Holocaust and, of course, had repeatedly promised "never again."

To get some distance on the Bosnian catastrophe and to comprehend the dynamics underlying American non-intervention, Power decided to study the history of U.S. responses to atrocities abroad. She returned from her historical quest with a tale of cowardice and mendacity, stretching from the massacre of the Armenians in 1915 to the slaughter of the Tutsis in 1994. Her basic theme is "America's toleration of unspeakable atrocities, often committed in clear view." It turned out that "the United States had never in its history intervened to stop genocide and had in fact rarely even made a point of condemning it as it occurred." She hammers home the premeditated nature of U.S. policy by instructive studies of Washington's passivity in the face of mass murder in Rwanda, Cambodia and Iraq as well as Bosnia.

Here is a typical passage: "The Rwandan genocide would prove to be the fastest, most efficient killing spree of the twentieth century. In 100

days, some 800,000 Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu were murdered. The United States did almost nothing to try to stop it." Not only were no U.S. troops dispatched or UN reinforcements authorized. But no high-level U.S. government meetings were held to discuss nonmilitary options, such as jamming Hutu radio broadcasts. No public condemnations were uttered. And no attempt was made to expel the genocidal government's representative from the Security Council where Rwanda held a rotating seat at the time.

Endeavoring to remain hopeful even while detailing America's refusals to rescue foreign victims of mass slaughter, Power alleges that pessimism of the intellect comports easily with optimism of the will. But the historical picture she paints is dark almost to the point of misanthropy. Basically, one U.S. administration after another stood idly by, feigning ignorance and impotence, while preventable genocide occurred. She freely reports this finding even though it blunts her indictment of the Clinton administration, whose reluctance to intervene militarily on humanitarian grounds comes across, in the end, as exactly what one would expect.

Not the U.S. alone, we are also given to understand, but every powerful nation looks first to its economic and strategic interests, embarking on missions of mercy only rarely and unreliably. All responses to injustice are selective, and the principles of selection are invariably tainted with the partiality of power-wielders toward themselves and their friends. During the Cold War, for instance, the U.S. eagerly dwelt upon Soviet violations of human rights. Today, by contrast, the U.S. plays down Moscow's behavior in Chechnya, out of respect for the two countries' shared confrontation with Islamic terrorism. Power is not the first to discover it; but, in international affairs, the factual distinction between them and us overshadows the moral distinction between just and unjust.

Another example of this shameful but persistent pattern makes arresting reading today. George H.W. Bush's outdid Ronald Reagan's largesse toward Iraq, even after Saddam Hussein's murder of 100,000 Iraqi Kurds had been amply documented. The credits provided by Bush "freed up currency for Hussein to fortify and modernize his more cherished military assets, including his stockpile of deadly chemicals." In 1989-90, Bush Sr. gave financial support to the vicious dictator in Baghdad not only to curry favor with American farmers, eager to peddle their crops abroad, but also

because of Teheran, that is, because the U.S. president assumed platitudinously that the enemies of his enemies were his friends.

Homicidal rulers are sometimes toppled, it is true, but rarely by good Samaritans. Power summarizes her dispiriting conclusion this way: "Unless another country acts for self-interested reasons, as was the case when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979, or armed members of the victim group manage to fight back and win, as Tutsi rebels did in Rwanda in 1994, the perpetrators of genocide have usually retained power." But what about the decision of the U.S. and its allies to intervene belatedly in Bosnia and, more rapidly, in Kosovo? According to Power, these are simply the exceptions that prove the rule.

The eventual decision to intervene militarily to halt the Balkan atrocities was the product of a coincidence of factors very unlikely to be repeated. For one thing, might does not even listen to right unless the latter occupies a fashionable address in Washington, D.C. In this case, according to Power, the influential American Jewish lobby, galvanized by TV images of emaciated white men behind barbed wire, set to work and put irresistible domestic pressure on the White House. Not universal morality but group politics cut the ice: "Jewish survivors and organizations put aside Israel's feud with Muslims in the Middle East and were particularly forceful in their criticism of U.S. idleness." And the apparent reason that "American Jewish leaders pressed for military action" was that "the Bosnian war brought both a coincidence of European geography and imagery." To emphasize the decisive role played by ethnic particularism, despite all talk of moral universalism, Power adds, "one factor behind the creation of the UN war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was the coincidence of imagery between the Bosnian war and the Holocaust."

Apparently, Clinton's desire not to appear weak also played a decisive role in the U.S.'s ultimate choice to intervene in the Balkans: "This was the first time in the twentieth century that allowing genocide came to feel politically costly for an American president." NATO's dread of losing its *raison d'être* and Europe's anxieties about refugees combined with such domestic U.S. factors to provide the necessary boost for a policy of humanitarian intervention. Such concerns gave the intervening states, or their leaders at the time, their own stake in military action. Moral

conscience had been demanding intervention for several years. But only when political pressure built up simultaneously on several fronts did forcible intervention occur.

III.

All this is fascinating and disturbing. But the most eye-catching feature of *"A Problem from Hell"* is Power's palpable frustration with multilateralism and legalism. An important clue to this aspect of her thinking is the approval with which she cites Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Pearle, two unilateralist hawks associated with the current Bush administration. During the 1990s, they both urged U.S. military intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo outside of the United Nations framework and contrary to the UN charter. Power thinks they were perfectly right. The Rwanda debacle was partly a result of UN dithering and incoherence. Indeed, the UN's credibility had been severely damaged even earlier on the streets of Mogadishu. In the 1990s, therefore, human-rights advocates did not speak deferentially about the UN. On the contrary. Uncertain of their mandate in Rwanda and focused on self-protection, the hapless Blue Helmets allowed themselves to be disarmed before ten of their number were brutally murdered. Referring to U.S. passivity as the catastrophe unfolded in Rwanda, Power remarks: "The United States could also have acted without the UN's blessing, as it would do five years later in Kosovo." Indeed, acting decisively may sometimes *require* a great power to extricate itself from the hopeless mishmash of multilateralism.

Liberals now lambaste Bush daily for failing to act through multilateral institutions and in accord with international law. He is thereby gratuitously alienating potential partners from America's just antiterrorist cause, they explain. But that is not the way they felt in the 1990s. In those days, liberals were the ones calling multilateralism a formula for paralysis and inaction. They pointed out, for example, that the exquisitely multilateral EU, left to its own devices, was pitifully unable to mount a serious operation in the Balkans. Recently, when Morocco tried to seize a bit of Spanish territory, the EU proved unable to act decisively for the simple

reason that its member states could not agree among themselves. (Colin Powell resolved the crisis by phone.) Today, on the question of Iraq, the three leading members of the EU have taken three mutually inconsistent positions. One could even argue that U.S.'s turn to unilateralism is a natural consequence of Europe's embrace of dysfunctional multilateralism. For how can Washington act in concert with allies who are fused at the hip but cannot settle internal differences in a timely fashion? And how wrong was Bush when he suggested to the General Assembly in September that the UN without U.S. leadership and law-enforcement capacity risks becoming another League of Nations?

Be this as it may, the proponents of humanitarian intervention, in the 1990s, were among multilateralism's least forgiving critics. Power writes in this spirit. Clinton embraced "consultation," she tells us, whenever his administration lacked a clear policy of its own. In that sense, too, multilateralism is a sign of weakness. When it comes to atrocities, she implies, the U.S. should have simply *told* its allies what it was going to do. From the same perspective, she also comments unflatteringly on the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal. The tribunal was initially established, she correctly explains, in order to avoid taking military action. In emergency situations, more generally, legalism can prove as debilitating as multilateralism. Due process can get in the way of an adequate response to genocide. We need to move swiftly and flexibly against the worst international villains even if this means unleashing lethal force on the basis of hearsay testimony and circumstantial evidence: "an authoritative diagnosis of genocide would be impossible to make during the Serb campaign of terror." Indeed, *preemptive* deployment of troops on the basis of clues collected by operatives in the field might be the only way to stave off a Rwanda-style massacre. The very idea of a war against genocide probably implies a relaxed attitude toward *mens rea*: "Proving intent to exterminate an entire people would usually be impossible until the bulk of the group had already been wiped out." Careful observance of procedural niceties will impede any speedy response to an unfolding massacre.

Deference to public opinion is equally inappropriate, Power continues, especially when the electorate is self-absorbed, parochial and fixated on body bags. One wonders if lack of sympathy with the public's widely reported aversion to military casualties might have anything to do with

infrequent human contact between human-rights activists and the families of grunts who would be asked to die to uphold vaguely worded international laws. In any case, a chronically reticent military, too, should be rolled over by morally attuned civilian leaders in order to confront wicked forces in the world. Faced with humanitarian atrocities in distant lands, any American official or citizen who claims to see shades of grey or two sides of the story, or who claims not to know exactly what is happening in the interior of a distant country, is probably feigning ignorance to deflect calls for action and to get the U.S. off the hook. Some of those who declare murderous situations inside closed societies to be indecipherable by distant foreign observers are simply liars while others are accomplices to genocide. If Power does not say exactly this, she comes close.

Needless to say, 1990s advocates of humanitarian intervention are marginal actors on today's political scene, with little or no influence on current policy. But that does not mean that their way of thinking has been without effect. They have, on the contrary, unwittingly muffled the voices of Bush's critics. This is the principal relevance of *"A Problem from Hell"* to contemporary political debates. Power helps us understand a neglected reason for the near paralysis of the American Left in the face of the pre-emptive and unilateralist turn in American foreign policy. The Democrats' embarrassingly weak grasp of the differences between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and their election-year fear of being branded unpatriotic are not the only pertinent factors. Having supported unilateralist intervention outside the UN framework during the 1990s, liberals and progressives are simply unable to make a credible case against Bush today.

Formulated differently, 1990s advocates of humanitarian intervention have unintentionally bequeathed a risky legacy to George W. Bush. They have helped rescue from the ashes of Vietnam the ideal of America as a global policeman, undaunted by other country's borders, defending civilization against the forces of "evil." By denouncing the U.S. primarily for *standing idly by* when atrocity abroad occurs, they have helped re-popularize the idea of America as a potentially benign imperial power. They have breathed new life into old messianic fantasies. And they have suggested strongly that America is shirking its moral responsibility when it refuses to venture abroad in search of monsters to destroy. By focusing predominantly

on grievous harms caused by American inaction, finally, they have obscured public memory of grievous harms caused by American action.

To be sure, Power discusses petty complicities of the U.S. with various wicked regimes. The generous aid that Bush père provided to Iraq has already been mentioned. For similar reasons, to please China and displease Vietnam, "Carter sided with the dislodged Khmer Rouge regime," orchestrating a vote in their favor in the UN credentials committee. She also mentions some other cases in which the U.S., for geopolitical and economic reasons, cynically consorted with the perpetrators of mass killing, including Nigeria in 1968 (one million Christian Ibo killed) and Pakistan in 1971 (almost two million Bengalis killed). But her principal stress throughout is on the immorality of the *bystander* who does nothing to prevent other peoples' crimes. In 1975, for example, "when its ally, the oil-producing, anti-Communist Indonesia, invaded East Timor, killing between 100,000 and 200,000 civilians, the United States looked away." It is typical that she gives greater attention to this "looking away" than to the weaponry and other active support that the U.S. supplied, say, to Suharto ten years earlier when he killed perhaps one million people in his campaign against the KPI.

The natural result of focusing on atrocities that the U.S. did nothing to prevent is to nudge other forms of wrongdoing and miscalculation into the background. Above all, it helps the current administration achieve one of its principal ideological goals, namely to erase from public memory the chastening lesson of Vietnam. In a footnote, to be fair, Power recollects the U.S.'s own crimes at Mai Lai: "Although not one villager fired on the U.S. troops, the Americans burnt down all the houses, scalped or disemboweled villagers, and raped women and girls or, if they were pregnant, slashed open their stomachs." But the overall effect of the book is to blur such memories, to obscure how the use of U.S. military force abroad, perhaps admirable its original purpose, sometimes mires America in local struggles that it cannot master, radically weakens the democratic oversight that a chronically parochial public can exercise over a secretive military operation, involves our own soldiers in savage acts, and undermines the country's capacity to deliver some modest help to distressed peoples elsewhere in the world.

IV.

If we are responsible for our incredulity, as Power claims, are we not also responsible for the credulity that our good intentions create in others? If human rights activists push an interventionist policy that cannot be politically sustained, what have they done? If the international community coaxes the Bosnian Muslims to sit unarmed in a "safe area," but does not come through when Srebrenica turns into a shooting gallery, who is responsible for abandoning those in whom we have nurtured unrealistic dreams of rescue? Are we responsible when we awaken false expectations by earnest talk? Are human rights advocates responsible when they initiate a policy that they know cannot be sustained politically, given domestic indifference to foreign affairs and the paralyzing array of political forces back home? Power mentions this problem, to be sure. In fact, she explains that, because the West had promised bombing, the Muslims of Srebrenica did not reclaim the tanks and anti-aircraft guns that they had turned over to the UN in 1993 as part of a demilitarization agreement. But she does not draw out the implications of this appalling bait-and-switch story for her depiction of humanitarian intervention as a politically shaky but morally obligatory cause.

In a battle with "evil," no means seem impermissible. In the midst of a humanitarian catastrophe, the downstream consequences of short-term strategies adopted do not occupy the center of attention. The ghastly sight of mutilated corpses disinterred from mass graves is psychologically incompatible with calculations about scarce resources, opportunity costs and trade-offs. That is what we mean by moral clarity. Max Weber called it the ethics of conscience. But a sickened heart does not necessarily exempt us from taking responsibility for what happens *after* we intervene. What if the side on whose behalf we bomb urban areas subsequently commits ethnic cleansing under our military protection? Even if it begins with moral clarity, humanitarian intervention may gutter into moral ambiguity once the interveners find themselves, as in Kosovo, on the side of ethnic cleansers or propping up an unseemly local "elite" infested with gangsters and drug smugglers.

Putting an end to atrocities is a moral victory. But if the intervening force is incapable of keeping domestic support back home for the next

phase, for reconstructing what it has shattered, the morality of its intervention is ephemeral at best. If political stability could be achieved by toppling a rotten dictator or if nations could be built at gunpoint, this problem would not be so pressing. Human rights cannot be reliably protected unless a locally sustained political authority is in place. But how well prepared is the United States for rebuilding a domestically supported political system in, say, Iraq where a multiethnic society has, so far, been glued together by a regime of fear administered by a minority ethnic group? A functioning state can be built only with the active cooperation of well-organized domestic constituencies. It cannot be imported from the outside by an occupying military force. Where are such forces in Iraq? Do we believe that militarily powerful outsiders with minimal understanding of Iraqi society can simply conjure such well-organized pro-democratic groupings out of thin air? Or is the Bush administration, despite its rhetoric about democracy, planning to establish a government in postwar Iraq by, of and for the U.S. military? The failure to think through, in advance, cogent answers to these questions is part of the dubious legacy bequeathed by genuinely well-meaning humanitarian interventionists to the considerably less well-meaning nonhumanitarian interventionists who bestride the Potomac today.

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