



A Toolbox for Genocide

During April 2004, commemorations across the world marked the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide in which more than 800,000 Tutsis and some Hutus were slaughtered in a bloody 100-day rampage. The commemorations were marked by solemn pledges from diplomats and human rights activists to never allow another "Rwanda." Yet, even as people remembered the failure to prevent slaughter in Rwanda, a steady stream of reports about deportations, massacres, and systematic sexual abuses in the Darfur region of Sudan were beginning to make news. On the influential Op-ed page of the *New York Times*, Samantha Power, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, wrote a column entitled "Remember Rwanda, but Take Action in Sudan." After describing the situation on the ground, Power outlines three lessons from the Rwandan Genocide that she felt could guide responses to the crisis in Darfur.

The first is that those intent on wiping out an inconvenient minority have a habit of denying journalists and aid workers access and of pursuing bad-faith negotiations. Thus far the Sudanese government has pursued both approaches, and Western officials have been far too trusting of their assurances.

A second lesson is that outside powers cannot wait for confirmation of genocide before they act. In 1994, the Clinton administration spent more time maneuvering to avoid using the term "genocide" than it did using its resources to save lives. In May 1994, an internal Pentagon memo warned against using the term "genocide" because it could commit the United States "to actually do something." In the case of Sudan, American officials need not focus on whether the killings meet the definition of genocide set by the 1948 Genocide Convention; they should focus instead on trying to stop them.

A third lesson is that even when the United States decides not to respond militarily, American leadership is indispensable. This is especially true because Europe continues to avoid intervening in violent humanitarian crises. And it remains true despite the Bush administration's unpopularity abroad. The United States often takes an all-or-nothing approach: if it doesn't send troops, it tends to foreclose other policy options.¹

As the horrible details from the crisis in Darfur became apparent, many individuals felt lost. They did not want to stand by and let genocide happen, but despite Samantha Power's warnings, the language used here mattered. Was what was happening in Darfur genocide? If it was genocide, what could individuals and groups do about it? The Internet now made it possible for people to send letters to lobby government officials to take action with a few clicks of a mouse, but what should they say? Was there a way to help the victims that didn't require trying to move the often-slow bureaucracies of national governments and the United Nations?

Scholars of genocide and human rights have noted that from the Armenian Genocide in 1915 through the present, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been much better at providing humanitarian assistance - food and shelter to victims - than finding a way to stop the abuses. At times, efforts to feed and shelter the victims have come into conflict with those who have advocated military intervention aimed at stopping further abuses. As the situation for Armenians in the

¹ Excerpted from "Remember Rwanda, but Take Action in Sudan," by Samantha Power, *New York Times*, April 6, 2001, Op-ed.

Ottoman Empire deteriorated, former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt highlighted the dilemma for those who want to help victims of genocide when he argued:

Mass meetings on behalf of Armenians amount to nothing whatever if they are mere methods of giving a sentimental but ineffective and safe outlet for those engaged in them...Until we put honor and duty first, and are willing to risk something in order to achieve righteousness both for ourselves and others, we shall accomplish nothing; and we shall earn and deserve the contempt of the strong nations of mankind.”²

Roosevelt was advocating for military intervention; others believe that use of military force should be the last option. That said, most people cannot identify other concrete actions. Without a clear sense of what to do and where to intervene, all of us risk becoming bystanders. Power explains that, “All systems tend to shut down in the face of genocide ...it’s almost as though the worse the crime, the more likely we are to say, ‘Ugh, who can even *begin* to go there.’”³ She suggests one way to begin to think about making a difference is to imagine a *toolbox* with each tool representing a different kind of intervention including condemnation, economic sanctions, freezing the bank accounts of the leaders of the genocide, and military intervention. Power notes that:

Most people that participate in genocide have never killed before, ever. They’re people who live normal family lives, they don’t steal their neighbor’s cows, they don’t even necessarily try to pick up their neighbor’s wives. They’re living normal lives - they have moral compasses. And every day, while the frenzy envelops their societies- and usually with top-down sophistication, manipulation-they’re deciding how far they want to go.⁴

After months of building pressure from individuals, governments, and human rights activists and organizations on July 30, 2004, the Security Council of the United Nations passed a resolution threatening action against the Sudanese Government if they failed to disarm the militias who were carrying out the genocide and restore security to the region of Darfur. The 30-day deadline passed without action.

Connections

Spanish philosopher George Santayana commented that, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” What was Santayana suggesting? How can studying history - including studying moments in which individuals, groups, and nations behaved less than honorably - inform our actions in the present? How does Samantha Power believe understanding the failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda can inform our response to genocide today?

Some human rights advocates argue that military intervention or declaring war on the perpetrators of genocide is the best way to protect the victims from systematic governmental abuse. Others, equally committed to protecting the lives of the innocent, believe that war will only increase the numbers of innocent victims. What other options can you think of to be added to a toolbox for dealing with genocide?

² Facing History and Ourselves *Crimes Against Humanity and Civilization: The Genocide of the Armenians*, 129.

³ Samantha Power speaking in Chicago, Illinois, February 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

Lesson Plan: A Toolbox for Genocide

This reading talked about *bystanders*. How do you define the word bystander? Ervin Staub, a psychologist and the author of *The Psychology of Good and Evil* believes that bystanders play a far more critical role in society than people realize.

Bystanders, people who witness but are not directly affected by the actions of perpetrators, help shape society by their reactions...
Bystanders can exert powerful influences. They can define the meaning of events and move others toward empathy or indifference. They can promote the values and norms of caring, or by their passivity of participation in the system, they can affirm the perpetrators.⁵

Why do you think people become bystanders? In your journal, reflect on a time when you were witness to a situation that you felt was unjust but did not take action. Describe the situation and consider what kept you from taking action. What do you think would have needed to happen for you to act? Consider sharing your story with other students in your class. What do the stories have in common? What lessons do you take away from hearing the various stories?

In a talk for Facing History and Ourselves, Samantha Power discussed the way individuals, groups, and nations respond to genocide. To see video clips of the talk and to read excerpts of the transcript visit www.facinghistory.org/power. After viewing the clips, consider what factors Power believes influence the way people respond to genocide.

One of Power's major contributions to the study of human rights is her idea of a *toolbox* with a range of possible responses to genocide and human rights abuses. After watching the clips discuss how she believes the toolbox can be used to influence the choices made by perpetrators of genocide. What does she include in her toolbox? Consider what tools are available to ordinary people?

Holocaust and Genocide scholar Michael Berenbaum writes that after the Holocaust politicians were able to say that they did not know what was happening. With regard to the genocide in the Sudan, he says, "we know and we see." The question, for him, is about *political will*. Is there a political will to do something to stop the genocide? And, how much will political acts reflect moral values? In a democracy people have the power to advocate for a cause and therefore help create the climate to influence the political will of politicians. What would you say to world leaders about the events in the Sudan?

This reading is about responding to genocide. What do we need to do in order to recognize what genocide scholar Helen Fein calls "warning signs," in order to prevent the loss of human life?

A Suggested Teaching Strategy:

One strategy teachers use to help students think about complicated dilemmas is called a "barometer". In this modified debate activity, students have a chance to literally take a stand on one side of an issue or another. Students will:

- *Develop their discussion skills, particularly their ability to listen to one another*
- *Find a safe place to disagree respectfully and learn from one another*
- *Complicate their own thinking and explore the complexities of the issues raised*
- *Formulate and articulate their opinion on a particular issue*
- *Develop critical thinking skills*

⁵ Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989) 86-87.

This strategy can be used in class:

To begin a conversation of a controversial topic

To start a lesson on a topic as a way to flesh out and assess student thinking around an issue

In place of a formal debate

Below is a sample barometer lesson that may be used to debrief some of the issues raised in this reading:

Prompt: "Military force is justified when it is used to stop genocide."

You will need:

- *A large enough space for students to stand up and arrange themselves along a continuum. Where space is lacking, or where the teacher prefers to have a limited number of students participate at a time, the barometer activity may be run similar to a "fishbowl" activity, where different sets of students participate while others watch from the outside.*
- *Signs which read "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree"*

Step One:

First and foremost: set a contract for this activity. Since it deals with students literally putting themselves and their opinions on the line, it has potential for outbursts which result from some students not understanding how classmates can hold different opinions. Reiterate your class rules about courtesy, respect for the opinions and voices of others, and encourage them to be honest, but not insulting. Re-address ways to constructively disagree with one another, and require that when offering their opinion or defense of their stance, that they speak from the "I," rather than from an accusatory "You."

Step Two:

Place the "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree" signs at opposite ends of a continuum in your room. After having students reflect upon a prompt which calls for agreement or disagreement, ask students to align themselves along the spectrum, telling them that if they stand on either extreme they are absolute in their agreement or disagreement. They may also stand anywhere in between the two extremes, depending on how much they do or do not agree with the statement. BUT, although students may feel solid in their position, they do not have to stay there if their opinion changes.

Step Three:

Once the students have lined themselves up, ask them to explain why they have chosen to stand where they are standing. They may use whatever knowledge or emotion they have at their disposal to defend their stance. It is probably best to alternate from one end, to the middle, and to the other end, rather than allowing too many voices from one stance to dominate. After about three or four viewpoints are heard, ask if anyone wishes to move -- either further toward the end where they are standing, or toward another end, or somewhere in between. Run the activity until you feel most or all voices have been heard, making sure that no one person dominates. Constantly remind students to listen fully, rather than interrupt. It may be a good idea to have someone keep track of the order of the students who wish to speak.

Step Four: Debriefing

Have your students write a reflection in their journals about the activity. Then, talk with your students about what it was like for them to stand their ground, or what it was like for them to consider another opinion and base their movement across the continuum on the arguments of others.

For additional background on the genocide in Darfur, please visit:

“Sudan’s Reign of Terror” by Eric Reeves, Amnesty Now, Summer 2004.
http://www.amnestyusa.org/amnestynow/sudan_terror.html

The Committee on Conscience at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
<http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/>

Passion of the Present: An independent, non-partisan, all-volunteer community initiative to stop the genocide in Sudan
<http://www.passionofthepresent.org/>

For additional background on responses to the Rwandan Genocide

Ghosts of Rwanda is a powerful television documentary produced by PBS. The film asks: How could it happen that America and the west stood aside and did nothing to stop the slaughter of 800,000 human beings over 100 days?
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/>