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POLS 530-01: International Relations

Samantha Power: Bystanders to Genocide: Why the U.S. Let the Rwandan Tragedy Happen

Avoiding Genocide

The term genocide did not exist until 1944 when it was invented by lawyer Raphael Lemkin when he combined the Greek word for tribe (genos) with the Latin word for kill (cide). Lemkin and his brother were Holocaust survivors and the rest of their family was killed in the genocide. Lemkin campaigned to have genocide be recognized by international law as a crime (Analysis 2010). In 1948 the United Nations created a treaty that defined the term and also obligated countries to intervene if genocide was occurring somewhere in the world. The leaders of the world said “never again” after the Holocaust and people were sure that it would never happen again because human kind would intervene (Schabas 1948) (Spiegel 2004, pp. 207 - 208).

The international legal definition of genocide is found in Articles II and III of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Article II describes two elements of genocide. The first is the mental element and the second is the physical element. The mental element refers to the meaning behind the killing. Do the killers have an “intent” to destroy a whole or part of a specific group of people? This group could be a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group etcetera. The physical element refers to five different acts referred to in other sections. These acts include killing, causing biological or psychological damage, imposing certain conditions on the group that bring about its destruction, preventing births, and forcibly removing children from the group (Schabas 1948) (Spiegel 2004, pp. 207 – 208).

Samantha Power’s article outlines the Rwandan Genocide, the events that took place, and the fact that the United States failed to intervene in the tragedy. She went over the myths on why the U.S. did not intervene and then showed, one by one, each time they could have, but didn’t. Some of the myths that the U.S. did not respond to the genocide taking place was that they didn’t know, they knew but didn’t care, and regardless of what they knew, there was nothing useful to

be done. Power's argument is that the U.S. government knew enough about the genocide early on that they could have intervened (Power 2001).

Africa has been known as a state of conflict in its various parts for so long that the world did not seem to fully comprehend the vastness of what was going on in Rwanda in the beginning. When General Dallaire, the head of the U.N. peacekeepers was sent there, he thought the mission was a simple and direct. It would be easy. From the outside, the world thought it was just more intrastate conflict, and not intentional acts of extermination at first. The killings began happening in April 1994 and the Hutus began destroying the Tutsis. The United Nations were not supporting their peacekeepers on the ground and the U.S. ordered all Americans in the area to evacuate immediately. Some say that the U.S. only thought this was intrastate conflict and not genocide taking place, but the deputy to the U.S. ambassador in Rwanda specifically told Washington that the killings that were taking place were not just political, but genocide (Barker 2004).

The Clinton administration shaped the decision not to intervene in Rwanda as moral. Officials of the administration exaggerated the extremity of possibilities that could happen if they did intervene. They knew that if they intervened in Rwanda they would have to intervene in other places as well. Because of the past intervention in Somalia, the U.S. was hesitant to intervene anywhere else because it might strain their current relationship with the U.N. and they would lose more U.S. soldiers if they sent them in to stop the killings. The U.S. decided to focus on the small victories such as working on the behalf of individuals from Rwanda like Monique Mujawamariya. The Clinton administration was also quick to avoid the term "genocide" altogether when referring to Rwanda. They stated that the legal term was complicated. Some officials called the killings "acts of genocide", but the difference between "genocide" and "acts of genocide" was never defined or explained. Some say that if the term wasn't defined so narrowly that more would be done to intervene in situations of genocide and others say it is misused and therefore people do not fully understand the meaning. It is also difficult for international law to clarify the parameters of the convention. Still others say that genocide is easy to recognize if you only look at the motives behind certain killings (Analysis 2010) (Balasco 2014) (Power 2001).

An estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed between April and July of 1994 – just 100 days. The Hutus were almost successful in the inhalation of the Tutsi minority. The U.N. created a legal term for genocide, they held a convention, and they made it obligatory for countries to intervene in those situations, but still genocide took place in Rwanda decades later. Power's argument that the U.S. could have and should have intervened is completely valid. The U.S. and the Clinton administration did not intervene because it was not in the U.S.'s current interests at the time and it wasn't convenient. It would have taken work, strength, and bravery to intervene in the genocide. It would have been messy and it would have cost some American lives, but the U.S. could have done something to help (Power 2001).

The U.S. could have asked the U.N. for reinforcements to assist the Belgians that were in Rwanda needing reinforcements. They could have organized and sent out U.S. troops to Rwanda themselves. They could have joined Dallaire's peacekeepers in their work without asking for the U.N.'s aid. They could have acted without the U.N.'s blessing. The U.S. avoided the term genocide for too long. If they had accepted the killings for what they were and acknowledged that genocide was taking place, it would not have taken long to get congress on board for U.S. intervention. I don't think that anyone can argue that the U.S. couldn't have done more to help in the Rwandan Genocide. The U.S. stood by when hundreds of thousands of innocent people were being killed because of their ethnicity. That is an injustice (Power 2001).

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