

“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide, Samantha Power (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 640 pp., \$30 cloth.

Joseph Stalin, mass-murderer extraordinaire, famously commented, “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.” Stalin’s cynical statement no doubt has a ring of truth to it—the mind is easily overwhelmed by the staggering death tolls that represent genocide in Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and elsewhere. Nonetheless, one expects and hopes that the United States and its leaders, as champions of human rights, would rise well above Uncle Joe’s cynicism to see such “statistics” for the crimes they are and put a stop to them where possible. In her authoritative book, *“A Problem from Hell”*, Samantha Power reminds us that, sadly, this has not been the case. Instead, the United States has consistently failed to exert its considerable leadership on the world stage to halt genocide. With forceful, regretful, and even angry prose, Power reveals the stark record: the United States has rarely missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity to stand against genocide.

Power, a former war correspondent and executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, includes important material on Raphael Lemkin (who coined the term “genocide”) and the origins of the United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC). Though the concept of normative progress in international relations is not discussed explicitly, the chapters on Lemkin and the UNGC provide useful insight into the idea of ethical evolution in world politics and the fitful development of a new international norm. Less attended to is the important role that the United States played in drafting the UNGC and in finding compromises to ensure the maximum number of signatories—a fact that only magnifies the United States’ willful

inaction in the “age of genocide” despite the rallying cry of “never again.”

Power makes a significant contribution by examining cases beyond the most “familiar” episodes of genocide like Rwanda and Bosnia. To tell the full tale, Power reaches back pre-Holocaust to the often-overlooked (and, incredibly, still officially denied) case of genocide perpetrated by the Turks against the Armenians. As she does throughout the book, Power here dramatizes and humanizes the issues through the stories of individuals—not just the victims, but also U.S. proponents of U.S. action. In the case of Armenia, we view the crisis through the eyes of U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau, Sr. In this chapter and others, the first-person account highlights the sense of frustration, urgency, and ultimate abdication of responsibility present in each case, and we find that the cold language of national interest turned the U.S. government away from the “race murder” underway in Turkey in 1915: Power notes flatly, “U.S. diplomats were expected to stay out of business that did not concern U.S. national interests” (pp. 6–7). While a true norm of humanitarian intervention did not really exist at the time, even as part of Woodrow Wilson’s liberal internationalist vision, the story of the United States averting its gaze from Turkish atrocities provides a disturbing precedent for the future of the United States’ response to genocide throughout the twentieth century.

While the world has most recently focused attention on Saddam Hussein’s likely possession of weapons of mass destruction, Power reminds us of one of the indictments against Saddam Hussein—his genocidal campaign against the Kurds. After

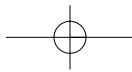
sketching a brief picture of U.S. support for Saddam in the 1980s, Power revisits the brutality of Saddam's *Anfal* effort to terrorize and destroy much of Iraq's Kurdish population. Power quotes the chilling exterminationist language of one Iraqi *genocidaire* who explained that "for every insect there is an insecticide" (p. 178). According to Power, the United States likely made two significant mistakes in dealing with Iraq: it gave no clear message on mistreatment of the Kurds in 1988 and no clear statement on Kuwait in 1990. A third mistake, which Power does not note, would be for the strongest U.S. supporters of regime change in Iraq to focus exclusively on the weapons of mass destruction angle and to overlook the case made by Power and others (including Human Rights Watch and the U.S. State Department in 1995) that Saddam has the blood of genocide on his hands. The two offenses together make the strongest case for action by painting the full picture of Saddam as not only a belligerent, potentially dangerous rogue but also as an international criminal with a disturbing rap sheet.

The Kosovo campaign also gets significant coverage from Power. The display of airpower that Republican leadership in 1999 did their best to paint as "Clinton's War" was a success that represented "the first time in history that the United States or its European allies had intervened to head off a potential genocide" (p. 448). Despite the intervention, America's response remains morally ambiguous: no ground troops, airpower at 15,000 feet and no lower, and a doctrine of supposed "combatant immunity" (p. 455). Yet while the history of Slobodan Milosevic's actions in Kosovo is still being written (and adjudicated in The Hague), Power is quite clear on the main point: it was genocidal and it was stopped. Still, it is difficult not to wonder if President Clinton's

forceful response had some origins—however small—in a feeling of guilt over his hollow (or nonexistent) Rwanda and Bosnia policies. For a book that places so much emphasis on the potential power of individuals—particularly those in positions of power—to shape and lead American public attitudes in favor of intervention, one might expect and hope for a bit more analysis of Kenneth Waltz's "first image," namely the impact of individual behavior and beliefs on state action.

Despite her posture as an angry interventionist, Power correctly steers clear of viewing intervention in solely military terms. She warns against framing policy options "in terms of doing nothing or unilaterally sending in the marines" (p. 513). In case after case she reminds us of the spectrum of possible actions, the various tools available to the United States to take a leadership role short of direct military force—a UN vote on Cambodia, for example, jamming hate radio in Rwanda, or speaking out forcefully against Iraq's atrocities. However, in the case of potential military intervention, the book is thin on the notion of "exit strategies." How long should an intervening state like the United States plan to stay in a place like Rwanda? Are establishing safe havens and stopping the immediate killing enough? Or do power and responsibility demand a much longer commitment to the (dreaded) process of "nation-building"?

The book is also less helpful in considering another type of action that Power argues is essential for waging war against genocide—engaging domestic American support. As she eloquently writes, "The inertia of the governed cannot be disentangled from the indifference of the government" (p. 509). The prescription for overcoming popular inertia is not made clear in the book; and to be fair the answer is not easy to find



even in a post–September 11 America that is at least temporarily more aware of troubles and discontents in, to paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, faraway countries about which we know very little.

“*A Problem from Hell*” forces us to come to terms with the difficult recognition that in many important ways, we have all been bystanders to genocide. Thus, Power urges us to reevaluate carefully a set of “national

interests” that allow us to play such a role as millions perish, and she exhorts us to conceive of a new role in the world where the United States exerts its considerable leadership to transform the international system into an international society where such crimes are actively prevented with maximum force.

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