

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide

Public Affairs

**Samantha Power, Michael N. Barnett, Joanne J. Myers**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. On behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to welcome members and guests to our Author in the Afternoon.

Today our guest is Samantha Power. She will be discussing her recently published book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. Her book is devoted to a century's history of unchecked genocide and the lack of response to it, especially in the United States.

I would like to mention that, coincidentally, today the International Criminal Court [ICC] became a reality. This is the first permanent institution designed to put an end to impunity by establishing individual criminal responsibility for the worst crimes against humanity. Sixty countries ratified the statute for the ICC. The United States was not one.

To introduce Samantha we are very pleased to have with us Michael Barnett. Mr. Barnett is a professor of political science and the director of International Studies Programs at the University of Wisconsin. In 1993 Professor Barnett was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow at the U.S. Mission to the UN. While there he worked on peacekeeping operations, including Rwanda, and was able to observe first-hand the U.S. reaction to the Rwandan genocide.

His most recent book, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda*, tells of this experience. He is also the author of *Confronting the Costs of War: Military Power, State, and Society in Egypt and Israel* and *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order and the Security Community*.

Thank you for being here.

**MICHAEL BARNETT:** My pleasure. I was thinking about where I was eight years ago this week, and I asked Samantha where she was, and it turns out that we were both covering two different genocides, but coming to radically different conclusions. Samantha was a journalist in Bosnia, on this day covering the fall of *Gorazde*, and wondering why the United States and NATO were not getting more involved to stop the genocide.

I, on the other hand, was at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, where I had been covering the Rwandan peacekeeping operation for the previous several months. I was probably writing talking points for the ambassadors in which I highlighted the need to withdraw the peacekeepers and close down the operation because there was no peace to keep, there was chaos on the ground, and, after

Somalia, everyone well understood that the UN could not risk another failure in some forlorn part of Africa.

In short, Samantha and I were reporting on different genocides and coming to radically different conclusions. She was cursing the American officials whom I was defending, arguing that the United States should not get involved in another genocide somewhere else.

About two years ago, we crossed paths for the first time. We were thick in our books, and she had contacted me about my recollections about U.S. policy on Rwanda. We quickly discovered that we were coming at our subject matters in remarkably similar ways.

For the past few years, I had been thinking about my experiences at the UN and had concluded that very decent, well-meaning people at the UN at the time of the genocide believed fundamentally that they should not intervene to stop crimes against humanity—not simply that it was pragmatic, but rather that it was the right thing to do to not get involved, to be a bystander to genocide. For the last several years, I tried to work out that central claim.

Samantha, who was not willing to let the trope of national interest get in her way, had gone on to think about the belly of the beast and how it is that the bureaucracy itself can become the incubator of indifference.

I stopped my investigations of Rwanda. Samantha, being much more bold, decided to cross the entire course of the century, to examine American policy towards genocide. The result is a remarkable book.

After graduating from Yale and working at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, she decided, at the ripe age of twenty-three, that she would be better off going to cover a war in Bosnia than anything else. I can only imagine what her parents must have thought.

For three years she covered that war for *The Economist* and *U.S. News & World Report*. Having seen the violence up close gave her the courage to become a lawyer, and so she got her J.D. from the Harvard Law School. And then, because law school wasn't challenge enough, she used her spare time to establish the [Carr Center for Human Rights](#).

She used all skills from all walks of life to produce this remarkable accomplishment. She used the investigatory skills of a journalist to uncover every single imaginable fact out there; she used her lawyer's analytic skills, and I suspect her ability to depose hostile adversaries, to charm those who otherwise would not be charmed; and then she used the human rights activist passion for the subject. All three of those qualities of her work and her characteristics come out and make the book *A Problem from Hell* quite the *tour de force* that it is.

## Remarks

**SAMANTHA POWER:** Thank you.

The problem with Rwanda is that the only people who were working there at the time of the genocide were low-level officials. So the only people who can come out on the other side and reflect about the crisis and how it was processed day to day, alas, are people who were at that level.

What Michael's book so importantly shows is the way that people can define day-to-day their tasks as deeply moral, fundamentally humanitarian, and, the right thing to do, as if, in the case of Rwanda,

not sending additional peacekeepers to reinforce General Dallaire, the commander on the ground, was the right and moral thing to do.

We can understand that it is in the national interest perhaps, because either it's too expensive or too risky; but that it's the moral thing to do, is such a fundamentally important part of understanding the story of American responses to genocide, societal responses to genocide, that it is only after the fact that it becomes deemed to be deeply immoral. This insight from somebody who was within the system was very eye-opening for me as I tried to excavate U.S. responses to genocide in the 20th century.

I would like to talk about the U.S. response to Rwanda and juxtapose it with that to Bosnia.

Eight years ago, the Rwanda genocide broke out, the plane went down, the killings began, and the Tutsi were exterminated.

Ten years ago that same day, the war in Bosnia broke out, and Bosnian Muslims and Croats were herded into camps—some call them concentration camps. Death was one instrument among many to humiliate, degrade, and to ensure that Bosnian Muslim life was purged and expunged from what then became Serb-held territory.

So you have these two crises, genocides, that are unfolding contemporaneously. I'd like to take you through descriptively and analytically what the responses were in the United States. We can talk in the question-and-answer period about European responses, but my particular slice is the American slice, to look at what the responses were, both as they overlapped and then looking at this as separate crises, by people who, because they were on different continents, brought in different officials, and who themselves brought to the table different stories and narratives.

A plane crashed on April 6, 1994. During the next three days it became increasingly clear to the U.S. officials who were still posted at the Embassy in Kigali not that genocide was underway, but that every Tutsi was vulnerable; that is, having "Tutsi" on your ethnic identity card was enough to earn you a death sentence.

What was also obvious is that conventional war resumed between the Hutu Government, which was also committing the genocide, and Tutsi rebels. So when you heard on this side of the ocean "there is civil war in Rwanda," it was true. There was conventional conflict between two armed parties.

But, under the cover of war, as so often happens, there was also a genocide. Genocide very rarely happens in a vacuum. Usually there's a conventional conflict and then genocide, with war obscuring it.

The United States and the U.S. officials on the ground reported back about both forms of violence, and were, in retrospect even, surprisingly coherent and careful about these two separate forms of killing.

Conventional conflict demands cease-fire negotiation, conflict resolution. For the other form of violence, if it's genocide or if you're systematically exterminating a certain ethnic group—which is how it was termed at that time—a cease-fire isn't necessarily the best way to go. Given that the Tutsi who were being targeted were vulnerable in the cities, townships and provinces, what they needed most was an outside intervention force that would either forfeit its neutrality or shirk it and confront and take sides. In negotiations, neutrality is a good thing. But when you're confronting genocide, you need to take the side of the victim. There was a great reluctance to do that.

Conflict resolution and cease-fires were the very instruments that would aid the government that was committing the genocide. The Hutu Government was all for a cease-fire to keep the people who were going to stop the genocide away. So what you saw was this pantomime.

The person who managed the U.S. response to the Rwanda genocide in the early days was [Prudence Bushnell](#), the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. She had been to Rwanda two weeks before the genocide started to meet with senior Rwandan officials. She understood the ethnic polarization and the ethnic dimension. She knew just basic facts: 85 percent Hutu, 15 percent Tutsi; Tutsi rebels outside trying to power share, having been purged and powerless for some decades, having been privileged under Belgian rule. She knew the basic facts. But, more importantly, she knew Rwandans.

So, while perhaps Michael and others, certainly myself in Bosnia, read the newspapers or the wires and learned of tens of thousands of Rwandans dead—literally 10,000 in the first two days were reported in *The New York Times*—no person came to my mind. But for Bushnell, she knew people personally. She was thinking, "My God, they may be killed in Kigali."

As a result of this personal encounter, she became one of the more active U.S. diplomats—not advocating U.S. military intervention by any means, but urging moral attention, urging that the U.S. Government take seriously these atrocities, that they prioritize them, that they think creatively about the policy tools at their disposal.

So the fact that she had Rwandans in her mind mattered; the fact that she was tasked, that her portfolio was an African portfolio, mattered; she wasn't tasked with the world, as National Security Advisor [Tony Lake](#) was, or even as [Warren Christopher](#) was. She was tasked with Africa, and so she owned it day to day, at least for the first five weeks of the genocide.

However, at a press conference on April 8th, two days in, she focused very much on the fate of the Americans who were in Rwanda—which, again, is what you would expect from a U.S. diplomat. First priority, take care of your people—missionaries, people who were affiliated with the United States, or citizens of the United States but weren't actually working for the U.S. Government. Journalists like myself were asking: "Is it Hutu killing Tutsi or Tutsi killing Hutu?" That is the level of society-wide ignorance that was pronounced, and we can't forget it.

Right now, because of Michael and [Gourevitch](#) and President Clinton's apology and the prominence that Rwanda later achieved, we now have a much broader societal understanding of what the ethnic dimension was.

Bushnell answered these questions quite patiently. But as she reflects now on this press conference, she says, "I felt pretty strongly that my first obligation was to the Americans. I was sorry about the Rwandans, of course, but my job was to get our folks out. Then again, people didn't know that it was a genocide. They were very careful. The word genocide wasn't used in the early days."

She continued, "What I was told was, 'Look, Prudence, these people do this from time to time.'" The places where genocide happens tend to have a history of ethnic violence, so there is a sense of "business as usual," up to a point. It is sometimes difficult to discern just when something has become qualitatively and quantitatively different.

At this point, the expectation of U.S. officials was that there would be a killing spree, as there had been in Burundi six months before, in which 50,000 people had been killed. Officials who worked Africa knew that when it happened in Burundi, there was no long *Atlantic Monthly* article about how

we didn't do enough for these 50,000; there was no problem from hell and ad hoc accountability; there was no presidential apology. We allowed 50,000 people to die without doing anything about it, and nobody complained. So the expectation, even of those who cared, was that many people could die without generating much in the way of complaint.

Bushnell continued, "Look, we thought we'd be right back, that the officials would come out, they would do their little killing, and then they'd go back. It wasn't thinking 800,000. It wasn't thinking genocide of the scale we now know it."

She left the podium and was replaced by [Michael McCurry](#), who was then the State Department's spokesman. McCurry, without missing a beat, announced that Rwanda was done; that was an item checked off the agenda—and he began focusing on the next item on the agenda, which was the failure of many foreign governments to screen Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*.

McCurry is adamant, as adamant as Bushnell had been about the dimensions of violence. He says, "This film movingly portrays the 20th century's most horrible catastrophe and shows that even in the midst of genocide one individual can make a difference." He says that the film must be shown worldwide. "The most effective way to avoid the recurrence of genocidal tragedy is to ensure that past acts of genocide are not forgotten."

None of the journalists, nobody on his staff, nobody anywhere, including Bushnell, who had gone back to her office to man the evacuation of the U.S. officials, made a connection between *Schindler's List*, between the Holocaust and the genocide that was unfolding.

Although everybody talked about the systematic killing and extermination of the Tutsi, "G" was not bandied about in nongovernmental circles until two weeks into the genocide. Most people who noticed that extermination and cared about it were afraid that if they used the "G" word, it was like crying wolf—that somehow if it proved not to be genocide, you wouldn't get invited to the next meeting, that you would have exaggerated your claim; it's better to stick to the facts as they were understood.

At the higher levels there was a reluctance to use the word for fear of triggering American obligations under the [Genocide Convention](#), which were read, actually wrongly, to demand military intervention in the face of genocide. In fact, what the Convention demands is that the signatories undertake steps to prevent and punish.

So by "undertake steps," you could have done many things. We could have denounced at a high level, threatened prosecution, frozen foreign assets, imposed an arms embargo, rallied troops from other countries, created safeguards, done radio jamming. But the fear was "use the word 'genocide' and you have to go the whole way."

In the coming weeks, there was a preference for diplomacy, for negotiation, for cease-fire. That was the emphasis of the U.S. and UN response—and again, very appropriate for one form of the violence that was underway; inappropriate, given the nature of the perpetrators' intent.

The same thing was true in Bosnia at the same time: a bias toward negotiation, toward initially the [Kurihara plan](#), then the [Vance-Owens plan](#), then the [Owens-Stoltenberg plan](#) and the [Contact Group plan](#). There was three and a half years of this negotiation and trusting in one side that had set out to systematically purge its territory of minorities. And, eventually, it was joined by another side that tried to do exactly the same thing, but later in the war, more than a year into the war, the Croats began some of the same tactics in their territory.

It was the ritual of "got to be seen to be doing something; after all, it's atrocities and it's genocide, and we've got to keep the paper trail, keep the peace process."

Genocide prevention had not been taught at the Foreign Service Institute, nor how to deal with perpetrators of crimes of this nature, and there was the sense that Hitler was an exception and that that kind of evil was passé.

In both Rwanda and Bosnia, we saw plenty of early warning ahead of the beginning of the killing. In Bosnia, you had the war in Slovenia and then in Croatia, where civilians had been systematically targeted in Vukovar and Dubrovnik.

In Rwanda you had plenty of warning, but only to the level of the African Desk officer. For people in the State Department, the sense was: "Those people above us aren't going to want to hear these warnings. They're not going to do anything about it. Who would do something about Rwanda? What level of U.S. engagement is ever going to be commanded by a country of this minuscule priority?"

While the warnings were heard and listened to in Bosnia, they were heard at a low level, listened to, and not passed up the chain in Rwanda. In both cases, however, when the killing took place, there was a sense of the ethnic violence almost arriving on schedule, so that those who cared the most and who were waiting and who had heeded the warnings and were afraid, were almost numb when it arrived.

The warnings about Bosnia had been so bad after Dubrovnik and Vukovar, given that ethnically Bosnia was more like a Jackson Pollack painting than Croatia had been, that diplomats thought, "My God, it's going to be brutal."

But dissent in bureaucracy includes a sense of knowing what your higher-ups want to hear, the language and discourse that's not just fashionable but appropriate—that is, the language of realism and national interest, knowing that you could not make an interest-based case for outright intervention in Rwanda, and making the mistake of thinking that you couldn't make a case of any kind for softer forms of intervention.

So you get a self-muting, a kind of nightmare and internalization of the atrocities—a real revulsion at what was going on and outrage, but not a sense that that was in any way politically relevant outrage within a system that had already made up its mind about where Rwanda belonged and where genocide largely belonged.

And it did matter. They were saying, "If we can't get intervention in Bosnia, if Gorazde is about to fall in the middle of Europe, how are we going to get something robust done about the Great Lakes Region in Africa? That's been on CNN every day for two years. Rwanda, we don't have that same pressure from the outside." So little dissent on Rwanda, much dissent on Bosnia.

And contrast those in the State Department who worked in the European Bureau with those in the African Bureau. Again, with all due respect to the people in the room who worked Africa tirelessly for all these years, Europeans had a sense of being on the fast track, that what they had to say and feel was relevant, that their higher-ups would be interested in hearing, because "it was Europe, after all."

There was not self-censoring to the same extent, but rather protest, working the dissent channel, eventually resigning, with more resignations over Bosnia than over Vietnam. Again, contemporaneous with no resignation over Rwanda, where 800,000 people were killed and where the United States did far less than they would do over the course of three and a half years in Bosnia.

In Rwanda, there was not an editorial in any of the major papers calling for intervention. There's a lot of revisionism now about where the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* were. They were nowhere. They were using what was unfolding in Rwanda as a springboard to talk about other issues.

One of the editorials in the *Washington Post* mentioned genocide—they used the "G" word very early—"there is genocide in Rwanda; this is proof yet again of the need for a rapid reaction force." But there was no talk about what should be done about Rwanda, only a systemic analysis of what this revealed about our screwed-up system.

The Congressional Black Caucus, which at that time was protesting vocally and very effectively over the repatriation of Haitian refugees—hunger strikes, Robinson arrested in front of the White House—was nearly mute, two letters to the White House, on Rwanda. There was utter silence coming from Capitol Hill.

The legacy of Somalia was not merely that one was squeamish about peacekeeping in Africa or peacekeeping generally in the United Nations, but it was feared that if troops from other countries of the United Nations got involved anywhere, inevitably it would be incumbent on the United States to go and bail them out when they got into trouble.

And so the response to Rwanda was "get those peacekeepers out." That's the only way we can insulate ourselves from entanglement, "mission creep" and the "slippery slope," and all of the catch-phrases of the day.

Human Rights Watch was terrific. [Alison Des Forges](#) has written a very important book documenting the nature of the genocide *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*. She had contact with people in the field, avoided the word "genocide," documented, was careful about access at the elite level, and met with the National Security Advisor two weeks into the genocide.

But when she got into the room, she realized very quickly that she spoke only for herself and her organization. When she said to Tony Lake, "Don't just think in terms of military intervention; think in terms of radio jamming and sending reinforcements to General [Dallaire](#)," the Canadian who was there pleading for help, he nodded and took notes and seemed to be heeding it. She said, "What can I do to make sure that this happens?" He said, "Make more noise. The phones are not ringing. You're speaking for Human Rights Watch's Board? That's not going to get you very far."

It is crucial point that the grassroots elite were absent for Rwanda. Contrast with Bosnia, where [William Safire](#), [Anthony Lewis](#), [Leslie Gelb](#) were weighing in once or twice a week on the importance of intervening to stop the Serbs, to lift the arms embargo.

Ironically, Rwanda was the case of genocide in the 20th century that was most like the Holocaust, in that it was a systematic attempt to exterminate every last person. It was also more efficient, despite the use of primitive implements, than even Hitler.

However, the Holocaust analogy was very rarely used in the Rwanda context by advocates who did care. But the skinny men behind barbed wire who were captured in Bosnia evoked the image there.

Not only were the advocates loud and relentless, but they were tapping into that was something that was more directly related to the Mike McCurry lament and the importance of remembering, and to the Holocaust Museum which had just opened on the Mall.

I have mentioned already that the response in Rwanda was distinctly low level. There wasn't a single Cabinet-level meeting the entire duration of the genocide. Can you imagine that 800,000 people could die and that the President wouldn't summon his advisors and ask, "What can we do diplomatically, what can we do politically? What are we doing? Do we have technical resources? Are there other troops from other countries who could go?" It never earned a Cabinet-level meeting. Contrast with Bosnia, where you had numerous Cabinet-level meetings.

It is important to note that there was no policy cleft over Rwanda. There was a bureaucratic and a societal consensus. It was only later that we all came back to lament what had been done, what might have been done, how many troops it would have taken to stop the genocide, or to at least deter significant portions of it.

There was fighting and crying and outrage, but it wasn't a constructive outrage. There was just a sense of despair.

On Bosnia we saw the largest policy cleft of the 1990s, a huge division right down through the Cabinet into the State Department, with those resignations.

Europe meant that the press was there legitimating. Press coverage of genocide is necessary for generating high-level attention, but not sufficient. Again, the killing wasn't as quick as that in Rwanda, and you would have seen society-wide noise, some bureaucratic dissent, pressure.

When you're in a bureaucracy and you see an editorial calling for what you think is the right thing to do, you're much more prepared to say, "Did you see what Safire said today? I agree." And, vice versa, if you're an editorial writer, you too inhabit the land of the possible, and so your advocacy tends to be quite derivative on what's on offer within the government. You're playing to one side or the other.

Now, what's the outcome? What happened in both of these cases? You would think from what I'm saying that Bosnia would be a no-brainer. You've got dissent, you've got press coverage, you've got Europe, the self-esteem of the bureaucrats, and you've got high-level attention.

Yet what one wanted didn't happen. NATO planes flew overhead for the better part of three and a half years, occasionally engaged in pinprick air strikes, mainly to support the UN peacekeepers who were on the ground there, deployed to deliver humanitarian aid and to aid the peace and negotiation process.

But we should ask ourselves what Bosnia would look like today if there had been no high-level denunciation, no day-to-day ownership of the issue, even if it was ownership in order to fudge and defer; if there had been no economic sanctions against [Slobodan Milosevic](#), and subsequently his cutoff of the Bosnian Serbs, depriving them of petrol and resources.

We didn't experience what we were doing in Rwanda as green lighting, but the problem with the perpetrators of genocide is that 1) they think they are doing the world a favor by purging the undesirables; and 2) that American leadership, sadly, is binary, in that we think when we're not leading we're simply not leading; but when we're not leading, others around the world are usually taking it as leadership not to act. It's a hefty burden, and not one that any of us especially enjoy carrying, but it is an important part of understanding how perpetrators view Washington.

When they were looking to Washington on Bosnia, for a couple of years they were scared that something was forthcoming and nervous about what lines they could cross. And, even then, they

killed 200,000 people over three and a half years.

But in Rwanda, when they looked, there was nothing. There was silence, no high-level denunciation, no radio addresses, no radio jamming—nothing.

Two weeks into the genocide, Dallaire's troops were withdrawn from under him, which meant that those Tutsi who had gathered at UN points seeking protection were then vulnerable to the militias, and often murdered, after having relied on the promise of UN protection.

Peacekeepers were pulled out on Washington's insistence, again with the Somalia syndrome in mind. Then for the next 6 weeks, there was a tortured effort by the UN Security Council to send reinforcements. They realized as soon as the troops came out that maybe they should be sent back, but that never happened. A Resolution was eventually passed in mid-May, but it would be the Tutsi who would end the genocide before the United Nations would ever see another troop deployed in service or assistance.

So troops came out, no troops were sent back in, all the things on offer that were discussed and debated at a low level in Washington were vetoed for fear of "mission creep," and with no high-level attention to cut through the red tape. Thus, virtually nothing was done along the continuum in Rwanda. In Bosnia, a lot was done—not military intervention, not air strikes of any meaningful kind, not stopping the Serbs from cleansing the territory, not taking back the territory once it was seized and purged of its non-Serb inhabitants; but economic sanctions, denunciation, dissent, daily attention. Peacekeepers on the ground, 20,000 of them throughout, who were mainly targets for snipers, didn't do much in the way of humanitarian aid, assistance; but they could only go where the Serbs would allow because they didn't have a mandate to confront.

And then finally, in August-September 1995, there was finally a mammoth NATO intervention, which brought the genocide in Bosnia to a close within two weeks. [Dayton](#) was a couple months later. But the intervention came about because of those forces that I've identified.

The hero of my book is [Bob Dole](#), the Senate Majority Leader. He was operated on after his war injury by an Armenian doctor who regaled him with stories of genocide as he was recuperating from his surgery. He always kept an eye trained on the Balkans, always had a greater sense of what genocide was and what it meant and why it mattered than just about anybody else. He got Rwanda completely wrong.

His interest brought him there in 1989, and he happened to bear witness to a Serb attack on some Albanians who had come out to cheer him in Kosovo. That made an indelible impression on him, which, again, like Bushnell, when he read then about Serb atrocities or about Muslims being killed, meant that he had something in his mind—tear gas and trenches.

He lobbied continuously against [Bush](#) and [Clinton](#) for lifting the arms embargo against the Bosnia Muslims, allowing them to defend themselves, and bombing the Serbs. He failed. He is not a terribly effective advocate, nor an effective presidential candidate, as we later learned.

But ultimately, when all the society-wide noise and dissent came together, massacres were documented in the daily press and the editorials came in full. It had been heavy throughout compared to other cases in the 20th century, but there was a deluge after the fall of [Srebrenica](#) in July of 1995, where Clinton felt that he was under siege.

And then Dole went to Capitol Hill and got a veto-proof piece of legislation that would lift the arms

embargo against the Bosnian Muslims, which in turn is going to precipitate a European peacekeeper withdrawal, and in turn an American extraction mission to get the European peacekeepers out, which in turn will get Clinton into Bosnia.

Clinton had been avoiding military intervention in Bosnia from the day he got into office, which proved to be a disaster for him. The climactic scene of the book is Clinton on the putting green, with his deputy National Security Advisor [Sandy Berger](#) and [Nancy Soderberg](#), screaming expletives like there's no tomorrow, and saying, "I'm getting creamed. We have got to stop the killing."

This was the first time in the 20th century that a political cost was created for doing nothing about genocide. That is the lesson of my book: It's all politics, politics, politics.

## Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** I believe that the reason for the lack of empathy, the lack of genuine caring, was a manifestation of racism. I don't mean overt racism, but in the same way that there was discussion about how it was easier to drop an atomic bomb on the Japanese than it would have been on Europeans because it was a different race. There is a similarity here, that in the abstract, "Yes, it's terrible to see these Africans, but they're Africans." Whereas when you see Europeans behind barbed wire, emaciated, starving, dying, there is an empathy because they are white and they are Western. It's an unconscious manifestation of racism.

**SAMANTHA POWER:** I agree with you, but I would agree a lot more if I had only done the Rwanda case. I would agree resolutely, I'm sure. But more than racism, is "otherism." We were very good at convincing ourselves that those skinny men behind barbed wire weren't like us in the most crucial way, that they were Muslim. The real test would have been if it had been Muslims killing Serbs.

We had had the [Sarejevo Olympics](#). If we had had the Olympics in Kigali at some point, that might have created a humanizing. The racism, or the "otherism," or the writing-off of provincial places that are out of our sphere of influence, is a proxy for something else, part of which is just "they're not like us." But part of it is that we've never been there; we don't have a personal connection. There's nothing that can take them out of the realm of "the other" and make them human.

And the victims—Armenian Christians, Jews, Tutsi, East Timorese, Cambodians, Bosnian Muslims, potentially Chechyan—are people of all kind of shapes, colors, sizes, geographic zones.

If you don't want to do anything, if the risk of getting involved on humanitarian grounds are so much greater than the non-costs of staying out, then you're going to be all the more prone to see difference rather than similarity.

Whiteness had something to do with it, but I would argue that there are other factors, and we did characterize those people who were dying as tribes. It was a problem from hell about which we could do nothing. As Warren Christopher said, "It's almost unbelievable, it's terrifying; they have been killing one another for centuries." That's not a way you talk about people who are like you.

**QUESTION:** My question is for both of you. What is the relationship between morality and American foreign policy? The underlying theme of your books is that genocide is the ultimate immoral act and that, therefore, regardless of where it is happening in the world, the moral responsibility to do something lies with the United States.

**SAMANTHA POWER:** Let me respond briefly—descriptively, rather than normatively—and then I'd

love to hear from Michael.

I was at the University of Chicago last week with [John Mearsheimer](#), one of the great realists of our time, who believes that foreign policy, descriptively and normatively, is and should only be made on the basis of national interest. Descriptively, my book reinforces his thesis, in that my conclusion is that values and morality alone are never enough, that you have to find either values, in turn triggering a shame, which creates political interest, as the Dole example would illustrate; or the kind of strategic nexus that you could potentially see in Sudan in the coming days, and that you did see more in Kosovo and in northern Iraq. After the Kurds had revolted and spilled into Turkey, we didn't leave them there; we brought them back because Turkey wanted them out. Turkey put pressure on Baker, and then Baker did see the refugees and was moved.

But there was also in both the Kosovo the Kurdish cases, a prior investment of U.S. credibility. We had intervened in Bosnia for all these reasons and, thus, U.S. credibility was there in the neighborhood. Milosevic was running rings around us, and we looked bad when again he began purging the Albanians.

Similarly, we had invested in the Gulf War. For [Saddam Hussein](#) to send all those Kurds into Turkey and into neighboring states was just too much, and so we went back in to provide comfort in a way that we hadn't done in 1987 and 1988. There was also more media there because the U.S. had been involved in both those circumstances.

Normatively, I would make a moral case. But I would also note simply that the weapons that Saddam tested on the Kurds in 1987–1988 are the very chemical weapons we're now afraid he's going to use on us; that the person who governed northern Iraq when he was killing between 100,000 and 200,000 Kurds in that period was the leader who then was sent in to govern Kuwait, [Ali Hassan al-Majeed](#).

I would note that [bin Laden](#) traveled for the better part of the last ten years on a Bosnian passport because he got into Bosnia. We had the arms embargo imposed on the Bosnian Muslims there, and there were people who said, "Come on, bring it on in, you're preaching that stuff. I'll take it if guns come with."

**MICHAEL BARNETT:** I have spent a lot of time puzzling over how you decide to rank order your priorities. Think of it this way: if the world is filled with suffering—and this is the problem that the UN had to face in the early 1990s—there is absolutely no way that the UN can somehow assuage all the suffering that takes place at any one moment.

As a consequence, what you had in the early 1990s, at least at the UN, was the quip "the UN never met a peacekeeping operation it didn't like." And, all of a sudden, it found itself scattered into god-forsaken places, being asked to do things that it could never do without the resources of the political will. So it was bound to fail.

And we wanted the UN to do things that we ask all bureaucracies to do, which is to somehow become more efficient, so that—in [Albright's](#) term at the time—it's the right tool for the job.

What you found people at the UN doing, in the way you're suggesting, is rank ordering their priorities, but doing it through rules. They came up with a set of rules: when is peacekeeping proper, when it is appropriate, and when is it right?

But what was fascinating was that by rank ordering these rules in the way that you did, you also

determined who would get your attention and who would be ignored. It was summed up very well by one of my bosses at the U.S. Mission at the time, that "we establish these rules that said peacekeeping is only proper when there's a peace to keep."

That means, then, that you are only likely to have peacekeepers when you have a situation like Madison, Wisconsin, but not when you have situations like Rwanda. And so, as he said at the time, "If you really need us, we won't be there."

As a consequence, we haven't established who will get your attention. These rules are not simply there to be efficient, but there is a moral division of labor, a moral distribution of attention. So when Rwanda comes around and everybody falls back on these nice little truisms, like "there's no peace to keep," then you say, "We've got no business there; it's not my job."

It's a question of moral responsibility. It's not simply about the evil that's possible, but what bystanders do in the face of evil. There has been much hand-wringing and finger-pointing over the last several years about whether the UN did enough, could it have done more, could it have stopped the genocide, and people can weigh in on all sides on that question.

Ultimately the UN does bear some moral responsibility because there were things that it could have done, that were in its power, that might have reduced the killing. It probably could not have stopped the genocide, but it certainly could have reduced the killing significantly.

In terms of the U.S., I find myself sympathetic with something that Tony Lake says, which is "having the greatest amount of power doesn't give you the greatest amount of responsibility—it doesn't mean you're the world's policeman." I completely agree with that.

At the same time, though, one of the things that has to be understood is that the U.S. was not the only one. The sidelines were crowded with people who decided not to care. But what was different about the U.S. is that when May came along and there were some plans that were being proposed, we stood in the way. And so, even in the context of samaritanism, the U.S. blocked and it didn't do what little it could have done, for many of the reasons that Samantha suggested, because of the fear of being swept under the undertow and of getting caught into something it didn't want to do.

On those grounds, then, the U.S. does bear some responsibility—not for the genocide, but for not doing what it could have done to have mitigated its awful consequences.

**QUESTION:** I was struck when you talked about some of the reasons why we did not get involved and you used Somalia as an example. Having been around in the late 1960s, when 500 Americans were being killed every week in Vietnam, and having been struck by the horrors of Rwanda from the very first days listening to the radio, I had always assumed that the reason we didn't get involved was jungle. And not only was it a jungle, but also it was far from an ocean.

Since most of the policy leaders in those days were roughly my age, that was the subtext of what kept us from dipping the toe and then being totally submerged.

**SAMANTHA POWER:** The syndrome, as it's now known in Washington is "Vietmalia."

After all of my reporting, I have not found any evidence that the subject of U.S. military intervention ever came up. It's true that there was some debate about how many troops it would have taken and how they would have got in there. There was one plan that was mooted at the time for U.S. peacekeepers to inhabit neighboring countries and then make their way in. The other was take Kigali

airport and then go out. There was no ocean, and that was an issue.

But again, the real legacy of Vietnam, which was reinforced in Somalia, was that, in the Pentagon especially—and they were the ones who were blocking many of the softer sanctions that were debated, like radio jamming—there was the conception that if the UN or whomever got into trouble, American politicians, specifically Democrats, would not give you the means to do the job and would pull the rug out from under you.

What so many U.S. military officials said to me was, "The only thing worse than eighteen U.S. Rangers dying on October 3, 1993, in Somalia was the President going on television within 24 hours and saying 'those troops are coming home' and not defending the mission, not giving the troops a way to reinforce, not altering the mission so it was actually a doable mission or the means matched the end." We see the discrepancy between means and end, and that suspicion from one branch of the government, from the Defense Department, towards the White House, compounded by gains in the military, draft dodging, and its being a Democratic White House when the officer corps is mainly Republican.

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