

THE REALITIES OF CONFRONTING  
GENOCIDE: A REVIEW OF SAMANTHA  
POWER'S "A PROBLEM FROM HELL"

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**Power, Samantha. "A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide. New York: Basic, 2002.**

IT IS EASY TO GET SWEEPED AWAY BY A BOOK LIKE THIS. Samantha Power is a former Balkan war correspondent and former head of a center for human rights policy at Harvard's Kennedy School. Her book sits at the intersection of three important topics: genocides, the tendency of the outside world to let them proceed, and the foreign policy of the U.S. Power skillfully tells stories which break one's heart—as we watch victim groups slide from possibly saved to certainly drowned—and which stir one's outrage—as we see policymakers watch the victims, too, for a moment, before quietly turning away. Power pleads for more concern for the victims of mass murder and for less hypocrisy and more risk-tolerance among U.S. policymakers—pleas which are, on their face, difficult to imagine rejecting. Not surprisingly,

the book has been widely reviewed and very positively received; it recently won a Pulitzer prize. And yet, in the end, Power's argument does not work.

The book's structure is straightforward and potent. Power opens by introducing us to Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew who escaped the Nazi net, which caught most of his family. He started lobbying in the late 1930s for greater international action against the Nazi project. In response to Winston Churchill's war-time comment in the face of unprecedented Nazi murders—that "We are in the presence of a crime without a name"—Lemkin coined the term "genocide." His efforts were distilled into his campaign for an international treaty making genocide criminal and punishable. His hours of triumph came when "[j]ust four years after Lemkin had introduced 'genocide' to the world, the [U.N.] General Assembly had unanimously passed a law banning it" in 1948, followed by the Genocide Convention (59). Lemkin poured his life-energies into the effort and died alone and penniless after a life of idealistic exertion.

Power then tracks U.S. policymakers' reluctance to ratify the Convention's words and even greater reluctance to live up to its spirit. She devotes discussions to Cambodia, Iraq, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo (as well as earlier Armenia). In nearly every case, she finds early warning signs of larger-scale murder to come; suspiciously emphatic incredulity on the part of U.S. journalists and officials; and dogged reluctance to act—even rhetorically, at times—when mass murder becomes undeniable. Power focuses on the U.S. because, if anything, its raised consciousness about the European Holocaust seems to make it the most likely candidate to be the world's first responder to genocides, and because of its disproportionate capacity to make a difference. With regret and evident bitterness, she details how, whenever genocides begin, U.S. officials suddenly develop courtroom-like standards for proof. She chronicles non-intervention, even when a little might have gone a very long way (in Rwanda, a few hundred crack troops could conceivably have saved hundreds of thousands). And she describes the domestic U.S. political processes that seem to cause this recurrent pattern. She absolves any partisan category and any particular policymaker:

“when you look at a whole century of American Presidents who all find a way to look away, it doesn’t seem so personality dependent.”<sup>1</sup>

For Power, the explanatory linchpin is lack of popular attention to and agitation around genocides, which ensures that “no U.S. President has ever suffered politically” for non-intervention (xxi). This provides Power’s target: her book is precisely meant to make Americans realize that this pattern can be broken if they know more about mass murder and demand better of their officials. Hers is a plea to recognize warning signs, overcome moral blind spots, and be willing to get involved at the decisive hour. It is also a plea for moral rigor. She decries our deal-making with mass murderers. In a later *New Republic* article, she condemns the inconsistency of our stated concern for Iraq’s Kurds alongside kid-glove treatment of Turkey’s Kurdish and Russia’s Chechnya policies, and calls for the U.S. to “inject *first-order* concern for human rights into *every* policy decision.”<sup>2</sup>

Power’s tone makes it seem painfully obvious or evident that we should intervene, and when, and how, but her book presents several problems, which jointly prove fatal to her proposal. They concern problems of causality, information, and what amounts to a crushing moral blind-spot, which conceals tough realities of interventionism from view.

Power’s concern is with genocidal projects that terrify and murder hundreds of thousands or millions of men, women, and children. Yet she is systematically unconcerned with their actual root causes, to which she devotes no sustained analysis. It is true that others have done little better even after sustained study. This is amply shown by the ongoing debate over the most famous genocide. Did the Holocaust require a violent underlying culture? Or was it sparked by the much more contingent rise to power of a movement (or leader?) with an eliminationist agenda, which others obeyed? Or was it the unintended consequence

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<sup>1</sup> Samantha Power, “Interview: Never Again, Again,” *The Atlantic Online: Atlantic Unbound* (14 March 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Power, “Bush’s Illiberal Power,” *The New Republic* (emphasis added) (3 March 2003): 30–1.

of a much vaguer desire to expel Jews from German society? How were the eventual victim groups selected from among many possible choices? Would answers to these questions even help us explain genocides outside Europe?<sup>3</sup> A reading of the literature makes clear that, for now, the causes of concentrated episodes of mass murder remain frustratingly opaque.

As a result, one is tempted to come to rest where Power begins, that is, ignoring underlying causes altogether. She begins each story with rising violence that warns of imminent killing on a grander scale. She then shifts rapidly to her real focus: not the root causes of genocides but, as it were, the root causes of not *stopping* genocides already underway. The act of “not *stopping* genocides” can be said to be the cause of genocidal outcomes only in the sense that it is one of the last parts of a lengthy causal chain, a chain that begins with the root causes of the genocides themselves. Focusing on that last part of the chain is not inherently problematic, as long as we do not lose sight of what portion of the overall outcome it can possibly explain. Unfortunately, Power loses sight of that completely. This results in disturbing formulations, as in: “It is in the realm of domestic [U.S.] politics that the battle to stop genocide is lost” (xviii). That battle was obviously lost in a slightly more important sense in Cambodia and Rwanda than in Washington. In a recent article, Power urges Americans to consider apologizing for our past “sins” in these matters, in the style of then-German Chancellor Willy Brandt going to his knees in the Warsaw ghetto. She cites an imperfect start: President Clinton’s statement in Rwanda regretting not having done more to stop the 1994 genocide.<sup>4</sup> The parallel is grotesque: Germans apologizing for crimes committed by Germans is nothing like Americans apologizing for not doing enough to stop crimes that some Rwandans committed against other Rwandans.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Mazower (“Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century,” *American Historical Review* 107 [2002]: 1158) argues they would not.

<sup>4</sup> Power, “Bush’s Illiberal Power,” 30.

So long as that distinction is maintained, though, a focus on the U.S. has a real purpose. From an advocate's point of view, the bulk of the story may well be in the U.S. in the narrow but crucial sense that that part of the overall causal chain may be the only part we can currently explain and influence. But here Power encounters, and this time grapples heroically with, another problem. A comparable line of argument illustrates this problem. James Q. Wilson has argued that we remain very far from identifying, much less eliminating, "root causes" of crime, but we are nonetheless able to fight crime by using punishment to raise the costs of committing it.<sup>5</sup> Power takes what amounts to the same position, framing the issue in terms of "raising the cost of genocide."<sup>6</sup> However, while U.S. voters appear very willing to pay for both the policing and prisons that raise the cost of committing crimes, they have proven very reluctant to be the police abroad, which is Power's mechanism for raising costs to genocidaires.

Power's most consistent focus is this reluctance. She devotes extensive attention to the question of what observers "knew" as genocides were unfolding. Sections are devoted to "official knowledge," "official skepticism," "in search of 'proof,'" and "what did the United States know?" Power argues that a major cause of non-intervention is that observers often are unwilling to believe that organized mass murder is underway.

Observers greet initial reports of genocide skeptically. Power generally treats this as a failure of ideas or imagination: "policymakers, journalists, and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed," and it is not easy for people to "bring themselves to imagine" genocidal policies (xvii, 36, 95). One consequence is impossibly high standards of evidence during turbulent events. This suggests that credulity operates as a cause in its own right, and that we are bearers of an exaggerated skepticism. Power's centerpiece evidence for this is that in each case of imminent or incipient genocide, there were people present who were

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<sup>5</sup> James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime* (New York: Basic, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Samantha Power, "Raising the Cost of Genocide," *The New Killing Fields: Massacre and the Politics of Intervention*, ed. Nicolaus Mills and Kira Brunner (New York: Basic, 2001) 245–64.

able to leverage available information into a correct prediction of what followed. Power deduces that since these people saw what was coming, others could have, too. Her mission is largely to shorten our “learning curves” so we will be more prone to believe while there is time to act.

But as Power also acknowledges, our willingness to believe is often less a cause than an effect. We discount claims of atrocities because we know they are sometimes true and sometimes not. This is true of claims of mass murder even when some violence is occurring. Power notes that genocide “is often preceded by little massacres...so I’d be watching for these kinds of killings.” She mentions periodic Hindu/Muslim violence in India, which she says “could turn into something even more dangerous.”<sup>7</sup> The problem with this is obvious: not all massacres are followed by genocides; in India, they have not been for over fifty years. During any episode, we can find a range of willingnesses to believe what we later know happened next. Afterward, we will always be able to go back and find someone whose predictions were vindicated.

By focusing only on cases in which genocide did occur, Power is able to find people who saw it coming and concludes from this that skepticism is unjustified and corrigible. Had she widened her study to include some of the many cases in which genocide did not follow, she would have found their equivalents who decided that, for example, each Indian pogrom foretold genocide, but who were wrong every single time. Power’s research design—focusing only on cases where genocide occurred—cannot detect this. As we will see, this is not the only time her selection of cases leads her analysis onto unpersuasive ground.

Ultimately, it is not clear that skepticism is causally important to begin with. Power also suggests that policymakers sometimes suspect what is going on but do not want to intervene regardless, and so deploy what amounts to feigned ignorance as a device for avoiding action. This may result from a clash of two norms: the policymakers do not want to get involved in a situation of mass murder, but know that they are not

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<sup>7</sup> Power, “Interview: Never Again, Again.”

supposed to say that out loud, so they deny the label rather than renounce the aversion. If caring rather than information is the problem, then shortening learning curves would have little impact on policy.

Perhaps for this reason, Power proposes that Americans be more caring as well as more willing to believe. To appeal to them, she argues that genocides are destabilizing and so threaten our interests as well as our ethics. But Power never seriously grapples with the complexities inherent in the kind of deterrence-based foreign policy she advocates. It is useful to consider, as a parallel, a policy of deterring international aggression. To even hope to deter aggression, threats of intervention must be credible, and that requires being ready to intervene. Power leaves the impression that that should not be difficult, since in matters of cross-border aggression, appeals to ethics can be just as clear—and appeals to self-interest even more persuasive—than in cases of genocide. Yet we know that deterrence of aggression is very difficult to generate and maintain. There is invariably extensive disagreement over how acute a danger is (as seen from before: what are the probabilities that Hitler will attack? Or that Saddam Hussein will provide certain weapons to terrorists?).

To this is added invariable disagreement over matters Power never addresses. How much interest is at stake? (Would it be worth losing the Sudetenland if Hitler would stop there?) Indeed, there is typically disagreement on how much is at stake even when aggression has already occurred. (Is restoring the Kuwaiti royal family worth a Gulf War in 1991?) Morality is contested, too, since there are also reasons to value sovereignty, to save our soldiers' lives, and to save other lives. (Would invading Iraq in 2003 kill 1,000 or 500,000?) Moreover, other countries may not resolve these questions in the same way and might prefer different, even divergent, policies. How do Americans weigh either interests or norms then?

A credible deterrence stance requires coming down on very specific sides of each of these questions. It requires a heightened sense of danger (to the costs of inaction), which sounds risk-averse, but a risk-tolerant willingness to act instead of giving in to the temptations of appeasement. It requires being relatively optimistic that intervening, if needed,

would successfully prevent future potential aggressions. It also requires, in order to be credible, a willingness from the start to go it alone if not all countries adopt a deterrence strategy. To put it provocatively, a posture of deterrence toward genocidal aggression requires that Samantha Power be a Donald Rumsfeld or a Paul Wolfowitz in all but name.

Sometimes, she seems to be just that. She emphasizes the costs of inaction. (“How can we get the Foreign Service Institute to talk to its diplomats about the perils of negotiating too long?”) She does not worry that intervention violates borders. She does not worry that intervention can provoke international opposition; she instead praises the Kosovo operation, which had to be carried out by a NATO-based coalition of the willing, since it could not secure U.N. Security Council approval. Stephen Holmes, in a very thoughtful review of this same book, notes Power’s tough-talking tendencies with concern and asks readers who might think they agree with Power to consider whether they really favor the level of U.S. intervention her logic seems to justify.<sup>8</sup>

I suspect that many of them would not. More important, it is unclear that Power is willing to follow her own book’s logic. Consider the Bush Administration’s Iraq policy. Power devotes one of her most powerful chapters to the mass murder of Kurds by Saddam Hussein, Tariq Aziz, and the regime’s other top personnel. Whatever Bush’s motives, toppling that regime punished its rulers who were awash in blood, and hopefully signals to others that such crimes could catch up with them. Yet, in a prominent article written after her book, Power suddenly becomes cautious. Dropping her forthrightness, she is too cautious even to take a clear position on the (at the time) proposed invasion. She discovers the costs of action and lets the costs of inaction go entirely unaddressed. And she feels an urgent need for U.S. actions to be tempered by much broader international approval.<sup>9</sup> The point is not that these criteria are illegitimate or incoherent. It is that they played no real role in her book. Power herself seems to be saying that her book’s criteria

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Holmes, “Looking Away,” *London Review of Books* (14 November 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Power, “Bush’s Illiberal Power,” 29, 31.

for foreign policy toward genocidal regimes proved inadequate to the making of U.S. policy toward the next genocidal regime to come under scrutiny. What was self-evident in the book becomes messy in practice. How could Power's book not have addressed these messy realities of an assertive foreign policy? Because of a second aspect of her research design: she focuses only on cases in which intervention could have been fairly safe and fairly morally uncomplicated. This bias is greatly facilitated by a moral inconsistency that lies at the heart of "genocide" as a legal concept. And it has crucial consequences for Power's analysis, by making seem obvious and simple what is in fact painfully complicated.

Lemkin defined "genocide" as an attempt to destroy a culture or way of life rather than people as such. Lemkin wrote that genocide "is more dangerous than war" because, as Power summarizes his view, even "those individuals who survived genocide would be forever shorn of an invaluable part of their identity" (42, 51). Since genocide is an act against a collective entity rather than against people as such, genocide can occur without any people being killed, and many people can be killed without genocide occurring. Moreover, and crucially, genocide is defined as an attempt to destroy communities defined in religious, ethnic, or cultural terms. In no small part at the behest of the Soviet bloc, Lemkin accepted and lobbied to exclude from the genocide treaty's terms all attempts to destroy groups defined in political terms (53, 69).

This reveals a distinct Enlightenment bias. "Genocide" is mass murder committed in the name of particularistic identities such as religion, language, and ethnicity. Excluded are murders that are committed on Enlightenment terms, so to speak, for example, by a group defined in universalistic political terms (e.g., Marxist-Leninists) against another group defined in similar terms (liberals and social democrats, or small landowners), or by anti-clericals against *religiosity*, as opposed to any specific religion. This leaves the distinct impression that the excluded murders are morally, because legally, less offensive and more tolerable.

Like many other books on genocide, Power's is contaminated by this. All the mass murders she treats meet the legal definition, with the exception of Cambodia. This default commitment is especially poignant in the Iraq chapter, where she discusses only Saddam's wars

against the ethnic Kurds. This relegates the extensive murder of non-Kurdish Iraqis to the sidelines. North Korea's horrors go unmentioned. So does what remains by far the largest-scale project of mass murder since 1945: China under Mao.

This exclusion of Marxism-Leninism—which killed more people in the 20th century than any other political project—has a key analytic consequence: it excludes great-power, as opposed to minor-power, cases of mass murder. This removes from the analysis many instances of mass murder in which intervention would have required the consideration of tradeoffs that Power sidesteps and the moral ambiguities against which she inveighs. First, the exclusion removes Stalin's regime from consideration. This matters because any attempt to stop Stalin's mass murders in the 1930s would have required a land war fraught with dangers and an alliance with Nazi Germany. Second, it removes Mao's China, which would have posed comparable challenges. It also removes mass murders in North Korea and Mengistu's Ethiopia; intervening in either one would have forced the U.S. to contend with either the USSR or China or both. The only Communist case included in Power's book—Cambodia—is also the only one in which Western intervention would almost certainly not have provoked a direct response from the USSR or China. For that matter, Power leaves the Holocaust out of her analysis. As we know, ending that genocide required an alliance with Joseph Stalin.

Power's depiction of an obvious, evident, clear-cut, and morally consistent foreign policy does not tell us what to do when intervening might involve large-scale war, when it is necessary to work with certain evils in order to combat others, or when other countries would oppose our mission. By focusing exclusively on "easy" cases, Power does not develop the guidelines we need for a robust anti-genocide policy in a difficult world. Her passion is inspiring, but her analysis falls short.