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U.S. Policy Choices During the Rwandan Genocide

Course 5603 National Security Strategy Process
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If the horrors of the holocaust taught us anything, it is the high cost of remaining silent and paralyzed in the face of genocide.” Governor Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign

On April 6, 1994 the Mystere Falcon carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi was shot down by a surface to air missile, igniting a long planned and well coordinated holocaust that ended in the deaths of up to 800,000 Rwandans. Over the next six weeks, Hutu extremists, led by the Rwandan Army and radical Hutu militias, mobilized the majority Hutu population against the Tutsi minority to execute a bloodbath unequalled since the Cambodian killing fields of the 1970s. Alone among the great powers, the United States possessed the political and military power to organize and lead a rapid military intervention to stop the slaughter – yet America took no action. The details of the tragedy are by now well known. What is less well known is the process by which the Clinton Administration arrived at a decision not to act – a startling decision in retrospect given the expressed principles of the administration and the almost unbelievable scale of the unfolding tragedy.

In the months and years that followed the Rwandan genocide, President Clinton at first excused American inaction by claiming that the true scope and scale of the killing was not known, and that the speed of the genocide precluded an effective response. Subsequent reporting revealed conclusively, however, that the killings continued for more than three months, and that the administration knew in detail that a systematic program of mass murder was not only in progress, but in fact had been planned in advance. U.S. inaction did not result from bad information or inadequate resources. Rather it was a conscious act of

policy. How that policy came to be will engage national security practitioners for years to come.

Chronology of Terror

Although tribal intermarriage and blending of ethnic groups had been commonplace in Rwanda for generations, conflict between the Hutu majority and ruling Tutsi elites had marked Rwandan history since long before the Europeans arrived. Originally a German colony, Rwanda was ceded to Belgium after WWI and ruled by a Tutsi monarchy until 1959, when a Hutu rebellion forced the Tutsis from power, killing thousands of Tutsis and ending Belgian rule. The new Hutu government soon found sponsorship from France, eager to retain influence in central Africa in the post-colonial era. Large scale massacres of the Tutsi population recurred in 1963, in 1967 and in 1973. Eventually more than half the indigenous Tutsi population fled to neighboring countries, spawning a resistance movement, the Rwandan Popular Front or RPF, operating from camps in Uganda and Tanzania. Significantly, the RPF included many moderate Hutus longing for a multiethnic Rwandan state at peace with itself.

Years of fighting and skirmishing between the Rwandan Armed Forces or "FAR" and the RPF led to the signing of the Arusha Accords in August 1993. Brokered by the U.S., the Accords allowed for the return of Tutsi refugees and a power-sharing agreement to be implemented in stages. Under heavy U.S. pressure, Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana began to implement the Accords. His assassination in April of 1994 was almost certainly planned and carried out by extremists bent on sabotaging the peace process.

Within an hour of the 6 April crash, FAR units, assisted by Hutu militia (the “Interahamwe”), established roadblocks and began hunting Tutsis in the capital. Using lists prepared in advance and broadcasting over government radio, the Hutus systematically detained and executed hundreds of Tutsis. On April 7th, the Hutu moderate Prime Minister Uwilingiyimana and her ten Belgian UN guards were killed, along with the President of the Constitutional Court, the leaders of the Liberal and Social Democratic parties, the Information Minister and the chief negotiator of the Arusha Accords, and thousands of others.¹ The killing quickly spread throughout the countryside as military, political and militia leaders forced a stark choice on the majority Hutu population: kill the Tutsis, or be killed yourselves.

In the weeks that followed, UN forces in Rwanda to monitor the Arusha Accords (“UNAMIR”), under Canadian Major General Romeo Dallaire, reported regularly on the massive scale of the genocide. The initial UN response was to downsize the UN contingent from 2,500 to just above 500, effectively stopping any possibility of effective UN intervention even in the capital area. Just days after the killings began, the RPF launched major military operations in an attempt to defeat the FAR and halt the genocide. But its campaign would take three months to capture Kigali. In the interim, most of the native Tutsi population would be destroyed.

The UN Security Council did not take up the matter formally until April 30th, when it deliberated for eight hours before issuing a resolution condemning the violence. However, the word “genocide” was specifically omitted, as its use

would have impelled collective UN action under the UN Charter. Meanwhile, advancing RPF troops precipitated a massive Hutu refugee exodus to neighboring Tanzania and Zaire. Various proposals to insert an African force under UN auspices faltered as member nations squabbled over who would pay to equip and transport the force. Still unable to act, the UN authorized France on June 22d to deploy a force into southwest Rwanda to create a “safe zone”. Paradoxically, however, the French operation, code named “Turquoise”, was intended to provide a safe haven for FAR forces and Hutu civilians fleeing the RPF – not to stop the killing of Tutsis.²

In mid-July, victorious RPF forces overran the territory still held by the FAR, finally ending the genocide. Intact FAR units, accompanied by Hutu militia formations, Hutu government officials and political figures, and hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians, fled to Zaire in the largest refugee migration since the end of the Second World War. Unwilling to act while the genocide continued, the UN and the U.S. government moved quickly to succor the Hutu refugees massed just across the border. By the end of July, a massive US airlift flew in U.S. troops and dozens of nongovernmental organizations to provide humanitarian assistance and relief to the displaced Hutu population. In Rwanda itself, the expatriate RPF set up an interim government of national unity in Kigali, by now a graveyard in place of a national capital.³

What We Knew, When We Knew It

In March of 1998 President Clinton stopped in Kigali while on a presidential junket to Africa. In a brief address to local notables gathered on the

airport's tarmac, Clinton said "we come here today partly in recognition of the fact that we in the United States and the world community did not do as much as we could have and should have done to try and limit what occurred" in Rwanda.⁴ So brief was this visit that the engines on Air Force One never shut down. President Clinton's brief remarks on this occasion represent virtually the sum total of the administration's public comment on the matter. In later years, however, public documents surfaced which showed that US government officials were well aware of the specifics of the ongoing killings.

Clear indications of an impending pogrom existed well before Habyarimana's assassination. On January 11, 1994 General Dallaire sent a message to the UN warning that lists were being prepared of Tutsis marked for elimination and that plans to assassinate key government officials were well advanced.⁵ From January to April, Dallaire sent numerous appeals for reinforcements and a broader mandate to prevent the impending catastrophe.⁶ That year, senior RPF officials approached Ambassador David Rawson with evidence of the planned genocide. Human Rights Watch and other international human rights organizations issued dozens of warnings prior to April 6.⁷ Despite the long history of Hutu-on-Tutsi violence in Rwanda, the UN, the international community and the U.S. government failed to take notice.

Once the genocide began, UN and U.S. officials were well informed of the progress of events. Reports streamed in to the UN from UNAMIR, to the Department of State from the U.S. Embassy in Kigali (which did not depart for some three weeks), and to human rights and media organizations from

intellectuals in Rwanda. Several dozen local hires at the U.S. Embassy, including Ambassador Rawson's personal driver, were killed in the first few days.⁸ Only days after the start of the killings, official memoranda in the Office of the Secretary of Defense warned that a "massive bloodbath (hundreds of thousands of deaths) will ensue."⁹ The New York Times, the Washington Post and other leading newspapers gave front-page coverage to events in Rwanda, specifically detailing the massive scale of the killing.¹⁰ A Defense Intelligence Agency report released on May 9 described an organized, ongoing "genocide" against the Tutsis.¹¹ While the reasons for deciding not to intervene to stop the killings may be debated, what is incontrovertible is that the Clinton administration was well informed of the attempted destruction of the Tutsi community in Rwanda.

Choosing Not to Act

Administration policy on peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions, explained in Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 25, placed stringent restrictions on the use of military forces in such scenarios. Framed in the aftermath of the disastrous raid in Mogadishu on the 3d of October, 1993, which resulted in the deaths of 19 Americans, PDD 25 established a long list of criteria requiring "a showing that U.S. interests were at stake, a clear mission goal, acceptable costs, Congressional, allied and public support, a clear command and control arrangement, and an exit strategy."¹² Although not published officially until May 3 (four weeks into the genocide), its provisions had been fully vetted within the interagency process months before. The logic of PDD 25 was in full

force from the opening hours of the killing. It would provide the pretext for inaction that would guide the Clinton administration throughout the crisis.

As later inquiries would document, the focus of the administration's response to events in Rwanda was not only to forestall any U.S. military intervention, but to limit or defeat any reaction of any kind. At the UN, U.S. Ambassador Madeleine Albright worked vigorously to kill General Dallaire's request for reinforcements and in fact successfully brokered the immediate pullout of most of the UNAMIR force.¹³ At the NSC, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake cannot be shown to have taken any particular interest in the Rwandan genocide at all.¹⁴ Richard Clarke, his Senior Director for peacekeeping, staunchly opposed intervention, pooh-poohing Dallaire's requests and asserting the infeasibility of any UN military operation to fly into Kigali. Clarke's counter-proposal, a vaguely defined "outside-in" option to establish safe zones near the border area, was manifestly unsuitable because the Tutsi population could not move there. Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State, undercut any such plan by declaring "the U.S. is not prepared at this time to lift heavy equipment and [UN] troops into Kigali."¹⁵

Even desperate attempts to take minimalist action¹⁶ – jamming Hutu radio broadcasts, for example, or providing obsolete armored personnel carriers to a proposed relief force of African troops – were stymied by bureaucratic delay or inaction by the Department of Defense and the Joint Staff.¹⁷ Secretary of State Warren Christopher refused to even use the word "genocide" until most of the Tutsi population in Rwanda was dead¹⁸, fearing that its use might activate the

legal provisions of the 1948 international Treaty on the Prevention of Genocide, which required intervention by signatory states to prevent the killing of targeted ethnic groups “in whole or in part.” In fact, the historical record shows that President Clinton never once convened his national security “principals” – the Secretaries of State and Defense, the National Security Adviser, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and other leading members of the national security apparatus – to consider the matter.

Conclusion

Why did the Clinton administration, initially charged with foreign policy idealism, so utterly reject all proposals to act to stop the Rwandan genocide? Official and unofficial explanations offered since the tragedy center around three themes: that the extent of the killings was not fully grasped until it was too late to act; that a military intervention was infeasible; and that the administration was preoccupied by events in Bosnia and elsewhere.

The first assertion, that the Clinton administration was in effect unaware of the genocide, has been definitively answered with the release of many of the internal documents relevant to the case. The second, that military intervention was not feasible, is refuted by the history of U.S. military operations in Africa both before and after the spring of 1994. In January of 1991 U.S. marines conducted an evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Mogadishu in the middle of a civil war. In December of 1992 the U.S. intervened in Somalia to stop the mass starvation there, deploying more than 20,000 troops in a few weeks.¹⁹ In July of 1994 the U.S. quickly deployed hundreds of troops to cope with the Rwandan refugee

crisis. In March of 1996 the U.S. again deployed hundreds of troops very quickly into Liberia during the civil war there to protect U.S. lives and property. With a Division Ready Brigade from the 82d Airborne consistently on 18 hour alert, a parachute battalion in Italy (always focused on African contingencies) in a similar status, and Special Operating Forces from the 75th Ranger Regiment and the Joint Special Operations Command able to move even more quickly, the ability of U.S. forces to intervene rapidly and decisively was never at issue.²⁰

Preoccupation with other foreign policy issues, particularly Bosnia, undoubtedly confused the issue. But in the final analysis, it is more accurate to say that the leading figures of the Clinton administration *preferred* to focus on Bosnia. There, the scale of the killing was far less. Absent a signed agreement between the contending parties, there was no chance of U.S. intervention on the ground, as the later massacre of the Bosnian men of Srebrenica showed. The real, unacknowledged heart of the matter, however, was not Bosnia. The reason that President Clinton and his principal advisers not only shunned, but abhorred, any discussion of active intervention in Rwanda was Somalia. More specifically, the administration had been hurt so badly by its political failures in Somalia that it could not countenance any possibility of a similar failure under similar circumstances. A disaster in Rwanda on the heels of a disaster in Somalia would have affected the 1994 mid-term elections and threatened President Clinton's chances for a second term in office. In that sense, no number of dead Tutsi would have sufficed to overwhelm the political calculus applied to the problem in Washington.

In the aftermath of the genocide, the advancing RPF pushed the FAR and Interahamwe across the border into Zaire, along with hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees. The U.S. government reacted swiftly, leading an international effort to provide humanitarian assistance to the starving Hutus. In time, many Hutu civilians returned to Rwanda, but the FAR and its militia supporters remained behind, where they exist to this day. The Rwandan genocide sparked a continuing chain reaction still in motion.²¹ In the intervening years, the FAR and Interahamwe have continued to target Tutsi civilians on both sides of the border, playing important roles in the implosion of Zaire and its successor state, the Democratic Republic of Congo. To date, an estimated two million Africans have lost their lives in the aftermath of the Rwandan civil war in the factional fighting in the Congo. The price of American inaction in Rwanda, at least to the people of sub-saharan Africa, has been steep.

Since the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy has been exercised principally by one question: how should America behave when its own core, vital interests are not engaged? At this stage of America's political development, both parties and the American public acknowledge that a moral and ethical component plays a large role in America's actions abroad. Clearly, the United States cannot and should not risk its blood, treasure and credibility to intervene in every international conflict. But the attempted destruction of a whole people, on a scale reaching to the hundreds of thousands, is surely a special case if American leadership in the international community is to have meaning. At the very least, the Rwandan genocide teaches that.

¹William Ferroggiaro, ed., "The U.S. and the Genocide in Rwanda 1994", The National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book, August 20, 2001, 1. All government documents cited in this paper were obtained by the National Security Archive under the Freedom of Information Act.

² French forces, built around elements of the 11th Airborne Division, provided safe havens in southwest Rwanda and inside Zaire for the FAR where US and UN officers were not permitted to go. The author witnessed French support for the FAR first-hand while serving in Kigali and Goma, Zaire with 3/325 ABCT July-September 1994. French arms shipments to the Hutu government perpetrating the genocide inside Rwanda were not halted until May 1994.

³"Rwanda: A Historical Chronology", Frontline, Public Broadcasting Company, on the worldwide web at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda.

⁴ Quoted in Samantha Powers, "Bystanders to Genocide", Atlantic Monthly, September 2001, 1.

⁵ Facsimile from MG Dallaire, UNAMIR Force Commander, to UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations,

⁶ Testimony by Holly Burkhalter, Physicians for Human Rights, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Operations, May 5, 1998.

⁷ "Rwanda Genocide Could Have Been Prevented", CNN Report, March 31, 1999.

⁸ Powers, 16.

⁹ Memorandum from the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East/Africa to the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, "Talking Points on Rwanda/Burundi", April 11, 1994.

¹⁰ Powers, "Bystanders to Genocide", 19.

¹¹ "Rwanda: The Rwandan Patriotic Front's Offensive", May 9, 1994, Defense Intelligence Agency Report

¹² Samantha Powers, A Problem from Hell (NY: Basic Books, 2001), 378.

¹³ See "Talking Points for UNAMIR Withdrawal", U.S. Department of State Cable No. 099440 to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, April 15, 1994.

¹⁴ Lake would later characterize his own role in the affair as "truly pathetic." Powers, "Bystanders to Genocide", 28.

¹⁵ Powers, A Problem from Hell, 379.

¹⁶ See memorandum from the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Subject: Rwanda: Jamming Civilian Radio Broadcasts, May 5, 1994.

¹⁷ For an example of OSD and Joint Staff opposition to proposals for action in Rwanda, see the May 1, 1994 Discussion Paper prepared by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East and African Region obtained by the National Security Archive.

¹⁸ The figure most commonly cited for Tutsi dead, 800,000 people, is an official UN estimate produced by a UN report commissioned by General Secretary Kofi Annan and headed by former Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson. This estimate reflects 75% of the Tutsi population thought to have been resident in Rwanda at the start of the genocide. Other estimates place the Tutsi dead as closer to 500,00, but calculate this figure as 77% of the resident Tutsi population.

¹⁹ The tragedy of October 3d in Mogadishu resulted directly from the decision to draw down US forces from 2 divisions to a single battalion, and to target Mohammed farah Aideed with grossly inadequate forces.

²⁰ The RPF was able to defeat the FAR and Hutu militias in 100 days with an unevenly trained force of about 12,000, without artillery, armored vehicles or aviation of any kind. See James R. McDonough, "African Holocaust", in By Their Deeds Alone, ed. R.D. Hooker, Jr. (NY: Ballantine Books, 2003). General Dallaire, a competent NATO trained officer, estimated that 5,000 properly equipped UN troops could stop the genocide.

²¹ "Report Slams US, UN Over Rwandan Genocide", The New York Times, December 16, 1999.