

## Darfur and the Politics of Altruism

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On March 24, 1999, NATO forces began bombing Serbia. For months preceding the attack, the “international community”—1990s shorthand for the principal Western powers and the United Nations—had sought to achieve a resolution to the growing tensions in the Serbian province of Kosovo. It was feared that the Serbs would, as they had in Bosnia, engage in ethnic cleansing—this time targeting Kosovo’s Muslims. Only five years earlier, the world had stood by as Rwanda was ravaged by a genocide that left nearly a million dead in a few weeks. The United States, Europe, and the rest of the international community voiced determination not to let that happen again.

Three months and thousands of tons of bombs later, an agreement was reached with the Serbs to allow Kosovo to be placed under the equivalent of international trusteeship, where it remains today. The more than 700,000 Kosovar Muslims who had fled the province during the bombing—a kind of perverse ethnic cleansing caused by the attempt to prevent one—slowly returned. Europe and America congratulated themselves for acting. The fact that the UN, the heart of the international community, had not approved the attack on Serbia was ignored and later rationalized; as international jurist Richard Goldstone put it later, the war over Kosovo was “illegal but legitimate.”

In September 2004, just five years after Kosovo, Colin Powell, America’s secretary of state, announced that genocide was taking place in Darfur, a rebellious province of war-torn Sudan. It was an extraordinary statement. And it led to absolutely no major action on the part of the United States or the international community. Indeed, even after President George W. Bush himself said in 2005 that genocide was taking place in Darfur, nothing other than the usual hand-wringing

ensued. (While it was news that Bush concurred with Powell in calling the killings in Darfur genocide, he suggested no way forward to end the massacres. “Our government,” he told reporters, “has put a lot of money to help deal with the human suffering there.”)

So much for the new humanitarian interventionism that Kosovo was said to herald. That the president and his secretary of state could issue pronouncements as weighty as ones announcing genocide, only to have them become historical artifacts rather than catalysts for action, is perhaps easy to dismiss as just another example of the unreality of the Bush era. But as Gérard Prunier argues in an updated edition of his essential *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*, this is what we should have expected: “In the end none of them went beyond talk. The UN, the AU [African Union], and the humanitarians were left holding the bloody babies.”

### GOOD AND BAD INTENTIONS

Prunier’s book (a portion of the original version was adapted in the May 2006 issue of *Current History*) documents the cynical response to this humanitarian catastrophe by a US-led international community that has made September 11, not Rwanda or Kosovo, its geopolitical center. Even more insidious than this cynicism, according to Prunier’s interpretation, is the Bush administration’s apparent two-pronged strategy in calling Darfur a genocide.

First, the administration labeled the killings genocide because it realized that doing so would force the issue back to the UN. This may have even been a calculated attempt at payback—the UN had been unwilling to give its blessing to the Iraq invasion in 2003. And the White House knew, as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan also well understood, that the United Nations had no independent capacity to intervene if Darfur were declared a genocide. (The UN depends on member states’ initiative to take action.) By publicly

**Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide**, revised and updated by Gérard Prunier. Cornell University Press, 2007.

declaring genocide, the administration in effect backed the UN into impotence. The United States looked morally strong; the UN looked weak, a miasma of rhetoric and good intentions without the ability to act.

A second potential motivation behind Washington's approach reflected a domestic political concern: quite apart from events in Darfur, which is in western Sudan, the Christian right in the United States was strongly interested in seeing a peace treaty signed and sustained between the "Arab" north and the "Christian" south. (Neither term, Prunier explains, adequately captures the flavor of northern and southern Sudan, but the religious divide was the operative image in the minds of many in the administration and among its Christian political supporters.) Washington wanted to keep the focus on that peace treaty and not upset the process by holding the regime in Khartoum fully accountable for aiding and directing genocide in Darfur.

Even if the Bush administration did not intend this sequence of events, it is what happened. (For further evidence of cynical intentionality, see former UN Ambassador John Bolton's recounting in the March-April issue of *The American Interest* of his role in the passage of UN Resolution 1706, an event that occurred after Prunier's book was published. Bolton treats the resolution, which calls for the deployment of more than 22,000 UN troops to Darfur, as a political plaything that the UN wanted to use to force the United States to accept the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court. Bolton expresses no concern for the people of Darfur.)

"Save Darfur" is a ubiquitous logo on campus T-shirts for the politically active; it is also the name of an interfaith alliance dedicated to doing just that. But saving Darfur is unlikely to happen unless Washington decides that it is in its interest to attempt it. This is a cold truth. Former colonial powers in Africa have "saved" their independent progeny in the past when pressed, but Darfur is part of too large and too powerful a former British colony for this to happen (Sierra Leone yes, Sudan no). Only the United States can force the UN to act.

Even then, there is the problem of finding forces to carry out the peacemaking.

Perhaps it is time to resurrect an idea that former UN Undersecretary General Brian Urquhart developed during the heyday of the humanitarian intervention debates of the 1990s: an international volunteer force under UN auspices that would intervene in humanitarian hot spots. The idea was debated but ultimately disappeared from discussion. What Urquhart proposed, however, seems less odd today.

It was, in a sense, a mercenary corps—one dedicated to good, to be sure, but not much different in terms of composition from the armed security contractors used by the United States in Iraq today. There is evidently no lack of recruits for such jobs: mercenaries—that is, security consultants—in Iraq are said to earn as much as \$100,000 a year. Why

not pay the international mercenary corps equivalent wages, drawn from voluntary contributions by the major powers to the UN? The resulting force could represent a magnificent trifecta of

do-gooderism, expert ability to kill, and a capitalist impulse to earn as much as possible.

Cynicism aside, this seems a reasonable formula for attracting the foot soldiers and officers who would be necessary to carry out the fighting in humanitarian interventions. What is also needed, though it will be more difficult to achieve, is an international consensus on developing such a force, on how it would be governed, and under what circumstances it would be deployed.

As things stand today, the UN Security Council would make the ultimate decision on whether to organize and activate such a force. As we have already seen, achieving consensus and avoiding a veto in that body is difficult. But working through the politics of gaining a "yes" might help make the UN a more realistic institution. An armed corps under UN auspices would be the force that George Bernard Shaw once called for in the pages of *Current History*: "a combination of armed and fanatical Pacifists of all nations" on which the world could better rely to impose peace than "a crowd of noncombatants wielding deprecations, remonstrances, and Christmas cards." ■

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