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Humanity Betrayed: The Clinton Administration's Failure to Intervene in the Rwandan Genocide

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Abstract

In 1994, over 800,000 ethnic Tutsi and moderate Hutu were brutally slaughtered by ethnic Hutu in Rwanda. This international atrocity challenged the United States' foreign policy response to humanitarian crises in the post-Cold War era. As the world's leading superpower, the United States under the leadership of the Clinton Administration faced the choice to intervene on moral grounds or pursue foreign policy based solely on American interests abroad. In a speech at the Naval Academy commencement, President Clinton stated, "as the world's greatest power, we have an obligation to lead, and at times, when our interests and our values are sufficiently at stake, to act." Despite knowledge of the ethnic tensions and increased threats of violence in Rwanda, the Clinton Administration pursued a policy of non-intervention. The research paper will review the various factors that influenced how the United States prioritized political and economic interests over moral obligations when electing not to intervene in response to the genocide in Rwanda.

Keywords: Rwanda, Genocide, U.S. Foreign Policy

Introduction

We are reminded of the capacity in people everywhere...to slip into pure evil. We cannot abolish that capacity, but we must never accept it...We did not act quickly enough after the killing began. We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide...It is not an African phenomenon and must never be viewed as such...We must have global vigilance. And never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence. (William J. Clinton, "Text of Clinton's Rwanda Speech")

In March 1998, United States President William J. Clinton traveled to Rwanda as part of an extended trip to Africa aimed to demonstrate a renewed promise of "peace and prosperity" and illustrate a positive image of Africa to the American people (Rosenblum 195). Standing on the tarmac at the Kigali airport, Clinton addressed the people of Rwanda with a heavy heart. His speech was an apology to an entire nation for the lack of vigilance by the United States, and the entirety of the international community, to stop the genocide that had occurred there in 1994. Throughout his speech, Clinton recognized the faults of his Administration stating, "we did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide" (Clinton, "Text of Clinton's Rwanda Speech"). While recognizing the mistakes of his Administration, Clinton also highlighted a way forward with new hope after the tragedy. He said, "we cannot change the past. But we can and must do everything in our power to help you build a future without fear, and full of hope" (Clinton, "Text of Clinton's Rwanda Speech"). Clinton and his key policy advisors ignored the multiple warning signs that genocide would occur if the United States did not take action. Ultimately, the United States pursued a policy of non-intervention, and this policy decision led to devastating repercussions for the entirety of the international community. Clinton's apology speech was a direct result of the blatant and intentional actions pursued by the United States to stand by while humanity suffered. One must ask, if there were clear signs of genocide presented to the administration, why were actions not taken sooner?

Despite concrete evidence of the violence in Rwanda, the United States passively stood by while hundreds of thousands of ethnic Tutsi residents were brutally slaughtered by ethnic Hutus. The factors that led to this foreign policy decision are important to consider in order to understand the underlying incentives presented by the United States to not step forward when humanity needed strength the most. The core argument presented by Clinton, and other policymakers, was that intervention in Rwanda did not align with the United States political or economic interests. There were no clear domestic or foreign policy incentives for the United States to intervene in Rwanda; therefore, when the genocide occurred, the United States did not see any justification for expected American casualties and money required by a military intervention. The Clinton Administration's policy of non-intervention in Rwanda was also influenced by the United States past involvement in world conflicts. Prior to the genocide in Rwanda, the United States was involved in a humanitarian intervention in Somalia which resulted in humiliation for the administration. The failure in Somalia acted as a strong deterrent for the administration to get involved in another African conflict. The United States failure to take action in Rwanda also demonstrated a failure to comply with international obligations to intervene under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. However, in the months to come it became clear that the killings perpetrated by the Hutu was a planned and systemic attack against the ethnic Tutsi community.

The foreign policy decision of non-intervention changed the perception of the United States on the international stage. The lack of action by the United States made it clear that under the Clinton Administration, when intervention to prevent or limit acts of genocide was warranted, the world's strongest economic and military power turned away while thousands were murdered because intervention did not fit into U.S. foreign policy objectives. The lack of a swift

and direct response in 1994 begs the question of why Clinton traveled to Rwanda four years after the genocide. In the years after Clinton left office, in interview after interview, he admitted that his lack of direct action led to the loss of thousands of lives.

The Rwandan Genocide

The circumstances that led to the massacre of about 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda had colonial origins (Ohaegbulam 195). The exclusion of specific ethnic communities from political participation and the ethnic division between Hutu and Tutsi were the most prominent causes of the conflict (Ohaegbulam 195). The history of the ethnic division in Rwanda dates back to European imperial rule in Africa. Germany colonized Rwanda as part of its larger German East African Empire and ruled the nation until the end of World War I when Belgium gained Germany's African colonies under a League of Nations mandate (Ohaegbulam 195). Both imperial rulers favored the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority in all aspects of social and political life. The suppression of the rights of the Hutu majority resulted in a polarizing division between Hutu and Tutsi communities. This division was encouraged by imperial rulership, and over time led to deep rooted sentiments of hatred between the two ethnic groups in Rwanda that lasted throughout post-colonial era and into the modern age.

These differences, rooted in a history of discrimination, came to head on the evening of April 6, 1994 when a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down while descending into the Kigali International Airport (Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence* 37). The killing of the Rwandan President marked the beginning of a military coup led by the Hutu and sparked the violence that would quickly escalate to genocide. The main victims of the genocide were men, women, and children from the

minority Tutsi ethnic group. Also murdered were many members of the majority Hutu ethnic group who opposed the new regime (Shattuck 163).

After the plane crash, information regarding the stability of the country was rapidly transmitted from the ground in Rwanda by both U.S. diplomats and ambassadors back to Washington, D.C. The reality of the death of President Habyarimana was a shock to many in Washington and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Prudence Bushnell was especially concerned about the probable outbreak of mass killing in Rwanda (Power 330). Bushnell wrote in a memorandum to Secretary of State Warren Christopher that “if, as it appears, both Presidents have been killed, there is a strong likelihood that widespread violence could break out in either or both countries” (5). Many messages, similar to the one by Bushnell, expressed concern about the instability in Rwanda and that the violence could lead to genocide. However, with constant messages pouring in, the Clinton Administration was overwhelmed with information and lacked a clear strategy forward (Power 330).

The National Security Council African Affairs Office consistently sent information providing updates about what was happening on the ground. On April 7, 1994, Donald K. Steinberg wrote, “The situation in Rwanda continues to deteriorate. There was open fighting in the streets of Kigali; cannons and gunfire can be heard regularly” (40). In less than twenty-four hours after the plane went down, the U.S. National Security Council received direct information defining the violence as “primarily inter-ethnic” (Steinberg 47). The reality of the conflict eventually led the U.S. State Department to authorize “an ordered departure of all American personnel from Kigali” (Steinberg 41). The decision for the immediate withdrawal of all American personnel from Rwanda confirmed the administration’s fear for American lives. However, the eventual removal of peacekeeping forces further demonstrated that the United

States intended to pursue a policy of non-intervention despite the overwhelming evidence and concern of the killings in Rwanda and an ultimate disregard for human life.

On April 12, 1994, the United Nations Security Council voted to pull out peacekeepers from Rwanda (Melvern 260). This decision came after long and contentious debates between the fifteen members of the Security Council. These meetings were meant to be behind closed doors where the representatives of each country could keep their political agenda hidden from public scrutiny. However, as the conflict ensued, the Security Council met more consistently deliberating how to handle the quickly deteriorating situation (Melvern 260). With the decision to pull out the U.N. peacekeepers from Rwanda, the international community allowed acts of genocide to continue. The discussions within the Security Council were more concerned with ending the civil war through negotiation between the two factions rather than focusing on a plan for intervention to halt the mass killings (Melvern 261). The vote for the withdrawal of all but a limited number of peacekeeping forces with the orders not to use force against the Hutu forces demonstrated that the United States would continue to push for an international response of non-intervention in Rwanda.

The Factors of Non-Intervention

The consequences of the Rwandan genocide shocked the world. The number of men, women, and children slaughtered from April to June in 1994 caused the international community to refocus on their role in the world when responding to humanitarian crises (Ball 155, 156). At the onset of the violence, U. N. peacekeepers in Rwanda made consistent efforts to contain the violence perpetrated by the Hutu. However, despite these constant efforts, the U.N. Security Council, with pressure from the United States, rejected all further requests for assistance. It was

not until well after the gravity of the genocide was revealed to the international community that the United States finally took small actions to prevent any further killings (Ball 170).

In the post-World War II era, the United States began to pursue foreign policy relations with African nations. Past policy decisions in the region affected the Clinton administration's policy of non-intervention in the Rwandan genocide. After the war, many African countries experienced periods of transformation as many nations gained independence from European colonial powers (Ohaegbulam 51). This process of decolonization was marked by increased violence as factions within African nations fought for governmental control. This instability further contributed to the inability of African nations to create new states and establish effective systems of government (Ohaegbulam 52). After the period of decolonization, U.S. foreign policy objectives in Africa were heavily influenced by the Cold War. The policy of containment was especially prevalent in order to subdue communist parties in African nations. During the Cold War, the United States supported many movements in African countries that were opposed to communist influences (Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence* 17, 18). The United States aimed to maintain the status quo around the world from Soviet threats in order to preserve American national security interests abroad (Ohaegbulam 52). Through the lens of the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union saw the instability in Africa as an opportunity to utilize their global power and influence to put a friendly government in power (Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence* 17).

Throughout the 1980s, African nations experienced continuous periods of change marked by civil conflicts. For example, apartheid in South Africa and the civil war in Angola, presented new challenges for African nations and the international community. These regional conflicts for economic and political power throughout Africa influenced neighboring countries which in turn

led to longer periods of instability (Ohaegbulam 193). In Rwanda, the United States developed diplomatic relations rather than direct economic or political policies; shying away from the Cold War policy of containment. As a land-locked country, Rwanda was not of great interest to the United States, especially in terms of economic relations. There were no major ports, oil, or other rich minerals the United States could exploit for their own economic gain. Because of these factors, and the lack of a communist threat in Rwanda, foreign policy relations between the United States and Rwanda never developed beyond financial support to promote development and friendly diplomatic relations (Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence* 18).

The United States did not promote strong foreign policy relationships with Rwanda or express clear incentives to become involved with domestic politics. Therefore, when the violence in Rwanda began, the main priority of the United States was to quickly remove all American personnel and walk away. In a speech delivered at the U.S. Naval Academy Commencement, President Clinton outlined the policy objective of non-intervention stating:

We cannot solve every such outburst of civil strife... simply by sending in our forces. We cannot turn away from them, but our interests are not sufficiently at stake in so many of them to justify a commitment of our folks. Nonetheless, as the world's greatest power, we have an obligation to lead, and at times, when our interests and our values are sufficiently at stake, to act. (Clinton, "Naval Academy Commencement Speech")

While Clinton recognized the responsibility of the United States as the leading world power, he failed to find that the interests of the United States were sufficient to justify a commitment of resources and personnel. Clinton determined that the United States' interests and values were not at stake despite a moral and legal obligation of intervention in order to prevent genocide.

Clinton pushed the political opinion that U.S. foreign policy was driven by the protection and preservation of American interests and values abroad. As mentioned above, historically the United States did not have economic or political interests in Rwanda. Therefore, when the genocide began in April 1994 the United States ignored the violence because a commitment of U.S. troops to Rwanda did not align with American interests and values. An article published in the *New York Times* further reiterated this point stating, “without oil or other resources as a rationale, the case for military intervention would have to be based on whether ending the killing is worth the cost in American lives and dollars” (Jehl A1). In the eyes of Clinton and his Administration, the moral obligation to save lives was secondary to protecting American economic and political ideals abroad.

The American media criticized the policy of non-intervention pursued by the Clinton administration in response to the Rwandan genocide. In an article published in the *Washington Post*, Charles Krauthammer wrote “Rwandans are black, African, foreign” evoking the argument of otherness (A25). Krauthammer argued that Clinton and his advisors ignored the signs of genocide because Rwandans were “foreign” to Americans. In the eyes of the administration and the American public, the violence in Rwanda was seen outside the scope of their own lives, interests, and values. Additionally, Krauthammer argued that the way that the situation in Rwanda was presented by the administration symbolized that the United States pursued non-intervention because of the concept of “otherness.” Krauthammer argued that the Clinton administration supported an intervention from African nations rather than Western countries stating, “the best answer is a regional force drawn from African countries” (A25). Further, Krauthammer claimed the United States believed the conflict was a problem in the region of Africa, therefore those nations who “have already volunteered troops for Rwanda peacekeeping”

should be the ones to step in to stop the slaughter (A25). Krauthammer's argument that the conflict was an African problem distinctly removed the responsibility of the United States and the international community to intervene.

The United States involvement in Somalia in 1993 serves as a backdrop that clearly influenced the policy of non-intervention in Rwanda. Prior to Clinton's election to office, Somalia experienced years of instability which led to the collapse of the Somali state in January 1991 (Cohen, *Intervening in Africa* 204). This resulted in the rise of insurgency movements and violent conflicts between various clans for power. Between August 1991 and January 1992, lawlessness, looting, and factional fighting spread throughout Somalia. The absence of governmental capacity led to instability and a lack of law and order throughout the country (Cohen, *Intervening in Africa* 205). The growing anarchy in Somalia was coupled with the growing threat of starvation. Warlords of the fighting clans stole humanitarian food aid and traded it for weapons to fight the ongoing civil war. While some U.S. policymakers argued the crisis in Somalia was "a food problem, not a security problem," the Clinton administration decided to intervene on humanitarian grounds (Cohen, *Intervening in Africa* 206).

The United States led intervention in Somalia resulted in humiliation and widespread political turmoil for the administration. The first steps of intervention by the United States consisted of airlifting food aid into the country. This form of humanitarian aid marked the beginning of U.S. leadership in Somalia. Nevertheless, the future decision to intervene with force only heightened frustrations in the region (Cohen, *Intervening in Africa* 207). In October 1993, eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed in Somalia during a military operation that became known as "Black Hawk Down." The death of nineteen U.S. service members in Somalia resulted in domestic political tensions and attacks by Congress against the Clinton administration and the

United Nations (Cohen, *Intervening in Africa* 206). The fallout from Somalia caused the United States to reevaluate their response to humanitarian crises around the world. Domestic political fallout from the debacle in Somalia strongly influenced the foreign policy decisions of the administration in response to the genocide in Rwanda. Instead of making the case for a moral obligation to intervene, the Clinton administration feared another domestic retaliation. The negative consequences of the humanitarian mission in Somalia loomed over the administration and resulted in the unwillingness of the United States to get involved in another African crisis.

International Law: The Crime of Genocide

International law declares that the international community has the responsibility to intervene to preserve peace and security (Charter of the United Nations). The international community recognized their obligation to intervene in Somalia but ignored the responsibility to stop the genocide in Rwanda. The term genocide was defined by Raphael Lemkin and later codified by the United Nations 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The 1948 Genocide Convention symbolized the international community's commitment to prevent and punish genocide committed after the Holocaust. This international obligation established a firm understanding that "the Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether

committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish” (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide). In 1988, the United States ratified the 1948 Genocide Convention therefore binding themselves to abide by this vital international obligation.

During the first three weeks of the genocide in Rwanda, the Clinton administration’s most prominent policymakers neglected to use the term genocide when addressing the violence in Rwanda. A discussion paper from the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East/African Region stated, “Be Careful...Genocide finding could commit USG [U.S. Government] to actually ‘do something’” (Discussion Paper, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East/Africa Region). The call to “be careful” when referencing the killings in Rwanda clearly demonstrated to other State Department officials that U.S. foreign policy decisions did not include intervention. Additionally, the administration gave U.S. spokesmen specific directions not to say the word genocide because, in the case that the violence was in fact genocide, the United States government would be obligated to “do something.” Further, an article in the *New York Times* echoed similar sentiments writing that “the Clinton administration has instructed its spokesmen not to describe the deaths there as genocide” (Jehl A1). The article added that “the State Department and the National Security Council have drafted guidance instructing spokesmen to say merely that “acts of genocide may have occurred”” (Jehl A1). The deliberate choice not say the g-word ensured that the administration stayed clear of any obligations on moral grounds and under the terms of 1948 Genocide Convention (Ohaegbulam 211).

As the killing continued, the U.S. State Department faced increased pressure to label the violence as genocide (Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence* 138). The evidence that genocide

had in fact occurred was astounding. Reports of bodies floating down the river and the body count in the hundreds of thousands proved to many officials that what they feared was in fact true. In a memorandum to the Secretary of State, Warren Christopher approved that “Department officials [were] to state publicly that “acts of genocide have occurred” in Rwanda” (Moose, et. al., “Has Genocide Occurred in Rwanda?”). The change in word choice by the Secretary of State demonstrated to reporters and the American public that the mass slaughter was more than crimes against humanity. However, the phrase “acts of genocide” still protected the United States from their obligation to intervene under international law. Also, by using the phrase “acts of genocide” the United States saw an opportunity to preserve credibility with the American public and influential human rights organizations (Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence* 139). However, Christopher still restricted the use and application of the “g-word” declaring that the “delegation is not authorized to agree to the characterization of any specific incident as genocide or agree to any formulation that indicates that all killings in Rwanda are genocide” (Moose, et. al., “Has Genocide Occurred in Rwanda?”). The loosened restrictions demonstrated a slight change in policy dynamics, but the deliberate decision to avoid the term genocide continued to ensure that the United States would not have to fulfill their legal obligation to intervene. Further, this policy decision to avoid the term genocide was also economically and politically self-serving for the United States.

President Clinton himself was also guilty of avoiding the term genocide. On August 1, 1994 President Clinton wrote to the Speaker of the House regarding the deployment of U.S. armed forces to Rwanda. The decision to send any troops to Rwanda was not made until four months after the genocide began in early April 1994. The decision to send troops was long awaited by the peacekeepers in Rwanda, but ultimately the small acts of intervention were too

little too late. Moreover, in his correspondence to the Speaker of the House, Clinton minimized the situation in Rwanda calling the atrocity a “humanitarian crisis,” rather than genocide (Clinton, “Deployment of U.S. Armed Forces to Rwanda”). Again, the administration neglected to respond with strength and leadership towards the conflict in Rwanda. Instead, Clinton purposely ignored the signs and did not call the violence genocide.

Therefore, international obligations to prevent genocide became significantly problematic as the United States continued to pursue a policy of non-intervention. The international obligation to intervene outlined in the 1948 Genocide Convention undermined the United States policy of nonintervention. In order to pursue a policy of non-intervention, the administration purposely prohibited the use of the term genocide in all press releases and public speeches. Instead of using the g-word, the administration instead stated that “acts of genocide” were happening in Rwanda. This specific decision not to use the word genocide to describe the violence occurring in Rwanda demonstrated the United States would not recognize their international obligation to intervene under the 1948 Genocide Convention. If the Clinton administration declared the violence in Rwanda a genocide it would require an international response and the United States was not prepared to respond. The responsibility to intervene was at play and the administration did not want to be bound by international legal obligations. Thus, the Clinton administration did not make a statement directly calling the violence in Rwanda a genocide and continued to pursue the policy of non-intervention.

Conclusion

Looking back on the Rwandan genocide, it is not difficult to imagine how the United States could have acted differently. As the violence escalated after the plane crash on the evening of April 6, 1994, the United States could have completed requests from the U.N. peacekeepers to

send troops. Once the killing of thousands of Rwandans began, President Clinton could have committed U.S. troops to Rwanda. The White House senior officials could have publicly denounced the killings. The United States could have encouraged the United Nations Security Council to condemn the slaughter and commit to prosecute those perpetrating the genocide. However, none of these actions took place. When the slaughter began, the United States did nothing.

The genocide in Rwanda marked a turning point in the role of the United States on the world stage. The United States under the leadership of President Clinton did not fill the role of world leader, but instead took a backseat approach to foreign policy. When violence erupted, the Clinton administration ignored clear signs of genocide and failed to publicly define the violence by its true name: genocide. Ultimately, the administration pursued a policy of non-intervention in Rwanda due to the lack of U.S. economic and political interests, the downfall in Somalia a year prior, and the wariness to fulfill international legal obligations under the 1948 Genocide Convention.

The decision to pursue a policy of non-intervention resulted in detrimental consequences for the people of Rwanda and the Clinton administration. In terms of international law, the Rwandan genocide demonstrated that the 1948 Genocide Convention does not, in practice, protect innocent groups of people. Further, it is the political will of powerful countries that determines the fate of the 'helpless.' The Rwandan genocide marked a shift in U.S. foreign policy towards non-intervention in world conflicts. Instead of exhibiting strength and international leadership, President Clinton found himself in a position of weakness, standing on the tarmac in Kigali, apologizing for his own grave mistakes.

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