

Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

A Legacy of Lies: The Clinton Administration and the Rwandan Genocide

Item Type	Other
Authors	Barrilleaux, Jane
Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
Rights	<p>All materials in this collection are copyrighted by Rhodes College and subject to Title 17 of the U.S. Code. This documentation is provided for online research and access purposes only. Permission to use, copy, modify, distribute and present this material, without fee, and without written agreement, is hereby granted for educational, non-commercial purposes only. The Rhodes College Archives reserves the right to decide what constitutes educational and commercial use. In all instances of use, acknowledgement must be given to Rhodes College Archives and Special Collections, Memphis, TN. For information regarding permission to publish this material, please email the Archives at archives@rhodes.edu.</p>
Download date	2025-05-16 10:45:13
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/24024

A Legacy of Lies:

The Clinton Administration and the Rwandan Genocide

Jane Barrilleaux
Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies 2011

Beginning on April 7, 1994, the small African country of Rwanda was ravaged by genocide for one hundred days. The systematic identification and killing of one ethnic group, the Tutsi, by another, the Hutu, led to the largest and most effective genocide since the Holocaust. The United Nations created the Genocide Convention of 1948, demanding “never again” would such events occur without international humanitarian intervention. However, the events that took place in Rwanda constitute one of the greatest failings of global responsibility – for one hundred days, the world stood aside and watched genocide occur without properly acknowledging those acts or intervening. The United States led the way in terms of not responding. President Clinton removed himself from the issue, thereby relegating the task of creating a U.S. position on Rwanda to the lower levels of the state department. Furthermore, when Clinton or the government did comment on Rwanda, it was with lies and exaggerations. International humanitarian intervention during Clinton’s presidency was a series of failed attempts and willful ignorance, characterized by a complete lack of honesty from the administration. Four years after the genocide, Clinton stood in front of Rwandans (never leaving the airport) and claimed that he and the rest of the world were unaware of the genocide and unable to appropriately respond. That speech symbolizes just how much Clinton was willing to lie to protect American interests, even if it had been at the expense of Rwanda lives. Rather, Clinton’s inaction in Rwanda, although a

result of American policy, also serves as an example of the consequences of lying for an administration and its legacy.

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 has been studied extensively. There are countless works that discuss different aspects of the crisis, none of which will be dealt with in this paper. There has been considerable work done on the Clinton administration's inaction in Rwanda, as well as the larger inaction of the global community under the U.N. Also, accounts of the Rwandan genocide itself provide necessary historical perspectives, as well as tales from genocide survivors. International humanitarian intervention, the meaning of genocide, and Rwanda within the larger context of human rights policy have all been studied, and rightly so. However, none of those topics is the focus of this paper. Rather, by utilizing aspects of several of those topics, this paper will critically examine the motivations behind and consequences of the way in which the U.S. government chose to respond to Rwanda. The actions, or more appropriately non-actions, of the Clinton Administration delayed international intervention and undoubtedly prolonged the genocide. But even more important, for this study, is that the administration lied about their choices, and by doing so created a legacy of lies within which the U.S. government could simply exaggerate or withhold the truth from the world in order to protect American interests by avoiding any obligations to aid humanitarian crises.

The word "genocide" did not exist until 1943, when Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer of Jewish decent, coined the term. Lemkin created the word to describe the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. Lemkin spoke out against Hitler's plan for the Jews as

early as 1939, and he eventually fled to the United States in 1941.¹ In 1943 Lemkin began to work on his book that would be published the following year, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. For his book, along with his legislative efforts for crimes against humanity to become a global responsibility, Lemkin needed a word that would symbolize the specific act of extreme ethnic cleansing he was working against. In 1943, Lemkin created the word “genocide,” which was formed from the “Greek derivative *geno*, meaning “race” or “tribe,” together with the Latin derivative *cide*, from *caedere*, meaning “killing.” According to him, genocide meant “a coordinated plan of *different* actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.”² After World War II ended in 1945 and after the Nuremburg trials passed, Lemkin went to the United Nations with a proposal to make genocide a crime against humanity that the international community would be obligated to defend against.

After hearing Lemkin’s proposal and holding sessions to discuss the issue, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution on December 11, 1946 that condemned genocide and created a committee with the task of drafting a treaty banning the crime. The committee designed to establish the treaty spent over a year drafting and redrafting the document, which was submitted to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Genocide Convention treaty defined genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, or religious group, as such:

- A. Killing members of the group;
- B. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

¹ Samantha Power, *“A Problem From Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 26.

² *Ibid*, 42-43.

- C. Deliberately inflicting on the group the conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- D. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- E. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.³

Furthermore, the treaty did not necessitate the “extermination of an entire group, only acts committed with the intent to destroy a substantial part.”⁴ The United Nations General Assembly voted to pass the treaty, and for the first time in its existence the UN adopted a treaty solely devoted to human rights. Although the UN accepted the treaty, ratification and implementation proved to be more difficult to achieve than the treaty itself. The Genocide Convention Treaty was officially dated 1948, but nearly “four decades would pass before the United States would ratify the treaty, and fifty years before the international community would convict anyone for genocide.”⁵

The 1948 treaty did not only acknowledge genocide as a crime against humanity, but it also obligated the nations of the world to intervene and suppress genocide, as well as provide justice and aid to victims. However, it must be understood that nowhere in the document did the treaty specify how the contracting states of the UN must intervene. There was no mention of soldiers, nor any specific numbers regarding aid or refuges. It is unknown whether this aspect of the treaty was intentionally written to be vague, or if the writing committee simply assumed the proper and most appropriate form of intervention and aid would be decided on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, this vague call for global responsibility allowed individual states to decide how obligated they were, and what measures they were willing to implement for the sake of human rights. During the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the United States was so concerned over what help they would

³ *Ibid*, 57.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

be obligated to provide that they intentionally denounced that genocide was occurring. By the time the United States and the rest of the United Nations finally acknowledged that the situation in Rwanda constituted genocide as defined by the 1948 Genocide Convention, it was too late.

Rwanda, a small country in central Africa, is home to two major ethnic groups: the Tutsi and Hutu. The ethnic tensions that ultimately culminated in the genocide of April 1994 began during the nineteenth century. Under the Berlin Conference of 1884, Rwanda became a German colony and existed as such until Belgian forces took over the country during World War I. After the war, the League of Nations made Rwanda a mandate territory under the control of Belgium, which remained in authority over Rwanda until it was issued a mandate to oversee the independence of Rwanda. During the transition from mandate territory to independent state, the ethnic tensions between Hutu and Tutsi intensified into the 1959 Rwandan Revolution, when Hutus killed Tutsis in a bid for power over the new state. During the German colonial period and Belgian mandate, a system of preference was established and continued by the foreign powers.⁶ The Tutsi were favored by their European colonizers, educated, and given positions within the colonial government. The Europeans developed theories to justify their preference for the Tutsi, including the Hamitic Theory that basically argued the Tutsi were mixed Caucasian and African decent, and therefore superior to other African ethnicities.⁷ Tutsis were believed to be tall and thin, with long noses, in contrast with the shorter and stockier Hutus.

⁶ Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 25-27.

⁷ Josias Semujanga, *Origins of the Rwandan Genocide* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), 60-63.

The colonial favoritism expressed by the Germans and Belgians for the Tutsi people over the Hutu instilled a sense of resentment that grew into hatred and a demand for power. The end of the mandate period under Belgium would leave Rwanda with the opportunity to form its own government, but the 1959 Revolution began a series of similar coups that would prevent stability in Rwanda leading up to the 1994 genocide. When Hutus launched the 1959 Revolution, the state was still under the Belgian mandate, and the violent outbreak that came with the Hutu bid for power and subsequent exile of Tutsi refugees delayed the transition from mandate to state. On July 1, 1962, Rwanda formally became an independent state with a republican, Hutu government.⁸ From 1962 through 1991, Rwanda and its government went through a series of uprisings and increasing ethnic tensions between the Hutu in power and Tutsi in exile, leading to civil war. After civil war broke out in 1990, the international community finally intervened.

A cease-fire was signed in Arusha, beginning the peace negotiations between the Hutu extremists and Tutsis. The Arusha Accords were supposed to end the three-year civil war and establish a new government that was influenced by neither Hutu extremists nor Tutsis from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Under the Accords, which provided constitutional, military, and political reforms, Rwanda “was to have a broad-based transitional government until a democratically elected government was installed.” An international peace force would be stationed in the country, refugees would return, and the army and RPF would be integrated following demobilization and disarmament.⁹ However, neither side supported the Accords or the new government under President Habyarimana,

⁸ Prunier, 54.

⁹ Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (New York: Zed Books, 2000), 52-53.

and the international community was also critical of the agreement. In order to secure the implementation of the Arusha Accords, the United Nations Security Council created the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) on October 5, 1993 with Resolution 872.¹⁰ Even with the presence of the peacekeeping force, the Accords were not well received, and ethnic tensions between the two groups only intensified. The establishment of free, democratic elections was postponed, and the implementation of the Accords was met with hostility and disagreement. Even the UN Security Council was aware of the consequences of inaction, and the Security Council President expressed concern over “the delays in establishing the broad-based transitional government” which had “adverse effects on the humanitarian situation in the country, the deterioration of which is of profound concern to the international community.”¹¹ Less than a year after signing the Accords at the request of such countries as the United States, Belgium, and France, the Rwandan government was overtaken and the genocide began.

On the night of April 6, 1994, the plane containing Rwanda President Habyarimana and Burundian President Ntaryamira was shot down during its scheduled landing at the Kigali airport in Rwanda. The assassination of both leaders marked the beginning of the Rwandan genocide. The killings began early on April 7, when Tutsis and moderate Hutus were systematically identified and murdered. The extremist Hutus in the army who led the genocide had already developed lists naming the most important targets, including the Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana. The ten Belgian soldiers working with UNAMIR that tried to protect her were brutally tortured before being executed. Belgium

¹⁰ Prunier, 192-194.

¹¹ Email, US Mission USUN New York to Secretary of State, “SC President Issues Statement on Rwanda;” February 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

immediately removed its remaining troops from Rwanda, and the UNAMIR forces were soon depleted on the UN's orders. Massacres did not only take place in the capital city, for roaming bands of Hutus began killing Tutsis and anyone associated with Tutsis in villages throughout the country.

The genocide in Rwanda lasted for one hundred days, and it is estimated that nearly 800,000 people were killed, and "the Rwandan genocide would prove to be the fastest, most efficient killing spree of the twentieth century," even compared to the Holocaust.¹² There are countless books and documentaries that recount the horrific events of the genocide, which expose the worst that man is capable of. People were offered sanctuary in churches and then offered up to the machete gangs. Children were thrown into mass graves while still alive, and many Tutsi were tortured by having their arms and legs cut off, in a symbolic attempt to bring the stereotypically tall Tutsi down to size. Part of what defined the more unique aspects of the Rwanda genocide was the violence and brute force necessary for the type of killing that was being committed. There were no gas chambers or crematoriums in Rwanda like there had been during the Holocaust – this was not the industrialized murder created by Nazis. In Rwanda, Hutus killed Tutsis with machetes and other crude weapons, but rarely bullets. This method of murder is highly indicative of the act of genocide itself. The physical act of killing another person with a machete requires intense labor. It is not quick or easy to kill with a machete – one must continuously deliver blow after blow, mutilating their victim until dead. Despite how physically taxing and time consuming the process, Hutus killed most of the 800,000 Tutsi victims this way. Genocide requires an ideological belief that the group being annihilated is inferior and deserves their

¹² Power, 334.

fate, and the torturous method of machete killing utilized by the Hutu reflect that ideological aspect of genocide.¹³

The genocide in Rwanda continued until the Rwanda Patriotic Front, a militant group of previously exiled Tutsi, seized the capital city of Kigali and other areas of the country on July 4. The RPF removed the Hutus from power and established a new government under their control. This successful coup prompted a mass exodus of Hutus into exile into neighboring countries such as Zaire and Burundi. It was only after the RPF victory and subsequent massive refugee problem that the international community stepped in. After watching the events unfold in Rwanda for one hundred days, only enacting measures that did more damage than good, the United Nations, led by the United States, decided to take action. The question is not “what did the United States do during the genocide?” – that answer is nothing, or rather nothing helpful. The more important issue that must be examined in order to understand the Clinton administration’s non-intervention is to analyze the conditions surrounding the U.S.’s decision to not act. Rwanda, as an example of failed American international humanitarianism, cannot be studied in a vacuum, but rather must be examined within the larger context of American foreign policy, and the Clinton administration’s relationship with the United Nations.

During the genocide, the United States did little to intervene to suppress the genocide, or send aid to the victims. Rather, most of those one hundred days were spent either trying to ignore the issue or asserting that the events in Rwanda were merely results

¹³ This idea of examining the physicality of the Rwandan genocide, specifically the use of machetes, was initially developed in: Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador USA, 1998). Gourevitch uses this idea as a theme through which to comprehend the extent of the genocidal ideology, as well as the difficulty in possible reconciliation.

of civil war, not actually genocide. The Clinton administration did everything in its power to avoid becoming obligated to intervene and help Rwanda. In fact, "President Clinton did not convene a single meeting of his senior foreign policy advisors to discuss U.S. options for Rwanda."¹⁴ The actions taken were only to stall the United Nations, prolonging the genocide. Clinton and the American government were more concerned with protecting American interests than stopping the killing. Clinton and the rest of the state department were informed on April 6 when the plane carrying President Ntaryamira was shot down, and when the killings began on April 7. However, President Clinton did not want to involve the United States in a potential humanitarian failure, and chose to remove himself from the issue, thereby relegating the United States' response to the crisis to the Subcommittee on Africa. Of any government official, Clinton and his "National Security Advisor Anthony Lake had the power and influence to make Rwanda a priority...however, throughout the genocide neither President Clinton, nor Anthony Lake ever sat down to formally discuss Rwanda."¹⁵ With the President and his National Security Advisor unwilling to even discuss the genocide, there were few options available for the U.S., and thereby the UN, to intervene in Rwanda.

After the killings began on April 7, President Clinton fulfilled the first of only two interactions with the crisis he would have until the war ended. Clinton authorized a noncombatant evacuation. From April 9-10, the Marines evacuated 240 American citizens, including the Ambassador to Rwanda David Rawson, from Rwanda, but an estimated

¹⁴ Power, 355.

¹⁵ Jared Cohen, *One Hundred Days of Silence: America and the Rwandan Genocide* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 7.

twenty-one Americans stayed.¹⁶ Only American citizens were evacuated, leaving Rwandan employees of the embassy behind. Other countries would soon follow suit, evacuating their citizens from Rwanda in the wake of the plane crash. Clinton's second, and last, public interaction with Rwanda until July came on April 30. Clinton recorded a speech that was played throughout the country. During the broadcast, he condemned the "horrors of civil war and mass killings of civilians in Rwanda," called for a cease-fire and claimed that the "pain and suffering of the Rwandan people have touched the hearts of all Americans. It is time for the leaders of Rwanda to recognize their common bond of humanity and to reject the senseless and criminal violence that continues to plague their country."¹⁷ Clinton's speech was broadcast in Rwanda, but did not present any real challenge to the situation in Rwanda. There was no threat of intervention or retribution, and Clinton would not speak directly to the Rwandan people again until his brief visit in 1998.

Although U.S. Ambassador Rawson had called Washington for reinforcements to evacuate Americans and protect Rwandans, the opposite happened. The UN initially wanted to increase the strength of UNAMIR in response to the outbreak of killings on April 7, and talks began in the Security Council. However, the United States quickly expressed its disagreement, and that it would not support such a measure. Rather, the American UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright was instructed to vote against the motion, and to state that "in the current environment in Rwanda, there is no role for a United Nations peacekeeping force...we do not believe that the warring parties in Rwanda are likely to respect UNAMIR's mandate." Furthermore, Albright was instructed to say that although the US was "willing to

¹⁶ Communication from the President of the United States, *Noncombatant Evacuations Operations in Rwanda*, 103d Cong., 2d sess., H. Doc.

¹⁷ Press Release, Office of the Press Secretary, "Radio Message by the President on the Situation in Rwanda," April 30, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

support and encourage a political initiative...[their] opposition to retaining a UNAMIR presence in Rwanda is firm...the Security Council has an obligation to ensure that peacekeeping operations are viable,” and the U.S. clearly did not think the situation in Rwanda was a viable option.¹⁸ With the United States leading the way, the UN Security Council voted to remove its peacekeeping force from Rwanda on April 21, although roughly 250 decided to stay behind.¹⁹ The creation of UNAMIR II in late May strengthened the peacekeeping force in Rwanda again, but at that point it was too late, and the UNAMIR II troops were severely limited in their capabilities. Once the genocide had begun in Rwanda, no amount of peacekeepers could stop the killings, especially ones that were only allowed to engage in combat for self-defense, not defense of innocent civilians.

The United States and United Nations largely did not act to alleviate the situation in Rwanda until after hostilities ended with the installation of a RPF government in early July. Once the genocide was over, the international community finally took action. Instead of taking a stand on genocide, the UN was now faced with a new RPF government and massive numbers of Hutus fleeing the country. The United Nations, disregarding the fact that these “refugees” were the people who instituted and executed genocide, rushed to provide those Rwandans with aid, while condemning the new government, established by victimized Tutsi. The situation looked very different in Rwanda than it had one hundred days previously, but the U.S. and UN seemed to be aiding the wrong side. On July 15, The White House released a statement saying that “in an effort to bring an end to the fighting and growing humanitarian disaster in Rwanda, the Clinton Administration has closed the

¹⁸ Email, to USUN New York, “EOV on Rwanda;” April 15, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

¹⁹ Adam Jones, ed., *Genocide, War Crimes, and the West: History and Complicity* (New York: Zed Books, 2004), 260.

Embassy of Rwanda and ordered all personnel to leave the country” and that it would consult “with other United Nations Security Council members to remove representatives of the interim government from Rwanda’s seat on the council.”²⁰ Furthermore, President Clinton himself stated that the United States could not “allow representatives of a regime that supports genocidal massacres to remain on our soil,” although at that point the perpetrators were fleeing Rwanda as “refugees” and the victims, represented by the rebellion group RPF, regained control of the country.²¹ The UN had allowed the Rwandan representative to sit on the council throughout the genocide, but once the war ended and Rwanda was soon to take its turn as President, the Security Council removed the representative of the RPF government.

The United States chose to become involved in Rwanda after the actual genocide was over, a success on its part since they did not have to intervene in the fighting or support a probably unviable peacekeeping mission. Rather, the U.S. sent money, troops, and water to Rwanda, but also mostly to the refugee camps in neighboring countries. In an ironic twist, the global community responded to the images of refugees needing water, who had actually committed crimes against humanity, more than they responded to the attempted removal of an entire ethnic group. Clinton pushed the development of Operation Hope, a program that would provide aid to Rwandan refugees, including extending the current visas of Rwandans in the U.S. indefinitely. Soon after the “civil war” was over, the international community was finally willing to admit that genocide occurred, and proposed the establishment of an international criminal tribunal to provide retribution in Rwanda. It

²⁰ Press Release, Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the Press Secretary,” July 15, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

²¹ Power, 381.

became clear that reconciliation would not be possible in Rwanda as it was in South Africa, and a war crimes tribunal was necessary. The United States was quick to spend millions of dollars aiding refugees, and was one of the first and most committed proponents of the tribunal, yet the Clinton administration had been unwilling to even acknowledge genocide was occurring. The complete lack of response to the Rwandan genocide has been associated with some of the international community's, and America's, greatest failings in humanitarian policy, and Clinton himself even apologized before the Rwandan people in 1998. However, the way the United States chose to deal with the Rwandan genocide was largely a product of the larger issue of American humanitarian intervention. The inaction of the United States was part of a much larger issue, which resulted in Clinton's willful ignorance and the inability of the state department to effectively deal with the situation.

President Clinton has been criticized for his lack of foreign policy experience, and his seemingly singular focus on domestic issues at the sake of foreign interests. Clinton preferred measures that were "clearly nonmilitary: trade, economic development, the sharing of democratic experience, and financial, legal, and other technical assistance," and he did not plan to use U.S. troops as representatives of American policy.²² In fact, when he assumed the presidency, Clinton "stressed the importance of humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping through a policy of assertive multilateralism." The relationship between the United States and United Nations seemed stronger than ever, and would allow for "unprecedented ambition for peacekeeping."²³ However, the multilateralism and ambitious peacekeeping efforts Clinton valued at the beginning of his presidency soon became victim

²² P. Edward Haley, *Strategies of Dominance: The Misdirection of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 77.

²³ Cohen, 47.

to the post-Cold War forces of disintegration. Countries around the world developed escalating human rights conflicts, including Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Haiti, and China, all within eighteen months after Clinton took office. It became evident immediately that the United States could not intervene in each of these conflicts without changing foreign policy.²⁴ Although Clinton would eventually reform the way in which American participated in multilateral peacekeeping efforts under Presidential Decision Directive 25 in May 1994, there were no guidelines for him to follow in terms of humanitarian intervention leading up the Rwandan genocide. Still in the early stages of his presidency, Clinton seemed to believe that the United States could successfully intervene to protect human rights wherever it was necessary. The United Nations, after decades of relative ease following its creation, suddenly found itself unprepared for the human rights wars of the 1990s. The UN did not have the “bureaucratic and administrative muscle” to complete its tasks, and therefore turned to the United States.²⁵

The civil war in Somalia changed Clinton’s policy toward the United Nations and humanitarian intervention itself, and largely contributed to the administration’s inaction during the Rwandan genocide. Civil war broke out in Somalia in 1991 during George Bush’s administration, but Clinton also assumed that international crisis when he assumed the presidency. Clinton decided to send a small group of American soldiers to Somalia in 1993 to provide security for humanitarian operations while the situation in Somalia intensified. On October 3, 1993, an event occurred that changed American humanitarian intervention for the rest of Clinton’s presidency, and beyond. The American troops were attacked, and

²⁴ John Shattuck, *Freedom on Fire: Human Rights Wars and America’s Response* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 12.

²⁵ Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 30.

the most defining image of America's attempted intervention was broadcast on news stations across the world: "one dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu while throngs of Somalis cheered wildly and hurled insults and threats against the United States and the UN."²⁶ The United Nations immediately ended their operation in Somalia and withdrew all remaining troops stationed there. However, the damage was done to the American psyche. Congress and the American public were outraged that American citizens were killed while trying to accomplish the humanitarian ideals of the president. Clinton felt the backlash at once, and could not continue to give the UN unlimited access to the United States' resources, whether it be manpower or money.

Thus began what is called the "Somalia syndrome" that changed the Clinton administration's relationship with the United Nations from advocate to antagonist. The events of Somalia eventually resulted in an ongoing feud between Secretary General Boutros-Ghali and President Clinton over "who bore the responsibility for the failure of UNOSOM II...Clinton blamed the UN as a way of saving face, but in actuality, the October 3 operation was American proposed, American planned, and American led."²⁷ Clinton developed a new method of dealing with the United Nations – a more "tough love" approach that turned the U.S. away from peacekeeping and was received positively in America and in the press. The administration's new strategy proposed that in order to preserve American support for the UN, it was necessary to "halt the more far-reaching proposals to strengthen the UN; to demonstrate to a suspicious Congress that it too could be tough on the UN; and to limit the amount of energy the administration had to expend on

²⁶ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁷ Cohen, 60.

Capitol Hill defending UN operations.”²⁸ What was intended to preserve U.S. support for the UN turned into the United States pushing its interests onto the UN, and refusing to support missions it deemed were not vital to U.S. interests. Tensions between U.S. and UN interests were significant issues during the Rwandan genocide, but the notion of U.S. interests defining humanitarian intervention policy worked against the United States ever choosing to intervene in Rwanda, or anywhere else in Africa, again.

America, especially under the Clinton administration, has allowed its statecraft and foreign policy to serve as an extension of domestic imperatives. Because domestic politics form the basis of the U.S.’s international agenda, “domestic forces also influence or constrain America’s role in the world.”²⁹ U.S. foreign policy is defined by American interests, which are created to satisfy domestic concerns. However, there is no set definition of what national interest is. Rather, “U.S. national interest is whatever U.S. policymakers define as such and are willing to make sacrifices to achieve...[it] is a tool policymakers of a nation supply in their efforts to influence the world environment to their own national advantage.”³⁰ Traditionally, the United States has intervened in nations where it deemed American interests were high and at stake – this has never been the case with Africa. The entire continent of Africa has been consistently at the bottom of the proverbial ladder of U.S. foreign policy because American policy makers “have not perceived America’s interest in Africa as fundamental or vital.”³¹ Humanitarian intervention, while mandated by the 1948 Genocide Convention, must still appeal to national interests if the

²⁸ Barnett, 40-41.

²⁹ F. Ugboaja Ohaegbulam, *U.S. Policy in Postcolonial Africa: Four Case Studies in Conflict Resolution* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 3.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

³¹ *Ibid*.

states of the Security Council are to uphold the treaty and choose to intervene. However, the outcome of Somalia left such a negative impression on the American public that carried over to Rwanda just months later. Even though it was still not officially called “genocide,” the Rwandan genocide “generated no sense of urgency in the American public and so was safely avoided by the Clinton administration.”³² Intervening in Rwanda may not have served American national interests, but there was not a complete lack of interest or decision making within the State Department. President Clinton may have chosen to not become involved personally, but there was an entire department to handle the United States’ response to Rwanda.

President Clinton and his top advisors never met to discuss the crisis in Rwanda, but the genocide was not ignored in Washington D.C. While the U.S. has been criticized for a lack of decision-making regarding Rwanda, in reality the “senior officials in the U.S. government adopted a policy of calculated non-interventionism” and “created an atmosphere that clearly ruled out intervention, but still permitted low-level officials to work the Rwanda issue within this context of doing nothing.”³³ The Subcommittee on Africa met almost daily to discuss the deteriorating conditions in Rwanda, and were largely responsible for answering the press by creating and defending the U.S.’s position on the Rwandan issue. African specialists were in a difficult position, since they “had the least clout of all regional specialists and the smallest chance of affecting policy outcomes.”³⁴ However, working daily within a “context of doing nothing” was not as easy as it seemed,

³² *Ibid*, 214.

³³ Cohen, 95.

³⁴ Power, 365.

for the Subcommittee had to provide commentary on the unfolding crisis, while not committing the United States to intervention or peacekeeping.

The most significant issue for the Subcommittee on Africa, and the entire government, was the word “genocide.” There were debates throughout the entirety of the crisis about using the term. While there were some Congressmen and members of human rights organizations that demanded the government acknowledge the crime for what it was, the administration refused to call the situation in Rwanda genocide until there was no other alternative. Talking points were issued for press reports, insisting that “acts of genocide” be used instead of the word “genocide” itself. American officials did not want to use the so-called “g-word” because they were “afraid that using it would have obliged the United States to act under the terms of the 1948 genocide convention. They also believed, rightly, that it would harm U.S. credibility to name the crime and then do nothing to stop it.”³⁵ In a series of emails between Donald K. Steinberg, Director of African Affairs for the National Security Council, and Neal Wolin, executive assistant to Anthony Lake, the issue of using the word “genocide” is discussed. Over the period of June 13-15, Steinberg pushed for utilizing the word, claiming, “the genocide point goes beyond where we were before. I believe at this point we have no choice.”³⁶ The next day he again appealed to Wolin: “I’ve proposed that we should state that genocide has occurred, as defined in the 1948 convention...we shouldn’t get caught up in the semantics, especially since it is our view that acknowledging that this is genocide does not impose a responsibility on our part to act

³⁵ *Ibid*, 359.

³⁶ Memorandum, from Donald Steinberg, “Points on Rwanda,” June 13, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

beyond what we are doing at the UNSC and UNHRC.”³⁷ After hearing that Secretary of State Warren Christopher stated the acts in Rwanda constituted genocide from a press conference in Istanbul, Steinberg once again pushed the issue. If the Secretary of State had basically said it already, and “hearing from all [their] lawyers that there are no legal obligations, shouldn’t we now say, simply and on the record, “Genocide has occurred in Rwanda.”?”³⁸ Finally, the United States was willing to acknowledge that the events in Rwanda were indeed genocide, although at that point the RPF was mounting a rebellion and would soon control the capital and government. However, the basic issue of semantics and using the word “genocide” indicate what was happening within the administration in terms of Rwanda. President Clinton was still recovering from the political cost of the failed Somalia operation, with Congress opposed to UN peacekeeping and the American public concerned for the victims but still unsupportive of sending U.S. troops to intervene.³⁹ By the time the administration agreed to acknowledge the Rwandan genocide, it was too late for intervention, and help from the U.S. would not arrive until after the fighting ended in July. In the period before UNAMIR II was created to help the refugee problem, people looked to President Clinton to justify the United States’ response to the crisis, but the President allowed others to handle Rwanda for him.

During the Rwandan genocide, many people expressed their displeasure with how the United States was responding to the crisis. Although the majority of the American public did not support intervention, there were several Congressmen, state officials, human

³⁷ Memorandum, Donald Steinberg to Neal Wolin, “Hall;” June 14, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

³⁸ Memorandum, Donald Steinberg to Wilma Hall and Neal Wolin, “Rwanda – Genocide;” June 15, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

³⁹ Shattuck, 44.

rights activists, and journalists who demanded action from the Clinton administration. These people wrote to the President, expressing concern and asking for the U.S., through the UN, to intervene to stop the genocide and protect the victims. It is not uncommon for people to write to the president and receive an automated response, but when members of Congress and the government are writing letters, one would expect a more personalized answer, especially about genocide. That, however, was not the case with Clinton. He chose to blind himself to the realities of the Rwandan situation, and allowed others to handle the problems his inaction caused. This extended as far as letters to his colleagues in his administration, which grossly over exaggerated the role of the United States and the peacekeeping and humanitarian aid efforts of the government. These letters reveal an interesting insight into how the American response to Rwanda was being portrayed, even to other people working in the government.

On April 20, 1994, eight government officials sent a letter to President Clinton expressing their support for a more active American role in resolving the Rwandan crisis. Written by Eliot Engel, Lincoln Diaz-Balart, Edward Royce, Harry Johnston, Donald Payne, Alcee Hastings, and Don Edwards of the Subcommittee on Africa, and Congressman Dan Burton, the letter urged the President that the United States could effectively serve as an intermediary in the conflict. According to the authors, the U.S. must “make clear to those involved in the killing of innocent civilians that they will be held accountable” and that “the U.S. will not recognize any government which assumes control by forceful means.” The President did encourage the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and he refused to acknowledge the government created after the RPF took control of Kigali. However, Clinton and the United States failed at their last request: “to

demonstrate that these individuals are just as worthy of our attention as people affected by conflicts in other parts of the world.”⁴⁰ Africa was once again a victim of U.S. national interests dictating foreign policy.

Two response letters, reportedly sent from Clinton but more likely written by a staff member in charge of his correspondence, show how the administration portrayed itself within the Rwandan genocide. The first letter, sent to Eliot Engel, was dated May 25 – over a month after the initial letter was sent. In the letter, Clinton expresses his “commitment to bringing an end to the senseless violence,” and also claims that he “took the initiative to request that President Mwinyi of Tanzania resume the Arusha peace process” and “urged President Museveni of Uganan to call on the RPF to cease-fire.” This, however, was not so much an example of U.S. initiative rather than placing the responsibility on “Africans to find an African solution to their problem.” Clinton continued to say that he agreed with Engel’s point that the “U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) still has an important role to play,” even though by May 25 the U.S. had led the UN to withdrawing all but 250 UNAMIR troops who chose to stay behind in Rwanda.⁴¹ This first letter still relied on the same rhetoric of Clinton’s April 30 radio address to Rwanda: empty words on the importance of peace, but no promise of action. Clinton focused more on the ideas and sentiments of the crisis without committing himself or the U.S. to any form of action or intervention.

On June 9, the second letter was sent to Donald Payne, with much of the same over exaggerations seen in the first letter. In early June the U.S. government still did not recognize the situation in Rwanda as genocide, so Clinton referred to the “civil war and

⁴⁰ Committee on Armed Services, *Department of Defense Briefing on the Situation in Rwanda*, 103d Cong., 2d sess., 1994.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

mass killings” that “continues to command the full attention of my Administration.”⁴² Not only did the administration refuse to properly name the crime being committed, but also the author of this letter lied outright. Rwanda never commanded the full attention of the Clinton Administration, not even during the refugee crisis when the government and international community were practically falling over themselves to provide water and “justice.” In response to the initial letter, Clinton offered examples of actions the United States took in response to the situation in Rwanda. He reaffirmed the necessity of UNAMIR peacekeeping forces, and explained that on May 16, the U.S. “supported a UN Security Council Resolution to authorize up to 5,000 troops for Rwanda,” all without mentioning how the administration originally argued that Rwanda was not a viable situation before pushing a proposal to withdraw UNAMIR from the country. He then stated that the U.S. sponsored a Security Council Resolution to place an arms embargo on Rwanda, which would have been even more successful if he had sponsored that Resolution earlier, perhaps during the nonexistent peace of the Arusha Accords.

Humanitarian aid was mentioned next, including the “more than \$50 million in humanitarian assistance for Rwanda and its neighbors since this crisis began...this assistance – by far the largest of any foreign donor – has helped to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis, especially among refugees on the borders with Tanzania and Burundi.” Although the U.S. would come to spend millions of dollars in relief aid for refugees in Rwanda, this response came mostly after the cease-fire on July 4. By being vague enough to say that \$50 million in “humanitarian assistance” was given to Rwanda “and its neighbors,” Clinton did not actually provide any concrete information on what was being done with

⁴² Letter, President Clinton to Donald Payne; June 9, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

that money. His side note about the U.S. contributing more aid than any other foreign power was unnecessary – at that point, no other country could rival the U.S.’s spending power, especially when the government was willing to send money in place of men.

Diplomacy and personal action are the ending themes of Clinton’s letter, and provide some of the most glaring examples of false communication and lies between members of the government. Clinton claimed “senior officials of [his] government have been in almost daily contact with the leaders in the region to support diplomatic efforts to negotiate a cease-fire.” But senior officials had no intention of intervening, and the task of handling the U.S. response to Rwanda was largely the responsibility of the Subcommittee on Africa. The line between exaggeration and lying is blurred throughout this letter, and the assertion that senior officials in the Clinton administration were working daily on the issue, much less to politically intervene to stop the civil war, is an example of such. “I have spoken out against the killings,” Clinton wrote, and indeed he had – once, in his April 30 radio broadcast. The humanitarian aid for Rwandan victims would be extended to those outside of the conflict as well: “no Rwandans now in the United States will be forced to return to Rwanda when their visas may expire.” While Clinton may have intended this to be viewed as a great show of humanitarianism, it is obvious to the reader that forcing Rwandans to return to a post-genocide state would further exasperate the issue of refugees and necessary aid. Finally, Clinton makes his grandest claim yet about the U.S.’s response to Rwanda yet: “these initiatives have helped to relieve some of the suffering of the Rwanda people.”⁴³ He is clearly talking about the suffering of refugees in camps, dealing with disease and malnutrition, because those were the Rwandans the United States chose to

⁴³ *Ibid.*

help – not the 800,000 massacred in one hundred days while the world stood by and watched. To claim that the United States is responsible for alleviating some of the Rwandan peoples' suffering is a bold claim, and a false one at that. If anything, the Clinton administration's choices had deadly repercussions for the Rwandans hoping for foreign intervention.⁴⁴

These letters from President Clinton, full of exaggerations and lies, are indicative of a larger problem the United States felt was even more pressing than the genocide itself. The Clinton administration never considered using military intervention in Rwanda – the tribal warfare in a small African country was not vital to American interests. What was of utmost importance, however, was the United States government must not be seen as a passive observer by the public, unwilling to help if necessary. The administration feared being accused of exactly what it was doing – delaying any attempts at intervention while waiting for the genocide to end on its own. Letters such as the one sent by the eight government officials given responses that almost exactly copied the two Clinton letters. There was a formula to the responses from the government, playing on sentiments and humanitarian notions but with no action. In a memorandum to the Public Affairs office, Donald Steinberg verbalized this pressure, stating he was “concerned that the story on what the United States is doing vis-à-vis Rwanda is not getting out. The implication of most of the stories is either that we are sitting on our hands, running from the issue or actually stifling the efforts of the international community to move into Rwanda.”⁴⁵ This was, of course, true, but the public should never know what its government was really doing regarding Rwanda.

⁴⁴ Power, 335.

⁴⁵ Memorandum, Donald Steinberg to “Public Affairs People,” “Rwanda Public Affairs;” May 28, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

However, Steinberg's concern was not for the fate of Rwandans, but for the public opinion of the government, especially with congressional elections approaching in November. Stories about the government intentionally delaying action were part of a "dangerous trend," according to Steinberg, because they "played into the hands of those who argue that the Administration is disengaged on foreign affairs."⁴⁶ Therefore, using such troublesome phrases, as "acts of genocide" instead of simply "genocide," and recycled response letters from President Clinton were necessary to keep up appearances for the U.S. and justify their policy towards Rwanda.

The larger context of American foreign policy and humanitarian intervention made it impossible for the United States to appropriately respond to the Rwandan genocide, even if the government had wanted to intervene in the first place. Clinton's lack of foreign policy experience or concern, compounded with the disaster in Somalia and the long-held view that Africa did not serve American national interests prevented an environment in which the U.S. could work with the UN to stop the genocide. Rather, these extenuating circumstances created the context of American international humanitarian intervention that continued to present great difficulties for the United States throughout the 1990s. However, the fact that the Clinton Administration chose to lie to the public about its positions regarding Rwanda without being exposed allowed the lying to continue. Clinton traveled to Rwanda once during his presidency, on March 25, 1998. After standing by while the country struggled four years previously, Clinton spent three hours in Rwanda, never leaving the Kigali airport. The act itself was representative of the importance the Clinton Administration placed on the Rwanda genocide. The U.S. and its president intentionally countered any

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

measures to intervene in Rwanda, while lying about their inaction the whole time, proving Rwanda did not factor into American interests. But for Clinton to only spend three hours in the airport of the country he watched destroyed by genocide was completely disrespectful. From the airport, itself a symbol of the genocide where foreigners left Tutsis behind to be slaughtered, Clinton gave a speech to the Rwandan President Paul Kagame and the Rwandan people who had gathered there. In his speech, Clinton apologized, stating:

the international community, together with nations in Africa, must bear its share of responsibility for this tragedy, as well. We did not act quickly enough after the killing began. We should not have allowed the refugee camps to become safe haven for the killers. We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide.⁴⁷

Despite this apology for the inaction of the world, Clinton still claimed that he, and people around the world, did not understand or fully recognize what was occurring in Rwanda until it was too late. However, this attempt at ignorance is both disrespectful and untrue. Years after the genocide ended, Clinton still felt it necessary to lie about what really took place during the crisis, and perhaps the most shocking part is that he lied to the faces of genocide victims, in their home country.

Despite this extensive critique of the Clinton administration's response to Rwanda, it is worth mentioning that an attempted intervention in Rwanda was unlikely to be successful. Genocide cannot simply be interrupted, it does not stop just because a foreign power invades and makes threats. Genocide, as discussed earlier, is an ideology that distorts one group's view of another so deeply that the "other" must be destroyed for the superior group to survive unthreatened. An attempted intervention before genocide began in April 1994 could arguable have only come about my foreign-imposed apartheid, which

⁴⁷ Cohen, 208.

could have created another environment to foster crimes against humanity, as occurred in South Africa. The notions of race, racism, and ethnic tensions are colonial constructs that were woven into the social fabric of Rwanda and other nations just like it. It is impossible to know if intervention could have been achieved, or at what time it could have succeeded. The fact remains that President Clinton, working within the context of Somalia syndrome and domestic interests dictating foreign policy, removed himself from the Rwandan situation and therefore allowed government officials to work on the issue with no intention of action.

The extensive web of lies the Clinton Administration created around the Rwandan genocide was unnecessary and created a legacy that made it acceptable to lie to the world in order to keep America out of humanitarian interventions. Clinton and his government chose to ignore the genocide, and lied to other government officials, the American public, and the world in order to prevent the U.S. from any obligations to intervene in Rwanda. Although the Clinton Administration chose dishonesty to define its response to genocide (and other human rights crises after), it was largely unnecessary. As previously stated, after the disaster in Somalia and the onset of "Somalia syndrome," the American public did not support sending U.S. troops to intervene in foreign crises, much less humanitarian operations. Congress also pushed for a "tough love" approach to the UN, so there was no real desire to become involved in Rwanda until the genocide itself was nearly over, as evident in the Congressional letter discussed previously. If the American public supported nonintervention, then what was the purpose of lying about it? It allowed the Clinton Administration to appear concerned and involved, without actually having to commit or act. Undoubtedly the government had lied to the public before, but now Clinton and his

government were lying about human rights. If the U.S. was willing to lie in order to avoid obligation to protect human rights in Rwanda, and did so successfully, then that sent a message to the government and the world. Other countries could follow the same path – willingly ignore situations they did not feel were pertinent to their national interests. For the Clinton Administration, the message was clear – not only can the public be lied to, but also the government will not be held accountable with any degree of severity. During the Rwandan genocide, the Clinton Administration used dishonesty as a form of policy, the success of which contributed to a legacy of dishonesty in foreign policy, and the consequences are evident in how the U.S. government responds to foreign crises, humanitarian or otherwise, even today.

Bibliography

- Barnett, Michael. *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Cohen, Jared. *One Hundred Days of Silence: America and the Rwandan Genocide*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007.
- U.S. Congress. House. *Communication from the President of the United States, Noncombatant Evacuations Operations in Rwanda*. 103d Cong., 2d sess., 1994. H. Doc.
- Committee on Armed Services, *Department of Defense Briefing on the Situation in Rwanda*, 103d Cong., 2d sess., 1994.
- U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. *Department of Defense Briefing on the Situation in Rwanda*. 103d Cong., 2d sess., July 25, 1994.
- Email, US Mission USUN New York to Secretary of State, “SC President Issues Statement on Rwanda;” February 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.
- Email, to USUN New York, “EOV on Rwanda;” April 15, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Gourevitch, Philip. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Picador USA, 1998.

Haley, P. Edward. *Strategies of Dominance: The Misdirection of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006.

Jones, Adam. Editor. *Genocide, War Crimes, and the West: History and Complicity*. New York: Zed Books, 2004.

Letter, President Clinton to Donald Payne; June 9, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Melvorn, Linda. *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*. New York: Zed Books, 2000.

Memorandum, Donald Steinberg to Neal Wolin, "Hall;" June 14, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Memorandum, Donald Steinberg to "Public Affairs People," "Rwanda Public Affairs;" May 28, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Memorandum, Donald Steinberg to Wilma Hall and Neal Wolin, "Rwanda – Genocide;" June 15, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Memorandum, from Donald Steinberg, "Points on Rwanda;" June 13, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Ohaegbulam, F. Ugboaja. *U.S. Policy in Postcolonial Africa: Four Case Studies in Conflict Resolution*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

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

Press Release, Office of the Press Secretary, "Radio Message by the President on the Situation in Rwanda;" April 30, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Press Release, Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the Press Secretary;" July 15, 1994; William Clinton Presidential Library.

Prunier, Gérard. *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Semujanga, Josias. *Origins of the Rwandan Genocide*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003.

Shattuck, John. *Freedom on Fire: Human Rights Wars and America's Response*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.