

## Race, Religion, and Rhetoric: The Challenges of Depicting Genocide in Rwanda and Sudan

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Genocide analysis is, by nature, rife with racial implications. These implications can either be the unconscious result of an author's biases or the deliberate attempt of an individual or organization to advance its own agenda. The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as acts committed "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."<sup>1</sup> In addition to a number of recurring debates in international law about when it is appropriate to use this term, "genocide" has acquired a number of specific connotations in public usage. This is particularly evident in the cases of Rwanda and Sudan, the sites of conflicts that have widely invoked use of the word "genocide." These conflicts are generally portrayed as struggles between two racially distinct groups, the historical and biological truth of which is dubious. Such oversimplification of these situations is potentially dangerous, both because it can be used to serve any number of political interests and because it impedes a meaningful solution. However, without such simplicity, conflicts may fail to grasp international attention. Therefore, there is a constant tension in genocide analysis between the need to portray the conflict in simple enough terms to move public opinion and the need to accurately depict all aspects of the conflict so as to avoid potentially harmful implications.

This paper will examine the general trends in portrayals of the conflicts in Rwanda and Sudan. Coverage of Rwanda during its genocide often reduced the situation to inter-tribal fighting. This depiction not only failed to mobilize international action but implied that the killings were motivated solely by racial hatred rather than placing them within a more complex historical and political context. Furthermore, the frequent insertion of the word "tribal" into discussion implied that the two ethnic groups involved bore simplistic, senseless grudges against each other. Although there was a shift in the type of analysis produced after the end of the genocide, much of this analysis still failed to adequately address the political nature of the genocide and thus perpetuated some of the same implications. Invoking the failures in Rwanda, the United States in particular has turned its attention to the Darfur region of Sudan. However, this

attention may stem from more than an increased political will to stop another genocide. Both in Darfur and in an earlier conflict in South Sudan, outside political and religious groups, particularly in the US, were accused of simplifying and capitalizing on the situation for their own gain. Nevertheless, the increased advocacy for Darfur that has accompanied the involvement of such groups is constructive so long as the advocacy has no goal other than an end to genocide and the end that is brokered addresses the complex nature of the conflict.

There are two general models of explanation for the origins of ethnic conflict in Rwanda: that of "ancient tribal hatreds," and that of "colonial manipulation." The tribal hatred model, which portrays a backward people whose ancient feuds suddenly erupt into genocide, is essentially discredited in academia. However, it remains prevalent in popular conception and tends to work its way into media coverage. When asked about the violence in Rwanda, CNN's Gary Streiker reported that "what's behind the story is probably the worst tribal hostility in all of Africa, hostility that goes back centuries long before European colonization."<sup>2</sup> When Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, an associate professor of African studies at Howard University, was interviewed on NPR, he blamed politics as well as ethnic hatred for conflict in Rwanda, asserting that "most of [the tribal violence] has been exacerbated by politicians hungry for power."<sup>3</sup> The interviewer, Daniel Zwerdling, responded, "Of course ... there is ancient ethnic hatred and something that surprises me is that you're blaming modern, contemporary African politicians."<sup>4</sup> While the idea of "ancient ethnic hatreds" may make for a simpler explanation or a sexier news story, it suggests a culture that is intrinsically violent, irrational, and unchanging.

The effect of this kind of analysis is to render genocide inevitable, the typical behavior of a primitive people. The words "ancient" and "tribal" work to reinforce this implication. This portrayal was used frequently while the Rwandan genocide was ongoing, with the result that the severity of the situation was minimized and therefore largely ignored. After the end of the genocide, when the international

<sup>1</sup> The United Nations, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/p\\_genoci.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/p_genoci.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 253.

<sup>3</sup> Power, 356.

<sup>4</sup> Power, 356.

community began to admit to the magnitude of the killings, more serious analyses were undertaken.

Sometimes, however, the “tribal hatreds” model can work its way into formal analyses in subtler forms. In his essay, “Obedience in Rwanda: A Critical Question,” Barrie Collins criticizes historians who advance what he calls the “killer culture” theory. This theory suggests that Rwandan society was predisposed to genocide because of a “culture of obedience” that had existed for centuries. Proponents of this theory are generally individuals or groups who reject the “tribal hatreds” model as racist, but, Collins suggests, propagate some of this theory’s implications nonetheless. He notes, “It appears that as long as the term culture is used, the charge of racism is unwarranted ... For these authors, this socially constructed ‘killer culture’ has nothing to do with the imperialist discourse of ancient tribal bloodlust.”<sup>5</sup> This “imperialist discourse” is clearly present in discussion of “ancient tribal hatreds,” but Collins asserts that it is also insinuated in the “killer culture” theory. Although proponents usually reject the idea of spontaneity and stress that the “killer culture” was manipulated by extremists, there is still the suggestion that such violence was culturally embedded. Noted historian Gerald Prunier claimed that “the main colouration of the impending violence was deeply Rwandese, deeply embedded in the ambiguous folds in the national culture.”<sup>6</sup> Such assertions, Collins insists, amount to a claim that Rwandan society, and, particularly Rwandan Hutus are still fundamentally different and dysfunctional.<sup>7</sup> This claim is both unfair to Rwandans and potentially dangerous in that it blindsides the international community to the possibility of genocide in other societies.

The other model, that of colonialist manipulation, is undoubtedly more historically accurate. However, just as the tribal hatreds model suggests cultural simplicity, the colonial manipulation model, when used as a sole explanation, suggests mental simplicity. While the categories of Tutsi and Hutu were used for control by the colonial government of Rwanda, Rwandans did not merely embrace these identities wholeheartedly and unquestioningly. They had an active part in shaping these identities and often did so with understanding of the advantages that could be won by embracing a particular identity. In her article, “The Ideology of Genocide,” Allison Des Forges asserts that although the Europeans brought a new form of racial classification to Rwanda, the Tutsi had an active role in manipulating these prejudices to their benefit. According to Des Forges, the population that is now referred to as the Tutsi was a sort of

aristocracy before the colonization of Rwanda, but it was by no means a racially distinct group. Rather, it was comprised of individuals of a number of different lineages who considered themselves superior based on ownership and on agricultural and pastoral knowledge. Hutus were also an extremely heterogeneous group, and the distinction between the two remained fluid.<sup>8</sup>

Europeans imposed the idea of two homogeneous groups and ascribed racial and intellectual characteristics to support their conception of the Tutsis being closer to Europeans and therefore superior.<sup>9</sup> Although this was an almost entirely European concept, the Tutsi quickly realized the advantages to it. Des Forges explains that “not only did [the Tutsi] use European backing to extend their control over the Hutu - whose faults they exaggerated to the gullible Europeans - they also joined with the Europeans to create the ideological justification for this exploitation.”<sup>10</sup> The role of the Tutsi in preserving their superiority is important not so much in implicating the Tutsi, as any advantaged group would naturally want to preserve its advantage, but in demonstrating that Rwandans were not simply a witless, helpless population preyed upon by colonists. The Europeans undoubtedly created the division that would lead to genocide, but considering the decades of largely autonomous interaction between these groups is also crucial to understanding the genocide.

This interaction is particularly important when considering the actual perpetration of the genocide. Post-independence politics are often simplified or largely glossed over, perhaps out of an underlying fear that illuminating the crimes of the older generations of Tutsis could be construed as “blaming the victim.” The alternative, however, may be worse. One common narrative of the events of 1994 is that of a “descent into madness,” directed by a few demonic figures but otherwise inexplicable. In her review of five books on the Rwandan genocide by noted groups and authors, Villia Jefremovas concluded that “because [the authors] have all justifiably tried not to ‘blame the victim,’ ... they have emphasized only certain elements of the historical record. This had the effect of rendering the twists and turns which led up to the genocide incomprehensible.”<sup>11</sup> Although interpretation of the genocide as the fault of the Tutsis must obviously be avoided, an interpretation of the genocide as inexplicable is perhaps equally undesirable. This interpretation both reinforces the tribal hatreds model and transforms the entire Hutu population into a hateful, illogical group of killers.

<sup>5</sup> Barrie Collins, *Obedience in Rwanda: A Critical Question* (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Collins, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Collins, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Allison Des Forges, “The Ideology of Genocide,” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 23, no. 2 (1995): 44.

<sup>9</sup> Des Forges, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Des Forges, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Villia Jefremovas, “Treacherous Waters: The Politics of History and the Politics of Genocide in Rwanda and Burundi,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 70 (2000): 301.

In addition to being racist, such thinking has had problematic effects in post-genocide Rwandan politics. The Rwandan Patriotic Front, an army composed mainly of Tutsi who had left the country during previous conflicts, killed thousands of civilians when it returned to Rwanda and established control over the country.<sup>12</sup> Although many of these civilians were killed in the course of combat, hundreds were killed after combat in what was a clear violation of international law.<sup>13</sup> This is downplayed to an overwhelming extent in analyses that portray the RPF as the liberators of the Tutsi people. In such analyses, the actions of the RPF are wholly justifiable because they are changing the status quo and saving Rwanda from either the instinctually murderous Hutus or the culture of confusion and disorder. Hundreds of thousands of Hutus fled in response to rumors of RPF atrocities and took refuge in camps in Tanzania and Zaire. There was an assumption, however, that these refugees were less deserving of aid than Tutsi survivors of the genocide. When vast numbers of Hutus refused to return home, the assumption became that they were avoiding justice. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees instituted an "aggressive returns policy" in which it invaded and closed forty camps in what was then Eastern Zaire.<sup>14</sup> Although the situation was desperate, and it was impossible to tell how many of the refugees were actually guilty, it seems incredible that the UN would sanction refugees as military targets. The widespread acceptance of the absolute guilt, even dementia, of the Hutus as a group made this decision possible and has left it largely unquestioned.

Such assumptions also gave the new RPF government almost unlimited license. The first open elections were not held until 2003, nearly ten years after the genocide ended, and former RPF commander Paul Kagame retained political control after these elections. A report by the International Crisis Group in 2001 expressed concern that views of the RPF as "liberators" had led to "an implicit international consensus which gives the RPF almost unlimited time to achieve its proclaimed goals."<sup>15</sup> The focus on the RPF's policies of ethnic reconciliation often overshadow the fact that political opponents and large numbers of Hutu remain exiled, and that internal criticism is not tolerated. The unmitigated acceptance and wide financing of the RPF's policies by the international community<sup>16</sup> demonstrate the continued misunderstanding of the nature of the Rwandan genocide. There seems to be an assumption that Rwanda is simply too dysfunctional for open democracy, that ethnic hatreds run too deep. An article in *The Economist* argued

that "For Tutsis, democracy means death."<sup>17</sup> Simplifications of the genocide perpetuate the idea of Rwandan society, particularly Rwandan Hutus, as deeply flawed and therefore dependent on the RPF. Analyses of the Rwandan genocide must instead clearly denounce the killers while explaining their crimes in a historical background. Genocide, while shocking and unconscionable, must also be portrayed as predictable, or at least explicable. Otherwise, societies that have been the site of genocides will be labeled as intrinsically different, and the assumption that genocide will not occur in other societies will persist.

This unwillingness to accept the existence of genocide is a historical trend. Thorough post-genocide analyses should contribute to an understanding of the factors that can lead to genocide and the warning signs that it is about to occur. However, thorough analyses during a genocide can soften the sense of urgency. The audience of the nightly news is not generally compelled by lengthy historical background and political context, even if this is necessary to understanding the situation. Therefore, along with all the problems caused by oversimplification of Rwanda, one must also consider the fact that if a genocide is portrayed in overly complex terms while it is occurring, it will be dismissed as civil warfare and ignored by the international community. It is already extraordinarily difficult to muster the political will to use the word "genocide" because of its legal and moral implications. Power argues that even when faced with clear indicators that genocide is taking place, "officials spin themselves about the nature of the violence ... They render the bloodshed two-sided and inevitable."<sup>18</sup> During the early months of Rwanda, this tendency manifested itself in what Power calls "a two-month dance to avoid the g-word."<sup>19</sup> Americans officials, particularly, used such phrases as "acts of genocide," but refused to respond when asked how many acts of genocide it would take to make a genocide.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the urgency of Rwanda was largely lost, obscured by irresponsible stereotypes and deliberately inefficient bureaucracy.

It is almost tempting, therefore, to argue that coverage during a genocide should have the purpose of urging action and coverage after a genocide should offer more complete analysis. However, it is extremely unlikely that such a policy would ever produce meaningful solutions. This is somewhat evident in Sudan, where the religious and racial divisions between opposing groups have been simplified, amplified, and, many would say, exploited for political reasons. This began long before the rebel insurgency that prompted the

<sup>12</sup> Des Forges, 44-47.

<sup>13</sup> Des Forges, 47-47.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, 17-20.

<sup>15</sup> The International Crisis Group, " 'Consensual Democracy' in Post Genocide Rwanda: Evaluation the March 2001 Elections," <http://www.crisis-group.org/home/index.cfm?id=1647&l=1>.

<sup>16</sup> The International Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1647&l=1>.

<sup>17</sup> "Spreading Poison in the Great Lakes: the Hutu-Tutsi Divide," *Economist* 346 (1998): 46.

<sup>18</sup> Samantha Power, xviii.

<sup>19</sup> Power, 359.

<sup>20</sup> Power, 364.

Darfur genocide in 2003. South Sudan was the site of a devastating civil war, which some would call genocide, that ended only in 2005.

Religious groups, particularly evangelicals, were extremely active in pressuring their governments to broker a peace deal, but also received criticism for over-stating the role of religion in the war. The war is generally classified as a power struggle between the Arab, Muslim north and the indigenous African, Christian and animist south. In a Minority Rights Group International report, however, researcher Peter Verney questions this dichotomy, asserting that “this simplistic perception disguises the complexities of a war fought by multi-ethnic groups where religious differences colour struggles over access to land or political power.”<sup>21</sup> The emphasis of religious conflict is in some ways another form of the tribal hatreds model; it suggests that the people of Sudan define themselves entirely by their religious affiliation and that this affiliation necessarily draws them into inevitable conflict. Neither this nor the colonial manipulation model provides a complete explanation for the war. British colonialism united very different regions in Sudan and left them to function as one country upon independence. It also attempted to turn South Sudan, which had previously had little political or cultural unity, into one administrative region.<sup>22</sup> However, like the Rwandans, the Sudanese were not passive receivers of their new identities; they reshaped or emphasized them to their own advantage. To suggest that the war became inevitable when the British invaded, or even when Muslims began proselytizing in northern Sudan, is to understate both the role that post-independence politics have played and the intelligence of the Sudanese. In this sense, analyses of the civil war in Sudan bear resemblance to those of the genocide in Rwanda.

In another sense, however, it seems that the implications made in analyses of Sudan are intentional rather than an unconscious result of the author’s bias. Sudan marks a departure from Rwanda in that it has captivated the attention of groups and individuals outside of the human rights community. Years before the conflict in Darfur began, reports of slave raids against Christian villages in the south caused a stir among Christian groups in the United States and Europe. In a process called “slave redemption,” groups such as Christian Solidarity International, a British-based non-profit organization, use donations to “buy back” the freedom of slaves through local middlemen. This process is controversial both because there is no proof that the individuals being “freed” were actually slaves and because the price of freedom could simply be used to conduct more

raids.<sup>23</sup> However, some reputable organizations do give credence to this process.

More outlandish is the participation of such individuals as Rev. Franklin Graham, son of famed TV evangelist Billy Graham. During a visit to Lui in South Sudan, Graham brought a TV crew with him, apparently to document what he saw in order to enlist the help of other American Christians:

“This country has declared a Jihad (Islamic holy war) on its own people. It’s wrong. It’s wicked. And it’s evil. For me as an outsider, the freedom of worship seems the main issue. Instead of being converted to Islam, these people have decided to fight. It is David against Goliath. As soon as I get back I’m going to share what I’ve seen here. Khartoum should be hit with the full force of American military strikes. Why not? These people are just as evil as Saddam Hussein”<sup>24</sup>

Ramadan Yasin, a relief worker in Southern Blue Nile Province, feared such aggressive evangelism, explaining that “Our area was in harmony, now people are hating Islam. We don’t want people to disturb the peace.”<sup>25</sup> A report by Anti-Slavery International to the UN Commission of Human Rights expressed similar concerns: “Unless accurately reported, the issue [of slave raids] can become a tool for indiscriminate and wholly undeserved prejudice against Arabs and Muslims.”<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the Christian right is sometimes credited with helping to end the war in South Sudan. In his book, “Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights,” Allen Hertzke, an author on religion in US foreign policy, describes the “unheralded story” of the joint effort between evangelicals and Jewish groups that pressured the current Bush administration to take an active role in negotiating the north-south peace accords. The peace deal was negotiated between the government and the major rebel group in the south, thus capitulating to the external idea of a north-south war and failing to include many of the rebel groups not aligned with the major group in the south.<sup>27</sup> Despite such simplifications, if the peace deal is successful, the Christian groups who advocated for it will deserve praise. If, however, the peace deal fails and religious and ethnic conflict increases, this will suggest the destructive potential of advocacy from groups with a limited or slanted understanding of the conflict.

Although the groups targeted in Darfur are Muslim rather than Christian, the influence of the Christian right on the

<sup>21</sup> Peter Verney et al., *Sudan: Conflict and Minorities* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1995), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Verney, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Slavery and Slave Redemption in Sudan,” <http://www.hrw.org/background/africa/sudanupdate.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Matthias Muindi, “Christian Right May Inflame War, Observers Fear,” *AfricaNews*, May 2001 <http://lists.peacelink.it/afrinews/msg00247.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Muindi, <http://lists.peacelink.it/afrinews/msg00247.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Verney, “Slavery in Sudan,” *Sudan Update and Anti-Slavery International* (London: 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Howard LaFranchi, “Evangelized Foreign Policy?” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 2, 2006.



issue has been considerable. The Christian Science Monitor cited increased calls for stronger intervention in Darfur as “the most recent evidence of evangelical influence in US foreign policy” and attributed this new political will largely to Michael Gerson, a Bush policy adviser and speechwriter who helped coin the “axis of evil” phrase and who himself is a member of an evangelical Episcopal Church.<sup>28</sup>

While such powerful and well-connected groups are able to bring attention to Darfur, there is also the danger that they will focus on the aspects of the conflict that interest them rather than on a holistic solution. For some evangelical groups, Darfur represents an opportunity to expand their mission work from South Sudan. William Chancey, director of the Persecution Project, described in an interview with Mission Network News the “opportunities” that Darfur provided for ministry, noting that “if [the humanitarian mission] is effective, it can’t help but have an impact on evangelism.”<sup>29</sup> Such attitudes touch on an intersection of evangelism and humanitarianism that many secular humanitarian groups would most likely find problematic and that, certainly, call into question how much involvement is prompted by ulterior motives. However, this case is the exception rather than the rule; the humanitarian response of the faith community has generally been earnest and magnanimous.

More serious than the influence of evangelical groups is the concern that condemnation of atrocities in Darfur fit into a larger anti-Arab campaign. Israel has been somewhat vocal in denouncing these atrocities, but certain journalists have done so as part of a larger denunciation of “Arab goals.” A journalist for the Jerusalem Post wrote that Darfur “is the consequence of a deep, far-reaching version of ethnocentric Arab nationalism,” adding that “it is in this context that the deep unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of Israel has to be understood.”<sup>30</sup> This is an extreme example, but the government of Sudan, particularly, tries to frame criticism of its Darfur policies along the lines of anti-Arabism. Although this is in most cases a shameful attempt to divert pressure and lobby against actual action, it is still of concern whether the charge of anti-Arabism is sometimes true, and whether certain countries or populations perceive it to be true.

The African-Arab division in Darfur is essentially invented. This invention has been a back-and-forth process between internal and external factors: the labels of “African” and “Muslim” were constructed externally but adopted internally because of their political advantages, which in turn has led to more widespread external use and more

acceptance of the terms internally. Sudan researcher Alex de Waal explains that,

“First to embrace an externally-constructed ethnic label were some of Darfur’s Arab Bedouins, who lived in Libya and served in Gaddafi’s ‘Islamic brigade’. They found that the label ‘Arab’ was a useful political tool, buying them identity and solidarity in Libya and also in Khartoum. In response, educated young men from Darfur’s non-Arab groups - principally Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa - found the label ‘African’ in use by the Southerners and especially the SPLA leader, John Garang, who sought to build a non-Arab majority coalition across Sudan. Political Arabism is therefore fairly recent in Darfur, and political Africanism an elite construction of just a few years’ vintage.”<sup>31</sup>

However, the African-Arab dichotomy is prevalent in the news and could well be a factor in the frequency with which Darfur is covered compared to conflicts in the eastern Congo and northern Uganda that are similar in scale. Mahmood Mamdani, a professor in the Institute of African Studies at Columbia University, asks, “Does the label [of Darfur as] ‘worst humanitarian crisis’ tell us more about Darfur or about those labeling and the politics of labeling?”<sup>32</sup>

The role of the United States in Darfur is particularly precarious because of its “war on terror” and perceived anti-Arabism. Its support for Israel and the Bush administration’s close relationship with the Christian right have made Darfur a more politically salient topic, and the level of public pressure to take action in Darfur has far exceeded that which existed during Rwanda, when one Congresswoman claims to have received far more calls from her constituents about endangered Rwandan gorillas than about Rwandan victims of genocide.<sup>33</sup> However, some political scientists have suggested that the Bush administration’s policy on Darfur, which has been far more rigorous than any other government’s, is influenced more by the political convenience of the Arab-African dichotomy than by the efforts of the American public.

The use of the word “genocide” by the US is particularly controversial. Although a score of human rights and humanitarian groups have also used the term, it has been notoriously absent from the rhetoric of most major governments. The UN published a report in January of 2005 explicitly stating that genocide had not occurred, although it acknowledged that crimes against humanity that could be equal in scale to genocide had occurred.<sup>34</sup> Four months before this report, however, Colin Powell issued a statement that “genocide has been committed in Darfur, and the

<sup>28</sup> La Franchi.

<sup>29</sup> “Christians Need to Remember Sudan Crisis Continues,” *Mission Network News*, October 25, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Shlomo Avineri, “Exposing Arab Goals for What They Really Are,” *The Jerusalem Post*, August 3, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Alex De Waal, “Darfur,” *Z Net News*, February 11, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, “Naming the Crisis in Darfur,” *Z Net News*, November 18, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Power, 375.

<sup>34</sup> “UN ‘Rules Out’ Genocide in Darfur,” *BBC News*, January 31, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Colin Powell, “United States Department of State. Testimony before Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Sudan,” September 9, 2004.

government of Sudan and the Jingaweit bear responsibility.”<sup>35</sup> The Bush administration was under fairly intense political pressure at this point; Congress had issued a resolution declaring that the killings in Darfur were genocide in July of the same year, and a growing interfaith and student movement was demanding a genocide pronouncement. However, Sudan researcher Alex de Waal insisted after Colin Powell’s genocide determination that “the fact that the group labeled as genocidaires in this conflict are ‘Arab’ is no accident . . . It has special saliency in the shadow of the US’ global war on terror.”<sup>36</sup> The lack of action in the wake of the genocide pronouncement was also disturbing, both because it decreased the significance of the term and because it suggested that the motives behind the pronouncement were indeed insincere. More than a year after Powell’s pronouncement, the Guardian’s Jonathan Steele insisted that “Washington’s lack of follow-through showed that . . . the genocide finding was a sop to the Christian right and anti-Islamist neocons.”<sup>37</sup>

It is not inherently problematic that special interest groups influence action more than do ordinary citizens; this is an extremely common trend in politics. However, Steele’s statement brings into light a larger problem with such influence. Policy that is enacted solely for the saving of political face is unlikely to effect meaningful change. Similarly, a shallow understanding of the Darfur crisis, even if it is politically expedient, will not solve what is truly a complex problem. While it may be acceptable for the general public to care about Darfur simply because unspeakable atrocities are being committed there, it is vital that the leaders of the international community seek a more nuanced understanding.

This said, the involvement of specific constituencies not traditionally involved in human rights should be welcomed, although cautiously. A simplistic understanding of the issue, when accompanied by sincere concern, can be the impetus for leaders to seek a more complex solution. Genocide is an emotional issue, and it is natural to relate to one aspect of the Darfur tragedy and become engaged because of this connection. The Jewish community often cites the Holocaust as its reason for taking action on Darfur, and parents often say that they feel compelled when they think of their own children in such a situation. Associations such as these, while they do not contribute to a deep understanding of the issue, empower people to take action in a way that is most meaningful to them. Such action only becomes detrimental when it detracts from a complete solution or enforces negative stereotypes, either about specific groups involved in the situation or larger groups with whom they may be associated. If action on Darfur becomes characterized by a significant part of the international community as aggression against Muslims or Arabs, any chance for peace in Sudan will likely be lost. Similarly, if Darfur becomes character-

ized as an example of the evils of Muslims or Arabs, chances for peace in other parts of the world could be seriously damaged. Islamic fundamentalists could use Darfur as the newest example of Western aggression to gain recruits, and anti-Islamists could use Darfur to justify discrimination and oppression. Thus, if Darfur is handled incorrectly, it could have much wider implications. It is imperative that portrayals of Darfur, while conveying the urgency of the situation, remember these caveats.

However, when comparing the example of Darfur to that of Rwanda, the former generally seems to benefit from the involvement of groups like evangelicals and neoconservatives. Urgency was something that was simply lost in portrayals of Rwanda during the genocide, obscured by rhetoric of ancient hostility and tribal hatreds. In Darfur, such stereotypes have actually functioned to promote a sense of urgency. Specific groups have been captivated by either the Christian-Muslim portrayal of the north-south war or the Arab-African depiction of the Darfur genocide. Although this is extremely unfortunate when considering the number of nearby conflicts that are largely ignored, it is not inherently negative for the people of Darfur. Such involvement becomes more precarious when groups utilize the situation in Darfur to promote broader stereotypes, particularly about Arabs and Muslims.

Ideally, depictions of genocide should be given as accurately and completely as possible, walking a thin line between clearly placing blame and allowing this blame to suggest something about the biological or cultural nature of the perpetrators. However, post-genocide works on Rwanda illustrate that the involvement of academics does not necessarily result in clearer or less biased analysis; racial and cultural implications are still made, and these implications can have lasting effects. Therefore, it would be unwise to discredit the vast array of groups not traditionally connected with academia or human rights advocacy who have aligned themselves behind the Darfur cause. It will ultimately take a broad-based coalition to muster the political will to stop genocide, and many groups have seemingly become involved not because of some specific aspect of the victims’ or killers’ identities, but because of the horrific nature of the atrocities. In addition to speaking to the politicized nature of the Darfur crisis, the wide involvement speaks to a deep desire to believe that the phrase “never again” is more than an empty promise. Although Darfur presents an extremely difficult political challenge, especially for the United States, it also presents a historic opportunity to stop an ongoing genocide and let the would-be victims tell their own story rather than relying on reconstructions that perpetuate misunderstanding.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Steele, “US Neocons, Christian Right, and Sudan Conflicts,” *The Guardian*, October 8, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> De Waal, “Naming the Crisis in Darfur.”

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