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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Viewpoint: Beyond the Terror War

Barry Zellen, 8/30/2010

Genocide has long been something of a taboo subject, marked by an indelible Manichean boundary that separates those who perpetrate it (the evil ones) from those who try to stop it (the forces of good in the world.) The terminology that infused genocide discussions in the 1990s as this darkest of human endeavors erupted across the fratricidal Balkan peninsula oddly resembles that applied to the terrorism discourse post 9/11: you're either with us, or with the terrorists.

Indeed, in the decade before mass terror ripped a hole in the fabric of our domestic tranquility, this was precisely how we described the Serbian ethnic cleansers who attacked unarmed Bosniak and Croat populations with such cruelty that it turned many a humanitarian from dove to a hawk, and created a new cottage industry of genocide experts that mirrored the proliferation of terrorism and homeland security experts after 9/11. That two traumatic political events a decade apart spawned the formation of parallel, passionate, and at times partisan academic and policy-analytical subfields eager not only to probe deeper truth but to induce bolder policy action would share the same "us vs. them" language is not surprising. Indeed, we can learn from the parallelism, and the persistence of historical myopia when assessing the paramount "evil" of any era, that is revealed time and again.

That our age is preoccupied with terrorism, perhaps the least menacing of all the threats that can harm a society, while a generation earlier the preoccupation was with genocide, one of the most menacing of threats that can harm a society, does not undermine the parallelism; indeed, terrorism and genocide are birds of a feather. Genocide may be viewed from a theoretical perspective as terrorism on a grander scale, where instead of selectively striking civilian targets with limited political violence, the perpetrator inflicts political violence on a mass scale, either to obliterate, decimate, or forcibly relocate an entire population.

Terrorism is the genocide of the weak, and not, as Mao had thought, the first step on the road to guerrilla warfare (which was itself only the second step on the road to conventional warfare.) Once a terrorist carves out a proper sanctuary, whether it was PLO-ruled Lebanon or Al Qaeda central in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the worry is not that the empowered terrorist will levy a guerrilla army and engage in a war of maneuver against a state opponent, but rather that he will instead migrate from localized forms of terror to mass terror, in the hopes of obliterating, decimating, or forcibly relocating his sacred enemy on a biblical scale of destruction. Genocide may thus be viewed either as a "weapon of mass migration" (WMM) as described by Kelly M. Greenhill in her forthcoming book on this topic, or as a "weapon of civil destruction" (WCD), the people's war counterpart to a "weapon of mass destruction" (WMD) unleashed by a nuclear, radiological, biological, chemical, or otherwise improvised countervalue weapons system.

Ironically, while opponents of genocide as well as proponents of bold American action to stop genocides from being perpetrated believe America should use its military power toward this end, American history is full of examples of American military power being used as WMMs, WCDs, and, at the end of World War II, WMDs, after which the bipolar international order was sustained by a balance of terror created by the mutual threat of massive WMD strikes upon the homelands and allied territories of the two superpowers, the well-named delicate "balance of terror" which promised not the threat of conventional war or even total war, but rather that of mass terror.

Continuity in the Age of Mass Terror

While 9/11 marked the official starting point of the Age of Mass Terror, the continuity of our time with prior eras and their recurrence of forced mass migration (the hallmark of America's own policies of ethnic cleansing that stripped America of indigenous sovereignty), wanton mass civil destruction (a hallmark of the total war era that was warmly embraced by the architects of America's civil war strategy), and ultimately mass destruction itself (as the civil populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, who were spared the agony of Curtis LeMay's saturation fire-bombing, would experience when incinerated in their fiery atomic sacrifice to the emergent world order) should not be overlooked. Terrorism, on a mass scale, is merely a weak power, or a non-state actor, joining this very lethal club that wages war against a people, one where America has earned premium status as an innovator in all known categories of mass mayhem.

A year ago, I read an intriguing article by Chase Madar in *The American Conservative* that bravely challenged one of President Obama's top genocide policy advisors, Samantha Power, for her historic myopia, appropriately titled "Care Tactics: Samantha Power and the weaponization of human rights." Madar illuminates a pattern of historical amnesia that riddles Power's Leviathan-like, and ultimately Pulitzer prize-winning, tome, *A 'Problem from Hell': America in the Age of Genocide*.

Power later worked closely with then-Senator Obama on his second book, hoping to become his muse – and would masterfully ride last year's wave of Obama-mania to power (until stumbling in her public clash with Hillary Clinton near the end of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign), finding the perfect president to serve, one who wants to rid the world of nuclear weapons (but not the underlying evil itself, as our last president sought), and in so doing, ultimately restrain America from doing what it does best – fighting blunt but effective total wars against truly nasty opponents – by emasculating the American nuclear arsenal, so much so that we may ultimately become vulnerable to external strategic attack and lack an assured means to prevail in a global conflict of the sort that we saw break out twice in the last century, and which seem to take place whenever a stable imperial order enters into an irrecoverable decline, as happened at the end of the era of British naval supremacy, which rapidly eroded on the eve of World War I, and which two millennia earlier left the world in chaos from Egypt to Afghanistan when Alexander's empire imploded, and a millennium after that, when Roman authority collapsed, resulting in another thousand years of political chaos.

America and the Age of Genocide: A Second Look

Power's many examples of historical neglect in *A Problem from Hell* troubled me when I read it, and the subsequent uncritical response to her work by media and pundits was even more confusing to watch after its surprise Pulitzer victory. After all, it was America that modernized genocide, made it national policy, and through its ruthless centuries of Indian removal, concentration, and annihilatory warfare policies, ethnically cleansed or exterminated millions of indigenous, and once proudly sovereign, peoples—violating Britain's sacred pledge to respect indigenous sovereignty west of the Appalachians made in its 1763 Proclamation, and unleashing domestic holy war against America's first peoples in what was at its core a naked land grab fueled by a lust for fertile farmlands or newly discovered mineral deposits. In a century of American genocide, an entire continent was effectively cleansed. And that was just the first act.

When America faced its own confederate revolt against federal power, Washington applied the same principles of genocidal destruction to break the will of its southern secessionists, and later unleashed Sherman's proven total war strategy on the remaining hostile tribes in the still unconquered West. And that was only the second act.

Once America was cleansed of its original inhabitants and it crossed the oceans as a Great Power with imperial aspirations, putting down revolts in various countries like the Philippines, and seizing others outright (like Hawaii), it applied the fully digested lessons of its own long Indian Wars: that its own superiority of arms, men, and wealth enabled it to use the specter of genocidal annihilation to deter potential foes, and to crush through annihilation those who would not be deterred by American power, a lesson that permeated its own unique methods of warfighting, as revealed in its lethally effective tactics in Japan and Germany which later Secretary of Defense McNamara freely admitted were war crimes—applying the full weight of state power onto the undefended civilian populace of its foes. And this was

only the third act.

During the Cold War, the entire structure of international relations was predicated on the potential unleashing of national destruction of our opponent: a doctrine that boils down to America's continued willingness to inflict genocidal destruction upon its adversaries. Granted, it took two to tango, and America, like the Soviet Union and the lesser nuclear powers, turned to the bomb because of its unique efficiency in laying waste to an opponent's homeland. We were not alone in courting the Apocalypse to ensure the security of our republic. But that was only the fourth act.

Now that we're fighting terrorism, insurgents, and a host of stateless actors, we've refined our predisposition for truly democratic people's war of the sort Napoleon unleashed on European soil and which we imported a half century later in our quest to break the spirit of the Confederate rebellion, to the fractious, sub-state realm, and along the way we have unleashed genocidal forces (as we saw in Iraq), collateral perhaps but nonetheless consistent with our historical willingness to engage in annihilatory warfare to achieve our own millennial aims, no matter how high the price paid in human terms by our opponent. And this was thus the fifth act.

From Melos to Myopia

Madar's critical response to Power's treatise on genocide importantly shed light on other chapters in America's historic foreign and military policy where America not only stood idly by but in fact armed, trained and unleashed genocidal forces in pursuit of its own interests, from Guatemala to Indonesia. But it is important to consider the deep domestic roots of America's complicity in the very invention of genocide, since war against a people is in fact the flip-side of total war, which since Napoleon has been understood to be a people's war, rooted in the mobilization of an entire nation for war.

To Mao, this became revolutionary war, and to the Jihadists, it's now become Holy War. But across time and space it has been popular war, and the passions unleashed when unlocking the populace are an order of magnitude more destructive than those unleashed by unlocking the passions of the demos in the inter-polis wars of Ancient Greece, where the atrocities at Melos continue to haunt the western conscience and whose connection to modern war and modern atrocity was eloquently argued by Lawrence Tritle in his 2000 *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival*.

Like Madar, when I read Power's passionate pleading that America's moral obligation is to never again sit on the sidelines and allow genocide to happen—I couldn't help but to wonder where she had drawn her lessons of history from, as she articulated an ideology that ignored America's own highly effective military traditions, its own rugged frontier experience, and its centuries-old approach to world conflict—the very sources of its economic and military power, and consequently the very foundation of world order, which, thanks to our values, is widely perceived to be a just order (albeit one contested by the Jihadists, who would structure a world order along more medieval principles.)

Genocide should not be overly politicized or de-contextualized from its historical roots. When Serbia sought to rebalance the ethnic composition of the remnants of Yugoslavia to create a more stable and governable Balkan state, it was doing only what Lincoln did a century before in a Balkanizing America, which likewise unraveled with unanticipated rapidity, denying the aspirations for independence of the reluctant but nonetheless constituent components of the greater state—and for which we celebrate Lincoln now as the greatest of American heroes—even though Lincoln's war was one of America's most savagely fought, and throughout the old Confederate states, he is still viewed more as a war criminal than hero. In the old Union states up north, Lincoln is so revered that he enjoys not only a mighty monument in the nation's capital, as well as a permanent spot on the ubiquitous \$5 bill and even the still persistent penny, but even the apostle of hope that Power now serves, President Obama, selected honest Abe to be his role model, and the bar according to which Obama hopes history favorably compares his presidency.

When the Germans sought in the last century to become the pre-eminent world power, they were following in the footsteps of the British, and the emergent American superpower, and as horrific as their excesses were, they were not so different from the actions of a young and expanding America as it strived to become first a continental power, crushing hundreds of indigenous tribes for merely being there, later destroying the Confederacy's will to be self-governing, and as it reached across the seas to become a world power, imposing American sovereignty on a reluctant Hawaii, then grabbing Spain's

colonial possessions to become a truly global power, waging effective wars of colonization and counterinsurgency across the seas ever since.

Looking back to the brushfires of the Balkan wars, I sometimes wonder if we had let the Serbs have their super-state, and tolerated the one-time exodus of its displaced peoples to enable their raw but certainly not abnormal (by any historical comparison) effort at state-formation, if perhaps the cause of peace and stability might have been better served – the departing Bosniaks and later Kosovars perhaps enriching their neighbors with their human capital much as Germany's refugees so enriched America (contributing to the brain power behind the Manhattan Project) and America in turn enriched Canada during its own Vietnam exodus – perhaps restoring balance to the troubled Balkan peninsula. And – importantly – perhaps Al Qaeda might have tasted its first defeat at the hands of an assertive, and unrestrained, state opponent, knocking Bin Laden's movement off its game at a critical moment in its development.

And then I wonder, if we had not pointed the finger and shouted "Genocide" on a crowded continent as communism collapsed and nationalism freely reasserted itself as we did first in Bosnia (where we in fact tolerated genocidal retribution by the triumphant Croats and Bosniaks in the end)—and later in Kosovo, a legitimate constituent component of a sovereign Serbia (even *after* Yugoslavia's collapse)—then perhaps the ambition of Al Qaeda might have been blunted, and the attacks of 9/11 never executed.

Then, we might not be bogged down as we are in Afghanistan or Iraq, unleashing nationalistic, and at time genocidal, fury along the way as we stumbled our way through a mess that began, indirectly, with our very first efforts in the 1990s to make genocide our foe, attacking a *tactic*, a symptom, and not an underlying cause, just as we again do in our war against terror – another tactic, another method, decoupled from its political causal roots, vilified as our enemy, much as President Obama now vilifies the very nuclear weapons with which we won the peace in 1945, yet which ensured a stable world order for a half century more.

Fighting Fire with Fire

But Power's selective historical memory, and her antiseptic approach to American military power, in precise, seemingly painless increments and not in its blunt and effective supremacy, remind me of the escalation and bargaining theorists of the Vietnam era—many who, like Power, resided along the Charles River while dreaming of the Potomac. They sought to apply a similarly antiseptic approach to the very rough and tumble process of winning a war against a determined opponent mobilized for total war, a method that only brought America a humbling and unnecessary defeat, diplomatic betrayal of a wartime ally, and the collapse of order across Indochina – resulting in the annihilatory fury of the Khmer Rouge, not a genocide per se, but a brutal class war that resulted in both mass migration and mass civil destruction, the internment and exile of millions of Vietnamese next door, and a precipitous decline in American power around the world.

We must therefore remember it's not words that we are fighting. Not concepts. Nor tactics. It's not a war against *terror*. Just as it wasn't a war against *genocide*—it was a war against evil, one against tyranny and darkness. Just as it is today. And if lost, the results would be devastating. But winning will require clarity of vision, a willingness to accept history for what it was, to remember why we built nuclear weapons in the first place, why we cleansed the America's of its first peoples, why we became a world power. It was to make sure that we would never again be in danger, our values never at risk of being overrun. It was, quite simply, so that cry of "never again" would have meaning, even if that meant a tough, at times dirty, and never easy fight.

And that requires knowing who we are, where we came from, and what we did to get here. Only in so doing will we maintain the will and the capacity to make sure we don't lose all that we have fought for. Whether it's America in the "Age of Genocide" or America in the "Age of Mass Terror," it's still America in a world of chaos, aiming for order and balance, and fighting for what is right. And using all means in its possession to make sure darker forces don't rise up again on our watch.

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