Moral Force: Learning from Vietnam and the Holocaust

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Over the past quarter-century, the lessons of Vietnam have nearly become a national obsession for an entire generation of Americans deeply scarred by that painful debacle. Following the loss of thousands of lives, untold military expense, and domestic upheaval, "no more Vietnams" remains a goal to which many Americans are committed. At the same time, remembering the lessons of the Holocaust, a horror Winston Churchill once labeled history's "worst crime," has become a profound legal and moral obligation for the international community. For the American people and the rest of humanity, never again allowing genocide to go unchallenged remains a goal of highest importance. Herein lies a paradox of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era: The United States's reluctance towards overseas military engagement contradicts the objective to prevent the recurrence of genocide in places such as Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. For many U.S. policymakers, the lessons of intervention in Vietnam and of the Holocaust seem irreconcilable.

It is essential to realise, however, that the lessons from military involvement in Vietnam and the Holocaust *are* mutually compatible. To effectively implement the lessons of the Holocaust, the international community must also apply those of Vietnam. In other words, the sole method for halting genocide

is through credible threat or imposition of substantial and decisive military force by a third party. Genocide is not like other human rights violations, ethnic conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, or civil wars. More than half a century ago, the international community determined through the Nuremberg Principles and the Genocide Convention that ethnic cleansing is an international crime equivalent to aggression, for which the international norm of national sovereignty does not provide impunity.[1]

Some critics of U.S. foreign policy over the last decade contend that a lingering "Vietnam syndrome" has at times prevented the United States from honoring its moral and legal obligation to halt genocide in places such as Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. These critics point to an overly-strict adherence to the lessons of Vietnam by U.S. foreign-policy makers who have adopted a zero-casualty doctrine that limits the use of U.S. military force in most conflicts. In order to stop genocide effectively, they insist, the United States must overcome its obsession with Vietnam and begin supporting the use of U.S. ground troops in robust United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations for humanitarian purposes. However, in this they are dangerously mistaken.

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The Strategic Nature of Genocide. The crime of genocide is a threat to the fundamental integrity of the current international order. Left unchecked, genocide can trigger massive migration, regional political destabilisation, economic disintegration, chaos, misery, and war. In most UN missions, the method proposed for halting genocide is peacekeeping, as described in Chapter VI of the UN Charter. A more effective and long-term solution, however, would be to evolve warfighting, the topic of Chapter VII.

The United States's experience in the Vietnam War has resulted in a cautious approach toward the use of decisive military force. However, rather than retreating into isolationism, the United States should heed the lessons of Vietnam while promoting its international leadership in order to contribute more positively to world peace and security.

What are the lessons of intervention in Vietnam? While it is true that there are multiple versions, I suggest the following cardinal lessons for which broad support can be garnered. The first and most important lesson is that using military force requires a clear and compelling purpose. In other words, a vital national interest must be at stake to warrant the risks to both military and civilian lives in war.[11] Second, in a democracy, political leaders must convince the people to support a policy of going to war. For without the "essential domino" of public support, a war policy that is potentially costly in lives and national treasure is ulti-

mately unsustainable.[] Third, the essential nature of the conflict must be correctly identified, for the development of the strategies and tactics necessary to prevail in that conflict depends upon this first and most important of all strategic tasks.[] Finally, a crucial lesson of Vietnam is that morality matters. Despite what realist theorists and practitioners say, morality is vitally important in the political process of taking a nation to war.[]

Realists identify military and economic power as having central importance in international relations. They argue that morality, on the other hand, is irrelevant in world affairs. As George Kennan wrote in a 1985 article in *Foreign Affairs*, "There are no internationally accepted standards of morality to which the U.S. government could appeal if it wished to act in the name of moral principles."[] This narrowly realist analysis, however, does not help us understand why a first-rate power lost a war to a fifth-rate power in Southeast Asia. By every measure of realist conceptions of national power—military might, economic power, population, land area, and physical resources—the United States dwarfed its Vietnamese adversaries. Yet America lost the Vietnam War because it lacked a moral high ground in the conflict, a strategic weakness made more apparent by the revelations of the Pentagon Papers and the My Lai massacre. America's war policy in Vietnam was rendered insolvent by a moral-power gap.[]

The Roots of America's Failure to Stop Genocide. What does all this have to do with the failure of the United States to halt contemporary genocide? The failure of U.S. political leaders to understand and apply the above lessons of Vietnam contributed to their mishandling of genocide over the past decade. U.S. decision-makers faced clear and compelling evidence of genocide in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. Delayed intervention to halt these crimes against humanity reflects policymakers' perception of genocide prevention as a humanitarian rather than a vital national interest, largely because they underestimated the power of the moral imperative to stop genocide. Only vital interests warrant U.S. military force, leading policymakers to assign the task of ending genocide the lowest level of priority in the U.S. use-of-force doctrine.[] Furthermore, the misidentification of the nature of genocide has led decision-makers to include genocide in the category of internal conflicts for which they have adopted a peacekeeping strategy, complete with the operational constraints of neutrality, impartiality, and light weapons. Such an approach is inappropriate for dealing with mass-murderers and their victims. Consequently, the outcome of this muddled strategy in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo was humiliating failure for the United States, the West, and the UN.

U.S. policymakers, misreading a U.S. public actually far less cynical than the policymakers themselves, falsely assumed that public opinion would not support the use of U.S. combat troops to suppress UN-certified cases of genocide, for fear of military casualties.[] Therefore, U.S. policymakers neither framed the issue in terms of genocide, nor sought the support of the public for the suppression of it. In fact, they stretched the boundaries of cynicism by promulgating a policy of completely avoiding the "g" word whenever publicly discussing conflicts they knew to be genocide. U.S. policymakers were afraid that if they mentioned this term too

often, they might trigger a landslide of political pressure to uphold solemn U.S. legal and moral commitments that they deemed less than truly vital.

The Case of Rwanda. The international community's tragic failure to stop genocide in Rwanda is a clear example of U.S. rationalisation of disregard for moral imperatives. Despite early warning and ample evidence that genocide was being perpetrated in Rwanda in April 1994, the UN Security Council, at the urging of the United States, refused to allow UN troops already on site to stop the killing. In fact, the Security Council withdrew most of the UN troops for their own safety. Subscribing to an artificial distinction between morality and national interest, U.S. foreign-policy makers decided that stopping genocide in Rwanda was not a vital U.S. interest.

This decision not to act was, in the words of the International Panel of Eminent Persons tasked by the Organisation of African Unity to investigate the Rwandan genocide, "a function of domestic politics and geopolitical indifference.... The problem was that nothing was at stake for the U.S. in Rwanda. There were no interests to guard."[illegible] A report on the Rwandan genocide by Human Rights Watch concluded, "Those at the top [of the U.S. government] had little incentive to go beyond their misconceptions to understand the situation. Rwanda was small, poor, remote, and African—in their eyes, irrelevant to the 'national interest' of the U.S."[illegible] The failure of U.S. decision-makers to identify the prevention of genocide as a vital national interest rendered U.S. policy towards Rwanda aimless, ambiguous, and insolvent.

Another mistake derived from a poor appreciation of the lessons of intervention in Vietnam was the comparison of the Rwanda genocide to the chaos in Somalia. With the bloody October 1993 debacle in Mogadishu still fresh in their minds, political leaders in Washington tended to view the situation in Rwanda as just another vicious internal war. They were burned in their efforts to carry out what was thought to be a righteous mission to feed the starving in Somalia, and subsequently concluded—especially after the deaths of eighteen U.S. soldiers—that "no good deed goes unpunished."[illegible] The failure to distinguish between a civil war, in which both sides share the blame, and genocide, in which there are clear criminal perpetrators and innocent victims, was a mistake of the first magnitude. Miscomprehension of the nature of the conflict, as was the case of U.S. policy with regard to Rwanda, will inevitably produce inappropriate strategies and tactics.

Instead of employing a strategy of enforcement in Rwanda under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the U.S.-led Security Council continued to employ a strategy of peacekeeping in accordance with Chapter VI, complete with an "observer" mandate, an "impartial" posture, and "light" arming. The remaining 270 UN peacekeepers in Rwanda were ordered to act as an "intermediary between the parties in an attempt to secure their agreement to a cease-fire."[illegible] This inappropriate strategy produced paralysis in the face of genocide and made the United States and the UN, through their depraved indifference towards the plight of the victims of genocide, accomplices in the crime.

Finally, U.S. decision-makers did not believe that the U.S. public would support another potentially costly intervention in a distant foreign land, even to stop geno-

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cide. Therefore, once more the White House instructed its officials not to use the "g" word when referring to the killing in Rwanda for fear of triggering a political outcry and the legal obligation to stop it.[illegible] However, they badly underestimated the moral character of U.S. public opinion on this issue. According to a July 1994 public opinion poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, 80 percent of respondents said they would favor a U.S.-led intervention in Bosnia and Rwanda if a UN commission determined that genocide was occurring. In subsequent polls, whenever the crisis was properly defined as "genocide," high levels of public support emerged.[illegible]

In the spring of 1994, if U.S. policymakers had better grasped both the lessons of Vietnam and those of the Holocaust, the result would have probably been far different. With sound strategic vision, they would have perceived the halting of Rwandan genocide as a vital national interest. They would also have recognized the imperative of using or credibly threatening decisive force to stop it. Furthermore, the United States would have determined that a collective enforcement strategy was required to prevent this tragedy. Finally, decision-makers would have taken their case to the nation and won strong public support for a principled policy, despite the risk of casualties.

Possible Solutions? More optimistic observers might point out that U.S. policymakers have made some recent gains in recognizing the importance of stopping genocide and developing mechanisms to do so more effectively. They might, for instance, point to President Clinton's apology in Kigali in 1998 for the West's failure to stop the genocide in Rwanda. Alternatively, they might point to the White House's call in 1998 for the establishment of an international genocide early-warning system, so that the world can respond more quickly the next time genocide rears its ugly head.[illegible] They might also point to the UN Millennium Conference held in New York in September 2000, during which the nations of the world pledged to improve the UN's peacekeeping capabilities to respond to genocide. Finally, optimists might point to the repeated use of the "g" word in the presidential and vice-presidential debates during this past election year.

All of these examples are indications of progress on the question of intervention. However, this progress is moving at a glacial pace, and what little progress there has been has failed to address the linchpin of this disturbing dilemma—the proper use of force. When the president apologized in Kigali, he neglected to mention what he would do differently the next time that genocide occurred in Africa. There was more than sufficient early warning in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo, yet the international community still sat on its collective hands. The problem is not a lack of early warning, but rather a lack of decisive action once warning is given.

UN peacekeeping operations strug-

gling to address other kinds of internal conflicts can certainly benefit from increased resources, better intelligence, and improved coordination. However, given that peacekeeping is strategically inappropriate for the task of stopping perpetrators of genocide, better-supported, better-coordinated peacekeeping approaches to genocide will only produce better-supported, better-coordinated failures.

Finally, presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2000 elections may have used the "g" word, but none dared to suggest that the task of stopping genocide be raised officially to the level of a vital interest in U.S. foreign policy. To have done so would have provoked a much-needed, long-overdue national debate. The reality is that the United States, and by extension the international community, is no more ready to stop genocide today than it was in 1992, 1994, or 1998.

At the end of the day, the lessons of intervention in Vietnam do not contradict the lessons of the Holocaust. On the contrary, if applied properly, they complement and reinforce each other. Decisive force, in the form of multilateral collective security, is required to stop the criminal perpetrators of genocide. Therefore, instead of getting over the Vietnam War, we need to better understand its lessons and employ them more effectively. If we do not succeed in this task, then what hope can we give to future generations that genocide will not be allowed to happen again and again?

NOTES

1 See Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide—A Modern Crime," *Free World* 4 (April 1945): 39-43 and "The Genocide Convention at Fifty," United States Institute for Peace Special Report 7 January 1999 <www.usip.org>, accessed 25 June 2000.

2 Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973): especially chapter one.

3 Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979) 332.

4 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) 88-89.

5 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Second Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

6 George F. Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 64 (Winter 1985): 205-218.

7 For a discussion of the concept of "strategic gap," see Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943).

8 See, for example, Madeleine K. Albright, "Use of Force in a Post-Cold War World," Address at the National War College, National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 23 September 1993. *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 4 (27 September 1993): 665-668.

9 See Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999) and See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Redefining the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 78 (July/August 1999): 24.

10 International Panel of Eminent Personalities, Report to the Organization of African Unity, 29 May 2000 <www.oau.org>, accessed 23 August 2000: 12.32-12.33.

11 Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999) 624.

12 See Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

13 United Nations, *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping*, Third Edition (New York: Department of Public Information, 1996) 347.

14 Amnesty International, USA, "Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda: Education for Action," (Spring 1997): 3-4.

15 Steven Kull, "What the Public Knows that Washington Doesn't," *Foreign Policy* 101 (Winter 1995-96): 113-114; also see Kull and Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

16 See David J. Scheffer, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, "The United States: Measures to Prevent Genocide and Other Atrocities," Address at the Conference on Genocide and Crimes against Humanity: Early Warning and Prevention, Holocaust Museum, Washington, DC, 10 December 1998.