

ONE YEAR AFTER PRESIDENT CLINTON declared “never again” on the occasion of the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, the killing started in Rwanda. Politicians like to say “never again”. It’s short and punchy, filled with resolve. But many Americans believe the US should not be the world’s 911. They needn’t worry. In the last one hundred years there hasn’t been one ethnic, religious or tribal group sufficiently slaughtered to warrant our intervention. Our country has not yet produced leaders equal to the challenges of genocide. The United Nations hasn’t devised an effective system to deter or end genocide either. Its efforts in Darfur are a force - provided by the African Union - in place only after most of the killing has occurred and barely able to defend itself. The country with the resources to act is the US, but the US record speaks for itself.

I have been struck while reading about the murdering of Armenians, Jews, Kurds, Cambodians, Bosnians, Rwandans and Darfuris by how often the perpetrators of genocide were sensitive to the presence of outsiders. The commander of the UN Peacekeeping detachment in Rwanda has written that the mere presence of even two peacekeepers was sufficient to temporarily stop the killing. Fifteen foreign journalists spent the 100 days of genocide in Kigali and were not harmed. The killers respected their power to witness and inform.

There is no governmental solution to genocide. Experience shows that domestic political considerations will trump other considerations in the nations best able to help. Fear of casualties, costs and failure and bureaucratic inertia contribute to an atmosphere of hesitation. In the case of Rwanda the US even refused to describe genocide as genocide, imparting as it would have an obligation to act. The US could have helped to reinforce the detachment of 503 peacekeepers but didn’t want to spend the estimated 30 million dollars it would have cost. We later spent more than 230 million dollars to assist the survivors and perpetrators.

Another, non-violent, solution is possible. We know enough about genocide to recognize its precursors. The use of sophisticated telecommunications technology to move public opinion could be a powerful tool in a country where those precursors are present. What if there was an international, citizens’ organization which could take preemptive action in that country? Motivated and organized citizens who view the globe as a community could converge at problem areas voluntarily in sufficient numbers to serve as witnesses. This non-governmental, non-military approach could succeed.

The genocides of the past that had the best conditions for non-governmental solutions were those in which the genocide was part of a civil conflict and not an external war. When the threat of genocide is high enough the volunteers could converge and disburse throughout the threatened population in distinct groups. Each group would have the capability to transmit live audio and video. Witnesses transmitting to millions around the world would be a powerful deterrent to violence. Their presence would continue until political tensions calmed or governments

mobilized their collective resolve. In fact, the volunteers, through the risk to themselves, might shame governments into action.

This organization would have a sophisticated media outreach to harness the power of public opinion. For example, it could send press releases to the news outlets of each country that has volunteers in place, explaining who they are, why they are there, what they are doing and what they up to achieve. Photos and contact info would be provided so those media outlets could interview their fellow citizens directly. The volunteers would blog about their experiences and the threatened population with whom they have immersed. This access would get each country interested and vested in and following the progress of their citizens in an area at risk. Public opinion is the best leverage for success, and all available means will be brought to bear on the country at risk and the powers which could support a solution.

Few in the world would volunteer, of course, because of the considerable personal risk, but I believe enough would to make a difference. Volunteers in this effort could affect a real solution to a problem that has been too big even for governments to solve. The volunteers could rightfully claim to have helped prevent or stop genocide. Who could say no to that? There is an untapped resource of the world’s citizens who are frustrated with intractable problems and global emergencies and would take the initiative if they saw a way. The issue of access to troubled areas would, I believe, be a solvable challenge. When presented with a real plan to stop genocide, committed global citizens will be there.



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