



""A Problem from Hell"": America and the Age of Genocide

By Samantha Power

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From the Armenian Genocide to the ethnic cleansings of Kosovo and Darfur, modern history is haunted by acts of brutal violence. Yet American leaders who vow “never again” repeatedly fail to stop genocide. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *“A Problem from Hell”* draws upon exclusive interviews with Washington’s top policymakers, thousands of once classified documents, and accounts of reporting from the killing fields to show how decent Americans inside and outside government looked away from mass murder. Combining spellbinding history and seasoned political analysis, *“A Problem from Hell”* allows readers to hear directly from American decision-makers and dissenters, as well as from victims of genocide, and reveals just what was known and what might have been done while millions perished.

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""A Problem from Hell"": America and the Age of Genocide By Samantha Power Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #33108 in Books
- Brand: Basic Books AZ
- Published on: 2013-12-24
- Released on: 2013-12-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 1.65" w x 6.13" l, 1.74 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 656 pages



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

During the three years (1993-1996) Samantha Power spent covering the grisly events in Bosnia and Srebrenica, she became increasingly frustrated with how little the United States was willing to do to counteract the genocide occurring there. After much research, she discovered a pattern: "The United States had never in its history intervened to stop genocide and had in fact rarely even made a point of condemning it as it occurred," she writes in this impressive book. Debunking the notion that U.S. leaders were unaware of the horrors as they were occurring against Armenians, Jews, Cambodians, Iraqi Kurds, Rwandan Tutsis, and Bosnians during the past century, Power discusses how much was known and when, and argues that much human suffering could have been alleviated through a greater effort by the U.S. She does not claim that the U.S. alone could have prevented such horrors, but does make a convincing case that even a modest effort would have had significant impact. Based on declassified information, private papers, and interviews with more than 300 American policymakers, Power makes it clear that a lack of political will was the most significant factor for this failure to intervene. Some courageous U.S. leaders did work to combat and call attention to ethnic cleansing as it occurred, but the vast majority of politicians and diplomats ignored the issue, as did the American public, leading Power to note that "no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for his indifference to its occurrence. It is thus no coincidence that genocide rages on." This powerful book is a call to make such indifference a thing of the past. --Shawn Carkonen

From Publishers Weekly

Power, a former journalist for U.S. News and World Report and the Economist and now the executive director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights, offers an uncompromising and disturbing examination of 20th-century acts of genocide and U.S. responses to them. In clean, unadorned prose, Power revisits the Turkish genocide directed at Armenians in 1915-1916, the Holocaust, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, Iraqi attacks on Kurdish populations, Rwanda, and Bosnian "ethnic cleansing," and in doing so, argues that U.S. intervention has been shamefully inadequate. The emotional force of Power's argument is carried by moving, sometimes almost unbearable stories of the victims and survivors of such brutality. Her analysis of U.S. politics what she casts as the State Department's unwritten rule that nonaction is better than action with a PR backlash; the Pentagon's unwillingness to see a moral imperative; an isolationist right; a suspicious left and a population unconcerned with distant nations aims to show how ingrained inertia is, even as she argues that the U.S. must reevaluate the principles it applies to foreign policy choices. In the face of firsthand accounts of genocide, invocations of geopolitical considerations and studied and repeated refusals to accept the reality of genocidal campaigns simply fail to convince, she insists. But Power also sees signs that the fight against genocide has made progress. Prominent among those who made a difference are Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew who invented the word genocide and who lobbied the U.N. to make genocide the subject of an international treaty, and Senator William Proxmire, who for 19 years spoke every day on the floor of the U.S. Senate to urge the U.S. to ratify the U.N. treaty inspired by Lemkin's work. This is a well-researched and powerful study that is both a history and a call to action. Photos.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

In the wake of the Holocaust, United States policymakers have been rhetorically committed to the idea of preventing genocide, and yet they have consistently failed to back up their words with actions. Although

Power begins her magisterial chronicle of failure with the Turkish extermination of the Armenians during the First World War, she concentrates on America's recent reluctance to intervene in the mass slaughter of civilians in Iraq, Bosnia, and Rwanda. She argues that had the U.S. done so—particularly in Bosnia and Rwanda—it could have averted the murder of tens or hundreds of thousands; instead, geopolitical considerations, indifference, and worries over domestic support trumped American ideals. Though clearly imbued with a sense of outrage, Power is judicious in her portraits of those who opposed intervention, and keenly aware of the perils and costs of military action. Her indictment of U.S. policy is therefore all the more damning.

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Users Review

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