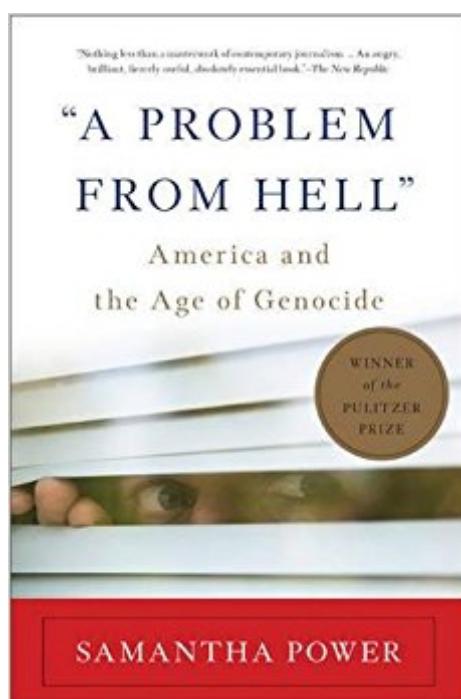


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""A Problem From Hell"": America And The Age Of Genocide



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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
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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. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

When I learned of this book, I really hesitated to purchase it because of long-held disdain for the author. I am really glad that I didn't give in to that emotion, and purchased it anyway. Doing so, among other things, has changed my perception of Ms. Powers to that of a thoughtful political scholar. While I'm still at only 22% of the way through this book, I am very confident in sharing that Ms. Powers has done a fabulous job of discussing this very real problem, and in a very apolitical way. At this point, she has led me through the pre-WW1 Turk/Armenian genocide, through the holocaust, and into the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia, and in a very methodical thoughtful way, and includes the efforts and difficulties in the original United Nations efforts to condemn it. This is a somewhat ponderous read for a layperson, but anyone that is willing to invest the time and energy in doing so will come away with a much more comprehensive understanding of genocide and the difficulties with both recognizing it while it's occurring and responding to it. It also, indirectly, warns us of giving in to the hysteria of condemning any group; after all, such hysteria is one of the elements that can lead to genocide.

Samantha Power's book is a thorough investigation into the various occurrences of genocide and America's reluctance to act, in what I feel to be our greatest foreign policy failure. The pattern is undeniable. We have had access to information in all cases, from Turkey to Bosnia, yet we chose not to do anything for a myriad of reasons. It was only until it was too late that we did anything of substance. Our selfishly narrow view of what constitutes "national interest" is due for expansion, and not for something as vaguely defined as 'terrorism.' The book's greatest point is that we, as the most powerful nation in the world, have a moral imperative to help prevent atrocities. As far as what this book covers, not only does it delve into the history of genocide and Raphael Lemkin's tireless crusade to get it recognized as an international crime, but it examines each case in terms of origin, details of what happened, and the response (or lack of one) from the international community. I found out about this book because the author was an interviewee for the recent documentary *WATCHERS OF THE SKY*, which I also recommend. It's an oft quoted maxim that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it (or something like that), so hopefully we've learned from our past mistakes.

In "A Problem from Hell" Samantha Power presents an engaging analysis of selected genocides from the 20th century, and America's complicit role in enabling these acts to occur. Each of the chapters goes into some depth, covering the Turkish genocide against Armenians, the Khmer

Rouge genocide in Cambodia, the Iraqi genocide against the Kurds, the Hutu genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, and the Serb genocide against the Muslims. Power also dedicates considerable attention to Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-American lawyer who coined the term "genocide" and who championed the passage of the United Nations Convention against Genocide in 1948. The book is a dark lesson on humanity's capacity for evil. It's also a sobering critique of how people and their political leaders repeatedly fail to respond -- either proactively or even reactively -- to the crimes being committed. "A Problem from Hell" is a hefty 516 pages in length (excluding endnotes, etc.), and it took me several cross-country flights to complete. The obvious strengths of the book are its highly readable accounts of the selected genocides that Power decided to cover, and a strong concluding chapter that endeavors to tie together the common themes and lessons of the preceding chapters. But I was somewhat disappointed that Ms. Power didn't spend more time exploring the psychological factors that cause people to rationalize that doing nothing is the right thing to do. Power's approach is entirely political -- and almost exclusively focused on the United States. It's a fair angle from which to analyze the chosen genocides, but it begs the question of whether deeper issues that transcend borders may also contribute meaningfully to the complicity. Shedding light on genocides that occurred prior to the US ascent to global power in the 20th century may have been a constructive addition to the analysis. This book was required reading for a class on US Foreign Policy that I took last spring. It's a great book for such a class -- and it should also be required reading for anyone interested in an exploration of the background and causes of contemporary genocides.

Brilliantly written, it moves readers to tears and...exasperation with an unjust and profoundly cruel, senseless world. Everyone is thinking of covering their back, the focus here is on how America has disengaged itself, but in fact, America is not the only one, Europeans share in this disgraceful race. The Age of Genocide is here, and our whole culture focused on the defense of national sovereignty isn't about to open itself up to a more merciful and generous vision of the world (as is presently seen in the way the West is refusing to accept refugees from war-ravaged countries like Syria and Afghanistan and so many others) Books such as this one are deeply important - possibly reflecting the last gasps of a dying liberal culture. Or perhaps not, if many people read this - and this book will open their eyes, how could it not? - then all hope for a change for the better might not be lost.

Warmly recommended.

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