



HAL
open science

An International But Especially American Event

Jacques Sémelin

► **To cite this version:**

Jacques Sémelin. An International But Especially American Event. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 2009, 4 (2), pp.161 - 166. hal-01475706

HAL Id: hal-01475706

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01475706>

Submitted on 24 Feb 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

An International But Especially American Event

Jacques Sémelin

Abstract.

The report of the Genocide Prevention Task Force (the Albright-Cohen Report), prepared under the auspices of the US Institute of Peace (USIP), is of great significance to the field of genocide studies. I do not hesitate to say that this report is an international event. Indeed, this is the first time that a group of experts—mainly former high officials, former diplomats, generals, and members of Congress—have worked together to propose a coherent and well-argued list of recommendations to a state so that its government can play a major role in preventing genocide throughout the world. One may certainly regret that so few genocide scholars and NGO members were consulted; it seems clear that the report has been written for a public policy audience rather than an academic audience. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there has been no equivalent document—directed to a particular state rather than to an organization such as the United Nations—in the young field of genocide studies or in international affairs. In particular, such reports cannot currently be found in the United Kingdom or in France.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Sémelin, Jacques (2009) "An International But Especially American Event," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2: Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol4/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Tampa Library at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

An International But Especially American Event

Jacques Sémelin

*Centre d'études et de recherches internationales (CERI),
Sciences Po, Paris, France*

The report of the Genocide Prevention Task Force (the Albright-Cohen Report), prepared under the auspices of the US Institute of Peace (USIP), is of great significance to the field of genocide studies. I do not hesitate to say that this report is an international event. Indeed, this is the first time that a group of experts—mainly former high officials, former diplomats, generals, and members of Congress—have worked together to propose a coherent and well-argued list of recommendations to a state so that its government can play a major role in preventing genocide throughout the world. One may certainly regret that so few genocide scholars and NGO members were consulted; it seems clear that the report has been written for a public policy audience rather than an academic audience. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there has been no equivalent document—directed to a particular state rather than to an organization such as the United Nations—in the young field of genocide studies or in international affairs. In particular, such reports cannot currently be found in the United Kingdom or in France.

Above all, this report is an American event, since the Genocide Prevention Task Force recommendations have been formulated mainly by American experts to convince the current American administration (that of President Barack Obama) to implement policy in the field of genocide prevention. As its subtitle indicates, the report is intended to be a “blueprint for U.S. policymakers.”¹ However, to grasp the significance of such an initiative, let us consider a broader vision of its historical importance, keeping in mind all the past failures of states in general, and the United States especially, to prevent and to stop genocide. This is why the Genocide Prevention Task Force is an “answer” or, at least, a follow-up to Samantha Power’s famous 2002 book, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*.² Power’s book analyzes the constant passivity of the US government in the face of ongoing genocides throughout the twentieth century, including the Holocaust. To some extent, the Genocide Prevention Task Force was a way for America to say “never again”: never again will America maintain a position of passivity.

Now, the question is: Is this report convincing to its target audience? In the field of genocide prevention, one too often reads generous statements and wishful thinking. This is not at all the case with the Albright-Cohen Report, whose goal is to be accurate and realistic as well as well balanced. All the report’s vocabulary comes from strategic studies and international affairs. In this respect, the Task Force brings the debate on genocide prevention from the margins to the mainstream of foreign affairs. There is a price to be paid for this: the report’s terminology is sometimes bureaucratic, in order, I assume, to convince key members of the US administration to take action on genocide prevention.

Interestingly enough, the task force has decided to distance itself from the legal definition of genocide (as it is accepted and recognized by the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, or UNCG). This is a wise decision, not only because this definition is a matter of endless debate and controversy among genocide scholars but also because the legal definition protects only four kinds of groups. Furthermore, the legal definition places those who want to prevent genocide in a deep contradiction: as soon as lethal violence against civilian populations is legally recognized as the crime of genocide, it is by definition too late to prevent it.

But is the expression “mass atrocities,” from the legal expert David Scheffer, the most appropriate choice for enlarging the notion? This is matter of debate as well. Faced with the same problem of definition, the steering committee of the *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* (OEMV) finally decided on the expression “mass violence,” which was perceived as more neutral and general. The term is used to refer to

human phenomena of collective destructiveness which are primarily due to political, social, religious or cultural causes. This category excludes natural disasters and technological accidents from the start. The notion of “mass violence” does not coincide with the armed combat inherent in war, but rather with all violence which directly or indirectly affects civilian populations, either in times of war or of peace.³

Thus, “mass violence” covers genocide, ethnic cleansing, massacre, and other sorts of lethal human behaviors that qualify as war crimes, crimes against humanity, or crimes of genocide.

In the Albright-Cohen Report, another problem of definition is posed by the scope of genocide prevention, or, more exactly, of limiting the definition. Is genocide prevention—a sort of diplomatic and strategic policy—fully autonomous or is it, rather, linked to the more general field of crisis prevention? Since genocide is considered in broader terms, the second option is much more satisfactory. But here we have another vocabulary issue: Are we dealing with *conflict prevention* or *crisis prevention*? The first formulation, often used in peace studies, is rather problematic, given that conflict is inherent to life. The expression “crisis prevention” is therefore much better and more realistic: prevention is aimed at ensuring that a given conflict does not evolve into a crisis that might generate mass violence. In other words, genocide prevention is “simply” a particular dimension of crisis prevention. While the report sometimes refers to “conflict prevention” in general terms, “crisis prevention” is used more frequently, including in the report’s summary. In my opinion, this is a good choice.

After reading the report, it is hard not to share its general argument: when mass violence is rising in a given conflict, between the two extremes of passivity and military intervention, a range of initiatives can be undertaken. This is exactly what the Genocide Prevention Task Force was about. Their report formulates interesting thoughts and recommendations, and raises critical issues and debates. I will focus my comments below on the report’s primary affirmation, recommendations, and assumption.

I.

One of the basic arguments of the Albright-Cohen Report, if not its main argument, is that genocide prevention is in America’s national interest and is not purely a humanitarian concern or a human-rights issue. Within the first few pages of the report

we find this solemn sentence: “As Americans consider our country’s role in the world in the years to come, we are convinced that the U.S. government can and must do more to prevent genocide, a crime that threatens not only our values, but our national interests” (ix). To justify this strong affirmation, the report notes that genocidal situations are deeply linked with major internal conflict or the taking of power by more radical or more harshly authoritarian leaders, which generates regional instability and an influx of refugees. Consequently, these crises

feed on and fuel other threats in weak and corrupt states, with dangerous spillover effects that know no boundaries. If the United States does not engage early in preventing these crimes, we inevitably bear greater costs—in feeding millions of refugees and trying to manage long-lasting regional crises. (xvi)

In other words, even if US policy makers have no desire to become engaged in situations that lead to genocide, they are inevitably forced to cope with them. On this basis, the authors assert that it is in the US national interest to contribute to ensuring that these situations do not escalate.

This interesting argument has already been supported by earlier reports advocating that the international community should play a major role in preventing such crises in order to limit the burden of their aftermath.⁴ However, the specificity of the Albright-Cohen Report is to underline the particular responsibility of the United States. But the argument correlating genocidal threat and US national interests is repeated so many times that one may wonder whether the authors really believe it.

It is regrettable that the report does not really discuss current case studies. Let us take the example of the ongoing crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Partly a consequence of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, this armed conflict has led the deaths of at least 4 million people. But can we seriously prove that this lethal crisis has threatened, and is threatening, American interests? I doubt that many US security experts really believe in such a threat.

It took me a long time to admit, as a genocide scholar, that states are not really interested in preventing genocide as long as their own populations are not targeted; in other words, they are not really concerned about rescuing foreign people. This is simply not their priority, unless they can profit from such actions for other purposes (economic gains, a military presence in the region, etc).

Does this mean that the “national argument” put forward in the Albright-Cohen Report is not relevant at all? That would be too simplistic a conclusion. Yet this argument will be acceptable only if it coincides with the desire of the United States to assume a leadership role as a great power in this highly sensitive issue, eager to deter “Hell on Earth”—that is, genocide. Inevitably, however, this would require America to embrace, yet again, the role of the moral leader against evil, standing at the head of the civilized world . . .

II.

A main recommendation of the Albright-Cohen Report is that “the president should demonstrate that preventing genocide and . . . mass atrocities is a national priority” (6).

Consequently, “the administration should develop and promulgate a government-wide policy on preventing genocide and mass atrocities”; this would involve creating “a standing interagency mechanism for [the] analysis of threats of genocide and mass atrocities and consideration of appropriate preventive action” (111).

The report also suggests that “the national security advisor and the director of national intelligence should establish genocide early warning as a formal priority for

the intelligence community as a means to improve reporting and assessments on the potential for genocide and mass atrocities” (112):

The State Department and the intelligence community should incorporate training on early warning of genocide and mass atrocities into programs for foreign service and intelligence officers and analysts. (112)

Finally, the task force proposes that

Congress appropriate an additional \$250 million annually to the international affairs budget to finance initiatives to prevent genocide and mass atrocities in countries at risk. This additional investment—less than a dollar for every American each year—would not only support valuable individual projects, but also provide focus for foreign policy professionals engaged in high-risk countries. (11)

This very ambitious plan is fully coherent with the report’s main statement (see above). For the first time, American policy makers have at their disposal a range of measures to implement genocide-prevention policy.

As a European scholar, I am not able to assess the relevance of these recommendations in the American political system. Certainly, the efforts of the task force are unprecedented; but can this impressive body of political, administrative, and financial proposals replace a lack of political will on the part of a given government? For example, let us take the case of early warnings. The Albright-Cohen Report suggests an inter-agency mechanism, including the creation of a list of countries under watch. But that kind of information is already provided by some NGOs, such as the International Crisis Group, founded after the Rwandan genocide for precisely that purpose. Similarly, genocide scholars already know more or less which countries are at risk. In January 2004, for instance, delegates from fifty-five nations at the Conference on Genocide Prevention, organized by Sweden, showed themselves to be well aware of these dangers, although the results of their work have gone almost unnoticed. According to their research, there was a risk of genocide in thirteen countries: Sudan, Myanmar/Burma, Burundi, Rwanda, the DRC, Somalia, Uganda, Algeria, China, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Ethiopia.⁵

It would be fine if the United States established its own list and improved its own system of early warning by taking genocidal threats into account. Nevertheless, the critical issue is not establishing the most sophisticated early warning mechanism but acting or to reacting in a timely manner on the basis of the information that mechanism would provide.

Let us hope that if the current US administration decides to implement the report’s recommendations, this will improve the analysis of crises by creating a “culture of genocide prevention” that would give decision makers a wider range of options at the early stages.

III.

Finally, the most important question must not be forgotten: What kind of decision or action would have a preventive effect? The entire work of the Genocide Prevention Task Force relies on the assumption that genocide is preventable. Having compared three cases (the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Bosnia) in my book *Purify and Destroy*, I have come to more or less the same conclusion.⁶ Fortunately, genocide is not the result of ancient hatred but, rather, a process that tends to instrumentalize ethnic and religious tensions. Theoretically, and possibly in practice, this process can be interrupted.

But the longer one waits, the worse it becomes. There are now hundreds of books on the passivity of the international community.

However, it is one thing to state that genocide can be prevented and another to determine the most judicious actions that might have a preventive effect in a given crisis. The Albright-Cohen Report notes that “action before or at an early stage of a crisis holds the greatest promise” (2). But action of what kind? There is simply no discussion in the report of what can be—or not be—effective. Rather, the report presumes that since genocide is most often planned, it can be interrupted by counter-measures. This general affirmation needs to be challenged. In theory it is correct, but the reality is much more complicated. While the report acknowledges the existence of a degree of uncertainty, policy making gives no guarantee of what the short and long-term effects may be. The outcome may be the opposite of what was expected.

The consequence of this unpredictability? We may suspect that prescribed initiatives, whether modest or ambitious, will not bring about the anticipated effects. Intellectuals seeking to exert an antidotal influence on a discourse of hatred may, of course, be acting in good faith. But it can also happen, against their wishes or through clumsiness, that their words ultimately increase tension rather than diffusing it. In the same way, the effectiveness of using economic sanctions against regimes accused of serious violations of human rights is also hotly debated, because of the harmful effects such sanctions can have on local populations; the sanctions taken against Iraq under Saddam Hussein are often cited as an example. Still more concretely, NGOs or states intervening in crises with the laudable intention of restraining or halting massacres cannot control the effects of their interventions, because they may not be best placed to intervene. In other cases, their knowledge of the realities of the country is limited, their actions may not have the desired impact, or their actions could even provoke the opposite effect of the one intended. The case of the American intervention in Somalia in 1992 is a well-known example, as is the US-led intervention in Iraq to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein. It is regrettable that the report does not really discuss these different case studies from the 1990s to assess the relevance of potential preventive actions.

* * *

I wish to add two final remarks on this important report. Its last chapter suggests several possibilities in the field of international cooperation. The task force appears to endorse the UN doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” in general terms. However, it clearly recommends the creation, under US leadership, of an international network dedicated to genocide prevention: “The secretary of state should launch a major diplomatic initiative to create among like-minded governments, international organizations, and NGOs a formal network dedicated to the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities” (104). Is this not a way to bypass the United Nations? Such an international network of states and non-state actors could be more effective and reactive than the formal structure of the United Nations; however, if this network is indeed controlled by the United States, it will come across other difficulties—the first being its political legitimacy, since some significant actors will likely refuse to be part of it.

Nevertheless, let us admit the theoretical scenario that America really becomes the lead state willing to prevent genocide throughout the world. Such a global commitment will involve moral consequences and constraints that are particularly difficult for the United States. If it wants to be consistent, it must also join the 108 states already part of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague; unfortunately, the task force

does not recommend such a decision. I see a contradiction here: If the United States wants to have this moral authority in the world, how can it refuse to allow its own citizens to be judged by the ICC? The argument that Americans should be judged by an American court cannot be understood abroad, particularly in Europe. It took thirty-eight years for the United States to ratify the 1948 UNCG; let us hope that it will take much less time to sign the 1998 Rome Statute of the ICC.

Finally, the Albright-Cohen Report seems to have been written with the future administration of Barack Obama in mind. We know that the new president feels concerned about this issue. However, will he act in the direction suggested by the task force? Is the US Congress ready to allocate funds for such action? This seems unlikely, considering the overwhelming responsibilities of the president, who is dealing with so many extreme difficulties, both domestic and foreign.

But should voicing these criticisms prevent us from trying to do something, and lead actors to cripple themselves with the very thought of their potentially negative effects? It is true that, generally speaking, every situation of mass violence may be of paralyzing complexity, and it is vital to exercise caution and clear-sightedness. But it is too easy for scholars to criticize those who try to “do something” in the name of the complexity that it is their job to decipher. Looked at from the point of view of those who have died in massacres, and of those who still risk the same fate, this position is not morally tenable. It would, moreover, destroy the very basis for any political or social action, whatever the objective in view, to argue that because we can never be sure of the outcome, it is futile to intervene. Any political action in the name of change or peace would, by definition, be in vain; we would effectively be advocating a “contemplative immobilism” of world misfortunes. Whatever its future impact, the Albright-Cohen Report will stand as a first and promising step.

Notes

1. Madeleine K. Albright and William S. Cohen, chairs, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: Genocide Prevention Task Force, 2008), http://www.usip.org/genocide_taskforce/report.html (accessed 10 June 2009). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
2. Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
3. Jacques Sémelin, “Our Scientific Approach,” in *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* (Paris: Sciences Po, CNRS, CERI, Caen Memorial, Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, 2008), ed. Jacques Sémelin, http://www.massviolence.org/IMG/pdf/Our_Project.pdf (accessed 11 June 2009), 4.
4. See Carnegie Foundation on Preventing Deadly Conflict, *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997), <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/subsites/ccpdc/pubs/rept97/finfr.htm> (accessed 11 June 2009).
5. The conference noted that this list should without doubt be extended to other countries as well. See Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 362–75.
6. Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*.