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Ending Our Age of Suffering

A plan to stop genocide.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen October 10, 2009 | 12:00 am



Genocide is much discussed and poorly understood. It is regularly decried, yet little is done to prevent it. It is seen to be one of the most intractable of modern phenomena, a periodic cataclysm that erupts seemingly out of nowhere, often in distant places--Indonesia, Guatemala, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur--where ethnic conflict or hatred is said to have spun out of control. So we can do little about it. Bill Clinton said as much while Serbs were slaughtering Bosnians: "Until these folks get tired of killing each other, bad things will continue to happen."

Perhaps we fail to prevent genocides not because they can't be stopped, and not just because we lack the will to stop them, but because we have misunderstood their nature. Perhaps if we understood genocide properly, a feasible path to stopping this scourge of humanity would become apparent. It may seem bold to say that we have not understood genocide. But, after studying the subject for decades, that is the conclusion I have reached. Genocides are so horrifying, so seemingly in defiance of the ordinary rhythms of social life, so threatening to what we believe we know about ourselves and the world--so out of this world--that we don't think clearly about them. We need to start over and rethink their every aspect: What they are. How they begin. How and why they end. Why they unfold as they do. Why victims are chosen. Why the killers kill. And, most of all, what we can do to stop them.

Even something as fundamental as the real extent of the problem is unknown. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, mass murderers have killed more, perhaps many more, than 100 million people--a much greater number than have died as a consequence of conventional military operations. So genocide is, by this fundamental measure, *worse* than war. Furthermore, people tend to think of our era's mass slaughters--of Armenians, Jews, Kurds, Bosnians, Tutsis, Kosovars, and Darfuris (not to mention recent history's long list of less-well-known mass murders)--as discrete, unusual events. This is wrong: Large-scale mass murder is a systemic feature of modern states and the international system, and that is how we should begin to treat it.

The foundational problem, in fact, is not even genocide. Genocide, however we define it, is but one expression of a broader and more fundamental phenomenon: eliminationism.

Political and social conflicts among groups exist in all human societies. In many societies, groups come to be seen as deleterious to the well-being of the majority or, sometimes, a powerful minority. How this happens and the character of the pernicious qualities projected onto such groups vary enormously. When it does, people can deem the perniciousness of such populaces to be so great that they want to neutralize them by eliminating the group or by destroying its capacity to inflict putative harm. So they employ any of

the five principal means of elimination: forced transformation, repression, expulsion, prevention of reproduction, or extermination. But, whatever means they choose, the desire and the attempt to *eliminate* peoples or groups should be understood as the core problem.

Precisely because these eliminationist means are functional equivalents, perpetrators typically use several of them simultaneously. The Turks did so for the Armenians. The Germans did so for the Jews. The Sudanese have done so for their victims, and so did the Serbs. Alisa Muratčauš, former president of the Association of Concentration Camp Torture Survivors in Sarajevo, explains that the Serbs "aimed to eliminate all Bosnian people." Yet they used a variety of means: "Some people will be expelled to another country, a Western country. Some people would be killed. Some people will be [kept] alive for maybe [the Serbs'] personal needs. Who knows? Maybe like slavery."

Whenever we see these large-scale violent assaults, such as expulsions or incarcerations mixed together with killing, we should immediately recognize them as being eliminationist assaults (which could also expand into much larger-scale killing) and respond to them with all the vigor that we ought to apply to genocides. And we should certainly not sit on our hands with pointless debates about definitions--does it qualify as genocide?--as we have done with the former Yugoslavia and Darfur. We should realize that the non-lethal aspects of eliminationist assaults are as critical to combat as the killing itself. Appreciating this helps to make clear that the problem we are confronting is even more vast and more urgent. Genocide and eliminationism should no longer receive the third-rate treatment that they currently do from our politicians: They should be at the core of present and future international policy-making.

Beyond appreciating its breadth, there are two other crucial facts we need to recognize about eliminationism. First, it is a form of politics. Like war, eliminationism is the extension of politics by other means. Political leaders use eliminationist measures to maintain or further power, socially and politically transform a country, defuse a real or putative threat, purify a society according to some ideological blueprint, or achieve any of many other aspirations. Mass murder and elimination are thus politics not in a superficial sense, but at their core, because they are purposeful, calculated acts of leaders meant to achieve political goals. They are an integral part of the repertoire of political leaders, always in principle available, and, in our time, frequently used. It is precisely because eliminationism is such a successful form of politics--those employing it almost always effectively carry out the eliminationist task--that political leaders have adopted it so often during the last century and this one.

Second, even though eliminationism may be grounded in widespread beliefs among groups about the pernicious nature of other people, such hatreds or prejudices are not what unleash eliminationist assaults. Eliminationist assaults are not spontaneous popular outbursts. Like other major state policies requiring large institutional mobilization and regional or nationwide coordination, eliminationism is initiated by one political leader or a small group of leaders, who at a specific moment make a discrete decision to expel, kill, or otherwise eliminate the targeted people.

Idi Amin initiated the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in Uganda. Presidents Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia and José Efraín Ríos Montt were responsible for the mass murder in Guatemala of Mayans under the guise of counterinsurgency. Mengistu Haile Mariam masterminded and initiated the various Ethiopian eliminationist programs. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leaders around him instituted the murderous policies that took almost two million Cambodian lives. The Argentinean junta's members started the "dirty war" against their real and imagined enemies. Augusto Pinochet authorized the slaughter of thousands in Chile. Hafez Al Assad gave the order to indiscriminately murder people in Hama. Saddam Hussein orchestrated the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Slobodan Milošević enacted one Serbian eliminationist onslaught after the next. Théoneste Bagosora, the Rwandan Ministry of Defense's director of services, and a small circle of associates set in motion the comprehensive assault on the Tutsis. Omar Al Bashir and the other political Islamists who run Sudan initiated the mass murder of Darfuris. In none of these cases was the eliminationist assault inevitable. These decision-makers could have decided otherwise. They could have spared innumerable lives.

So why did they decide to do it? Even the most monstrous leaders have also been pragmatic and purposeful politicians. All sought power and all made every effort to keep it. Even when political leaders are--like their followers, who willingly implement their policies--animated by hatred, even when they dehumanize the targeted people, they are still politicians, which means they are still

interested in power. They will pursue eliminationist policies only if they believe these policies will succeed at enhancing their own power or furthering cherished goals--that is, only if they believe the benefits to themselves will outweigh the costs. And, more often than not, from Indonesia to Ethiopia to Guatemala to Iraq to Sudan, that is exactly what eliminationist policies have done. This explains why rationally calculating political leaders use such policies so often.

Recognizing that eliminationism--not only its most murderous variant, genocide--is a widespread problem, and that it is a form of politics, and that it is pursued by leaders who believe (almost always correctly) that it will benefit them, how can we respond politically? Can we remove eliminationism from the standard repertoire of policy? In other words, can we save millions of lives?

Past efforts have accomplished little. The 60-year-old U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide has proven itself almost useless, and the United Nations, as the international community's lead institution, has been a foot-dragging disaster, doing more to enable eliminationist leaders than to stop them. Special tribunals and the International Criminal Court (ICC), all necessary and good, have been too late, too slow, and too partial to be effective--the ICC took more than five years from the start of the Darfur genocide just to issue an unenforceable arrest warrant for Al Bashir! Serious diplomatic efforts have been meager. The occasional military response has been years late. The Responsibility to Protect movement, while promising, remains slow-moving. All in all, the current anti-genocide regime is ad hoc and toothless. In fact, it would be fair to say that, as a practical matter, it doesn't exist. And eliminationism more generally--which can include the expulsion of a vast number of people from their homes--is barely on the international community's radar, meaning that, unless an assault is seen to fit the restricted definition of genocide, it is unlikely that the international community will respond forcefully.

A robust anti-eliminationist system would contain three substantial and interrelated components: prevention, intervention, and punishment. Currently, there is no prevention regime, only infrequent attempts at intervention, and rarely any punishment. All three parts of such a system need to be thought through, but *preventing* eliminationist assaults, more than intervening to end them or punishing the perpetrators after the fact, should be our initial focus.

Prevention works in two ways. First, changing the mindset of leaders and creating conditions that make eliminationism utterly unworkable removes it from the toolkit of political leaders so that pursuing such politics does not even occur to them. Democratic institutions do this effectively. Mass murder and elimination have ever more become domestic rather than international matters. And not only do today's democracies not practice such domestic politics, but, it is fair to say, eliminationism is not even a consideration for their leaders. A world of democracies would be a world without mass murder, or, at worst, with an enormously reduced incidence of it. Eliminationism today is the practice of dictatorships, and today's dictatorships should all be considered proto-eliminationist regimes. Even when their leaders and dominant groups are not undertaking eliminationist assaults, precisely because they are always at least implicitly threatened by the groups and people they are repressing, they are at any moment not that far away from ramping up their repressive measures to eliminationist levels of violence.

Second, and far more immediately effective and doable, is radically altering the cost-benefit calculus of political leaders and the immediate subordinates upon whom they rely, to make the price of eliminationist politics so costly that leaders will not opt for it. A critical feature of international politics is generally underestimated: the capacity of political leaders to learn. In today's globalized world, knowledge of what is possible or impossible, permissible or impermissible is rapidly disseminated and absorbed. Until now political leaders have learned that the politics of eliminationism is a politics of impunity. We could teach them and the world the opposite. If we did, we could rapidly end or greatly reduce the threat posed by eliminationism.

Let's look at two possible measures for raising the price of eliminationism. If leaders knew that initiating eliminationist assaults would turn them into permanent outlaws--that is, the legal doctrine of *Hostis Humani Generis* (enemies of humanity), until now applied to pirates, would apply to them for the rest of their lives--and, if they understood that they would be relentlessly hunted until they were brought to justice, their cost-benefit calculations would radically change. If not just leaders but all their high-ranking civilian and military subordinates were similarly declared international outlaws (by dint of serving in institutions that, according to international law, can clearly be deemed criminal organizations) and subject to the same penalties as the political leaders, those leaders would calculate their chances of enlisting their subordinates, and relying on their cooperation, very differently.

Of course, as the ICC has shown, indicting an eliminationist leader is easier than bringing him to justice. But what if the democratic countries of the world were to adopt a modified version of the United States's Rewards for Justice program--which has led to the capture and killing of major terrorists and, when instituted after the fact, Rwandan genocidaires--guaranteeing that any eliminationist assault would immediately trigger million-dollar bounties being placed on the heads of political and military leaders and their high-ranking subordinates? Then the critical conditions of deterrence would be met: A powerful disincentive would be in place, accompanied by a reasonable certitude on the part of anyone contemplating the deed that the disincentive will be applied to him. No political leader, wanting the good life, would want to be wanted dead or alive. Which dictator in a poor country could even be sure his own bodyguards would not turn on him? The Obama administration, like earlier Democratic and Republican administrations, offers such bounties for terrorists who kill a few dozen or a few thousand people. How can we justify not doing the same when the lives of millions are at stake?

I asked Rwandan Minister of Justice Tharcisse Karugarama--who has steeped himself in the problem of genocide and knows more about it than just about any other public figure in the world--whether a *guarantee* that anyone initiating genocide would be hunted down would have prevented the Rwandan genocide and would be effective in preventing future mass slaughters. "Definitely, definitely, definitely, many times definitely," he replied, then explained: "If people knew that at the end of the day they'll be the losers, they'd never invest in a losing enterprise. Because genocide, as you correctly pointed out, is a political enterprise, it's a political game. But again, it's a power play, it's wealth, it's everything. So, if people involved knew at the end of the day they'd be the losers, they would not play the game. That's for sure."

There are other deterrents available as well. Most dictators rely on their militaries to stay in power. If dictators understood that their eliminationist policies would trigger the destruction of their country's military capability, then this also would be a powerful disincentive. Under such a policy, political leaders would quickly learn: If they choose to initiate an eliminationist assault, the world's democracies, led by the United States, would bomb their military bases and forces (steadfastly avoiding population centers and civilian infrastructure). How many dictators would begin an eliminationist assault if they were facing such consequences? Bombing by nato in 1995 quickly forced Milošević to stop the eliminationist assault on Bosnians. If it had been done three years earlier, when the onslaught began, many tens of thousands of people would not have lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands more would not have been expelled from their homes, raped, or brutalized.

To buttress the deterrent force of such threats, these and other political, diplomatic, and military measures should be communicated to all world leaders and their high-level subordinates by every available means the moment they assume office, democratically or not. Handbooks should be distributed by every major international and regional association (the U.N., NATO, the WTO, the African Union, etc.), spelling out these and other anti-eliminationist measures. Every political leader, cabinet member, and high-ranking military and police official ought to be put on notice: Should you decide to participate in eliminationist assaults or serve eliminationist regimes, this is what awaits you.

Some may say these measures are too costly--referring to money, not lives. But, compared to the cost of allowing mass elimination to take place (or of forcibly inserting ground troops), these steps would actually be relatively inexpensive. The United States alone spent \$1.35 billion in the first ten years for Bosnia's reconstruction, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has cost more than \$1.5 billion.

Others may object that such policies would lead to too much intervention. But these policies are designed to provide effective deterrence--and, if deterrence ever fails, then, with the first intervention, to strengthen deterrence by demonstrating what will happen to the next set of political leaders who initiate an eliminationist assault. The danger in the world today is anything but too much intervention to stop mass murderers. The real problem is getting the world's democracies to intervene at all. So let's focus on trying to get a robust anti-eliminationist system in place, rather than worrying about the hypothetical and unlikely problem of too much intervention-- or the practical need to perhaps make occasional exceptions.

Still others may declare that these steps, costly or not, are too radical. But, as with so much thinking about genocide, such vision is clouded: The really radical stance consists of maintaining the status quo, the do-nothingness that has governed international law and politics as we all stand by and watch eliminationist regimes slaughter, expel, and brutalize millions.

If in 1900 you had said that it would be possible to end imperialism, few would have believed you. Imperialism, after all, had been a fact of the human condition for millennia. Likewise if you had said that it would be possible to stop war from being the principal means by which a large percentage of the countries of the world relate to one another. Yet each has occurred. The notion that we could end eliminationism--a phenomenon that has existed as long as humanity--may seem similarly fanciful today. But it is much less unrealistic than it sounds.

Just as it only takes one or a few political leaders to decide to slaughter or expel millions, so too can a few political leaders, a few moral men and women, go a long way toward ending such practices. (These relatively low-cost preventive measures--compared to after-the-fact invasions--also have the virtue of being far more likely to get them to act.) Let's not be content to utter pieties. Let's not wait for the glacially moving international community--centered around the United Nations--to evolve. The matter is urgent. Tens of thousands can die and be brutalized every day. The leaders of a few democracies, or even just the president of the United States, could institute bounties and guarantee the application of force. This would open up a new anti-eliminationist era.

So far, on these matters, Barack Obama has gone in precisely the wrong direction. Instead of attempting to show that there are consequences for eliminationist murdering and expulsions, his administration has taken a soft line toward Al Bashir, one of the worst eliminationists and mass murderers of our time. In doing so, the administration is broadcasting a simple message around the globe, a message being heard by other dictators contemplating similar assaults: You will get away with it. Obama and those serving under him present themselves as people of conscience. So we must ask: With millions of future lives hanging in the balance, how can Obama and his administration fail to devote their considerable political skill and our country's power to ending our age's greatest scourge?

In retrospect, would anyone really disagree that, if such measures could have prevented the Rwandan genocide and the deaths of 800,000, then we should have taken them--regardless of international law's obstructionism and whatever unease we might feel? So how can we say that we shouldn't adopt these same measures to prevent the next Rwanda, and the next one after that?

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen is the author of Worse Than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity, from which this piece is adapted.

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