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Getting Things into Perspective

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From a Latin American perspective, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (the Albright-Cohen Report) is an interesting but confusing report.¹ Like many documents produced in the United States for domestic consumption, it is so embedded in the values of American society that even if we try to put ourselves in the writers' shoes, it is difficult for outsiders to evaluate it as an action plan.

Perhaps the most striking and significant feature of this report is not what it actually says but what it does not say about the causes of genocide and ways of preventing it. It is not that these omissions are deliberate; rather, they are a consequence of the perspective used to understand genocide. This perspective directs attention away from one of the principal causes of genocidal social practices since the beginning of the twentieth century, namely, the active role played by US governments in promoting such practices in the first place.

The Perspective of the Report

The Albright-Cohen Report reflects a point of view that is common in the United States and clearly discernible in Samantha Power's book *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, which focuses on genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, and the Balkans.² Winner of a Pulitzer Prize, Power—a former Balkan war correspondent—has done perhaps more than anyone else to shape the way in which Americans view their country's relationship to genocide.

At the risk of oversimplifying her position, Power's book can be seen as a denouncement of the "failure" on the part of the United States to prevent, slow down, or hinder the development of genocidal processes when it has had the power to do so. Thus, Power complains of "America's toleration of unspeakable atrocities, often committed in clear view" and the fact that "the United States has consistently refused to take risks to prevent genocide."³ Similarly, she points out that "no U.S. president has ever made genocide prevention a priority, and no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for his indifference to its occurrence."⁴

The Albright-Cohen Report takes this logic a step further and tries to develop proposals for greater US involvement, often riding roughshod over the national sovereignty of other states and even over international agreements; gaining the support of regional and international organizations is considered important, but by no means necessary, for US intervention to occur. We will return to these issues in a moment; but first we need to understand what is missing in the report.

The "Epistemological Obstacle"

The term "epistemological obstacle" was coined by Gaston Bachelard in 1938 to describe those psychological difficulties that preclude a proper appraisal of knowledge.⁵ Later, Jean Piaget and Rolando Garcia extended this concept to account for the process whereby certain ways of constructing (or "re-presenting") reality make it

impossible for us to observe phenomena that contradict our representations—even though these would be patently obvious to any observer with a different point of view.

By way of example, anyone living in a Third World country in Latin America, Southeast Asia, or Africa would find almost laughable the idea that the main problem of the United States with respect to genocide has been “non-intervention.” From Mexico to Argentina, from India to Cambodia, and from Algeria to Angola, it is axiomatic that reduced US intervention in these regions has led to a significant reduction in systematic mass murder in recent years.

During the Cold War, the US government and its intelligence services played a key role in the processes of political violence and genocide around the world, from direct involvement of US advisers and troops in overthrowing democratic regimes and invading other states (e.g., the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Vietnam, Cuba, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq) to support for local movements attempting to destabilize democratically elected governments or to bring about military coups (e.g., Chile, Uruguay, Argentina) and funding insurgent organizations as a way of undermining “enemy” governments (e.g., the Khmer Rouge to undermine the Vietnamese government, the *contras* in Nicaragua to subvert the Sandinistas, the Taliban in Afghanistan to fight the pro-Soviet government).

The fact that the 150-page report drawn up by the Genocide Prevention Task Force, chaired by former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright and former US secretary of defense William Cohen, does not even mention these events is so obvious to anyone living in the Third World that it calls for some sort of explanation. This is where the concept of the epistemological obstacle may prove useful. For if we assume—and there is no reason to suppose otherwise—that the task force is acting in the utmost good faith and that the authors of the report have not excluded any of these issues deliberately, then there is clearly a huge conceptual, emotional, and political obstacle—most likely arising from problems of self-esteem, public discourse, and the construction of common sense in the United States—that prevents everyone from seeing the obvious: *the direct intervention of the United States to commit mass murder in regions all over the world.*

Given these glaring omissions and the apparent naïveté of its approach, we might ask whether it is worth looking any further into the Albright-Cohen Report. I believe that it *is* worth examining a little more—if only to highlight some of its misunderstandings and to get things into perspective.

The Meanings of the Word “America” and Its Consequences

The key problem of the report, as I see it, is its profoundly ethnocentric approach, which is clear in its abundant use of the term “American.” Although the word “American” is used in English to refer to a whole continent (made up of seventeen separate states excluding the countries of the Caribbean) as well as to a specific country (the United States of America), many people from Central and South America object to being called “Americans,” as if they had no distinctive identity of their own.

Within the context of the Albright-Cohen Report, it is significant that there is not a single reference to the need for cooperation with other “American” states through organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), MERCOSUR (Mercado Común del Sur), and UNASUR (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas), which have played key roles in preventing conflicts in the region. This is despite the fact that

the report recognizes the distinctive nature of regional conflicts and repeatedly recommends—with certain reservations—joint regional action with the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to prevent genocidal processes.

The implicit assumption is that “America” is the only country that really exists and has rights on the “American” continent, and the only country that can prevent genocide from occurring in its own backyard. Moreover, the neo-imperial power called “America” has repeatedly shown in the past that it does not consider itself bound by the guidelines or decisions of any international or regional organization. All this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reach a negotiated settlement of any conflict in which the United States chooses to become involved—at least in the Americas.

On Sovereignty and International Agencies

Another major problem with the report is that its authors have not thought through the implications of their ideas. For example, a key idea running through the report is the need to limit national sovereignty in order to prevent genocidal practices. Thus, the authors argue that “sovereignty cannot be used as a shield” (xviii), that “traditional views of sovereignty have also been obstacles to more effective international action” (xix), and that, “aside from calculations of national interest, the generally accepted principles of national sovereignty and nonintervention present formidable barriers” (58), to cite just a few examples.

However, the recommendations of report contain no suggestion that the US government should set an example by ratifying the many international human-rights agreements that it has so far failed to sign. This is a glaring omission, given that the United States has, in the past, refused to sign on the grounds that to do so would limit state sovereignty. Indeed, the United States has been so determined not to sacrifice an inch of its sovereignty that in the case of the International Criminal Court (ICC), set up precisely to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, it not only voted against the ICC Statute at the Rome Conference in 1998 but decided to withdraw Economic Support Fund (ESF) aid in 2005 from all countries that ratified the ICC treaty unless they signed a bilateral immunity agreement with the United States.⁶

Similarly, the report does not make it clear to whom the rest of the world is supposed to surrender state sovereignty; there is no suggestion that greater powers should be vested, for example, in the United Nations, in regional organizations, or in international courts. In any case, this would hardly be feasible without the support of the United States. So, in the absence of any clearly defined international body with powers to determine that genocide or other heinous crimes are being committed and to intervene accordingly, charges of genocide could easily be manipulated to suggest that such decisions should be taken by, for example, some *ad hoc* committee within the US Department of State. From there it would be a short step to justifying unilateral US diplomatic, economic, or military intervention anywhere in the world. Conversely, no international or regional organization, and no organization within the United States itself, would have the power to intervene if US citizens committed similar crimes at home or abroad. Immunity would very quickly become impunity.

The examples given in the report of how the United States might intervene to prevent genocide are highly questionable. The US decision to invade Iraq was taken unilaterally, and, far from diminishing the possibility of genocide, US intervention has

worsened the already complex situation created by the regime of Saddam Hussein, destabilizing the political balance, deepening divisions between Sunnis and Shiites, and increasing the Iranian presence in the region. One of the central problems for the current US administration, which has publicly stated its aim of withdrawing troops from Iraq in 2010, is how to do this without serious internal conflicts' breaking out that might end in genocide. It is also surprising that US–NATO military intervention in Kosovo is mentioned as a valid example for future actions: numerous articles suggest that while this intervention stopped the massacres of Kosovar Albanians, it did nothing to prevent massacres and human-rights violations among the Kosovar Serb population.

Given the Albright-Cohen Report's deep contempt for international and regional organizations, and its insistence on the need for the United States to act independently of any consensus reached in these forums, it is hardly surprising that the report makes no serious attempt to understand the difficulties international agencies face in trying to prevent genocide and atrocity crimes. For example, the main obstacle to greater UN intervention in conflicts involving widespread and systematic killings of civilians has always been the power of veto held by permanent members of the Security Council (the United States, Russia, China, Britain, and France).

Now, the United States has used this power as much as other members—if not more—to veto investigations into violations of human rights. So, while it is true that the task force's Recommendation 6-2 proposes “diplomatic efforts toward negotiating an agreement among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council on non-use of the veto in cases concerning genocide or mass atrocities” (106), this recommendation rings somewhat hollow, given the role of the United States in delegitimizing the efforts of the United Nations, and reads almost like an afterthought to the suggestion that “if the Security Council is unable to act, there may be other appropriate options” (97).

One cannot help thinking that instead of arguing for “non-use of the veto,” it might be more to the point to propose an amendment to the Statute of the United Nations to eliminate the Security Council's power of veto in matters relating to violations of human rights. This would allow decisions on preventive measures to be taken by simple majority of the General Assembly—a consensus of member states—rather than by just one state with superpowers to overrule international agreements.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Despite all the problems mentioned so far, there are some positive aspects to the report that are worth highlighting, even if they are distorted by problems of vision and perspective. Among them is its willingness to extend the definition of terms beyond the four groups expressly protected by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide to include the victims of “atrocity crimes” and “large-scale and deliberate attack[s] on civilians” (xxii). The report correctly points out that “there is little support for the conventional wisdom suggesting that religious or ethnic diversity in itself poses risks for genocide or mass atrocities” (24). Other important recommendations include establishing systems of risk assessment and early warning of genocide around the world, as well as preventing arms sales to countries or organizations that pose a risk of genocidal phenomena (42–43). However, these ideas are overshadowed by the notion of “genocide prevention” as a way to justify US intervention in various parts of the globe without the endorsement of any regional or international organization.

In short, most readers of the Albright-Cohen Report who are not US citizens will be left with the unpleasant feeling that moral condemnation of genocide may soon become little more than a pretext for intervention—limited only by the capacity of the State Department Office of War Crimes Issues, the Atrocities Prevention Committee, the National Security Council, and other US agencies to respond. The question is what level of international conflict we are prepared to accept if other countries decide to copy this model.

The fact that human-rights organizations within the United States have failed to understand the implications of the report can only be explained again by the concept of epistemological obstacle. The ethnocentric perspective of most “Americans” leads them to believe that the United States is incapable of genocide. Thus, rather than seeing their country as just another actor in the international arena, they are all too willing to accept the notion that it is the responsibility of the United States to “respond” when atrocities are committed in “backward” parts of the world—a modern version of “the White Man’s Burden.”

By Way of Conclusion

In my view, the main lesson to be learned from this report is how “American” politicians and academics, rightly preoccupied with risk assessment and early warning, are nonetheless incapable of understanding the causes of many genocidal processes because of their own the hegemonic perspective. Not to put too fine a point on it, any approach to genocide and atrocity crimes must address two fundamental problems: (a) what the United States can and should do to prevent genocide, and (b) what the United States should *stop doing*. From this perspective, a key issue in managing public policy would be how to establish a system of controls to prevent the United States from acting in ways that increase the possibility of genocidal events. Without such controls, risk assessment and early warning will have little impact in preventing new cases of genocide.

Let us begin with what the United States should *stop doing*. We have already mentioned the US role in fostering processes of political violence and genocide in various parts of the world during the Cold War. More recently, early recognition of Kosovo’s independence, the permanent destabilization of the Venezuelan government, and support for the territorial division of Bolivia are just three ways in which the United States has fueled conflict in different parts of the world. Indeed, the US embassies in Bolivia and Kosovo have actively supported secessionist claims, while the US embassy in Venezuela has even supported an attempted coup, increasing the chances of genocide or atrocity crimes.

The fact that Venezuela, Bolivia, and Kosovo have not slipped further into violence and bloodshed is due largely to the initiatives of international or regional organizations. For example, the refusal of other Latin American countries to recognize the US-sponsored coup in Venezuela in 2002 was clearly intended to prevent genocide. The UNASUR mission to investigate the massacres of peasants in Pando, Bolivia, in 2008 by armed groups opposing the government of Evo Morales, along with strong support for Morales from MERCOSUR, UNASUR, and the OAS throughout the crisis, prevented a possible backlash from Bolivian national police and armed forces in the face of attempts to destabilize the Morales government. These initiatives were clearly contrary to the wishes of the United States.

The intervention of the European Union and some of its governments to prevent further conflict in the Balkans after the largest EU countries recognized the

independence of Kosovo, simultaneously with the United States, on 16 February 2008 is also worth highlighting. The decision has generated similar demands within Bosnia-Herzegovina that threaten to destabilize the whole region.

What, then, can and should the United States do to prevent genocide? Fortunately, the Albright-Cohen Report has already been overtaken by political events in the United States. The prompt measures taken by President Barack Obama in January 2009 to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center (one of the main centers of human-rights violations in US territory), his announced plans to withdraw US troops from Iraq and other parts of the world, and his pledge to rebuild alliances with the United Nations and other international and regional organizations seem to indicate that the new US administration will adopt a far more productive approach to protecting human rights than that recommended in the report.

Referring in a foreign-policy speech delivered in April 2007 to the need to reform the United Nations, the World Bank and other international organizations, Obama pointed out that

such real reform will not come . . . by dismissing the value of these institutions, or by bullying other countries to ratify changes we have drafted in isolation. Real reform will come because we convince others that they too have a stake in change—that such reforms will make their world, and not just ours, more secure.⁷

Let us hope that this perspective becomes part of academic and political common sense in the United States and an antidote to the “epistemological obstacles” that have so often prevented America as a nation from understanding its complex role in the escalation of genocide and mass atrocities.

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*, paperback ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).
3. *Ibid.*, 504, 503.
4. *Ibid.*, xxi.
5. Gaston Bachelard, *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* (1938; reprint, Paris: Vrin, 1993). The English translation is my own.
6. Such provisions (the so-called Nethercutt Amendment) were contained in appropriations bills passed by the US Congress for the 2005, 2006, and 2008 fiscal years and in legislation signed into law on 26 December 2007 as PL 110-161, but were not renewed for fiscal year 2009.
7. Barack Obama, address to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (23 April 2007), <http://www.asksam.com/ebooks/releases.asp?file=Obama-Speeches.ask&dn=Chicago%20Council%20on%20Global%20Affairs> (accessed 15 July 2009).