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Is the Tragedy of Darfur — Is It Genocide? Does it Matter?

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Michael Clough, a specialist on African issues, argues that the murderous tragedy in the Darfur region of Sudan is not, properly speaking, genocide.

In, "[It's Hell in Darfur, But Is it Genocide?](#)," published in the May 14, 2006 edition of *The Los Angeles Times*, Clough argues:

Genocide is not being committed in Darfur. This is not a popular position, I know. But to call what's happening there "genocide" when it's not is unlikely to help the people of Darfur — and could even make it harder to mobilize the public to respond to similar crises in the future.

The U.S. government and several international organizations have identified the slaughter in Sudan as genocide, but Clough asserts that, unlike the classic genocide, the murderous rampage of the government-backed Janjaweed militias is not specifically directed toward the destruction of "a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such." [That language is taken from a report on the Sudan crisis published by Human Rights Watch.]

This article may awaken some persons to the reality that the definition of a genocide is one of the most contested issues in international law. The background to the word is important, since it is rooted in the murderous legacy of the twentieth century and the *Shoah*.

Clough is concerned that the word is improperly applied to the Darfur crisis, and that this distorts American foreign policy and international opinion because it implies that the only human rights crisis that rise to the level of American attention are genocides. As he argues:

There is also a grave risk in raising the specter of genocide to galvanize a global response to the human rights abuses in Darfur — the international community may be less inclined to react to serious abuses that don't rise to the level of genocide. This could be truly tragic because the only way to prevent genocide is to act at the first sign of threats to civilians. Of the many tragedies of Darfur, one is that it had to be mislabeled a genocide before politicians and activists were stirred to respond.

This argument over a word reveals deeper rifts in the international community and in the philosophical underpinnings of foreign policy and military engagement. Clough certainly has a point, but if "the only way to prevent genocide is to act at the first sign of threats to civilians," then there is no way to stop a genocide at all. Major world powers are not ready to "act" at the first sign of *anything*, and no international body (the United Nations in particular) is able to violate national sovereignty at the first sign of any threat. To suggest otherwise is patent nonsense.

Furthermore, ideological liberals and conservatives operate out of different conceptions of threat. The division over the war in Iraq should suffice to make that point perfectly clear.

In my view, the major powers should intervene rarely but decisively. But, in the rationalized logic of modernity, state actions are limited by the ability to present a rational case for action — and that takes time. Beyond this, such actions (or failures to act) are analyzed for generations to come.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt should have ordered the bombing of the rails that connected the death camps to the bureaucracy of the Third Reich — and that was in the context of war. The civilized world refused the ghost ships of Jewish refugees to its everlasting shame, citing the complications of international law. Surely some nation or power could have prevented the genocide of 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda, and the list goes on.

What about Saddam Hussein? Why are so many of those certain that the situation in Darfur requires a military response opposed to the same in Iraq? Is it a question of degree? Or, is the issue a different definition of threat in the first place?

These are excruciating but inescapable moral questions. What should be done about Darfur? What should be done about Iran? Michael Clough raises some good questions about human rights abuses. There are no easy answers. The truth surely lies somewhere between utopianism and resignation to the inevitability of tragedy. Just where that truth lies is a central question for our times.

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