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Bystanders to Genocide

Vocabulary:

**Neophyte:** A beginner or novice

**Parlance:** A particular manner or speaking; speech, especially in conversation or parlance

**Panacea:** a remedy of all disease or ills; cure-all; an answer or solution for all problems or difficulties

Summary:

1. **People Sitting in Offices**

After the one hundred days of the most efficient killing spree in the twentieth century, many Americans who were in power at the time of the genocide expressed odd interest after the fact, given their determination to avoid the situation at the time. Given all of the excuses and evasion surrounding the events of Rwanda, a three-year investigation including a multitude of interviews and research of declassified government documents reveals, in fact, that the U.S. government knew enough about the genocide early on to offer help, but chose to dodge the opportunities that were afforded to them. Though the veil of an ongoing civil war in Rwanda presented some confusion at the start of the killings, the massacre did not receive the attention it deserved, even after it became clear of the reality of genocide. The idea that U.S. foreign policy could be noble and guiltless while allowing crimes to be committed is based on the idea that foreign policy is a “lifeless, bloodless set of abstractions” and that “nations”, “interests”, “influence”, and “prestige” are all “disembodied and dehumanized terms which encourage easy inattention to the real people whose lives our decisions affect.”

1. **The Peacekeepers**

In 1993, Romeo Dallaire, a major general in the Canadian army, was sent to Rwanda to command a Rwanda UN Assistance Mission to help keep the peace in the fractured country during the Arusha Accords. That same year, two separate international commissions were sent to New York that warned explicitly of the possibility of genocide, yet Dallaire received copies of neither report, crippling the reality of his mission intelligence. Once Dallaire became aware of the tensions in Rwanda and began to suspect he would need reinforcements, his requests were denied citing that “the Department of Peacekeeping Operations needed fixing” and that the “UN ‘learn to say no’ to chancy or costly missions.” Even after an anonymous Hutu informant high in the circles of Rwandan government came forward to warn of preparation for slaughter and a plan to provoke the Belgian peacekeepers and ensure Belgian withdrawal from the country, the alarm was discounted and Rwanda remained a low priority.

1. **The Early Killings**

After the plane crash that killed both the President of Rwanda and the President of Burundi, an urgent memo was drafted to Washington that cautioned against the chance of violence in both countries. Information was sent to the Human Rights Watch that stated: “For the last two weeks, all of Kigali has lived under the threat of instantaneous, carefully prepared operation to eliminate all those who give trouble.” Within hours of the plane crash, the Hutu militia began systematic killing of the Tutsi and eliminated Rwanda’s moderate leadership in a single day. The forewarning of a Belgian target came true when ten Belgian peacekeepers were savagely mutilated; Tutsi rebels in the RPF resumed the civil war against the Hutus in response to the killings that were taking place around them.

1. **The “Last War”**

The simultaneous war and genocide in Rwanda confused policymakers and the events in Somalia caused reluctance in relation to peacekeeping in Africa. U.S. officials in Washington were clear about their unwillingness to send troops to Africa, wanting “zero degree of involvement, zero degree of risk, and zero degree of pain and confusion.”

1. **The Peace Processors**

Individual American biases toward Rwanda created weaknesses in the handling of the crisis. Those who were familiar with the country had repeatedly threatened to pull UN support from the country, which would have given the Hutus exactly what they wanted; they were more likely to trust the word of the Rwandan officials, who were the same men who were plotting the genocide behind the scenes; they were familiar with the violence in the country, and had come to expect a certain level of ethnic crimes in Rwanda. Those in the U.S. felt that they were both “psychologically and imaginatively too limited” in terms of expectations of war in Rwanda.

1. **Foreigners First**

The evacuation and removal of all foreign citizens in Rwanda at the time of the genocide took precedence over the safety of the Rwandan people. It was believed that the Americans had no national interest in Rwanda, and they refused to be anything but neutral in the matter. Meanwhile, Dallaire was left with a force that was not large enough to exact any real force on those perpetrating the attacks.

1. **Genocide? What Genocide?**

Though there was a civil war going on at the same time, there were several sources reporting that an act of genocide was occurring in Rwanda, and all of them were ignored. The use of the term “genocide” was avoided at all costs even after it became irrefutably apparent of that reality, as it might cause the need for the U.S. to actually “do something.” It took weeks for the U.S. to acknowledge that the terms of the Genocide Convention had been met and even then, they only conceded that “acts” of genocide had occurred in Rwanda.

1. **“Not Even a Sideshow”**

The United States lost interest in Rwanda after the foreigners had been evacuated, despite the fact that mass killings were still happening every day. Those who wanted action to be taken against the slaughters were pushed aside for “national interests” and “humanitarian consequences.” The President’s concern for the Rwandan people extended only to those with whom he had been personally acquainted and once their safety was assured, he turned his attention elsewhere. Throughout the entire three months of the genocide, Rwanda “generated no sense of urgency and could be safely avoided at no political cost.”

1. **The UN Withdrawal**

Though Dallaire called for reinforcements, the U.S. resisted intervention of any kind. After Belgium decided to withdraw, they petitioned the United States to join them so as not to be seen as doing it alone. Full UN withdrawal was granted at first, but later opposed; a small operation was left in place to “show the will of the international community.” No member of the United Nations was ever compelled to offer safe haven for refugees nor suggest that the representative for the genocidal Rwandan government be removed from the council.

1. **The Pentagon “Chop”**

The only policy that the Defense Department supported in terms of U.S. action against the genocide was that of an arms embargo, but even that was seen as being “ineffective”; the government was unwilling to even make financial sacrifices to help Rwanda. The idea of jamming the radio signals that were broadcasting propaganda were seen as “ineffective” and “expensive”, citing complicated international legal conventions. Inaction was justified by the argument that military intervention was required in order to help, and nobody above a mid-level position in the government got involved in the events in Rwanda.

1. **PDD-25 in Action**

In late April, members of the Security Council finally pressed to send a new and larger force to Rwanda in order to help, except this time in a “hostile environment,” requiring more resources, aggression, and specific intent to help civilians. Two plans were suggested: one by Dallaire, one by the NSC. Dallaire was doing all he could to help the Rwandans while he believed that the government was just to “put on a show at no risk.” By the time the UN had agreed on terms for intervention, it was late May and most of the Tutsi victims were already dead; Logistic problems kept the U.S. from actually helping and eventually the genocide was stopped by the RPF.

1. **The Stories We Tell**

There were many things the U.S. could have done differently to help and ultimately, lack of willingness came from political, moral, and imaginative weakness and not from informational ones. Some in the government were even able to justify their inaction against genocide as ethical and moral. The government chose how to act based on their desire to avoid engagement in a conflict with no American interests, show that they were cautious in terms of peacekeeping, and contain political costs and avoid the moral stigma associated with allowing genocide, while drawing out the process with “illusion(s) of continual deliberation, complex activity, and intense concern.”

1. **A Continuum of Guilt**

Many members of the government who were in power at the time are able to feel guiltless about their inaction in Rwanda, because they don’t find fault with the way they handled the situation. In hindsight, some of them may feel some guilt, but it seems more of not feeling guilty about Rwanda. Those who were considered Africa specialists were the ones who were most affected by the genocide because of their personal attachments to the country. Many wish they had done more, and Romeo Dallaire even tried to commit suicide because of the guilt and depression he harbors over the things he experienced during the genocide.