

PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



Make the Sudan an Offer It Can't Refuse

BEFORE THE FULL EXTENT OF GENOCIDE COMES TO LIGHT, LITTLE CHANCE exists that a nation in a position to intervene will do so, especially if what is happening is peripheral to its national interests and/or it is engaged in a protracted struggle elsewhere. Genocide is usually beyond the reach of practical intervention because it may be sheltered or accomplished by a military near-peer, or—as in Cambodia 30 years ago or the Congo now—because of the dispersal of individual atrocities over vast and inaccessible terrain. Even when relatively easy, intervention is rare.

Despite almost a million and a half bombing sorties flown against Germany during the Second World War, many of which targeted road and rail, the United States and Britain failed for lack of trying to destroy the system of transport that fed the gas chambers and crematoria. Thirty-five years later, America failed despite its unquestioned naval supremacy to protect the Vietnamese Boat People. That we and our two allies capable of projecting power, France and Britain, are now distracted and divided by the wars in the Middle East, is unfortunate for Darfur.

The genocide there is thus an unattended stepchild left to well-meaning philanthropies and governments that further sap the possibility of decisive action by proposing delicate measures of relief and equally fragile diplomacy. Blankets are necessary, but they will not stop the razing of villages. Even should China be embarrassed, it might not be sufficiently so to protest roughly to the Sudan, which on account of China's embarrassment is not guaranteed to terminate its air raids or its support of the Janjaweed.

As the Sudan brazenly defies, if not the world's will, then, its wishes, and the death toll closes upon half a million, the pity is that the people of Darfur can in fact be saved. In concert with our allies or entirely alone, we have the military potential to accomplish this at little or no cost to anyone except the Sudanese government, which itself would pay only in the currency of unrealized aggrandizement.

The multinational troops in Darfur have neither the training nor the organization nor the mobility adequately to defend the population. Seventy-eight countries, each with its own problems, procedures, and rules of engagement, are represented in what is less a rescue mission than a camping trip to the Tower of Babel. A possibly influential force is developing in Chad, where the E.U., soon to be supplemented by Russian helicopters, will deploy weakly to defend a line drawn across largely empty desert. But, for the sake of those who face slaughter on the other side, why not cross that line? Nations hesitate to violate sovereignty because doing so is a matter of immense consequence and gravity. Then again, so is genocide.

Darfur is physically distant from the Sudan's heartland and sources of military power. Every inch of the 600 miles of barren territory between Khartoum and the killing grounds is an opportunity for a reprieve commanded by American air power—with not a boot on the ground. The Sudanese military in Darfur can be trapped without sustenance, to wither or retreat as reinforcements are kept out. And the Janjaweed can be denied support by severing the few extenuated routes of supply.

The first requirement of a cordon sanitaire, however, would be to cut all air links, which would require carrier air strikes to destroy the Suda-

nese air force's 51 combat aircraft, 25 transports, and 44 helicopters; its fuel, munitions, and maintenance facilities; and the few runways capable of supporting heavy transports and fighters. Were Chad to approve a small expeditionary force of U.S. A-10s, which it probably would, just a few of these could closely suppress remnant Sudanese armor and check any force of the Janjaweed sufficiently concentrated to overcome local means of self-defense.

MOREOVER, NONE OF THIS WOULD PROVE NECESSARY WERE THE United States willing to go further yet and threaten or accomplish the destruction of the Sudanese regime's means of power over a country pulled apart centrifugally by multiple secessions. One needn't be squeamish about such a proposition. It pertains to a government that has long massacred hundreds of thousands of its "own" people in its South and West, supported international terrorism, and menaced most of its neighbors. The precise targeting of a substantial portion of its 1,200 armored vehicles and 1,100 artillery pieces, its telecom exchanges, microwave towers, uplinks and downlinks, its dozen small naval vessels, its aircraft, runways, munitions, military headquarters, logistical stores, security ministries, and presidential residences would be only a few days' work for long-range bombers dispatched from remote bases, and the planes of two carrier task forces hastened to the Red Sea.

Which would the regime in the Sudan prefer? To be annihilated, or to discontinue its campaign of mass murder? Taking into account the air defenses, distances, and the ranges, numbers, and capacities of our (and perhaps French and British) aircraft, this is a choice to which the Sudan can be brought. Given its record, few nations would come to its aid with other than a pro forma whimper, and given the geography and the air and naval balance, no nation could. Though repressive dictatorships might protest, and China determine to hurry the formation of the blue-water navy it is already building, little else would change except for the better.

This is especially so because only in the worst case would a military strike actually be necessary. One of the chief attractions of such an initiative is that, if properly directed, it could, one way or another, military strike or not, accomplish its aims. They are, first, to stop the mass killings and displacements; and, second, to pressure the Sudan into negotiating settlements in good faith, which it need not do as long as it retains its habitual option of simply murdering the populations it finds troublesome.

The threat itself would likely be enough. If not, then to carry it out in the present circumstances would be honorable, right, and overdue. For these are human lives that in Darfur are senselessly extinguished. There is no soul anywhere more valuable than any of theirs, no child more worth saving than any of theirs. We are able to do so, as we can stand our carriers and pilots at the ready. And why would we not? A whole people, no matter how wretched or obscure, must certainly be worth three-days' ammunition.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the New York Times.

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In this Issue

With intelligent direction and undeflectable resolve, we can have a stable peace in the Pacific and elsewhere. In their absence, we shall suffer either slow and ignominious defeat without war, or war with a tortuous unfolding and an uncertain end, and, of course, millions of broken hearts—like the war we are fighting now, because we did not heed these lessons in time. And yet what candidate is alert to this? Who will speak of such things in time, and who will dare to awaken them?

Mark Helprin
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