

WHY SOME WARS BECOME GENOCIDAL AND OTHERS DON'T

A Talk by Daniel Chirot, November 15, 2001

There have always been wars, just as there have always been, in every society, dreams of everlasting peace. The pacifist's dream of a world without war is an ancient dream that is no closer to realization today than in the past. Yet, human societies have worked many effective ways of controlling war, limiting it, and making conflict, even violent conflict, susceptible to limitations, truces, and conciliation. Perfectly peaceful societies with no violent killings are myths, but at the same time, total war with unlimited killing is very rare.

Today, the United States is its sixth major international war in the past 100 years. This does not count well over a dozen, or depending on how we count, more than two dozen minor wars fought by small American expeditionary forces in various parts of the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa. The United States, however, is not unusually warlike for a large nation with many interests throughout the world. Other major nations, France, Russia, China, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Japan have also been at war often in the twentieth century. Germany, Italy, and Japan have been rather more peaceful in the past 56 years than the other major powers, but that is because they were obliged to be less bellicose after being crushingly defeated in 1945, at the end of World War II. Before 1945 they were instigators of many of the worst wars of our times. Only a few, oddly situated small nations have been largely peaceful in the twentieth century, Switzerland, Sweden, and some very small places such as Bhutan or Botswana have pretty much avoided war in modern times because they have been surrounded by bigger powers who have not bothered to invade them. I might point out that Sweden in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was one of the most aggressive and warlike nations of Europe, and that Switzerland remains one of the most heavily armed nations in Europe, and the one, incidentally, best prepared for a nuclear holocaust.

Being small is no guarantee of peace. Many states in Africa have been involved in almost endless wars for the past few decades, some across international boundaries and others internal, or both. Angola, Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sudan have produced, between them, something on the order of 8 to 10 million deaths over the past 35 years. In Algeria over 100,000 people have been slaughtered in one of the world's nastiest civil wars over the past few years. We know about the Vietnam War in which the United States was involved, but have followed with somewhat less attention bloody wars in Southeast Asia since then between Vietnam and Cambodia, Vietnam and China, and the many civil wars taking place in Burma almost without cessation since 1948. It is only recently that we have paid much attention to the many wars within Indonesia, including the war on East Timor. Few Americans follow the bloody civil war on the island of Sri Lanka which has killed well over 60,000 and which still rages. We are now aware, in a way most of us were not before September 11, of the fact that South Asia has had four big wars and an endless little war between India and Pakistan, that Afghanistan has been at war for over twenty years, and that if you add the deaths from all of these you come up with, probably, well over 6 million people killed since 1947. I need not remind you of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, which could break out again if American and European forces now keeping the peace were to leave, or of the brutal wars in the Caucasus involving Chechens, Russians, Georgians, Armenians, Abkhazians, Ossetians, Azeris, and others. Another million dead, more or less. Even Latin America, which has had fewer international wars than any other large part of the world in the twentieth century, has been plagued by dozens of internal wars, some of which, as in Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Peru, and Columbia, have cost tens or in some cases hundreds of thousands of lives. All of this does not include, of course, the 9 million killed in World I and, probably, 35 to 40 million killed in World War II.

Please do not think that the past was all that much better, though on the whole, before the twentieth century it was harder to kill so many people so quickly. Communications in the past were not very good, it was easier for civilians to run and

hide in the forests and mountains, and as far as direct war was concerned, weapons were fairly primitive compared to the ones we have developed in modern times. Yet, almost constant warfare and, occasionally, large scale massacres occurred in the past, too.

Massacres of whole populations are an ancient phenomenon. The word genocide was first coined only in 1944, but the concept and the act are much older. We all remember the story of how Joshua's men blew their trumpets and down came the walls of Jericho, the first of the Canaanite cities to fall to the invading people of Israel. Children who are told Biblical stories in Sunday schools are not usually told what happened next. "Then," the story continues in Joshua 5, "Then, they utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword." Only the family of the harlot who had protected Joshua's spies and betrayed her people was saved. Finally, and I quote again, "they burned the city with fire, and all within it." Lest you think this is just an ancient story, remember that it inspired Oliver Cromwell in the mid-17th century, whose army invaded Ireland explicitly using the Book of Joshua as an example in what began as a campaign to exterminate Catholicism from that land. He failed, and in the end the English were more practical and only subdued Ireland without wiping out the Catholics, but at the start of the campaign, the intent was there. Historians estimate that close to 20% of Ireland's population at that time died from war and the diseases and famine that always traveled with invading armies in those days.

Most wars, however, do not produce such devastating massacres, which today we would call genocidal crimes against humanity. Only a few do. This was so in the past, and it is so today.

When the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan swept through Afghanistan in 1219 and 1220, Herat, a city that has been in the news these past few days, surrendered and was spared damage. But later, it revolted against the Mongols, and Genghis Khan furiously ordered that every man, woman, and child in it be slaughtered and its walls torn down. This was done. The Persian sources claim

some two million were killed. This is almost certainly an exaggeration, but still, there were probably 300,000 to 500,000 people within the city walls at the time, including many refugees. Afterward, the sources tell us there were about 40 survivors. This was a genocidal massacre, but the Mongols did not do this to all cities. Massacres like those in Herat were carried out for revenge, but also for sound strategic reasons – to convince other potential enemies that it was better to surrender than to face total destruction. This is what one historian has called the “Harry Truman” strategy that convinced Japan in 1945 that it was better to surrender than to face complete annihilation of all of its cities. To those who surrendered, the Mongols, like the Americans, could be quite tolerant.

Wrapped up as we are in the illusion of living in a peaceful world, we – and I include those of us who are professional social scientists – have not sufficiently asked the question why some wars have limited aims and kill mostly soldiers, some have less than genocidal intent but still wind up massacring large numbers of non-combatants, while others result in dreadful, deliberate genocidal acts.

That is what I want to ask this evening, and then, see what that can tell us about this new war we are fighting.

My definition of genocide is simple. A genocidal act kills large numbers of a religiously, ethnically, nationally, regionally, or politically defined group, combatants and non-combatants alike, in order to be rid of them. There are small genocidal acts, massacring people of a particular group in one place, as in a deadly ethnic riot that might be limited to a single town, and there are very big genocides. Most genocidal acts are less than thorough, as when masses of people are expelled from a region, and many die, through murder or the harshness of the expulsion, but some survive. We now call that ethnic cleansing, and it tends to produce many deaths. Finally, there are also genocides that attempt to be total, as the massacres of Tutsis by the Hutu government of Rwanda in 1994, or the Nazi killing of Jews from 1941 to 1945.

When do genocidal acts occur?

The most common kind in the past was as a matter of rational convenience. Caesar in Gaul, or the Mongols, or for that matter white settlers in Australia or in the United States exterminated whole tribes of natives who did not surrender, or who fought back too hard against occupation by the outside invaders. If the weaker, conquered group submitted, that would usually end the killing. Much of the killing of civilians in modern war is of this type, too, particularly when aerial bombardment of heavily populated areas occurs, as it did in World War II.

I am not commenting on the morality or immorality of such acts, but on the fact that they have occurred, continue to occur, and will occur again.

If the United States, or any other modern state, felt that it was involved in a life or death war, that defeat would mean utter ruin, perhaps even extermination, then, certainly, means would be used that would produce tremendous massacres of enemy populations. Understanding that this was the case prevented the Soviet Union and the United States from ever pushing each other too far during the Cold War. Backed against the wall, each side had the power and will to commit the largest genocide in history, but since neither had genocidal intents against the other, both avoided such an outcome.

We should not forget how dangerous it is to provoke modern nations into life and death struggles because once they begin, the movement toward extreme measures becomes ever harder to resist. Thus, for example, we all know that an all out war between Pakistan and India would, in all likelihood, provoke the use of nuclear weapons if one side, say Pakistan, felt that it was about to suffer a total defeat. Once such weapons are used, there is little to restrain the other side from becoming as extreme.

This kind of mass killing is not something the United States is likely to engage in any time soon unless, of course, weapons of mass destruction are unleashed by an enemy. If, instead of Boeing airplanes that killed roughly 5,000 people Osama bin Laden had managed to get hold of small atomic bombs and killed, say, 500,000 people in New York and Washington, it is quite likely that the American reaction would not have been limited bombings of military targets in

Afghanistan, but large-scale bombing, perhaps including nuclear weapons, of major cities in a number of countries, including, probably, Iraq as well as Afghanistan, and perhaps some others, too. If a group such as, say, Hamas, gets a nuclear bomb and destroys Tel Aviv and several hundred thousands Israelis, the Israeli reaction would probably be retaliation against several Arab cities and against the Palestinian population. Millions would die.

But rational, practical use of extreme violence is not the most frightening cause of genocidal acts, because it can be understood, even predicted, and therefore counter measures to avoid it are possible. If Pakistan and India, for example, are both governed by practical politicians who seek political and military security for their states, there is no reason either should provoke the other into nuclear war. If Israel and the Palestinians have any hope of ever reaching some sort of settlement, as the PLO and the Israeli government still claim they want to do, both are aware of the fact that there has to be some limit to their use of violence and killing; that to go all the way and engage in genocidal massacres would end all possibility of resolution. This does not mean that killing stops or that peace is easily achieved, but that there are some limits, and these keep open the possibility of an eventual truce, perhaps, even, stable, more peaceful arrangements.

Much more frightening than the practical use of extreme violence is the desire for revenge that leads to a genocidal impulse. A desire for revenge is very much of a natural human impulse. Some call it justice. I find it hard to tell the difference if by justice we mean punishment, though legal scholars insist there is a difference. Revenge is psychic compensation, because we can be pleased by the thought that at least our pain has been shared by the wrong doer. Of course, when it is a matter of war and violence done to others, what one side perceives as criminal the other side typically considers to be self-evidently just. So justice, while compelling for those who want a more moral world, from the point of view of the losers, is unlikely to be seen as anything but vengeance.

We know from some recent cases that one of the only ways of solving seemingly intractable conflicts is to abandon the notion of revenge, and that means

being willing to forget about justice, too. In South Africa, in order to bring about a reconciliation, however imperfect, it was necessary for Black South African leaders to say that they would not take revenge on White South Africans. There have been very few prosecutions, and very little compensation. This was artfully concealed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, though many Black South Africans have not been as fooled as the admiring international public. Still, it was necessary to do this to bring about peace. Otherwise, Whites might have continued to fight, or they would have all fled, or both. South Africa would have been destroyed. Justice, or from the point of view of White South Africans, revenge, would have left a ruin.

That, by the way, is something too many Israelis and Palestinians have failed to recognize. This is not a war that can ever end by satisfying the conflicting just claims of both sides, but only by a messy compromise that leaves a lot of the participants feeling that justice has not been done. That is the kind of settlement being slowly reached in Northern Ireland – no justice, no revenge, just a practical bargain.

The worst kind of revenge is what is called historical justice – a murderous wish to get even for real or imagined historical wrongs. When one nationality, or ethnicity, or religious group demands vengeful justice for a long list of past sins committed by an enemy, the probability of reconciliation drops, and the probability of genocidal acts increases if the aggrieved party achieves a strong enough position to carry them out. I would like to go back to the Bible for a moment, to the First Book of Samuel.

And Samuel said to Saul, “The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people of Israel; now hearken to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish what the Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.’ “

You will recognize the language also found in the Book of Joshua, and that is surely no coincidence. The issue is not whether anything like this actually happened, but the sentiment, so clearly expressed, that because a historical wrong was committed, justice demands genocidal retribution.

Not all those who seek historical retribution commit genocide, but it is certainly easier to kill on a large scale, and to be indiscriminate about killing if we are motivated by a vengeful rage directed against a historically defined group of enemies – Tutsis, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Bosnians, Vietnamese (who were the first target of the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian genocide), Muslims, whomever.

The atrocities of September 11 were motivated by a sense of righteous historical vengeance, at least from the point of view of those who committed these acts. Had they possessed the means to kill on a much larger scale, they would have. As my colleague Resat Kasaba asked in one of the lectures in this series, why are they so angry? What is their historical grievance?

All of us have tended to lay the blame on sources of injustice that we perceive in the world, not on what they perceive. Those hostile to globalization say it is the fault of American led globalization. *Le Monde*, a respected French newspaper cleverly juxtaposed on one its recent front pages a cartoon portraying Americans as mad bombers killing innocent civilians with an article about a famous French chef who bitterly denounced genetically altered foods, tasteless American vegetables, and, of course, ketchup, a pet peeve of fancy French cooking. Well, maybe this is what was on Mohammed Atta's mind as he piloted a hijacked plane into the World Trade Center, but I somehow doubt it.

Many reasonable analysts both in the United States and abroad have said that inequality in the world is to blame – the presence of so many poor people next to the increasing wealth of the richest 15% or so of the world. Yet, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the men involved in the attacks of September 11 were from Saudi Arabia, which is, by all measures, not at all poor. Saudi Arabia, in fact, has been by far the main source of funding for the madrasas, the religious Muslim schools, which have been teaching

hatred of non-Muslims and an extreme form of puritanical, reactionary Islam, Wahabbism, throughout the Muslim world for the past two to three decades. Is there inequality in the world? Yes, of course, but it is not poor Central American *campesinos* who destroyed the World Trade Center. Most of these poor peasants would prefer to come to the United States and work here rather than to destroy it, and a program that promises death to all non-Muslim infidels can hardly do them much good. At least in the old days, when there were communist revolutionaries like Che Guevara who wanted to destroy American capitalism, their vision was a genuinely universalistic one that was meant to apply to the poor everywhere.

The Palestinian cause is widely seen in the Muslim world as an egregious example of historical injustice that merits vengeance. But one need not take sides in this particularly bitter conflict to recognize that there are many other cases of terrible injustice in the Middle East. In a few days, Hafez Assad, in 1982, slaughtered some 10,000 people in the city of Hama because the Muslim Brotherhood had revolted against his unjust rule. That has not upset Muslim extremists too much. Saddam Hussein used poisoned gas on Kurds, and after the 1991 Gulf War, massacred tens of thousands of Shi'ite Arabs, but that has not evoked calls for vengeance except from those immediately affected. What angers the Muslim world most, and particularly its most extreme elements, is when infidels, that is, non-Muslims commit acts perceived to be unjust against Muslims. Thus, for the many branches of the extremist organizations linked to Osama bin Laden, their main causes are not matters of poverty in the Third World but cases such as Chechnya, where, as they see it, Muslims are battling Christian Orthodox Russians, or the Philippines, where Muslims are battling Catholics, or Kashmir, where Muslims are battling Hindus. Palestine is certainly part of their vision but it is only one of many cases. So let us not think that a massive foreign aid effort to remedy poverty, however worthy that would be, or a compromise solution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict, desirable as that would be, could satisfy the extremist Muslims. Only the complete elimination of infidels from Muslim lands would please them. Of course, most, more moderate Muslims would be less likely to sympathize with the extremists

if there were less poverty, if the Israeli-Palestinian issue were resolved, and if India and Pakistan could compromise over Kashmir. But for the extremists, compromise would be entirely unsatisfactory.

There are practical wars fought for limited ends – to gain access to a resource, or to keep control of one, and these rarely if ever turn genocidal. There are wars of conquest that may be genocidal if the losers resist too much, but even these are amenable to solutions and compromises. There are wars of vengeance that are harder to control because one or both sides feel so strongly that an injustice must be righted, but ultimately, that usually still leaves room for compromise among those who recognize that only very imperfect justice can bring the conflict to an end. But there is an even more frightening kind of war that is least amenable to compromise. These are launched by those obsessively afraid of pollution. Such wars logically lead to genocide, because the existence of the enemy is itself the polluting sin that makes the world so imperfect. To rid the world of such pollution is to bring back utopia; but that blessed dream can never be fulfilled as long as the filth that has invaded the world continues to spread.

Hitler's war on the Jews had no limits because Jews were perceived to be a disease, like small pox, that could infect healthy populations. One of the great tragedies of the 1930s was that almost none of the leading statesmen of that time ever bothered to read what Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf*, where he laid it all out. Much of that book is filled with obsessive ranting about how polluting, how filthy, how corrupting Jews are. Jews are a disease, they are a secret infection weakening the Aryan race, infiltrating all that is healthy and strong, and if they are not eliminated they will bring the good races to their knees. *Mein Kampf* also harps on Germany's needs to conquer vast spaces to the East and subjugate the racially inferior Slavs. Serious statesmen don't take ideas too seriously, except their own. Certainly, the English and French leaders of the 1930s couldn't take Hitler's ideology seriously because it was so foreign to their ideologies. At a League of Nations meeting in 1938 Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet Union's foreign minister, asked top British and French diplomats if they had read *Mein Kampf*. They hadn't, and didn't take

Litvinov seriously. He was, after all, nothing but a communist Jew himself. It turned out that Stalin didn't take Litvinov or Hitler's ideology seriously enough, either, and so signed a treaty with Hitler in 1939 hoping this would spare the Soviet Union from war.

I might point out that when the Hutu government in Rwanda set out to exterminate Tutsis in 1994, the Tutsi were called cockroaches, and the language used was also one of purging filth from the land, just as Nazi propaganda films portrayed Jews as plague spreading rats.

Hardly anyone in the world, except a few scholars, noticed until after September 11, that religious schools in much of the Muslim world have been teaching a whole generation of boys such things – about how evil and polluting Jews and Christians are, about how filthy Westerners and their ways are in general, Americans in particular because the United States is the most powerful of the Western infidel nations. The presence of thousands of American soldiers on Saudi soil is the worst form of pollution because that was the land of Mohammed. This is what set Osama bin Laden himself off on his career of anti-Americanism in 1991, when American troops were sent there to defend Saudi Arabia from Iraqi invasion. The outright lies, the distortions being taught in the Islamic schools, are too numerous to mention. At the bottom there lies one fundamental assumption, that Western led modernity has created a hell on earth in which the impious infidels rule, and if righteous, God fearing Muslims are to regain their rightful place on earth, and the one true religion is to triumph, as it did in the past, all that filth must be swept away. It is not surprising, then, that so many Arabs, Pakistanis, and other Muslims still believe that the World Trade Center was destroyed by Jews to provoke a war of extermination against Muslims, and still repeat the patently false claim that no Jews were killed in this tragedy because they had all been warned to stay out of the World Trade Center on that day. The United States engaged in two wars against Serbia to save Bosnian Muslims and then Kosovo Albanian Muslims, but that has not made much of an impression in places where so much of the population has been educated to believe that infidels are purely evil.

Wars to rid the world of pollution have always been the worst. The wars of religion in Europe between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th and 17th centuries, of which Cromwell's invasion of Ireland was only one part, produced the worst massacres, unspeakable tortures, and destructions of civilians in European history until World War II. The bloodiest war in the 19th Century was actually not fought by Europeans but in China, during the Taiping rebellion. This was also a war of religion. The Emperor of Heavenly Peace, as the Taiping ruler called himself, claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ brought to this world to cleanse it of its sins and to rid China of polluting foreign rulers, in this case the ruling Manchu dynasty. Some 30 million people died during this war that ended with the destruction of the Taiping.

Some of you may wonder why Saudi Arabia does not grant its women any rights, and why the Taliban have been such vicious persecutors of women. Let us leave aside talk about modesty, which, after all, can be practiced without going to such extremes, and recognize such excess for what it is, an obsession with the polluting effect of women's bodies on pure, religious male minds. I can't explain such an obsession, but it is clearly related to the way in which the most extremist Muslims think, just as Hitler's obsessive hatred of Jews was most clearly expressed in his fantasy that Jewish men endlessly plotted to sexually pollute pure Aryan women, and the same way in which the worst white racists in the United States in the past were endlessly panicked by the thought of Black men polluting pure White women. Just because I, and probably most of you can't explain such obsessions, or find any justification for them, doesn't mean that they aren't real in the minds of extremists.

Now, an obsessive urge to cleanse racial or religious or ethnic or political pollution from the face of the earth is almost necessarily genocidal. And indeed, there is some evidence that the Taliban were planning to exterminate the Hazaras in Afghanistan once they had gained complete control because the Hazaras are Shi'ites and therefore heretics. That, of course, is why the Iranian regime, which started out on such an extremist course, but has gradually softened over the years,

hates the Taliban so much. What the Taliban consider heresy is what the Iranian clerics consider their own true religion.

Because absolute justice and righteousness are on their side, as they see it, and their aim is a cleansed world, at least in Muslim lands, these extremists are an even more serious menace in their own lands than they are to the external world. Where they win, they will murder vast numbers of their own people, all those who are corrupt and heretic, all who are insufficiently pious, and all those who do not obey. This they have made clear by slaughtering tens of thousands of innocent villagers in Algeria in that country's civil war, by slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Christians and animists in the Sudan, and by their killings in Afghanistan. That is the fate that awaits all those middle class Egyptians who think it amusing to tweak the nose of the Americans and make Osama bin Laden a hero. If the fundamentalists were to take power in Egypt, tens of thousands from this largely westernized middle class would be slaughtered, along with the Christian Coptic minority in Egypt, over 7 million of them, who would probably be forced to convert, to emigrate, or to die.

That is a grim analysis. To look carefully at our enemy is frightening. But I have to close by being a lot more optimistic, because I don't think that the situation is anything close to being that bleak. We should pay attention to the ideology being propagated in Islamic schools around the world, especially when it is financed by Saudi Arabian fundamentalism, but we need not panic.

First of all, this is an ideology that cannot succeed for very long. It is simply too anti-modern. Osama bin Laden and his ilk can use modern technology, and may, perhaps, be able to steal enough radioactive material to create a so-called "dirty" bomb that could contaminate a whole city. To fight that, we need far better intelligence and cooperation from other governments. We also need to make it clear, as I think we have, that any government that harbors and helps such people will suffer the consequences. But in the long run, this anti-modern rejection of science and industry means that it will be impossible to run any country successfully if they do take power. Iran is a good example. It is the only Islamic country where, according to accounts, there have been pro-American demonstrations. After 22

years of fundamentalist Islamic rule, the Iranian people are fed up with their extremism. Even among the Iranian clerics there is some recognition that compromise and accommodation with the modern world, and the West, is necessary. We are witnessing such a phenomenon in Afghanistan, where, it would seem, much of the population loathes the extremism of the Taliban. In Sudan, the most extremist Islamic leader has been under house arrest and has lost power for similar reasons.

Not many people in the world, either in Islamic countries, or Christian ones, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or anything else, really want to live a life of extreme puritanism, endless hate, and suicidal wars. Extremist leaders can take power, and for a time, be backed by much of their population hoping to redress past grievances and trying to find a new utopia. But as with the most extreme Christian warriors during the European wars of religion, or with the Nazis, or the most committed communist revolutionaries, it eventually turned out that few of their people were willing to go all the way in their struggles if that meant permanent violence, suffering, and death. So it will be with Islamic extremism.

The victory against the Taliban, which seems to be in the works, may or may not catch Osama bin Laden. One way or the other, this is only one victory in what will continue to be a war for a long time. There will be other atrocities and deaths because there are many thousands of committed extremists willing to wage war, and they have millions of sympathizers. But in the long run, this too, will pass, and increasingly, some religious Muslims will begin to speak out and say that this is leading nowhere, and needs to change. This will take a decade, or two, or three, because this is how long it has been building up. But as long as we realize what we are facing, and that we have to respond by waging limited, calculated, practical wars, not genocidal ones like our enemies, and as long as we understand that we have no choice but to persevere, there is little doubt that eventually the task can be accomplished.