

The Politics of Genocide

Review of Book by Edward S. Herman and David Peterson

By [Rick Rozoff](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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In 1895 novelist Anatole France – who in the same decade took up cudgels in defense of persecuted Armenians in the Ottoman Empire while also entering the lists on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus – wrote an essay in which he maintained that words are like coins. When freshly minted the images and inscriptions on them are clear. But by dint of constant circulation they become effaced until the outlines are blurred and the words unintelligible.

As Edward S. Herman and David Peterson write in *The Politics of Genocide*, “During the past several decades, the word ‘genocide’ has increased in frequency of use and recklessness of application, so much so that the crime of the twentieth century for which the word was originally coined often appears debased. Unchanged, however, is the huge political bias in its usage...” With their painstaking efforts to compile information and analyze the self-serving misuse of this term by the government, media and establishment academic figures of the United States and its allies, the authors have performed a valuable service to the cause of truth and of peace.

The fact that combating “genocide” has replaced confronting communism in some notably left and liberal circles as a major intellectual and moral legitimation for an enduringly aggressive and interventionist U.S. foreign policy is not fortuitous. It has been adopted to further American and allied interests in Europe and Africa in particular but with international application.

Nowhere is this more explicit than in the U.S.-based Genocide Prevention Task Force’s 2008 report Preventing Genocide, where the “Save Darfur” activism of the last decade is singled out as a model for how to “build a permanent constituency for the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities.”

But this shows that “Darfur has been...successfully framed as ‘genocide’,” the authors counter, even as “the signature Nefarious bloodbath of the early twenty-first century,” and we should take the Task Force’s praise of “Save Darfur” activism to mean rather that the “U.S. establishment’s handling of the western Sudan (ca. 2003-2010) should serve as a model for how best to propagandize a conflict as ‘genocide’, and thus to mobilize elite and public opinion for action against its alleged perpetrator.”

During the past two decades, the post-Cold War era, Washington has employed and exploited the word genocide in furtherance of geopolitical objectives in several strategic parts of the world. As the foreword to the volume by Noam Chomsky warns, the one-sided, nakedly partisan and frequently fact-distorting genocide stratagem not only diverts attention from genuine acts of mass killing and targeting of ethnic and other demographic groups perpetrated by the U.S., its allies and client states, but runs the risk of producing a

boy who cried wolf effect, one moreover with a retroactive component.

Chomsky characterizes the authors' work as indicting a practice that since "the end of the Cold War opened the way to an era of virtual Holocaust denial." That is, as facts such as those marshaled by Herman and Peterson demonstrate, the exaggeration, distortion and even outright fabrication of genocide accusations may produce as an unintended consequence a universal scepticism on the matter, even – most alarmingly – toward the genuine article. That leveling charges of genocide against nations and governments the White House and State Department are opposed to and in parts of the world where the Pentagon is bent on deploying troops and bases occurs as World War II revisionism, neo-Nazism, and the formal rehabilitation of Nazi collaborators and even SS troops plague much of Europe is the most alarming manifestation of that disturbing phenomenon.

The U.S. has rightly been accused of practicing double standards in relation to genocide charges, condemning mass killings (alleged as well as real) in nations whose governments are not viewed favorably by Washington and its allies while ignoring, minimizing and justifying it when perpetrated by an approved government.

But it is not, as defenders of American foreign policy often state, a question of not being able to respond to every crisis or of responding to the most egregious situation first. Nor as the rapidly deteriorating Christopher Hitchens wrote in 1993 in one of his many efforts to mobilize opinion in favor of the "Bosnian cause" (by which he never meant anything beyond the Sarajevo Muslims around Alija Izetbegovic, and Hitchens' own mythic land of multiculturalism overrun by "racist" Serbs) is it a case of "making the best the enemy of the good."

Instead, as Herman and Peterson meticulously detail, it is a fixed policy of assigning cases and charges of genocide to four distinct categories, the first two applicable to the U.S. and its allies and clients, the second two to adversaries or other governments whose nations occupy space or possess resources coveted by Washington's empire-builders and U.S.-based transnational corporations.

Drawing on years of observation and analysis of international events – in Herman's case efforts extending over five decades – the authors present a four-point model for examining how the issue of genocide is viewed by the American government, the mainstream news media and a veritable battalion of "engaged" academics and handsomely funded non-governmental organizations (the latter sometimes not so non-governmental).

As they explain:

"When we ourselves commit mass-atrocity crimes, the atrocities are Constructive, our victims are unworthy of our attention and indignation, and never suffer 'genocide' at our hands – like the Iraqi *Untermenschen* who have died in such grotesque numbers over the past two decades. But when the perpetrator of mass-atrocity crimes is our enemy or a state targeted by us for destabilization and attack, the converse is true. Then the atrocities are Nefarious and their victims worthy of our focus, sympathy, public displays of solidarity, and calls for inquiry and punishment. Nefarious atrocities even have their own proper names reserved for them, typically associated with the places where the events occur. We can all rattle off the most notorious: Cambodia (but only under the Khmer Rouge, not in the prior years of mass killing by the United States and its allies), Iraq (but only when attributable to Saddam Hussein, not the United States), and so on – Halabja, Bosnia, Srebrenica, Rwanda,

Kosovo, Račak, Darfur. Indeed, receiving such a baptism is perhaps the hallmark of the Nefarious bloodbath.”

To reiterate their point: When the killing, maiming, poisoning and displacement of millions of civilians are perpetrated by the U.S. directly and in collusion with a client regime it assists, arms and advises – Indochina in the 1960s and early 1970s, Central America in the 1980s, the deaths of as many as a million Iraqis resulting from sanctions and the deliberate and systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure in the 1990s – that form of indisputable genocide is never referred to as such and instead presented by the government-media-obedient academia triad as not abhorrent and criminal but as legitimate actions in pursuit of praiseworthy policies. Constructive genocide.

Similar systematic and large-scale atrocities carried out by U.S. clients armed by Washington – Indonesia against its own people from 1965-1966 and in East Timor from 1975-1999, Israel in the Palestinian Gaza Strip and West Bank from 1967 to the present day, Rwanda and Uganda in Congo (where over five and a half million people have perished over the last twelve years), Croatia and its Operation Storm onslaught in 1995 which caused the worst permanent ethnic cleansing in Europe since World War II and its immediate aftermath – are not condemned and not even deemed regrettable, but in fact are viewed by the U.S. political establishment as Benign.

Contrariwise, though, security and military actions taken by governments not aligned with the U.S., even against armed and cross-border separatist formations, are inevitably branded as gratuitous acts of what Samuel Coleridge called motiveless malignancy: Nefarious genocide.

Related to the last category, the U.S. government and its news and NGO camp followers are not averse to inflating numbers, misattributing the cause of death and outright inventing incidents to justify the charge of genocide and what are frequently pre-planned interventions, including sanctions, embargoes, travel bans on government officials, freezing governments’ financial assets abroad, funding and advising assorted “color revolutions” and ultimately bombing from 25,000 feet, beyond the range of a targeted country’s air defenses. What the authors call Mythic genocide, though with quite genuine – deadly – consequences. Aesop: The boys throw rocks in jest but the frogs die in earnest.

To illustrate these basic categories, Herman and Peterson conducted exhaustive database searches for usage of the word ‘genocide’ by some of the major English-language print media in reference to what they call “theaters of atrocities.”

The three tables they have compiled for the book are something to behold.

Table 1 is titled “Differential attributions of ‘genocide’ to different theaters of atrocities,” and Table “Differential Use of ‘Massacre’ and ‘Genocide’ for Benign and Nefarious Atrocities;” Table 2 focuses on different aspects of Iraq specifically.

The various “theaters of atrocities” include but are not limited to Iraq, the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo, the Tutsi of Rwanda, the Hutu and other peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the peoples of western Sudan (Darfur).

In one of the more impressive empirical confirmations of a hypothesis readers are likely to find anywhere, the results of Herman and Peterson’s database research are both predictable

and appalling: In case after case, major English-language newspapers such as the New York Times and The Guardian (as well as countless others) used the word 'genocide' in a manner that would have been approved of by the State Department, linking it consistently to toponyms like Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and Darfur, but rarely if ever to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq, whether Iraq during the "sanctions of mass destruction" era (1990-2003) or since the U.S. invasion and military occupation (from 2003 onward).

There are, in the terms introduced by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky years earlier, "worthy" and "unworthy" victims in the system of "atrocities management," and each and every victim's worthiness rises or falls depending on who's doing the killing – official enemies or we ourselves.

Again, to elaborate: The worthiness of a victim to elicit concern and support depends not on the victim himself but on the "worthiness" of the perpetrator. "Good" perpetrators – the U.S. and its allies – are eo ipso incapable of bad actions, therefore anyone on the receiving end of an American bomb or cruise missile is inherently unworthy.

Genocide, murder on a grand scale, is treated not with the urgency and gravity the subject warrants but as the theme of a near-comic book morality play. We and they, good and bad.

An analogous bias exists, the authors detail, in relation to the work of the International Criminal Court and even more so with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

The latter two are nothing other than the embodiment and institutionalization of great power victor's justice and the first is used by the U.S. against recalcitrant states on Washington's enemies list. (In the Foreword to *The Politics of Genocide*, Chomsky cites the Greek historian Thucydides, who placed in the mouth of an Athenian the immortal words: "you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.")

International courts doing the bidding of the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization cohorts do not, Herman and Peterson point out, address the greatest cause of suffering brought about through human agency: Wars of aggression. Although borrowing their lexicon from the Nuremberg Principles – for example, "war crimes" and "crimes of humanity" – while adding "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" (with the last two used all but interchangeably), Western states are highly selective and equally self-serving in their interpretation of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the model for prosecuting international crimes of violence.

Principle VI, the gist of the Nuremberg indictments, states:

The crimes hereinafter set out are punishable as crimes under international law:

(a) Crimes against peace:

(i) Planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances;

(ii) Participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the acts mentioned under (i).

(b) War crimes:

Violations of the laws or customs of war which include, but are not limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation of slave labor or for any other purpose of the civilian population of or in occupied territory; murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the Seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.

(c) Crimes against humanity:

Murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation and other inhumane acts done against any civilian population, or persecutions on political, racial, or religious grounds, when such acts are done or such persecutions are carried on in execution of or in connection with any crime against peace or any war crime.

The U.S. and its Western allies, which launched three wars of aggression in less than four years (Yugoslavia in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003) with the forced displacement of millions of civilians, have deliberately chosen to ignore the core proscription of the Nuremberg Trials, that against waging wars of aggression, “the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

Principle VII says that “Complicity in the commission of a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity as set forth in Principle VI is a crime under international law.”

To relentlessly prosecute lesser crimes while perpetrating and abetting greater ones is the prerogative of the “world’s sole military superpower” (from Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech) and its allies. Governments of small, weak countries not sufficiently toeing Washington’s line are threatened with prosecution for actions occurring within and not outside their borders and the only “war crimes” trials conducted are also exclusively in response to strictly internal events. By design and selective enforcement, the new system of international law is what Balzac said of the law of his time, that it is a spider web through which the big flies pass and the little ones get caught.

Herman and Peterson have studied the above contrasts, what most often are an inversion of justice and not simply its distortion or selective implementation, in several locations: The Balkans, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Latin America, examining the most salient examples in each locale to demonstrate the unconscionable dichotomy of “good” and bad genocides.

In one of the most penetrating sections of the book, the authors study the differential approach of the U.S. in the contexts of both space and time; that is, how the suppression of the Kurdish movement has been treated in relation to Iraq as opposed to Turkey, and in Iraq from one decade to the next depending on whether the same head of state (Saddam Hussein) was a U.S. ally or adversary at the time.

Not a matter of what is right or wrong, not even of who does what to whom, but solely one of what advances America’s narrow and cynical geopolitical agenda.

Their model, however, possesses relevance to developments in other nations beyond those studied in *The Politics of Genocide*. Colombia, for example, and Western Sahara.

Also to Kosovo after 50,000 U.S. and NATO troops marched in eleven years ago and hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Roma (Gypsies) and other ethnic minorities were forced to flee the Serbian province.

Onslaughts against the people of South Ossetia two years ago this August by preeminent U.S. client Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia and against the Houthi minority community in northern Yemen with military backing from Saudi Arabia and the U.S. would be examples of Benign attempts to exterminate entire peoples, to commit genocide.

During the generation following the end of the Cold War and the triumph of global neoliberalism, enough genuine problems have weighed upon humanity. With the privatization of increasingly broad sectors of former state functions and the concomitant economic dislocation of a large percentage of the population, and with the penetration of rapacious transnational financial and corporate interests, tens of millions – perhaps hundreds of millions – of people in poor countries have fled the countryside to the large cities. Millions more have attempted the desperate and often deadly migration to the global North. The last twenty years have witnessed the largest Völkerwanderung in history.

In that context competition for natural and other resources takes on a drastic intensity, and conflicts based on residual ethnic, religious and regional suspicions and strife can be too easily revived and inflamed. The potential for communal, for inter-ethnic, violence is a power keg that must not be ignited.

The willful exacerbation and exploitation of such conflicts by outside powers to achieve broader geostrategic objectives add a greater degree of peril, one of regional conflicts that could expand into wider wars and even a showdown between the U.S. and nuclear powers like Russia and China.

The 78-day bombing war waged by the U.S. and NATO against Yugoslavia in 1999 in the name of “stopping genocide,” the “worst genocide since Hitler,” coincided with the induction of the first former Warsaw Pact member states into the Alliance (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) and resulted in the building of a mammoth U.S. military base, Camp Bondsteel, in Kosovo and NATO’s absorption and penetration of all of Southeastern Europe. Every country in the region but Serbia (for the time being) now has troops serving under the military bloc in Afghanistan.

The crisis in Darfur in western Sudan gave rise to NATO’s first operation in Africa, the airlifting of African Union troops from 2005-2007. At the end of 2007 the first U.S. military command established outside North America since the Cold War, Africa Command, was launched.

In the same year and in the name of opposing genocide, a self-styled “March for Darfur” was held in Berkeley, California – a birthplace of the anti-Vietnam War protest movement forty years before – in which participants adapted a standard anti-war chant – “What do we want? Peace! When do we want it? Now!” – to “What do we want? NATO! When do we want it? Now!”

At the end of the day military actions, including full-fledged wars, conducted by the U.S. and NATO in part or in whole to ostensibly “end genocide” will produce more deaths, more mass-scale displacement, and more expulsion and extermination of endangered minorities as has happened over the past eleven years in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. More

genocide. The genuine article.

Questions about the intentional and systematic extermination of a people are not to be taken lightly. Neither are they to be dealt with as yet another weapon in the arsenal of history's mightiest military power for use against defenseless adversaries. The U.S. government and its highly selective "genocide" echo chambers are adept at seeing the mote in their neighbor's eye, but are blind to the mountain of corpses produced by Washington and its proxies. Myopia passing into active complicity.

In documenting the diametrically opposite manner in which the subject of genocide is treated by the government of the United States and its apologists (acknowledged and otherwise) based on international political and economic motives, Herman and Peterson have provided a simultaneously concise and comprehensive guidebook to separating fact from fabrication. Truth is the first casualty of war and war is in turn the offspring of falsehood. Exposing the last contributes to eroding the foundation for U.S. armed aggression and global military expansion.

The Politics of Genocide is available from:

<http://monthlyreview.org/books/politicsofgenocide.php>

[http://www.amazon.com/Politics-Genocide-Edward-Herman/dp/1583672125/ref=sr_1_3?s=b
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