Playing Devil's Advocate: Reflecting on Samantha Power's 'A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide'
by Patrick Allington, Altitude, Volume 4, Article 3, 2004.

Even after the violent political and ideological excesses of the twentieth century, even in an era of multiculturalism following successive waves of migration, relatively few of us in the western world of 2004 have personally endured policies and practices of genocide. We might think of Samantha Power's dense, disturbing book, 'A Problem From Hell': America and the Age of Genocide, as a conduit. The horrifying case studies she recounts inform us about the callousness and the breadth of certain recent crimes against humanity, and cast at least a dim light on the dark realities endured by humans living in war-torn communities. Power also reminds us that western governments respond (or do not respond) to such events via the continually evolving and faltering, sometimes fatuous but sometimes effective, global geopolitical system. This global geopolitical system can itself contribute to future unrest: when the US, for its own strategic and economic reasons, supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war it obviously did not plan to fight two Gulf Wars and to commence a messy occupation of Iraq; when the US supported the Taliban following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan it did not expect to later fight a war against terrorism.

'A Problem From Hell' is part investigative journalism and part scholarly and passionately argued interpretation of Power's own research, based on a political position that itself informs the direction of that research. After discussing the alleged Armenian genocide in Turkey (in 1915, before the word 'genocide' existed) and the emergence of the legal concept of genocide following the Holocaust, she summarises subsequent examples of what she determines to be genocide in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda and Kosovo. Taken in isolation (and whether or not readers choose to accept Power's determinations of genocide), each of these historical studies is appalling. The importance of presenting an accessible summary of some of the worst mass acts of violence of last century, for many of us either forgotten, dimly remembered or never known, cannot be overstated. But the greater value of 'A Problem From Hell' is in its comparative, contextual approach. Power makes clear that crimes against humanity are neither isolated nor date to a previous, less civil age; by the time she discusses events in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the legacy of nearly a century of accumulating genocides weighs heavily on the text, and the reader.

Power argues that US administrations have sometimes responded ineffectively to genocide, sometimes with indifference, by choosing to over-privilege dual tenets: first, that national sovereignty is inviolable, and second, and perhaps more significantly, that US responses to the activities of other nations should proceed on a basis consistent with the US' 'national interest'. In contrast, Power argues that America has a moral obligation to prevent or arrest genocide but, beyond a moral response, she makes the case that policymakers and citizens should regard preventing genocide as itself serving the US national interest.

‘A Problem From Hell’ won Power the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction 2003, and it won and was short listed for a number of other important awards. It has been widely and mostly positively reviewed, many critics suggesting that it should be a standard text in its field, some even implying that it could become an influential part of the political and moral landscape it itself critiques. Power tackles a most difficult subject; she reaches nuanced conclusions while remaining, in the best sense, argumentative. But even as we admire ‘A Problem From Hell’, and even as Power’s narrative shocks us, we might release ourselves from considering the many complexities that she does not resolve. This concerned, informed passivity might even manifest in us the belief that reading (or even owning) ‘A Problem From Hell’ itself could represent a substantial personal-political reaction.

Power eschews the facade of neutrality and she at least points towards the relevance of the distance between lives of hardship and lives of privilege. But if we appropriate her concerns and the personal questioning that must have led her to her conclusions, we might avoid subjecting ourselves to similar scrutiny. ‘A Problem From Hell’ is a much more important book when it is placed in its wider context, which is not only the history of twentieth-century genocides and western responses to those genocides, but also the broader history of international relations and the theory and practice of modern diplomacy. This might include, for example, focusing more precisely on what core US priorities have been seen since World War Two, noting especially the various stages of the Cold War and the central importance of the US’ dealings with the USSR and the People’s Republic of China. It might also include trying to recognise how we in the west, not directly involved in or associated with policy framers and decision makers, connect with and impact on the elusive geopolitical system that operates on our behalf.

In this context we need to be able to disconnect Power’s narrative of events from her conclusions and prescriptions, which remain open to interpretation and will be accessible to disagreeing protagonists in future debates. Consider Power’s argument that genocide prevention should be seen as serving the national interest:

If it was difficult before September 11 to get US decision-makers to see the long-term costs of allowing genocide, it will be even harder today when US security needs are so acute and visible. But security for Americans at home and abroad is contingent on international stability, and there is perhaps no greater source of havoc than a group of well-armed extremists bent on wiping out a people on ethnic, national, or religious grounds.

Recalling that ‘A Problem From Hell’ was first published in 2002, I might use this quote to support the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the ‘Coalition of the Willing’. Or, by referring to Power’s description of earlier US support for Iraq, which the US deemed to be in its national interest, I might label the invasion a cynical attempt by the US to avoid its role in Saddam Hussein’s reign, and I might choose to doubt whether the occupation is now serving the US national interest, even in purely strategic terms.

My point is not to criticise Power for failing to be definitive, but to note that 'A Problem From Hell' is a book of dissent and that its narrative partly focuses on dissenters, inside and outside the system. But policymakers and the general public often ignore or dismiss dissenters, and employ their 'unreasonableness' to reinforce official positions. Dissenters might also, simply, be wrong. They might also act as a conscience by proxy, allowing us to laud their courage and respect their principles and give thanks that such people exist.

In the context of the problems and possibilities of dissent, consider Power's discussion of the evolution of the legal concept of genocide. She recounts the efforts of Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew, lawyer and emigrant to the US who lost many family members in the Holocaust. Lemkin conducted a relentless crusade in the newly created UN to codify a specific type of crime, which he named genocide, and which reflected crimes committed against people because of their membership of a specific group. His long struggle led eventually (1951) to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, of which Article II states:

… genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Power emphasises the need to distinguish between this legal definition of genocide and the word's more colloquial use, which tends to evoke the scope and severity of the Holocaust. This is not a mere question of semantics, and neither should the need for precision imply that Article II cannot also be a 'living' definition, itself subject to debate and precedent. But if the word genocide is to have any function in public discourse — whether we are discussing Tutsis in Rwanda or indigenous Australians or Muslims in Bosnia — users of the term must state plainly what they are alleging. If we use the term loosely, we should not be surprised by any resulting dissonance, given that, for example, the full definition of genocide in the Oxford is, 'The deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group.'

None of this is simple. Power emphasises repeatedly the need for precision, and in doing so she effectively demonstrates that the legal use of the Genocide Convention has been underemployed as a unilateral or multilateral means of challenging the perpetrators of genocide. But the need for precision can also aid obfuscation. Power is at her most scathing when recounting the efforts of spokespeople for various US administrations to twist their language so as to avoid publicly referring to genocide. For example, she quotes from this 1994 confidential memo from then Secretary of State Warren Christopher on the question of Rwanda:

The delegation is authorized to agree to a resolution that states that 'acts of genocide' have occurred in Rwanda or that 'genocide has occurred in Rwanda'. Other formulations that suggest that some, but not all of the killings in Rwanda are genocide … e.g., 'genocide is taking place in Rwanda' — are authorized. Delegation is not authorized to agree to the characterization of any specific incident as genocide or to agree to any formulation that indicates that all killings in Rwanda are genocide. (362)

Christopher's primary intention, it seems, was to ensure that injudicious public use of language did not compromise policies regarding Rwanda. Still, this leads to a broader question, and one acknowledged by Power: when the carnage of innocent people is occurring, should the onus be on defining whether or not that violence constitutes genocide? Does such a determination alter death tolls or refugee numbers or the amount of individual and collective grief and hardship? Regarding Iraqi actions against its Kurdish population, Power considers the response of Amnesty International:

Whatever its internal skepticism about Kurdish claims, instead of publicly casting doubts on refugee reports, the organization did something no non-governmental group had ever done: It appealed directly to the UN Security Council to act immediately to stop the slaughter of Kurdish civilians. It made what was then a radical, new argument. When a state committed massacres inside its borders, the killings constituted 'a threat to international peace and security' and thus, according to the UN charter, became the responsibility of the Security Council. The organization did not invoke the genocide convention. It argued only what it could prove definitively. Researchers did not want a debate over the aptness of the genocide label to distract policymakers from crimes that were undeniable. (215)

Again, there is no simple conclusion. We can invoke the Genocide Convention and use it as a means of both ceasing bloodshed and punishing perpetrators: it can define the crime and legitimate the response. But this requires the willingness of states to choose to use the convention as this type of tool. And that depends, it appears, on whether such use falls within a state's national interest.

Former Australian diplomat, Richard Woolcott, suggests,

The definition of Australia's national interest must be the starting point of policy formulation. This will always be a combination of our economic and trade interests, our geopolitical and strategic concerns, and the extent to which our interests are served — and not eroded — by participating in multilateralism and what has been called 'good international citizenship' activities. Despite the seminal changes of the last decade, one thing has remained constant: Australia's basic objectives are to preserve itself from attack or the threat of attack and to advance the economic and social well-being of all its citizens.

I do not quote Woolcott in order to locate him amongst the many US diplomats and politicians criticised by Power. Neither do I argue that his definition is conclusive (or, for that matter, that this one quote reflects even his definitive word) but it is, I suggest, a

reasonable summary of the way our government interacts with the world on our behalf. And though it probably serves us reasonably well and reasonably honourably a fair amount of the time, it is also utterly vague: we can argue that almost anything is in the national interest. We cannot express surprise, and we cannot deflect all blame onto our policymakers when, for instance, our national interests and our moral obligations do not coincide, leading to a practical response that is at once convoluted and inflexible and, further, that policymakers are disinclined to expose for all to see. Neither should we — even when we are reading a book about US responses to genocide, and whether we believe that Australia is America's ally, co-sheriff or far-flung dependency — fall for the tempting, satisfying option of damning the Yanks and hoping, abstractly, that they might do better next time.

Many difficult and disturbing questions remain for us, not the least of which is whether we are prepared for the realities and the complexities that flow from wanting to bridge the gap between how the geopolitical world works and how we hope it might work. Consider Samantha Power's call to dissent, made in the final paragraph of her book:

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, 'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.' After a century of doing so little to prevent, suppress and punish genocide, Americans must join and thereby legitimate the ranks of the unreasonable.

Though it is probably not her primary intent, Power's book exposes the limitations of the media acting as the dominant conduit between citizens and those engaged in enacting and preserving both foreign policy and the systems and rules that drive foreign policy. Unlike Power, who served as a newspaper correspondent in Bosnia, many of her readers will not have personally witnessed genocide, except perhaps in history classes or via Hollywood or maybe at a commemorative museum at a significant location such as Auschwitz in Poland or S-21 in Cambodia. Power states,

Despite graphic media coverage, American policymakers, journalists, and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil. Ahead of the killings, they assume rational actors will not inflict seemingly gratuitous violence. They trust in good-faith negotiations and traditional diplomacy. Once the killings start, they assume that civilians who keep their heads down will be left alone. They urge ceasefires and donate humanitarian aid.'(xvii)

This challenge of imagining crimes against humanity, whether or not we declare them genocidal, is different for most of us than it is for Power, who has at least glimpsed the graphic reality of perpetrators targeting and killing innocent people because of who they are. The fact that genocide is almost inconceivable to our imagination should hardly surprise us. But to hide behind our remoteness is to deliberately suppress our imagination: not being able to believe is different to not wanting to know. As Power makes clear, the twentieth century, including the late twentieth century, was awash with politically motivated violence. To be required to imagine such violence, rather than to

draw on personal experience, is a blessing with, unavoidably, political ramifications. In the meantime, those of us who might feel distant from the decisions (and the deflections) of our political and diplomatic representatives, and who might feel helpless in the face of a newspaper headline announcing political murders in some distant country, might also have legitimate doubts that we possess enough information to be sure of our reaction. Even if we accept that our leaders are telling the truth, are they telling us everything? Is the media? Doubting these sources is a legitimate part of attempting to inform ourselves; but while doubts fester, governments do react and respond, and they do so in our name.

Consider again Christopher, the US Secretary of State from 1993-1997, who had a face too woefully morose to be a politician in the age of television. When Christopher resigned from his position (not, in all likelihood, because of his face) President Bill Clinton inflicted on him a hug of thanks. If I remember correctly — I think I do, but it was a momentary image on the seven o'clock news — Christopher turned granite-like with embarrassment. Clinton whispered in his ear, or so I now choose to imagine, 'It's about the cameras, stupid: hug me back.'

Does Warren Christopher's face matter? Or, more correctly, does it matter what I remember about his face or, more correctly still, how I now choose to caricature him? Does it matter what I imagine Clinton said to him? Do I gain anything useful, and am I fair to Christopher, by extrapolating that a sour face, fixed in place by overwork and over worry (or perhaps because the wind changed) reflects a mind lacking dexterity and vibrancy?

Of course, these questions should be as inconsequential as whether Christopher prefers Coke or Pepsi (or, heaven forbid, neither). But to recognise that so much media-dominated politics is facile does not enable me to avoid the reality that I rely on the media for the vast majority of the information I gather in order to have a world view that I can, myself, take seriously. Warren Christopher's face is significant to me — for you it might be Henry Kissinger's accent or Deng Xiao Ping's height or Margaret Thatcher's handbags — because I create my worldview through a combination of information, interpretation and imagination.

The last of these — imagination — is troublesome but it is a recurring theme in discussions about war and about genocide. As Power, who in Bosnia witnessed terrible scenes but still could not believe subsequent events, suggests, 'Before it begins, genocide is not easy to wrap one's mind around. A genocidal regime's intent to destroy a group is so hideous and the scale of its atrocities so enormous that outsiders who know enough to forecast brutality can rarely bring themselves to imagine genocide' (95). Or as the historian Inga Clendinnen wrote to help explain the aim of her book, Reading the Holocaust (1998): 'I want to dispel the 'Gorgon effect' — the sickening of the imagination and curiosity and the draining of the will which afflicts so many of us when we try to look squarely at the persons and processes implicated in the Holocaust.' Or as President George W. Bush said in his 2003 State of the Union address: 'Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily

contained. Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans — this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.' Or as Richard Brookhiser argued in his March 2003 assessment of George W. Bush: 'The unknown quality is imagination — the imagination to foresee consequences, the imagination to be a wartime President.'

The primary connection to genocide for those of us blessed by ignorance — in other words, the connection that gives our imagination a starting point — is the media. Sound bites are, it should hardly be necessary to repeat, simplistic and unreliable. Certain that no half hour explanation is ever going to be recounted on the six o'clock news, politicians employ language that amounts to marketing, not merely in the content of the message but in the 'selling' of the sound bite to journalists, who can only 'buy' so many quotes for any given bulletin. No government spokesperson is ever going to explain an actual government position, with all its complexities and possibilities and pitfalls, on a television programme, or, for that matter, at a news conference. The function of a sound bite is to summarise, to appease, to deflect, to market in wildly simplified ways, a policy or action; if this affronts us as receivers of sound bites — actually affronts us, as opposed to allowing us the comfort of feeling affronted — we have a responsibility, and in countries such as the US and Australia we have the right and the opportunity, to reject the legitimacy and primacy of this mode of communication. Unless, that is, we need and want our representatives to make decisions we ourselves would not make and that we ourselves do not condone.

In 1993, as Power recounts, Christopher said this about the unfolding violence in Bosnia: The hatred between all three groups … is almost unbelievable. It's almost terrifying, and it's centuries old. That really is a problem from hell. And I think that the United States is doing all we can to try to deal with that problem.' Christopher managed to summarise considerable detail, and to signpost his position, in the short quote. When he said the 'hatred' existed amongst all combatants, he was also saying that he did not want, as a matter of policy, to hold the Serbs solely responsible; he certainly was reluctant to accuse them of genocide. When he said the hatred was 'centuries old' he offered historical context and so absolved modern participants, and the modern geopolitical system, from direct responsibility. When he said that the US was 'doing all we can', he absolved his government of the need, indeed the capacity, to do more; after all, if a problem comes from hell, the logical response is to pray.