

Higher Education in an AGE OF STRIFE

Great skepticism about the use of American power exists around the world today. The dichotomy between American idealism—who we want to be and what we hope to accomplish—and realism—what we can actually get done—can be demoralizing. Samantha Power, Anna Lindh Professor of Practice of Global Leadership and Public Policy at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and the author of *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World*, discusses how this gap might be bridged. Power notes the increasingly prevalent dualism found in the United States and reflected on college campuses today, where some students actively form groups to address problems such as genocide in Darfur, while others believe that we should retreat from world affairs and focus on domestic problems. Power believes that isolationism is a totally untenable prospect and that domestic and foreign policy ought not be stovepiped as they have long been. She urges colleges and universities to educate and engage students in ways that channel their energy onto paths that take our country forward as a positive influence in our strife-ridden world.

NOTEBOOK

- All of us need to force that long-overdue conversation about American foreign policy and global citizenship. We all need to define the sacrifices we are willing to make, and describe the world we wish to be a part of.
- The battle to stop genocide is lost in the realm of domestic politics: No U.S. president has ever made genocide prevention a priority, and no U.S. president has suffered politically for his indifference to its occurrence.
- Americans today seem torn between two impulses. The first is to retreat from global engagement altogether. The second is to go abroad and stamp out threats in the hopes of achieving full security.
- The biography of Vieira de Mello is also the biography of a dangerous world whose ills are too big to ignore but too complex to manage quickly or cheaply.

The United States is nowhere near as powerful as it was five years ago. The disproportionate military and economic might this country historically has brought to bear has waned. Our military is stretched beyond its means and our economy is faltering. American influence is on the decline. While the Bush administration has carried out policies that have undermined U.S. influence, one cannot point solely to the Bush administration as responsible for the current state of affairs; rather, this administration has exposed and exacerbated structural fissures that were evident long before it took office.

U.S. foreign policy has long been crafted by a small group of elites in Washington who make their decisions far removed from domestic scrutiny. Occasionally, they direct a stirring speech about America and its role in the world to the people in the heartland. Newspapers publish short summary articles about what the U.S. government is up to overseas. But in the 21st century we will not be able to tackle the kinds of threats we face, nor promote the kinds of values that must be at the heart of our foreign policy, if Americans are not brought into the conversation. All of us need to force that long-overdue conversation about American foreign policy. We all need to define the sacrifices we are willing to make, and describe the world we wish to be a part of.

I have tried to bring people into the foreign policy conversation through writing stories—stories about real people's lives—those who shape U.S. policy and those affected by it. The stories make what can be quite dark historical material more accessible, which in turn widens the net and engages more readers. *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (2002) helped to engage students in the struggle to end genocide and, importantly, the broader effort to change U.S. foreign policy. By partaking in Darfur advocacy, they come to believe that their collective actions can make a difference. *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World* (2008) allows students to walk in the footsteps of one man who crossed borders as do the key challenges of the 21st century. I hope that Vieira de Mello's creative problem solving will serve as a model for those who follow.

"A Problem from Hell": American and The Age of Genocide

"A Problem from Hell" looks at American foreign policy through the lens of genocide. It is a book about the policy process and how gaps open between who Americans want to be and who we become in moments of crisis or trade-offs. A survey of the major genocides of the 20th century—the Ottoman slaughter of the Armenians, the Nazi Holocaust, Pol Pot's terror in Cambodia, Saddam Hussein's destruction of the Kurds, the

Bosnian Serbs' eradication of non-Serbs, and the Rwandan Hutus' extermination of the Tutsi—reveals strikingly similar U.S. policy responses across time, geography, ideology, and geopolitical balance. The pattern is this:

- Despite graphic media coverage, American policy makers, journalists, and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil. Ahead of the killings, they mistakenly assume that rational actors will not inflict seemingly gratuitous violence. They trust in good-faith negotiations and traditional diplomacy. They urge cease-fires and donate humanitarian aid.

- American political leaders interpret society-wide silence as an indicator of public indifference. They reason that they will incur no costs if the United States remains uninvolved but will face steep risks if U.S. leaders engage. Potential sources of influence—lawmakers on Capitol Hill, editorial boards, nongovernmental groups, and ordinary constituents—do not generate political pressure sufficient to change the calculus of America's leaders.

- The U.S. government not only abstains from sending its troops, but it also takes very few diplomatic or economic steps along a continuum of intervention to deter genocide.

Thus, the battle to stop genocide is lost in the realm of domestic politics: No U.S. president has ever made genocide prevention a priority, and no U.S. president has suffered politically for his indifference to its occurrence. In short, there has been no political cost to allowing mass atrocities. High level decision makers have been insufficiently attentive to the human consequences of their decisions.

Students are helping to change that calculus. In 2004, a group of students at Swarthmore College formed the Genocide Intervention Fund (now the Genocide Intervention Network) to raise money to help stop the genocide in Darfur. At that point, Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times*, John Prendergast, and others had begun to write about and advocate for action in Darfur. Coincidentally, also in 2004, around the 10-year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, the film *Hotel Rwanda* was released. The convergence of these forces breathed oxygen into the nascent student movement.

The Swarthmore group raised \$500,000 in order to assist, concretely, in civilian protection. Their spirited idealism crashed into reality when they tried to donate the funds to the African Union (AU) peacekeepers to buy helmets, fuel, and other nonlethal equipment that could help with peacekeeping. There was no one within the AU who could receive the money. The students ended up latching onto a women's nongovernmental organization and giving them a grant to offer additional training for peacekeepers dealing with women and girls in the refugee camps in Darfur.

Today the student division of the Genocide Intervention Network, STAND, has 700 chapters around the United States—300 on college campuses and 400 in high schools. Obviously they haven't ended the atrocities in Darfur, but they have made enough noise about Darfur that politicians have had to take notice. U.S. policy makers cannot claim public indifference and now must adjust their usual national interest calculation to take into account the human consequences of their actions with regard to Darfur. Further, to date, 61 colleges and universities have divested their holdings from companies doing business in the Sudan.

That said, the reality is that this Darfur movement is all dressed up with no place to go because of America's standing in the world today. Darfur illustrates Washington's diminished capacity to influence events. The Bush administration, to its credit, has made a greater commitment to address the conflict in Darfur than any other country, but other countries have been reluctant to join the United States.

Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello And the Fight to Save the World

Students' efforts to stop the genocide in Darfur illustrate the complexity of the global issues we face. It is hard to bring about change. I teach my students about the mechanics of foreign policy, how it is that human consequences can get excluded from the discussion, and the limits of 20th century institutions for dealing with 21st century problems. The life of Sergio Vieira de Mello presents an inspirational model for students as to how to dive in, clear-eyed, creative, and determined.

Vieira de Mello worked his entire adult life for the UN. In his 34 years of service, the Brazilian moved with the headlines, working in Bangladesh, Sudan, Cyprus, Mozambique, Lebanon, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Congo, Kosovo, and East Timor. Besides Portuguese, he spoke English, French, Italian, and Spanish fluently. In 2002, he was promoted to High Commissioner for Human Rights. Soon thereafter, he was given the toughest assignment of his career: UN envoy to Iraq. Vieira de Mello was torn about accepting the assignment to Iraq but was pleased the UN had been summoned to offer assistance. He agreed to go on two conditions: He would choose his own team and he would serve in Iraq for only four months. (At that time, no one had any idea how long the war would continue.)

Vieira de Mello was suited for the job not because he knew Iraq—he did not—but because he had amassed so much experience working in violent places. He could perhaps show Americans what to do—and what not to do. He had long ago stopped believing that he brought solutions to a place's woes, but he had grown masterful at asking the questions that helped reveal

constructive ideas. Vieira de Mello arrived in Baghdad in June 2003 and immediately began the controversial task of trying to persuade the Americans to end the occupation. That August, he was killed (along with 21 others) in the country's first major suicide bombing, an attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad.

The biography of Vieira de Mello is also the biography of a dangerous world whose ills are too big to ignore but too complex to manage quickly or cheaply. Because of the terrible costs of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, Americans today seem torn between two impulses. The first is to retreat from global engagement altogether. We do not feel sure that our government or we ourselves know what we are doing. The second is to go abroad and stamp out threats in the hopes of achieving full security. Vieira de Mello's life reminds us of the impossibility of either course. The United States can no more pack up and turn away from today's global threats than it can remake the world to its own liking.

Vieira de Mello began each of his missions by trying, in his words, to "get real," to see the world as it was rather than as he might have liked it to be. Today, getting real means recognizing that the most pressing threats on the horizon are transnational and thus cannot be tackled by a single country. But getting real also requires acknowledging that the international system is polarized and slow, just when we need cooperation and urgent action. Vieira de Mello was a UN man to the core. Despite its flaws, the UN remained the embodiment of the "world's conscience" for him because it was the place where governments assembled to enshrine their legal and moral commitments. It was the home of international rules that, if followed, would breed greater peace and security. But by the time of his death, he was deeply worried that the system he had joined 34 years earlier was not up to the task of dealing with the barbarism and lawlessness of the times.

Vieira de Mello's global life, spent trying to save and improve broken lives and broken societies, breaks open and sheds light on the dichotomy between idealism and realism. He started out as a humanitarian, but by the time of his death, he had become a diplomat and politician, comfortable weighing lesser evils.

Vieira de Mello's professional journey led him to believe that the world's leaders needed to do three big things: First, they had to invest far greater resources in trying to ensure that people enjoyed law and order. Second, they had to engage even the most unsavory militants. Even if they did not find common ground with rogue states or rebels, at least they might acquire a greater sense of how to outmaneuver them. And third, world leaders would be wise to orient their activities less around democracy than around individual dignity. And the best way for outsiders to make a dent in enhancing dignity would be to improve their linguistic and cultural

knowledge base, to remind themselves of their own fallibility, to empower those who know their societies best, and to be resilient and adaptable in the face of inevitable conflicts.

What Higher Education Can Do in an Age of Strife

A tremendous amount of misunderstanding and ignorance exists across cultures worldwide—cultures that have been brought closer together by advances in communication technology that beam news and images around the globe on a 24/7 cycle. These bits of information, though, rarely come with the context needed to interpret events and beliefs through lenses wide enough to promote understanding. It is no secret that Americans need to learn more about the world by learning other languages, studying other cultures, and living abroad. Higher education's pivotal role in enhancing America's cultural knowledge base is clear. Indeed, our nation's colleges and universities present the best hope for preparing future generations to thrive in a global society.

Not only do Americans need to travel, study, and work abroad, but we also need to encourage more foreigners to do the same in our country. While homeland security should not be discounted, a better balance should be struck between security and allowing more people from the Muslim world, for example, to enter the United States. At this point, the long-term benefits of hosting students from around the world who could return to their native countries as ambassadors for ours are not given enough weight.

In our classrooms we have all begun to talk a good game about the importance of tackling global problems, but few of us have drawn on figures like Vieira de Mello who themselves cross borders. The models we have offered students have remained static, and, given the nature of the world students will enter, excessively statist. Some teachers have had success using Tracy Kidder's biography of Paul Farmer to introduce young people to human rights and public health. As teachers and administrators, we need to try to give young people exposure to this new career genre—and the new nature of the challenge that lies ahead.

Higher education leaders can use their bully pulpit to signal what their institutions value in a number of ways. Curriculum requirements could include basic international relations courses or area studies focused on regions such as the Middle East or East Asia, which will have tremendous influence on the course of global events for some time to come. Faculty can be encouraged to approach topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, perhaps by team teaching to bridge traditional divides such as that between domestic and foreign policy, or between civil rights and human rights. Faculty can engage students in their subjects through role playing. In "*A Problem from*

Hell," the relevant categories were not winners and losers or victims and perpetrators (as is often the case when history and wars are taught) but rather upstanders and bystanders. Students can identify with upstanding and bystanding because that is the continuum on which most of them already have experience. I cannot overstate the power of getting students to engage material in this way.

Institutions send signals about what is important by whom they ask to speak at commencement or to whom they award honorary degrees. Opportunities to bring speakers to campus throughout the academic year present leadership possibilities to demonstrate the importance of topics such as global warming, genocide prevention, or HIV/AIDS care and to make the point that so many of these challenges are borderless. What changes should be made in the curriculum to educate students who will be borderless as well?

Finally, if your institution has not yet divested its holdings from companies doing business in the Sudan, the lessons for students about engaging with the world beyond their usual scope and taking action on such issues are invaluable because they are just that—action and not merely an academic exercise.

Conclusion

Considering that we have two wars going on today—one going terribly in Iraq and the other not well in Afghanistan—I am surprised at the energy students are pouring in to the Darfur movement. The wars have given rise to very controversial policies, including torture, rendition, Guantanamo, and so on. In the post-9/11 world students seem eager to latch on to something and devote their enormous reserves of energy to a cause, but they seem to be staying away from Iraq and the so-called "war on terror" because they find it morally challenging and practically confusing. They seem to be channeling their larger anxiety about the direction of American foreign policy into the Darfur movement.

While most students are not serving in the military, they do want to do something constructive. They are hungry for a path through the confusing thicket that is our world today. The task before us is not simply to point to a path, but to create the paths that will take America forward as a positive influence in our strife-ridden world.

Samantha Power is Anna Lindh Professor of Practice of Global Leadership and Public Policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Her book "*A Problem from Hell*": *America and the Age of Genocide* won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. Her book *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World* was published in 2008. Power can be reached at samantha_power@harvard.edu.