

Book Review: Don Cheadle and John Prendergast, Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond

Samuel Totten

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Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond is a call to activism; it is not a scholarly work, and it does not present itself as such. What it does best is provide a solid overview of the anti-genocide activist movement that has been created as a result of the ongoing crisis in Darfur, Sudan. What it does not do, though it tries, is to offer any solid answers as to how genocide can be stopped. This is not surprising, given that the first author is a Hollywood actor (Don Cheadle starred in the feature film *Hotel Rwanda*). That said, a book of greater substance could have been expected from the second author, John Prendergast, a long-time associate of the highly regarded International Crisis Group and a former official in the Clinton Administration (1992–2000). But both authors are obviously concerned and passionate about the ongoing crisis in Darfur and are intent on doing their utmost to rally citizens to apply pressure on the United States and the international community to act whenever genocide's ugly face appears on the horizon.

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Book Review

Don Cheadle and John Prendergast, *Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond*. New York: Hyperion Books, 2007. Pp. 252, paper. \$14.95 US.

Reviewed by Samuel Totten, *University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and Centre for Conflict Management, National University of Rwanda, Butare*

Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond is a call to activism; it is not a scholarly work, and it does not present itself as such. What it does best is provide a solid overview of the anti-genocide activist movement that has been created as a result of the ongoing crisis in Darfur, Sudan. What it does not do, though it tries, is to offer any solid answers as to how genocide can be stopped. This is not surprising, given that the first author is a Hollywood actor (Don Cheadle starred in the feature film *Hotel Rwanda*). That said, a book of greater substance could have been expected from the second author, John Prendergast, a long-time associate of the highly regarded International Crisis Group and a former official in the Clinton Administration (1992–2000). But both authors are obviously concerned and passionate about the ongoing crisis in Darfur and are intent on doing their utmost to rally citizens to apply pressure on the United States and the international community to act whenever genocide's ugly face appears on the horizon.

The book's main title—*Not on Our Watch*—can be interpreted in at least four different ways. First, it is an assertion that the authors and many of the activists they write about (for that matter, anyone involved in the anti-genocide movement) will not remain silent when a genocide-like situation occurs. Second, it is a clarion call to citizens across the globe to join the current movement to bring an end to the crisis in Darfur. Third, it is a call to all people, no matter where they reside, to join the larger anti-genocide effort—an effort to end genocide once and for all.

Fourth, it is a dig at US President George W. Bush, who purportedly wrote—as he was about to take office, or early in his presidency—the words “Not on my watch” in the margins of a report about how the Clinton administration totally and callously ignored the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, allowing between 500,000 and 1 million people to be murdered by Hutu extremists. It is a dig at the fact that while the Bush administration declared, on 9 September 2004, that genocide had been perpetrated—and possibly continued—in Darfur, it simply referred the matter to the United Nations, and has subsequently done little more than watch as the Darfur crisis continues to this day (early 2009).

The authors correctly assert that “throughout American history, social movements have helped shape our government's policy on a variety of issues” (13), but what they do not seem to appreciate (or do not want to admit, as it would interfere with their argument and their agenda) is that such social movements dealt with single self-contained national issues such as the emancipation of women, the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement. Some, such as the anti-nuclear movement, had an international focus, but one has to question just how much good the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s did, given the nuclear arsenals that exist

around the world today: both the number of weapons in these arsenals and the number of nations belonging to the so-called nuclear club are slowly but inexorably growing.

The international anti-apartheid movement, on the other hand, was successful; but it took many, many years to finally break the spine of apartheid South Africa. The problem with approaching genocide from this perspective is at least twofold. First, genocide has the maddening tendency to pop up here, there, and everywhere, under different guises, in different circumstances, driven by vastly different antecedents, and undertaken by radically different actors. In other words, it is not the type of stationary phenomenon that apartheid was, being located solely in South Africa and thus easily zeroed in on because it was in one place and was largely the responsibility of one group that could be dealt with in a sustained fashion without Activists having to, time and again, try to figure out the causes, actions, and major actors involved. Second, by the time the international community even begins to assess the seriousness of the crimes being committed by an alleged perpetrator of genocide, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, may already have died. The point is genocide is radically different from most of the issues that successful social movements have focused on; and, in light of this, it is a phenomenon that, seemingly, going to take radically new approaches to bring to its knees. Thus far, what most scholars and activists have suggested is not radical at all (not in any sense of the word, including that of “getting at the roots” of the problem) and thus, not surprisingly, has not been particularly effective in coming up with solid ways to overcome, for example, *realpolitik* or the lack of political will on the part of those with the power to prevent or halt genocide. Ample proof of this, at least as far as Darfur is concerned, is that the Darfur crisis has only grown more complicated, and thus more intractable, over the past six years.

Written in a breezy style aimed at a general audience, *Not on Our Watch* comprises a preface (“On Our Watch”), nine chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix. The titles of the nine chapters provide a good overview of the focus of the book:

1. Challenges and Choices
2. Two Paths Out of Apathy
3. Sudan’s Backdrop to Genocide
4. From the Front Lines of Darfur
5. Citizens v. Government: Knowing What We Are Up Against
6. Activist Beginnings and Success Stories
7. The Upstanders
8. Strategies for Effective Change
9. Stop Mass Atrocities Now: An Agenda for Change

Despite the book’s limitations (which are addressed below), numerous aspects of it are interesting and informative. First, it is positive that, in certain places at least, the authors pull no punches with respect to the hesitancy of most presidential administrations in the United States (and, for that matter, other governments in the international community) to intervene in genocide. Activists and citizens need to be well aware of this tendency if they ever hope to develop an effective means of combating genocide. This is particularly true for those who believe that simply applying pressure on a US president is sufficient to bring a genocide to a close. For example, the authors assert that

The U.S. has . . . claimed that it is loath to interfere in the affairs of a sovereign state, a fair-weather policy at best, when no matter the possible implications and political intricacies the West does choose to intervene when a boon can be derived. (33)

Second, chapters three and four provide a quick and dirty overview of the background of the genocide in Darfur. As presented, the historical information is reader friendly and easy to understand. It is important for activists to be conversant with key issues of the crisis they are addressing, and these chapters will provide many with insights that they may not previously have had. Third, the book is packed with information about what activists have done thus far to try to address the Darfur crisis, keep it in the news, and bring it to the attention of an ever-increasing number of citizens.

In chapter five (“Citizens v. Government: Knowing What We Are Up Against”), Prendergast and Cheadle assert that,

given the excuses used over the past three and a half years, the truth appears to be that combating genocide and other mass atrocities is not considered a national security issue by most elected officials. The United States government does not want to burn its leverage on confronting genocide. It would rather save it for issues like Iraq, Iran, as well as keep friendly relations with its counterterrorism pals in Khartoum. The only antidote to this searing truth—the only way the United States will take the kind of leadership necessary to end the horrors—is for there to be a political cost for inaction, the voting booth. We need to make the temperature a little hotter, a little more uncomfortable for those politicians who would look away. (97–98)

Hitting the politicians where it hurts is a fine idea, and certainly organizations such as STAND, the student-led division of the Genocide Intervention Network, are beginning to figure out ways of turning up the temperature on politicians. But Darfur never really became the heated issue that STAND and others hoped it would during the 2008 US presidential race. It was, of course, greatly overshadowed by the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ongoing search for Osama Bin Laden, the color of Barack Obama’s skin, the “Palin factor,” and the difficult economic situation. In fact, Darfur was, for the most part, only perfunctorily touched on by the leading presidential candidates. With no intention of being flip, one has to ask, Where’s the heat?

Ultimately, for this reviewer, this book was more irritating than motivating. For example, in the first chapter, the authors state that

we have identified the Three Ps of ending genocide and other crimes against humanity: Protect the People, Punish the Perpetrators, and Promote the Peace. . . . If the government of the world’s sole superpower, the United States, motivated by the will of its citizens, takes the lead globally in doing these three things, crimes against humanity can come to an end. (10)

Is it really likely that crimes against humanity (here it appears the authors are subsuming most human-rights violations, including genocide, under the rubric of “crimes against humanity”) will one day come to an end? Are the authors serious? Apparently so. Again, one expects more from Prendergast, who is known as a wily and experienced human-rights activist.

Such rhetoric is not helpful. Platitudes go only so far—not far at all, in fact, in terms of making real progress in the world of international politics—but *Not on Our Watch* is rife with platitudes. Granted, the book was written for a general audience, and thus is perhaps bound to present a somewhat simplified version of reality, but still!

Continuing with their argument that the US government can ostensibly be the savior of millions across the globe, Cheadle and Prendergast assert that

the U.S. Government can take a leading role in stopping atrocities, in most cases without putting U.S. forces on the ground in large numbers. However, the only means by which U.S. policy can change, and thus the only way mass atrocity crimes can end, is if U.S. citizens raise their voices loud enough to get the attention of the White House and force our government to change its policy. (14–15)

Many who have actively confronted US policy *vis-à-vis* Darfur over the past four years are bound to question the validity of such an assertion. Or, they are bound to ask, Just how loud must our voices be? This would be a legitimate question since it is estimated that well over a million letters have been sent to the White House over the past four years urging the Bush administration to help put an end to the Darfur crisis. Just how many more letters are needed? Will 2 million letters have the impact that a million did not? Do the rallies have to be louder, more frequent, more vociferous? For the most part, the authors simply urge activists and concerned citizens not to give up the fight, to stay strong, to forge ahead, to keep their voices loud and persistent. More concrete suggestions that are truly likely to be efficacious are needed here, but, unfortunately, they are not forthcoming.

At one point—after listing and briefly discussing the “Top Ten Current U.S. Excuses for Inaction” (which, in and of themselves, are interesting and worthy of serious consideration by activists), the authors tell readers, “Just a few more degrees [to go]. Just a few thousand more letters. It is frankly, that simple” (98). If only that were true. If it were, genocide scholars, activists, and others alarmed by genocide would have the answer to preventing and halting genocide. But it is not true; and here, again, Cheadle and Prendergast are being not a little disingenuous.

At another point, they state that

the U.S. government usually does not respond to cases of mass atrocities—particularly African—because of the ... Four Horsemen Enabling the Apocalypse: ignorance, indifference, policy inertia, and apathy. (89)

Although they touch on the thorny issue of political will, they do not truly address how the lack of it can be overcome—if, in fact, they believe that it can be overcome. Cheadle and Prendergast allude to *realpolitik* early in the book but the fact that they leave it off the aforementioned list is baffling. Possibly they perceive *realpolitik* as policy inertia, but it is hardly that; in fact, *realpolitik* is an active agent within the world of politics. Or perhaps they felt compelled to choose four factors in order to use the metaphor of the original Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The upshot is that they largely fail to address the overpowering reality of *realpolitik*, its ubiquitous presence in the world of geopolitics, and its adverse impact on efforts to address such issues as the prevention of and effective intervention in genocide.

Cheadle and Prendergast also make one assertion after another that sound good in theory but conveniently overlook the role of fear in driving certain agendas. For example, they assert that in order to win peace in Sudan, we must first win an ideological battle at home: “We must show that combating crimes against humanity is as important as combating terrorism” (12–13). Many officials in the US government, and many US citizens, greatly fear the prospect of terrorism, but most do not fear genocide—neither its perpetration thousands of miles from their country, nor that it ever will become a reality in their world, on their soil. So to suggest that there is a real chance of genocide’s gaining the same traction as the fear of terrorism within the borders of the United States is wishful thinking.

Not on Our Watch also includes some howlers. This one is from Prendergast:

Early on, I had been a bit incredulous as to the real possibilities of citizen action in moving governments to act. Then, as I saw student and religious groups and others really responding and mobilizing to these different crises [e.g., world hunger, starvation, and now the crisis in Darfur] and as I started to see policy change [what changes he saw, he does not say], I began to believe in the power of ordinary people to make a difference. Perhaps it is too much to hope, but if these students and the thousands of other new activists on behalf of the defenseless have their way, the first genocide of the twenty-first century might also be the last, or at least the last one that doesn't provoke an appropriately strong response. (47)

The last genocide? Surely he is jesting. And just what is “an appropriately strong response”? The authors speak of organizing, writing and sending letters, and attending rallies, but just what effect have such activities had thus far? Unfortunately, not much!

In the case of Darfur, there is a distinct possibility that the window of opportunity for halting what was genocide has passed—that is, it is certainly possible that, at this point, the crisis may be morphing from what certainly was a genocide into what may now be more a case of civil war and internecine fighting among an increasing number of groups. If that is, in fact, true, then a totally new set of actions is called for. That said, until that “if” becomes an indisputable fact, anti-genocide groups must forge ahead with their attempts to halt what may continue to be a genocide. The question that remains, though, is this: Will their actions truly be effective, or are they, to paraphrase Shakespeare, going to end up engaging in a lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing?

Cheadle and Prendergast play rather fast and loose with certain facts. For example, they write, “In the fall of 2004, after his visit to Sudan, Secretary Powell officially invoked the term ‘genocide’” (5). Not quite. Powell officially invoked the term only after he had sent an investigatory team (the US Atrocities Documentation Team, or ADT) to the Chad/Sudan border to interview refugees from Darfur and then carefully studied, debated, and weighed the analysis (conducted by an outside agency as well as by State Department researchers) of the data collected by the team.

On a different note, the authors pile one superlative atop another in describing the their friend, and their hero, Paul Rusesabagina, the Rwandan played by Cheadle in *Hotel Rwanda*. According to the myth portrayed in the film, Rusesabagina, with great altruism, saved more than 1,000 people from certain death during the 1994 genocide. Over the years, both those Tutsi who survived as a result of being housed at the Hotel Mille Collines in Kigali and various Rwandan journalists and scholars, among others, have decried the bald-faced lies depicted in the film and have revealed Rusesabagina as little more than an opportunist. They have also accused him of denying the genocide after the fact. In speeches at various venues Rusesabagina has reportedly played the “double genocide” card in order to malign the current Rwandan government, arguing that a second genocide was perpetrated by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) as they fought the extremist Hutus and *génocidaires*. (There is no doubt that some RPF troops did, in fact, carry out massacres against suspected *génocidaires*, but to call such acts a genocide seems rather far-fetched, to say the least).

Treating Rusesabagina as the hero and altruist he wishes he were but wasn't (and isn't), and as the sole savior of thousands fleeing genocide in 1994, Cheadle and Prendergast fall into the trap of blind hero worship. Concomitantly, they buy into a

myth created largely by Rusesabagina himself and thus end up believing a tangle of lies and passing them on to thousands of unsuspecting readers. Essentially, the authors are continuing to do Rusesabagina's dirty work, if inadvertently, by falsely portraying him as the epitome of decency, when in fact he was anything but that (some in Rwanda claim he even forced Tutsis to pay him for water—for drinking, washing, and cooking—taken from the hotel pool).

Adding insult to injury, they are supporting a man who charges in the neighborhood of \$25,000 per appearance to speak on campuses around the United States—talks during which he spreads his lies while building his reputation as a “hero” and, in the process, effectively enriches himself by capitalizing on the genocide. The point is that Rusesabagina hardly seems like the sort of person who should be held up as a model of caring, decency, and altruism in the face of genocide.

It is important to note that the crisis in Darfur is now well into its sixth year, with no end in sight. Each year that genocide is allowed to continue unabated means an ever-increasing death toll—which makes the anti-genocide movement very different from other movements that attempt to ameliorate other injustices (as terrible as they may be). Because of this stark fact, there must be urgency in addressing genocide. To believe that one has four, five, six, seven, or more years to end a genocide is, in many ways, to blind oneself to the fact that genocide equals death—often in enormous numbers—and that genocides are often carried out within a relatively short period. A patient, step-by-step approach that involves beating the bushes to raise concern within a single nation or around the globe may (and no doubt often does) play into the hands of the perpetrators. Indeed, it gives perpetrators all the time they may want (or need) to accomplish their deadly goals.

At the very least, what activists can and should learn from history is that close to 6 million Jews were wiped out in less than eight years; that Pol Pot and his lackeys killed more than a million people in roughly four years; and, of course, that extremist Hutus largely accomplished their deadly task of murdering between 500,000 and 1 million people in an astonishingly short 100 days. Time is on the side of the killers, not the victims. This is an incontrovertible fact that all those who wish to see genocide prevented need to understand clearly—and then to act upon.

Ultimately, *Not on Our Watch* is bound to be perceived by the general public and by genocide scholars with two vastly different sets of eyes. The general public may find it interesting and informative, possibly even inspiring. Genocide scholars are likely to find it naïve, full of bluster and self-congratulatory comments and stories. But even they may find a kernel or nugget here or there that is worth considering as they continue to think about preventing genocide.