Exclusive
Genocide Under Our Watch

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Foreign Policy Journal, April 16, 2015

Newly declassified White House documents place Richard Clarke and Susan Rice at the forefront of U.S. efforts to limit a robust U.N. peacekeeping operation before and during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Nearly two weeks into the 1994 mass killings in Rwanda that would ultimately be called genocide, Eric P. Schwartz, a human rights specialist on the National Security Council, wrote a memorandum to his White House colleagues voicing alarm over reports of tens of thousands of slaughtered ethnic Tutsis.

Human rights groups were pleading for the Clinton administration to help keep 2,500 U.N. peacekeepers on the scene in the Central African country. Human Rights Watch, the New York-based advocacy group, was warning that "Rwandans will quickly become victims of genocide."

"Is this true ?" Schwartz asked Susan Rice, at the time a 29-year-old director of international organizations and peacekeeping on the National Security Council (NSC), and Donald Steinberg, then the NSC's new director for African affairs, according to a recently declassified White House memo dated April 19, 1994. "If so, shouldn't it be a major factor informing high-level decision-making on this issue ? Has it been ?"

In the end, the fate of Rwanda's victims hardly figured at all in U.S. calculations about the international community's response to what turned out to be the worst mass killing since the HolocaustIn the end, the fate of Rwanda's victims hardly figured at all in U.S. calculations about the international community's response to what turned out to be the worst mass killing since the Holocaust, according to hundreds of pages of internal White House memos.

On the contrary, Richard Clarke, a special assistant to President Bill Clinton on global affairs in the NSC and Rice's boss, had already been looking for a way out of Rwanda for months. Rwanda's descent into mass killing, paradoxically, provided a fresh opportunity.

"We make a lot of noise about terminating U.N. forces that aren't working," Clarke wrote on April 9, just three days after the genocide started. "Well, few could be as clearly not working. We should work with the French to gain a consensus to terminate the U.N. mission."

The Clinton administration's fai-

lure to muster a credible international response to Rwanda's mass murder has been amply documented over the past two decades. President Clinton and his key aides — including National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright, and Rice, who has since risen to become President Barack Obama's top national security advisor — have all publicly expressed regret that they didn't do more to stem the killing.

But the recently declassified documents — which include more than 200 pages of internal memos and handwritten notes from Rice and other key White House players — provide a far more granular account of how the White House sought to limit U.N. action. They fill a major gap in the historical record, providing the most detailed chronicle to date of policy instructions and actions taken by White House staffers, particularly Clarke and Rice, who appear to have exercised greater influence over U.S. policy on Rwanda than the White House's Africa hands.

The National Security Archive and the Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide obtained the documents during a two-and-a-half-year effort to amass long-secret records of internal deliberations by the United States, the U.N., and other foreign governments. They add to a collection of some 20,000 declassified documents from Britain, France, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, and the United States. They were made available exclusively in advance to Foreign Policy before their public release Thursday, which is Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The White House documents, which were secured through Freedom of Information Act requests, largely confirm previous accounts that portray the Clinton administration as reluctant to play the role of global police force, stung by peacekeeping setbacks in Bosnia and Somalia and faced with a hostile Congress bent on cutting funding for new U.N. adventures.

But these documents also alter the public record. It was the White House, not a beleaguered Belgian government that had just suffered the brutal murder of 10 of its soldiers, that was the first to advocate a pullout of U.N. blue helmets from Rwanda during the genocide, where they served as a last line of defense for tens of thousands of terrified Tutsi civilians.

A midlevel crisis

The documents provide few fresh insights into the thinking of President Clinton, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, or other top officials, reinforcing indications that Rwanda policy was left to midlevel bureaucrats. They place Clarke and Rice — who were overseeing a far-reaching review of U.N. peacekeeping — at the crux of American efforts to limit U.N. involvement in Rwanda in the face of mounting congressional pressure to rein in U.N. peacekeeping costs. The death of 18 U.S. Rangers in Mogadishu while participating in a raid on a Somali clan on Oct. 3, 1993, less than six months before the genocide began, only hardened the administration's resolve to say no to an ambitious new peacekeeping operation in a country with few historical links to the United States.

The Rwandan genocide officially began on April 6, 1994, following the shooting down of a plane carrying

the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi back from a peace conference in Tanzania to the Rwandan capital of Kigali. Their murder dealt a lethal blow to the Arusha Peace Agreement, a wobbly pact aimed at reconciling the country's predominantly ethnic Hutu government with an insurgency comprised of ethnic Tutsi exiles. Over the following three months, hard-liners in the Rwandan government, backed by armed militias, carried out a systematic rampage, targeting ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutu officials who had favored the peace process. U.S. diplomats on the ground in Rwanda recognized the nature of what was unfolding before their eyes. Over the coming three months, in a country of nearly 8 million, more than 800,000 would be dead, 2 million would flee for their lives to neighboring countries, and another 2 million would be driven from their homes.

In the early days of the violence, the United States devoted all its efforts to securing the evacuation of more than 250 American nationals in the country and scaling back the U.N. presence. By April 11, the American evacuation had been completed. President Clinton and then-first lady Hillary Clinton visited the State Department that day to pay tribute to Prudence Bushnell, the deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs, and other staffers who had organized the evacuation.

At the same time, American diplomats were working behind the scenes to pull the U.N. peacekeeping mission, known as the U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda, or UNAMIR, out of Rwanda.

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning book A Problem from Hell, Samantha Power, who now serves as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, wrote that the decision to withdraw troops from Rwanda was precipitated by a request from the Belgian foreign minister, Willy Claes, to the State Department to provide political "cover" for his country's retreat following the April 7 murder of 10 Belgian peacekeepers. "Belgium did not want to leave ignominiously, by itself," Power wrote. "Warren Christopher agreed to back Belgian requests for a full U.N. exit."

But Clarke was already pressing for the withdrawal of blue helmets days before the Belgians decided to pull out the rest of a force of more than 400 peacekeepers, according to the new declassified documents.

"What these new documents show is that the White House was already driving for a total pullout. Two days into the genocide, Clarke is already saying, 'Time to terminate this mission,'" Thomas Blanton, the director of the National Security Archive, told FP. "The process which Clarke drove as the head of the interagency committee on peacekeeping became the prism and the prison of thinking" through which Rwanda policy was being formulated.

"To Clarke's credit, he was attempting to save peacekeeping," Blanton said. But the means — imposing highly constrictive conditions on peacekeeping missions to gain congressional support — "was destroying peacekeeping in order to save it," he added.

Clarke did not respond to a request for comment for this article, but he has defended his role, telling Samantha Power in an interview for a 2001 investigation she published in the Atlantic : "Would I have done the same thing again ? Absolutely."

"The U.S. record, as compared to everyone else's record, is not something we should run away from," said Clarke.

Rice's office also declined to comment publicly for this story, but a senior U.S. administration official provided written responses to some specific questions about her role. During her confirmation hearing in 2009 and in public remarks at the Holocaust Memorial Museum, Rice said she did not set policy on Rwanda, saying she was a junior official with responsibility for peacekeeping, not Africa : "I was not involved in high-level decision-making," she said.

"In retrospect I believe that the failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda came less from a considered decision not to act, but more from a failure to seriously contemplate the question about whether action should be taken," she said. "The United States had just removed remaining forces from Somalia. It's possible that our experience in Somalia narrowed our collective capacity to contemplate robust action in Rwanda."

Empty pockets and a whole lot of peace to keep

On Aug. 2, 1993, nearly eight months before the Rwandan genocide began, Rice signed off on a memo for then-National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, detailing the financial constraints on U.S. support for peacekeeping missions around the world.

The U.N., she wrote, is planning to establish new missions in Abkhazia, Cambodia, Haiti, Liberia, and Rwanda. Even without the new missions, the United States is expected to fall more than $1 billion into arrears to the United Nations by the end of fiscal year 1994, she warned.

"Within the next two weeks, the U.N. Security Council will consider establishing five new peacekeeping operations," Rice wrote.

"The U.S. has some interest in resolving each of these conflicts ; however, we do not have the funds to pay for them," she added. "We have two choices : voting for missions for which we cannot pay, or ; vetoing resolutions because we lack sufficient funds," she wrote.

Rice highlighted the paralyzing impact that congressional financial restrictions placed on America's freedom to act. Even if the administration were able to move money from another account, it would still require Congress to pass a budget amendment approving new funds, she explained.

"Given the current hostility among congressional appropriators to peacekeeping, obtaining a budget amendment for new operations in regions of little public interest could be difficult and require, at a minimum, high-level administration lobbying," she wrote in the Aug. 2 memo.

But it was France, not the administration, that lobbied for a force.

At the time, France was seeking to build support for a U.N. mission in Rwanda to implement the May 1993 Arusha Peace Agreement, which was designed to end the civil war between Rwanda's Hutu-dominated government and the ethnic Tutsi insurgency based in Uganda. Paris was keen to see the U.N. move in to relieve a force of more than 400 French paratroopers, military trainers, and advisors supporting the Rwandan govern-

ment.

An Oct. 6, 1993, analysis marked "secret" and attributed to a U.S. defense intelligence officer for Africa assessed that a U.N. mission for Rwanda, if properly executed, has "excellent prospects for success." The failure to stand up a mission, it added, would "probably lead to a breakdown of the peacekeeping process, and increased regional instability adverse to U.S. interests."

"In short, support of U.N. operations should be inexpensive, uncomplicated, and far less demanding than the PKOs [peacekeeping operations] in Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, and elsewhere in Africa," read the assessment.

The State Department supported the mission. But the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense initially opposed the peacekeeping operation, arguing that it would be better to use unarmed observers, or at least lightly armed observers, Rice wrote in an Oct. 2, 1993, memo to Samuel "Sandy" Berger, who was then serving as deputy national security advisor. Rice agreed with the latter position : "We ought to be able to achieve the same goals with observers if the parties truly want peace." She recognized, though, that the French, the U.N., and the Rwandan parties wouldn't accept such a pared-down mission.

Indeed, U.N. Force Commander Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire recommended that he would need a force of 8,000 to implement the peace deal. The U.N. peacekeeping department, mindful of American financial constraints, convinced him to cut that number down to as few as 5,000. The U.N. Security Council then cut the number of troops to about 2,500. "I was instructed that this mission had to be on the cheap," he said last summer. "The Americans had not paid [their U.N. dues], there was no money, and nobody was particularly interested in the mission to start with."

In the end, the Joint Chiefs of Staff "walked back from the cliff" and agreed to a compromise that enabled U.S. support for an armed peacekeeping force, but only on the understanding with "absolute clarity" that they would use force only in self-defense, Rice wrote.

A senior administration official said Rice's October memo was written at a time well before the genocide, a period in which "the security was labeled 'permissive.'"

"Conditions on the ground then were far from what they became in mid-1994," the official said.

French berets for U.N. blue helmets

While the United States finally came around to supporting a mission, it was not because Washington was persuaded by the merits.

On Sept. 30, 1993, the U.S. mission to the United Nations voiced concern that the French might retaliate against American intransigence by pulling their own troops out of the U.N. mission in Somalia. France was leading the push to establish a new mission to implement the peace process.

France's ambassador to the United Nations, Jean-Bernard Mérimée, had been arguing that the United States owed it to France to back a Rwandan mission, noting that Paris had supported U.S. plans for missions in Liberia and Haiti.

But France had another reason : "The French have a keen interest in this operation because deployment of U.N. troops to Kigali, the Rwandan capital, would permit Paris to withdraw 400 French troops who are currently there to provide security for the expatriate community," Clarke wrote in an Oct. 1, 1993, memo to Lake.

And the French had leverage. The United States, which was preparing for the withdrawal of American forces from Somalia, was eager to see Paris maintain a presence in the U.N. peacekeeping force in Somalia.

"If we take the step of vetoing the French draft resolution, thereby forcing the French to maintain their battalion in Kigali, we can almost certainly write off the possibility of French troops remaining in Somalia," the mission wrote.

Clarke and a colleague, Jennifer Ward, drafted a letter from Lake to French President François Mitterrand's chief military advisor, Gen. Christian Quesnot.

"I understand that deployment of a U.N. force will permit France to withdraw its forces from Rwanda," he said. "I hope you can also tell the U.N. that the creation of a U.N. force in Rwanda can permit French forces to remain in Somalia beyond the end of the year."

In the end, President Clinton assured Mitterrand that the United States would support a U.N. mission in Rwanda, adding : "I do hope that France will be able to extend its participation in UNOSOM II [the Somalia peacekeeping operation] beyond December to help ensure the success of this important U.N. mission."

At the State Department, officials marveled at France's diplomatic success.

"The only reason that we got into Rwanda was because the French twisted our arm in Somalia," Bushnell told a gathering of diplomats, politicians, and scholars at a gathering at a conference in The Hague on Rwanda last June. "We in the Africa bureau were thrilled that the French were more successful in our interagency process than the Department of State or USAID."

Beyond the reach of American interests

Despite official U.S. support for the mission, American policymakers remained skeptical about the value of a Rwanda mission.

Several months before the genocide, Clarke saw involvement in Rwanda, a country far removed from America's perceived national security interests, as just the sort of undertaking that would reinforce congressional suspicions that the United States was incapable of passing on any costly new U.N. peacekeeping missions. Clarke was also overseeing a review of U.S. peacekeeping policy. Speaking to staffers before a briefing to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Dick Clarke intimated that Rwanda may be the case the NSC is looking for to prove that the U.S. can say 'no' to a new peacekeeping operation," according to an account described in a Sept. 28, 1993, State Department memo.

"While this operation may have a better chance of success than some others, the Security Council vote comes at a difficult moment for us, given our stated reluctance to say 'yes' to every proposed operation," Clarke and Ward wrote in an Oct. 1, 1993, memo

to Lake, noting that the $80 million cost to American taxpayers over two years "will add to [the] already substantial burden on the U.N. peacekeeping apparatus and budget."

Rice and an NSC colleague, Nick Rasmussen, laid out the dilemma in stark terms in a Sept. 20, 1993, memo to Clarke and Ward.

"This issue may fuel concern on the Hill that we can't say no," they wrote. "It's yet another operation that we cannot pay for," they wrote. "On the other hand, we must consider the implication of failing to support the Rwanda peace plan, which the U.S. helped broker."

Peacekeeping on the cheap

Clarke's efforts to shutter the Rwanda mission in the days following the start of the genocide encountered overwhelming opposition at the U.N. Security Council.

When the U.S. delegation to the United Nations, acting on instructions from Clarke, informed the council that they favored closing the mission, they faced sharp opposition. The U.S. mission to the United Nations warned that the United States lacked the votes required in the 15-nation Security Council to push through a resolution shuttering the Rwanda mission. Britain's and Nigeria's envoys convinced Albright to seek new instructions, which she did. But the United States prevailed in ushering through a resolution scaling down a force of more than 2,500 to a skeletal presence of 270. The move, combined with the evacuation of U.S. and other foreign nationals, sent a message to the Hutu killers that they had an essentially free hand, according to Cameron Hudson, the director of the Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

"If you look at the first two weeks of the genocide, as violence was increasing exponentially, the focus of the U.S. government was the evacuation of U.S. diplomats and Westerners," Hudson said.

"So while there was a very small window to double down and stop the violence, we sent the opposite signal : We greenlighted genocide by saying, 'We are going to get out of your way while you kill each other.'" The lesson of Rwanda has pushed the United States — which since has developed an Atrocities Prevention Board to detect early warning signs — to place a greater emphasis on conflict prevention.

Rice posted a tweet on Thursday indicating that President Obama "is focused on strengthening institutions & tools to prevent mass atrocities. We all owe that to the victims we remember."

But its record has been mixed. In Libya, the Obama administration claimed its NATO-led air campaign against Muammar al-Qaddafi saved the lives of thousands of civilians in Benghazi facing certain death at the hands of the former Libyan strongman's forces. And the United States has used air power to prevent Yazidis in Iraq and Kurds in Syria from being slaughtered by the forces of the Islamic State. But it has been unwilling to commit military power to halt mass atrocities by government forces in Syria.

Hudson credited the administration for developing a far more effective early warning signs indicating the

possible outbreak of mass atrocities. But "ultimately I don't think our crisis response is any different. As violence in Central African Republic intensified last year, we closed embassies and got our people out."

The ides of May

By May 1994, as the death toll swelled, pressure built for a reinforced mission with the capacity to protect civilians.

Dallaire, the U.N.'s Canadian force commander in Rwanda, drew up a plan to deploy between 5,000 and 8,000 peacekeepers inside Rwanda.

The Non-Aligned Movement, as well as the representative of New Zealand, began drawing up draft U.N. Security Council resolutions that would have authorized the expansion of the U.N. peacekeeping mission with rules of engagement strong enough to protect civilians.

But Washington again opposed the move, proposing a mission that operated out of Burundi and focused on protecting refugees along the border.

On May 6, 1994, Rice prepared a set of talking points for Vice President Al Gore to deliver to U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. The talking points, marked "confidential," outline steps the United States was willing to take to address the crisis, including the use of its diplomatic muscle to press for a cease-fire, and support for humanitarian assistance. They also signaled U.S. support for a plan to deploy an international force in a protected zone along Rwanda's border with Burundi. But the talking points indicated Washington was dead set against a plan to establish a peace enforcement operation inside Rwanda.

"We have serious reservations about proposals to establish a large peace enforcement mission, which would operate throughout Rwanda with a mandate to end the fighting, restore law and order and pacify the population," read the talking points.

A week later, Rice's handwritten notes of a meeting on Rwanda suggested the United States was prepared to cast its veto at the U.N. to block such proposals. "IO-Strategy to keep U.S. looking proactive while vetoing this resolution," she wrote. (IO is an acronym for International Organizations, the sections in the State Department and the NSC that oversee U.N. activities.)

Vice President Gore's talking points "constituted the U.S. government position at the time and almost certainly were a consensus resulting from interagency coordination," according to a senior Obama administration official who responded to questions for this article about Rice's role. "It's wrong to assume that Ambassador Rice drafted" them. "NSC directors, even very talented ones, are not the sole authors of memos intended for the vice president," the official said.

The official said it was also wrong to "conflate" Rice's handwritten notes from an interagency meeting with her own thinking at the time. "Presumably Ambassador Rice was noting what others had said — whether those statements were based in fact or not."

In the end, the United States prevailed in scaling back the resolution, which promised more than 5,000 troops to enforce an arms embargo and protect civilians. But it imposed a raft of conditions that made it hard to get troops on the ground, leaving a bitter

taste in the mouths of its counterparts in the U.N. Security Council.

"The U.S. has essentially gutted the resolution," Colin Keating, New Zealand's U.N. envoy during the genocide, wrote in a cable to his government in Wellington after the May 17, 1994, resolution was passed. "In reality, the expansion is a fiction. There is nothing to contribute at all to the fundamental concern about civilians at risk in the interior of the country. Any further deployments are hostage to a reporting procedure and further declarations."

The United States would continue to resist the urge to call Rwanda's genocide by its proper name.

Donald Steinberg, who at the time was the NSC's director for African affairs, wrote a cover note for President Clinton's talking points for a meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus. He urged the president to say what U.S. officials had been instructed not to say.

"I think it would do the president well to stand up himself and say that genocide has occurred in Rwanda. Period," Steinberg wrote in a June 14, 1994, cover note. "He is in the unique position to break through the goobledy-gook [sic] that the rest of us are required to say. If he does it, it will make it seem like he himself is frustrated over the bureaucracy's inability to call a spade a spade — that would be a good thing."

Steinberg told FP that he and Anthony Lake had been describing events in Rwanda by this time as genocide in briefings with outside groups. But he felt it would carry greater weight if the president said it. But he doesn't believe the word was included in his final talking notes. The administration's congressional affairs advisors told him it wasn't the right venue for issuing the declaration. "The clear implication was that he was not going to raise this unless they [Black Caucus members] brought it up." At that stage, he noted, it's unclear it would have had much impact on the killing. Within a matter of weeks, the genocide had ended.

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