



Ghosts of Rwanda

- » Home
- » Analysis
- » Interviews
- » Timeline
- » Video
- » Discussion

Interview David P. Rawson

He was U.S. ambassador to Rwanda from 1993 to 1996 and arrived in Kigali at a point when the Arusha peace process was faltering. After being ordered to leave Rwanda after the killing started, he joined a mid-level group of officials back in Washington who tried to deal with the crisis: "We were all working very frenetically. The problem is, we weren't able to move the bureaucracy. We weren't able to get equipment out in a timely way. ... We had debates that were probably too long and improperly focused on the strategy of the U.N. activity, before we actually took a vote to have this activity. All of this had us coming up with a peacekeeping force after the genocide had wreaked its havoc." This interview was conducted on Oct. 5, 2003.

What are you looking for and hoping to find in researching and going back to that period when you were ambassador there?

I think that's a good question. Why would I want to go back [and revisit] something that happened 10 years ago that was so horrible, so horrific? And yet, I think that there are lessons that can be learned by looking at the record.

I certainly have not had a chance to look at the record. I don't know what I might have said at the time, what I might have put in government documents. I don't know what others were saying to

different elements of the bureaucracy or to the United Nations or to our allies in the French and German and Belgian governments. I've just this desire to get a fuller picture of what was happening, even as I was out on Kigali Hill trying to get the government in place, a national assembly in place and so forth.

"Looking back ... we were all calling for a cease fire when cease fire wasn't really the issue. It was an issue of somehow stopping the killing of innocents. It's an illustration of how we misunderstood the dynamic of what was happening."

What have you found?

First of all, there's a lot of documents that I haven't gone through. I think the first thing I found is the bureaucracy incurred some incredible amount of documents, just huge volumes of things, and most of them probably not all that terribly good in terms of the story. But I think one of the things that does seem clear is that they were building a peacekeeping mission for Rwanda.

It was always assumed that this was a classic peacekeeping mission, that it did not need enforcement powers, that it would be what we call a Chapter VI ceasefire of the U.N. Charter kind of operation -- simply helping two parties who'd already [agreed with] each other towards a peace process. When the president's plane was shot down, it's quite clear that the U.N. forces there did need a peace enforcement kind of mandate, and they did need the kind of equipment that would go with that kind of mandate.

What are some of the other lessons that you draw?

Looking at what I'm seeing written -- and looking at it close, in hindsight -- is that we didn't fully understand what was

RELATED LINKS

November 13, 2013 / 12:27 PM
 « Rwanda's 20th Anniversary: A
 Journey of Reflection and
 Hope for the Future »

November 12, 2013 / 12:15 PM
 « Rwanda's 20th Anniversary: A
 Journey of Reflection and
 Hope for the Future »

November 12, 2013 / 12:15 PM
 « Rwanda's 20th Anniversary: A
 Journey of Reflection and
 Hope for the Future »

FOR MORE INFORMATION

e-mail address

Subscribe »

Like | 1,211 likes | 1,211 likes | 1,211 likes | 1,211 likes

Follow @frontlinepbs 294K followers

FRONTLINE on G+

OWN FRONTLINE ON DVD TODAY
 COLLEGE, INC. SHOP NOW > shop PBS

going on; we didn't fully appreciate the situation. We didn't understand the seriousness or the depth of the antagonism that was between the two sides, the determination of either side to end up being the controlling partner in the peace process. Certainly we were focused very much on the culture of peace, trying to make [it] happen, and [we] weren't -- from what I've seen up to this point, at least -- not all that aware of the darker side that revealed itself in the genocide. ...

Some people, when they talk of Rwanda, talk about the Holocaust, Cambodia. Was it of that nature?

Certainly. The numbers -- who knows, but it's horrific numbers -- 800,000, a million people killed in a very, very short period of time; those who survived living in situations of great personal terror. You had really a total change in the structure of society as a result of the outcome of this. So this was probably the worst kind of example of man's inhumanity, at least in our generation.

Do you believe in evil?

I think it's very difficult to understand Rwanda unless you believe that there was evil in the hearts of men that were carrying out these kinds of activities. The men and women, I should say -- mankind, if you will.

Why do you say that?

The things that we would say would be inhuman -- the slaughtering of innocent children, the wholesale raping of women, the killing of innocents, old men, old women, that go against all that all societies everywhere would hold to be sacred values; yet this was being perpetrated on a massive scale. I think that it simply reflects a potential evil that is open to any human being if he turns to his darker side.

Having looked through that, did it test your own faith?

Yes. One often wonders, "How can these kinds of things happen in a world in which God is supposed to be sovereign?" At the same time, there are great acts of courage carried out by those who, on the basis of their faith, refuse to be caught up in the genocide and killings. There are great testimonies of faith that come out of this experience. I think fundamentally it comes down to individuals, and where they were at in terms of how meaningful were the values that they had adopted as members of the household of faith -- and did those values really carry them through the kind of brave actions that denied this kind of killing, or were they swept up in it?

What was it like for you personally to see these events unfold?

There's kind of two different levels. One is, of course, great personal sorrow at friends that we knew, and when we came back and learned of their deaths and so forth. Even the embassy, out of about 150 employees that we had, about a third of them died in the in the genocide in one way or another -- and seeing the beautiful country and the people that we loved and admired [were] caught up in this kind of horror.

At another level, I was there as an official of the United States government, trying to carry out the policies that were given to me. There had to be a very close focus on what it is we're supposed to do today in order to do what we had been instructed to do. So our preoccupation was often in carrying out instructions, even as we were being personally really ripped apart by what was happening around us. ...

What caused [Arusha] to collapse?

A couple of things. I think one, a change in circumstances -- especially the fact that, in Burundi, there was an attack against the newly elected president, and with his death and reprisal killings, and ... back and forth. The upheaval in Burundi in October 1993 certainly changed a lot of attitudes about the possibility of living and working out differences together in the political context.

In reflection, I think that the agreement was fundamentally flawed. It was, in essence, an agreement between party leaders [that were] self-appointed. There was not much reference to a political base, and in the wake of the Burundi events, the parties began to break apart.

Also, I should say, in the wake of the possibility of being in power and having some significant part in the ruling process, parties were beginning to break apart. There wasn't any way of bringing that together again, and so we were never able to get the [convening] of the national assembly or the government established, because the parties were split internally, and the whole of the Arusha accord was based on party participation. I think it was fundamentally flawed, and part of that structural flaw showed itself in the events leading up to the president's assassination.

In Burundi, 50,000 people were killed in that [conflict], and the international response was, well, not much at all. Did that send a message to the parties in Rwanda?

That's certainly a possibility. I think you have to ask the [parties] themselves whether that kind of understanding of the international scene was there. As a matter of fact, Burundi, a couple of years previously, had a series of attacks led by military forces against populations of another part of the country. That had been very rapidly dissipated by the introduction of international military presence, by a firm commitment by the government to redress what had been done, and to get the offending soldiers out of there. Burundi had been held up as a kind of example of how you move locally without a significant international input into a conflict resolution kind of mode.

The Burundi example was around, as was the South African example, as one of the kind of good things one could do. So there was probably some good lessons as well as some possible other lessons that could have been drawn from the Burundi experience. I think that the prime lesson was that of mistrust; that this government, which had been elected, was now overthrown by an attempted military coup, the president was assassinated. Obviously you can't trust the military; you can't trust goodwill to overcome this kind of thing -- you have to make your own preparations. I think a result of the Burundi events -- It really changed the attitudes about power sharing, about working together with opposing sides. ...

When you were confirmed [as ambassador to Rwanda], what did you think you were getting into?

The period immediately before we went out was one in which there had been a number of efforts to get the government in place to get the national assembly in place, to get the president sworn in, which had aborted. That looked like the early promise of an Arusha -- of people agreeing, cooperating, and so forth -- was clearly being threatened by a lack of cooperation between the parties. I went out, fully expecting that the government and national assembly and the president would be fully installed by the time I got there.

When I arrived at the airport, I was informed that there had been a huge mix-up the day before as various elements tried to get themselves sworn in, and the national assembly and government still were not. I had spent time preparing to go out, talking to different elements in the United States government, trying to increase the amount of our stake in the peace process. USAID was willing to up its ante. The Peace

Corps was there and willing to do more. There were a number of avenues where we could begin to expand what we were doing in Rwanda. ...

I went out thinking, "All right, we're off, we'll get engaged. We'll begin to have significant programs. We'll bring people together around a new agenda of economic development, and focus them on the future."

Instead, I found myself in three months of the bitterest wrangling that I'd ever witnessed and ending up, of course, in the downing of the presidents' plane and the launching of the genocide. So it was quite other than I had anticipated.

But you thought of going into it when [you understood that] the stakes were really that high?

Yes. I felt that, if we went back into open conflict, that it would be a very brutal and bloody kind of thing. I didn't think necessarily there would be genocide. I think, like many others, we found that, as a kind of all-out war between armed forces, that one part of those armed forces would instead turn on innocent population, but up to this point in time, had only from time to time been engaged in violence. ...

Looking back on that and the immediate reactions of the governments like France and Great Britain, Belgium, the United States, afterwards we were all calling for a ceasefire at the point when ceasefire wasn't really the issue. It was an issue of somehow stopping the killing of innocents. I think it's an illustration of how we misunderstood the dynamic of what was happening there. ...

A couple of days [after you arrived in Rwanda and the president was sworn in], they tried to swear in the transitional government?

I don't remember the exact details, but there were a number of these occasions when we were put on alert to show up for a ceremonial swearing-in, then it was cancelled, and then back to the drawing boards. [There were] continuous readings amongst the diplomatic group, trying to figure out what we can do to make it all possible. The most dramatic in my mind was perhaps the occasion where it had been agreed we would call on both sides to the conflict, dividing up our energies.

I was in a group that went to see the Rwanda Patriotic Front. I was seated right next to the ambassador from Libya. The ambassador from the United States and the ambassador from Libya were saying exactly the same thing, about how we wanted the process to go forward and so forth. So it was a very intense diplomatic activity. ...

Within days of your arrival, General Dallaire sends his warning fax to [the U.N.]. What did General Dallaire and Booh-Booh say they were concerned about?

We were briefed by General Dallaire. I do not recall if Special Representative Booh-Booh was there at the time or not. This briefing was at the headquarters of the of the UNAMIR forces. [General Dallaire] informed us that there had been an informant who had told him of a collection of arms, stocking of arms and the distribution of arms to civilian elements -- that he had reported this to New York, and had recommended a police activity that would abort that and pick up these arms. He recognized that he was not entirely confident of this information, but he was confident enough to launch an operation.

My own feeling at that time, which I think I expressed to General Dallaire, was that under terms of the agreement in which Kigali was supposed to be a weapons-free zone, this agreement had been violated, and he certainly had it within his mandate to do this.

What I had not fully seen is whatever exchanges there may have been, either between the embassy, our embassy and the State Department, or the State Department and the United Nations at this time. But obviously, from what we've found in the histories that have been written since, his instructions from the United Nations were to turn down that, and to simply carry out a diplomatic demarche -- not to launch any pre-emptive police action.

Did he tell you that that's what he'd been instructed to do?

I think that was obvious in the context, in that nothing was being done. No activity had been taken out; no strike had been launched against this source of arms. Subsequently, his concern was basically, how does he get his informant out of the country? So it was quite clear that the U.N. had decided not to go ahead with confrontation on this issue at that point.

What we did do bilaterally, with other diplomats, was go to see the president [of Rwanda] and tell him that we'd heard that the militia was being rearmed, and that this was not acceptable. I also went to the president's party [headquarters] and presented a very firm demarche to them, [about] how this was of very great concern, totally unacceptable, and must stop.

The president seemed to take on board what we were saying, gave some instructions, which seemed to be focused in the way of, "Well, this is not true, but if it is true, make sure it doesn't happen again." So that was, again, one of a series of the many demarches that we were making in this context. ...

Did it make you question whether the peace process was working?

I think it was indicative that there were people out there who didn't want it to work, and yet we kept on pressing ahead. I think that our focus really was, "All right, we've got this [situation]. This is even more problematic than we thought. But we've got to push ahead and try to get the parties together, try to get institutions in place that can begin to deal with these kinds of activities within a structured political context."

What was the option to the peace process? Was there one?

The peace process was based on a rather carefully worked out system of how many of each party should have positions in government, how many of these parties should be in the parliament. Parties were allowed to nominate their own people and so forth. The answer really to this was either that one side comes to dominate or the other side comes to dominate; or the alternative is that they go back to war. With the stakes as high as they were, it would have been -- as it turned out to be -- a horrific thing.

Was the U.S. government and the U.S. embassy there invested in the process?

We were very heavily invested in the peace process, had been since 1991. We had been [in] 1992, when we had been trying to get the parties together to talk, when we had been trying to get some measures that would be practical. There had been odd agreements, but nothing had actually happened. ...

We talked to Prudence Bushnell, and she talked about her visit. One of the big issues there was the CDI (Coalition for Defense of the Republic) as part of the [government]. What was the thinking behind that? What was the concern of the RPF on that?

[In] some of the documents I've seen, that [issue] shows up fairly early on. There had been an effort in November 1992, in some of the slowing discussions, to get CDI not just in parliament, but in government, as one seat in government. They were a party with a very conservative following, which they had demonstrated in a number of ways, including violent activity in blocking the roads and so forth. The issue, from the Arusha accords' point of view, was that they pledged themselves to give up [violent] activity within the country, and pledge towards the Arusha principles of cooperation and so forth. ...

By the time we got to March, the issue of them being part of the government had been given up entirely. However, some of the documents I've seen indicated that the RPF had, in the Arushan negotiations, indicated informally that they might not object to a CDI presence in the national assembly.

At this point in time, it looked like there were efforts being made both by the RPF and others in the internal opposition to keep shooting off and being seated in any positions of power. The principle which the United States government had enunciated even more early on was the principle of inclusion -- that the different political elements within the country should be part of political institutions. Basically it was [United States] policy that we should seek to get them at least represented in one element of the new interim government institutions. ...

My recollection is that we had a meeting, in which my own recommendation was that this be briefed to the different parties. The diplomatic community instead decided that it ought to be put forward as an ultimatum. In retrospect, I think that was wrong. The use of ultimatums or the kind of "take it or leave it" [attitude] is not a negotiating strategy. It's not a moderator's or a facilitator's strategy. But it perhaps reflected where my community was at this point in time, with the inability to get to parties to come up with institutions that they had agreed formally to [in the accord]. ...

Looking back now, during this period did you feel like you had missed something that was going on underneath the surface?

Yes. I think that we should have had some kind of inside report that would have given us reliable details, because there was a lot of rumors going around; details from somebody reliable, [so] that we could begin to act on the [leadership] that brought around the presence of laws, that had been involved in a lot of corruption but [also] military operations. That were focused against [the peace process], and again, we knew very little about that. ...

Where were you [on April 6]?

On Sunday, I had been out on the porch actually, and had noticed it was a full moon. It was a beautiful night. Very quiet, and it was the kind of quiet that you [rarely] had in Kigali, because you would hear machine gun fire, and you might hear a grenade going off or there would be raucous cries going off, or reports of something [happening]. So it was very quiet.

We came back in ... and when we heard the big boom, Sandra said to me, "That was not a grenade. That was something different." Then we heard a secondary boom, and in a few minutes, I got a call from the airport, from the president's diplomatic counselor, saying, "They have shot down the president's plane." I said, "Who was 'they?'" and he said, "Well, obviously the RPF." I said, "How do you know?" He said, "I don't, really. But there's a block out here at the airport and the plane was supposed to be here, and was not here. We heard this explosion and the [guard] are headed in that direction, trying to find out what happened."

A little bit later, I got a call from General Dallaire, saying that he feels the president's plane had been shot down, but his

airport contingent had gone out to investigate and had been stopped by presidential guard forces. [They] had been asked to give up their weapons and to report to their barracks. This was obviously a complete transformation from a situation where the Rwanda military were returning to barracks and giving up their arms to [the U.N.] surrounding; and now telling the U.N. to give up their arms and return to barracks.

I called Washington that evening and described what I knew had happened. My own opinion was that the U.N. needed a stronger mandate, and they needed equipment to carry out that mandate if, indeed, they were going to be able to hold -- I didn't realize was how very difficult that process is.

What was Washington's response to that?

They took it on along with everything else I was saying about the situation. Of course, they began then to brief the establishment as to what was happening. We found out fairly shortly that the Burundi president was on that plane as well. We were never certain ... [but] in fact that was the Burundian president's plane.

Then the order went out to everybody to just to stay home, not to circulate. Then we went to bed, and then in the middle of the night, [there was] a tremendous amount of firing across the hills. ...

When did you start getting a sense that that there was something systematic, [the] sense of a plan being implemented?

When we began to [discover] two things. One is we heard of the [extremists] going after the leadership of the opposition rather systematically. The second was we heard that there were soldiers going house to house in areas where there were either opponents of the government or there were Tutsi, and they were simply killing the people in those houses.

My recollection also [from] the first day, towards the latter part of the first day, because we were all in our houses, we were not aware at that point in time the extent to which barricades had gone up. ...

Were you frightened?

It's hard to describe the feelings that you have when you're in a situation like that, when you're having [explosions], with all kinds of shooting going all around you. Fairly quickly on, we were given instructions to begin preparing evacuation, and you begin to focus your energies on that. ...

You were at your home; people began coming to your home?

That's right.

Why, and who were they? What did you do for them?

They were people from the surrounding area. They gathered at our gate. They asked if they could come in and stay inside. I said, "Well, you have to understand this is the American residence, the American Embassy. This is not necessarily a safe place for you. Why don't you go to the church?" There was a church and some priests had housing and so forth, and they had a small chapel right across the way. ...

They said, "Oh, if we go in the church, they will come there and find us and kill us." "They" was not explained, but it was obviously the enemy, which would have been the RPF. That they were thinking in those terms -- that the image of slaughter within the sanctuary of a church should be on their minds at this point in time -- is extraordinarily telling. Clearly

they had a mirror image in their own mind of what happened later.

I'm not sure where this idea [came from] that churches were no longer safe, because churches had been used in Rwanda in a number of times when there had been community violence. Anyway, they said, "The church is not safe." I said, "OK, come on in." I suppose we got upwards of 300 people or so at camp there at the residence -- some inside, some outside.

They were afraid of the RPF -- so they were Hutus?

I don't know who they were. They were neighbors. Some of them were people that the government troops had come through their housing earlier, and said had looted and knocked down doors and so forth. So very quickly on, quite obviously the troops were on a rampage -- as much as trying to defend anything, they were just out on a rampage.

Some of them probably were Tutsi, some of them probably Hutu, I don't know. But as long as we were there, they had sanctuary in our place. ...

At one point in time, somebody from one of the attacking forces got up in a tree and shot down into the compound and killed a baby, and wounded a couple of people. Even the compound was obviously not secure. When we got ready to evacuate, I went out and told [them] that we weren't going to be there any longer; that when we left, the United States flag would come down, and they were going to have to make their own decisions about what to do.

Some of them, the more articulate ones, asked for human escorts, so they could get out. The U.N. was trying its best to provide those kinds of things, but [at] that point, they were pretty well neutralized. In any case, by -- I would say by the late morning of the day that I finally left the compound, most of those people had left.

Obviously, one of the first concerns was the safety of Americans in the country. Talking to [Laura Lane](#), who was at the embassy, there was a warden network set up. So were you able to communicate with the other Americans?

Yes. We had been practicing this on a regular basis. It was both within the city, and the warden system, kind of a cascading warden system had been outside of the city on the basis of phone calls to key people. Within a couple of hours after I'd gotten the order to close down the embassy and [was] told that [we must evacuate] all of the Americans in the country within a couple of hours of that, [Lane] came back and said, "All the Americans have been informed."

It was a remarkable exercise on her part, in dealing with all that, to [also deal with] Americans who then had to make up their minds as to whether they would stay in the country or not, given the fact that the embassy, the United States embassy, was not there in any way to deal on their behalf.

Most of them chose to -- by whatever means -- to get out of the country. ...

How did you hear of the decision [from Washington] to evacuate, not just American civilians, but entire embassy staff?

That was communicated to me by phone. My own initial recommendation had been that we keep a [portion] of the embassy there in place to try to again push forward on the peace process. In retrospect, I guess one didn't realize how completely gone that was. But that decision, given the events on the first day and Washington's understanding of the seriousness of those events -- They decided to shut down the embassy. So my orders were to close down the embassy, to

evacuate all American government personnel and to inform other Americans of what we were doing.

Did you argue with that decision?

No. I had made my original proposal. [It] had been reviewed in Washington. Clearly the situation was much less tenable at the end of the first day than it had appeared when I originally made my recommendation. At that point, I had orders, and [was] trying to make them work. ...

Did you have any contact with people who seized control, Bagosora and others, during those first couple of days?

The meeting that Special Representative Booh-Booh asked to be held at my residence was to have had the Western ambassadors, Dallaire and Booh-Booh, and whatever representatives the Rwandan government could have come up with. There were three Rwandans who showed up. None of the diplomatic people could get there. ...

In that meeting, I presented ... the idea that everybody go to a kind of Burundi situation, where they all get together and pledge with RPF to hold the peace. The answer was, "We have to deal with some units that are out of hand first, before we can talk about anything further that we will do."

I also presented an offer which, by this time, by phone we had gotten cleared -- that the United States was prepared to bring in a team to help investigate the cause of the president's plane being shot down. What we needed was a clear request from the authorities, and the answer to that was, "We don't have means at hand to make that request."

I said, "Well, you take a piece of paper and pencil and write it out right here if you want." But clearly they were not prepared to request United States assistance at that point in time. After that, they excused themselves and left, and I didn't see any of them again. ...

When the [moment] came to finally leave, you were at the compound. How did you get out? Did Walt Myers come and get you?

Yes, the assumption all throughout had been that the U.N. would have the force necessary to secure the airport and secure the access to it, and to assist the expatriates in getting out of the country. That was all blown to bits by the actions against the U.N. forces in the first day.

The last evacuation had been pretty well organized, and it was time for me to move out of the residence. I went down to the U.N. headquarters for Kigali, which was two or three houses down. [I] drove down there very fast in my car, because there'd been occasional firing in the area, and asked for an escort to the other side. They declined; said they could not escort me out. ... [The U.N.'s] orders were to stay where they were, and they were incapable of providing me an escort out. They had at one time escorted one of our evacuations, but at this point, they declined to escort me out.

I communicated this to the embassy staff. Walt Myers very bravely put the American flag on the little jeep and drove across to the valley, with the one gendarme, through two or three checkpoints, picking me up, and then drove me back. Then we all left together. So that's how I got off of my hill. ...

Officially, [Joyce Leader](#) and I were traveling together, the last car out. But then, very quickly we moved kind of towards the middle of the pack, so that we could be in radio communications with the front and the back, and eventually got down to the border, [with] tremendous help from the American embassy crew, who had been at the border preparing the way. Even though we showed up there very late on that day, [they] brought us through and got the whole

gang on down into Burundi and to places where we could [find] hotels or whatever, where we could stay.

There was a big convoy. My understanding is there weren't many Americans on the convoy.

That's right. First of all, I understand that, [according to] the evacuation procedures, British subjects and Canadians are always included, but others may [be] on a case-by-case basis. Clearly, at this point in time, if people were wanting to join in on the convoy, we're not going to say, "No, you can't do that." So we had, I think, 104 vehicles and 400 and some people -- I think only nine Americans at this point in time going out in the last convoy.

Were there any Tutsis on there?

In our group, no. I think there may have only been one Rwandan family in any of the convoys, and this is one where the children were American.

On those convoys, would it have been possible to take some of the Foreign Service nationals or any of the Tutsis and make it to the embassy compound or anywhere else out of the country?

We didn't have any [Tutsis] that I'm aware of who were asked to go along -- whether at that point in time there wasn't sufficient awareness of the seriousness of it, or whether it just wasn't in their scheme of thinking of what was possible.

But we did have in the convoy one Kenyan who was with the Kenyan embassy, who only had a Kenyan ID card -- not a Kenyan diplomatic passport -- and who, when questioned by the officer at a checkpoint, responded in Kinyarwanda. [The officer] immediately thought that she was Rwandan, and ordered her out of the car. By this time, Joyce Leader and I had gone across the bridge and we returned back there. I had to rather forcefully intervene on her behalf and insist she was under my protection to allow her to be put back in the car, and to allow the car to go ahead.

I think that incident would -- Because we were, on the way out, checked two or three times at checkpoints, that incident indicates that it would not have been possible to have taken Rwandan nationals with us in a convoy. ...

[What was it like for you, as] the ambassador, to be leaving the country [that you were] there to serve?

I think it didn't really sink in initially, because all of the focus had been on getting the task done. Once we were on the road, we were a large group of cars in what was beautiful countryside, being greeted gaily by children along the side of the road or in town and so forth, and everything seemed to be going smoothly. I think it was only after getting to Bujumbura that I began to realize that really it's over, in terms of what I came out to do -- that the peace has broken, that killing has started. That whole thing began to sink in. ...

When that realization sunk in -- the vision of war -- what was that like for you personally?

It's one of those things where you say, "OK, now what can I do that's helpful, and how can I try to somehow, if possible, bring peace back to this situation and stop the killing?" My initial idea was that perhaps I could stay in Bujumbura and then do some kind of shuttle work, getting back up into Kigali. But I was asked to come back to Washington, at which point I joined the Washington team and carried out such assignments as were given me.

What kind of assignments were you given?

Everything from making phone calls, to joining in with a trip with Assistant Secretary [John Shattuck](#) to the area to try and brief African leaders as to the enormity of what was happening in Rwanda.

Were you taken into the heart of decision-making on this crisis?

The heart of the decision-making is a little bit difficult to pin down. The meetings that I attended were all rather large, with representatives of all the different interested parties. Even the television meetings [were] a number of people crammed into a little booth for the videoconferencing. Meetings at the White House, the one or two that I was at, began [with] a large number of people gathered around a table, with reports from the different sectors.

So who really was making the decisions-- It seemed to be part of a deliberative policy process that was going on, usually at the deputies' level, and obviously I didn't attend any of those meetings. ...

Did you ever meet with [Anthony Lake](#) of the National Security Council?

There was a meeting that Lake chaired that I was part of, [and] another that Clarke chaired that I was part of.

What were those meetings about?

What we do next. We move out of the impasse that we seem to be caught in -- of not being able to move forward on peace equipment, or peace troops, or whatever in fulfilling the resolution that had been voted on, on building up UNAMIR.

Did you sense a strong willingness for the U.S. to become more involved?

At the level I plugged into when I came back, we were very actively engaged on this. There was teleconferencing. There were all kinds of memos being written [addressing] problems -- everything from hate radio to troop deployment, to the strategy to be used for the new forces when they come back into Rwanda, to the situation on the ground -- the populations that we were aware of that were particularly vulnerable.

We were all working very frenetically at this level. The problem is that we weren't being able to move the bureaucracy. We weren't able to get equipment out in a timely way. We weren't about to get troop commitments to the U.N. effort in a timely way. We had debates that were probably too long, and improperly focused on strategy of the U.N. activity, before we actually took a vote to have this activity. All of this, in essence, had us coming up with a peacekeeping force after the war was already over and the genocide had wreaked its havoc. ...

On the one hand, I think the idea first of all was to get an African position against what was happening, hopefully from that might have come some kind of an African force. The African force idea is a very old idea in U.S. policy. That had been our original plan -- for a peacekeeping force in Rwanda. So in that, we were really going back to an older scenario.

Were the African countries eager to get involved themselves, commit troops?

Some of them, obviously, like Uganda -- that was not something they could do, because of the political situation; Tanzania similarly. These were not really the troop contributors as so much the leaders of the region that we'd hope would stimulate the OAU [Organization of African

Unity] and other African leaders to come forward. Even with the new U.N. resolution which eventually came out, we were in effect looking for African troops to fill up the contingents there under blue hats.

Just looking back, obviously the U.S. missed what was going on before, and the U.N. But did other African leaders in the region miss it, as well?

I would say yes, that each one of them had a kind of particular view of the problem based on their own national interest, based on their own history of refugee problem populations, and their own kind of views as to what the best solutions were. They were probably sufficiently aware of animosities between African groups to be somewhat more familiar with those kind of dynamics than those of us who so hopefully came out and tried to push a peace process. However, particularly amongst the neighbors, both Mozambique and the Tanzanians were very deeply engaged in the peace process, and very anxious to see it succeed.

I know that, in the past, [General Kagame has] criticized you directly, saying you were too pro-Hutu because of your past and position -- which were also U.S. government positions -- before April 6, and then also afterwards, when you went back. How do you respond to that general criticism?

I would like to think that I was a faithful interpreter of U.S. policy. I have had considerable experience in the area. I have been accused by both sides of having favored the other, to the point where extremists on both sides have considered me to be their enemy. The United States policy always looked towards a power-sharing arrangement, always looked for a democratic basis, or the new policy decried the use of force in the seeking of political objectives. I tried to implement that policy as I undertook it, and to the best of my ability. We'll have to leave it at that. ...

It's about 10 years on. Where does Rwanda sit [with] you?

It is a country whose people I still admire, some of whom are friends. On different parts of the political spectrum, it's a country that continues to face a lot of problems, from economic problems as well as political problems. A large exile community [is] still on the outside of the country. It is a country that, based on the very good times I've had there throughout different parts of my life, I could only hope that peace will be [achieved]; and lack of violence, lack of the use of coercive force in establishing whatever political situation will continue to be the pattern; that people will not resort to arms to achieve the objectives, but will find a way of achieving their hopes and ambitions within a political context.

Much earlier, you were talking about when you first arrived, and that your mission was to bring help and peace to this country, and that you failed. It obviously just wasn't just you. But do you feel that, somehow, you did fail?

Yes, I think I did. This was what we were trying to do. These were the objectives we put out for ourselves for the United States government, and I did not achieve those objectives. You can't look at the whole of what happened after the president's plane was shot down and claim any kind of victory, or even peace of mind about that situation. All of us were implicated in that.

So what lessons do you draw from that?

I don't give up on democracy. I believe it's the best form of

government, in which differences of background and region and whatever might be worked out. I don't give up on peace as an accommodation compromise that is necessary for people to live together. I think we need to continue to press for these, as American people, as our U.S. diplomatic group. I do think that we need to be realistic -- perhaps more so than we were -- to understand how much we can be captured by our own objectives. ...

I think [we need] more information, better understanding. But the overall objective of trying to get people to live together in a situation that secures their future, and brings a modicum of peace and eventually allows them to participate in some significant way in their own governance, is what the American dream is all about. ...

A number of people have said this to me, like [Philippe Gaillard](#) with the ICRC -- they felt like this was the time that they looked evil in the eye. Some feel like they did all they could. Some people feel like they didn't do [enough], and just a range of emotions, but clearly strong emotions there. I'm just wondering if it has had that kind of impact on the morality and who you believe that you are?

I think that we did what we thought was best -- we, the United States government. I think that I tried to carry out what was U.S. government policies as best I understood [them]. Once back in Washington, I was but one figure amongst many scurrying around, in what was quite clearly an inadequate response. All of these things need to be taken into account.

Ultimately, I think we're forced to confess that our best is sometimes not good enough; that our designs, as logical as they may seem, may not have been the appropriate solution. And that's something you just have to live with. At least we have the opportunity of continuing to live and to work for peace -- something that had been taken away from many hundreds of thousands of Rwandans.

[home](#) · [introduction](#) · [analysis](#) · [interviews](#) · [timeline](#) · [rwanda today](#) · [video](#)
[the responsibility to protect](#) · [discussion](#) · [producer's chat](#) · [links & readings](#) · [press reaction](#) · [tapes & transcripts](#)
[credits](#) · [teacher's guide](#) · [viewer's guide](#) · [privacy policy](#)
[FRONTLINE home](#) · [wgbh](#) · [pbs!](#)

posted april 1, 2004

FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of wgbh educational foundation.
photo copyright © antony njuguna/reuters
web site [copyright](#) 1995-2014 WGBH educational foundation

CDI