

Over the course of 13 weeks in 1994, at least a half-million people were massacred in Rwanda's genocide. It was a drawn-out, low-tech butchery, much of it perpetrated with knives and machetes, and the killers often interrupted their work to rape and torture their victims. A small outside force--perhaps as few as 5,000 soldiers--could have stopped the slaughter in its early stages. The failure of the United States and other powers to act is one of the most shocking episodes of the past decade. But when Rwanda came up during Wednesday's presidential debate, neither candidate seemed to have grasped even its most basic lessons.

Gov. George W. Bush got the first chance to reflect upon Rwanda. He declared that the Clinton administration was right not to send U.S. troops to stop the killing, and that in the future there should be early warning systems in places where genocide might happen. An aspiring president ought to know that, in the case of Rwanda, there was no lack of early warning. Beginning in January 1994, three months before the genocide started, the Canadian general in charge of the U.N. contingent in Rwanda sent five cables to U.N. headquarters in New York warning that a bloodbath was brewing and begging for reinforcements. In February Belgium pressed the same case at the United Nations too. All the major powers, including the United States, were well aware of these warnings. They ignored them.

Next, Vice President Al Gore commented. He said, rightly, that "in retrospect we were too late getting in there. We would have saved more lives if we had acted earlier." But Mr. Gore also sought to imply that the administration had not failed completely to act: "We did actually send troops into Rwanda to help with the humanitarian relief measures." But U.S. troops did not arrive in Rwanda until July, after the killing was finished. Mr. Gore also said the United States was right not to have "put our troops in to try to separate the parties." But that was not what a Rwanda intervention need have entailed. In much of the country, the genocide did not involve two armed bands fighting pitched battles. It involved thugs killing unarmed civilians.

Mr. Gore went on to say, "In the Balkans, we had allies, NATO, ready, willing and able to go and carry a big part of the burden. In Africa, we did not." This is not true either. In Rwanda, the United States could have built on help from the United Nations, which had a force of 2,800--before it was cut back in April, partly at American urging. In May, after the massacre had begun, the United Nations assembled an African force to go to Rwanda, and asked the United States to supply 50 armored vehicles. But the United States failed to deliver these for weeks, arguing over who would provide spare parts and maintenance.

The few U.N. troops who remained in Rwanda saved about 30,000 lives simply by stationing small groups of soldiers outside a stadium, a hotel and a few other places where Tutsis were taking shelter. It did not take much to turn back the machete-wielding

youth. It would not have taken much, U.N. commanders believed, to have saved many thousands more.

It is bad enough that Mr. Gore, who claimed to espouse a foreign policy based on values, half-defends a failure for which even President Clinton has apologized. It is worse that Mr. Bush does not even see a policy failure in the way America allowed the genocide to unfold. The Texas governor said his foreign policy would be based on national interest alone; he further suggested that events in sub-Saharan Africa seemed to him remote from U.S. interests. But it is not in the national interest for America to lose its ability to lead; and that is what will happen if this nation's leaders see no urgency in preventing a preventable genocide.

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