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THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND THE STRUGGLE TO PREVENT ATROCITIES IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC DECEMBER 2012 – SEPTEMBER 2014



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METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the product of research conducted while I was the Leonard and Sophie Davis Genocide Prevention Fellow at the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). It is based on a review of more than 3,500 publicly available documents, including material produced by the US and French governments, the United Nations, the African Union, and the Economic Community of Central African States; press stories; NGO reports; and the Twitter and Facebook accounts of key individuals. I also interviewed a number of current and former US government officials and NGO representatives involved in the US response to the crisis. Almost all interviewees spoke on background in order to encourage a frank discussion of the relevant issues. Their views do not necessarily represent those of the agencies or NGOs for whom they work or worked – or of the United States Government. Although I attempted to meet with as many of the key players as possible, several officials turned down or did not respond to interview requests.

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INTRODUCTION: HIGH WATER MARK

On the morning of December 19, 2013, a US Air Force C-40 carrying Ambassador Samantha Power touched down on the sole functioning runway at M’Poko International Airport in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). Power – the US Ambassador to the United Nations and architect of the Obama Administration’s atrocity prevention efforts – had come to Bangui to draw attention to one of the world’s worst human rights crises.

It was a return of sorts for the United States. One year earlier, the American embassy had suspended operations after Séléka, a loose alliance of predominantly Muslim insurgent groups from the country’s north, had threatened Bangui. No one in CAR had thought that the rebels posed a serious risk to foreign nationals, but in the aftermath of the September 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, State Department officials weren’t taking any chances.

Three months after the embassy closed, Séléka took Bangui. Both before and after seizing power, its soldiers looted, burned, raped, and murdered their way across CAR, terrorizing tens of thousands of civilians, most of them Christians. In response, Christian communities formed a loose network of self-defense groups. Known collectively as the anti-balaka, they attacked Muslim civilians in retaliation for Séléka’s crimes. In response, Séléka fighters began explicitly targeting Christians.

By the time Power landed, Séléka and anti-balaka militia were roaming the capital, murdering anyone found in the wrong place at the wrong time. Throughout the country, tit-for-tat reprisal attacks were driving thousands into the bush. Out of a population of 4.6 million, more than 850,000 had fled their homes. UN officials were warning that they could not rule out genocide. In response, the Security Council had authorized France and the African Union (AU) to deploy troops to try to stop the chaos. Thanks to a quickly organized US airlift, a battalion of Burundian peacekeepers was deploying to help restore order.

To appreciate the magnitude of the crisis, all Power had to do was look out the window of her plane. The fields surrounding the airport had become a massive refugee camp. More than 100,000 people were living in hangars, under the wings of broken-down planes, and out in the open. Few had access to medical care, sanitation, food, or clean water. As the C-40 taxied toward the terminal, tens of thousands lined up along the runway. M’Poko was, as another senior US official later put it, “just acres of human misery.”¹

¹ Nancy Lindborg (former Assistant Administrator for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, US Agency for International Development), interview with author, June 2015.

Power's visit was the centerpiece of the US effort to end the violence. In just a few weeks, the Obama Administration had organized a major response to a rapidly deteriorating atrocity crisis. In addition to the airlift, it was providing tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance, funding reconciliation efforts, and mounting a public diplomacy campaign that included not only Power's trip but also a recorded message from President Obama to the people of CAR.²

The only problem was that it was twelve months too late.

Before November 2013, it is unlikely that any US official – not even Power – would have predicted that the United States would devote so much time and attention to CAR. There were no significant US investments there. No more than a handful of Americans lived in Bangui. The country was regarded as a diplomatic backwater, an afterthought. As one former Administration official later admitted, “Before the crisis, I doubt that most policymakers could have found CAR on a map.”³

So why, then, did CAR suddenly become a priority? In interviews at the time of Power's visit, US officials said it was because the United States had a moral responsibility to prevent mass atrocities.⁴ The President, they noted, had pledged that the United States would not stand by and let another genocide such as that in Rwanda in 1994 happen.⁵ In Presidential Study Directive 10 (PSD-10), Obama had determined that preventing mass atrocities was “a core national security interest” of the United States and ordered the establishment of an interagency Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) to coordinate planning and response.⁶ Early on, the APB had identified

² For simplicity's sake, this study often refers to the “US response” or “US intervention” in CAR. However, it is important to emphasize that the United States was part of a broader international effort that included the UN, AU, and France, among others. For more on the international response, see Evan Cinq-Mars, *Too Little, Too Late: Failing to Prevent Atrocities in the Central African Republic* (New York: Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, September 2015), http://www.globalr2p.org/media/files/occasionalpaper_car_final.pdf.

³ Interview with former US official, July 2015.

⁴ For Administration officials' characterization of the US response to CAR, see Hayes Brown, “The Inside Story of How the U.S. Acted to Prevent Another Rwanda,” *Think Progress*, December 20, 2013, <http://thinkprogress.org/security/2013/12/20/3054321/inside-story-acted-prevent-rwanda/>; Colum Lynch, “Can Samantha Power Wage a War on Atrocities in the Central African Republic?,” *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/19/can-samantha-power-wage-a-war-on-atrocities-in-central-african-republic/>; and Rebecca Hamilton, “Samantha Power in Practice,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 3, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2014-02-03/samantha-power-practice>.

⁵ Specifically, they would point to a speech President Obama gave in April 2012 at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. See White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” April 23, 2012, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/23/remarks-president-united-states-holocaust-memorial-museum>.

⁶ White House, Presidential Study Directive 10 (PSD-10): “Creation of an Interagency Atrocities Prevention Board and Corresponding Interagency Review,” August 4, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/04/presidential-study-directive-mass-atrocities>.

CAR as a country of concern, encouraging agencies to track events there more closely.⁷ When, in late November 2013, US officials began to fear that CAR could be another Rwanda, they moved quickly to support a broader international effort to end the killing.⁸ The intervention, officials said, demonstrated that the United States was committed to atrocity prevention and that the APB process worked.⁹

The idea that preventing mass atrocities should be a core national security interest was not a new one. Ever since the United States had failed to intervene to stop the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Power – along with numerous other NGO leaders, journalists, academics, and former government officials – had been contending that the United States needed to be prepared to act the next time a conflict spun out of control. They argued that mass atrocities and genocide could destabilize regions, generate massive refugee flows, embolden bad actors, cause economic and resource disruptions, and foment violent extremism – all of which could have a direct impact on US national security. They also noted that it was far less costly to prevent atrocities than mitigate or end them: in the aftermath of a mass atrocity, US support for humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations could run into the hundreds of millions of dollars. Prevention wasn't just the right choice; it was the sensible one as well.¹⁰

Many of those making the case – including Power – subsequently obtained key positions in the Obama Administration. Although they were successful in getting the President and other senior officials to embrace atrocity prevention in speeches and policy papers, the concept remained largely on the periphery of US policy until March 2011, when Obama decided to back air attacks to prevent then-Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi from following through on threats to kill thousands of his own citizens. The success of that campaign influenced the Administration's decision in August 2011 to issue PSD-10 and establish the APB.¹¹

⁷ Interviews with current and former US officials, May-June 2015. "Country of concern" is not a formal designation but rather a term of art used by some inside government.

⁸ See, for example, Power's description of what she said was her initial reaction to CAR: "It just sounded so much like Bosnia and Rwanda before the genocides . . . The sirens went off." Evan Osnos, "In the Land of the Possible," *New Yorker*, December 22 & 29, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/land-possible>.

⁹ Brown, "Inside Story" and Lynch, "Samantha Power."

¹⁰ The best-known pro-prevention argument is Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). The best summary of the specific steps that preventionists think the USG should take to prevent genocide is the 2008 report of the bipartisan Genocide Prevention Task Force (GPTF), which looked at how the USG could do a better job responding to genocide and mass atrocities. See Madeleine Albright and William Cohen, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington: US Holocaust Memorial Museum and others, 2008), <http://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20081124-genocide-prevention-report.pdf>. According to one report, Obama Administration officials relied heavily on the report and ultimately implemented many of its recommendations. See James P. Finkel, *Atrocity Prevention at the Crossroads: Assessing the President's Atrocity Prevention Board after Two Years*, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Occasional Paper No. 2, September 2014, 10, <http://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20140904-finkel-atrocity-prevention-report.pdf>

¹¹ In interviews, a number of current and former US officials emphasized the key role that events in Libya played in helping Power and others to convince the President to sign off on PSD-10.

Almost immediately, critics began to question whether the new policy was little more than rhetoric. By the time the APB held its first meeting in April 2012, atrocities committed by the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria were capturing headlines worldwide. The Administration chose not to intervene despite credible evidence of the Syrian government's involvement in mass violence. The widespread perception was that the President had punted in the face of one of the worst mass atrocity crises since the Rwandan genocide.¹²

Even supporters of the APB began to question its efficacy and relevance. As one former APB participant subsequently put it, "a sense soon emerged that . . . the President and influential members of the White House staff were stepping away from the initiative."¹³ The Administration had quietly backed away from immediate plans to issue an executive order that would have institutionalized the APB.¹⁴ Promised annual reports to the President did not materialize.¹⁵ If atrocity prevention really was a core national security interest, both external critics and certain APB participants wondered, why was the Administration so selective in acting on it?

In a January 2013 interview with *The New Republic*, Obama offered one possible answer. "What I have to constantly wrestle with is where and when can the United States intervene or act in ways that advance our national interest, advance our security, and speak to our highest ideals and sense of common humanity," he said. "In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact? . . . And how do I weigh tens of thousands who've been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo? Those are not simple questions. . . . You make the decisions you think balance all

¹² See, for example, Senator John McCain's reaction to the contradiction between the rhetoric of PSD-10 and the Administration's Syria policy: "How can these words mean anything when 40,000 men, women, and children have been slaughtered in Syria?" John McCain, "Remarks at the 2012 Human Rights Summit," December 5, 2012, <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/speeches?ID=6bf4624f-db22-1948-eeed-478d3a8c78a0>. See also Tod Lindberg, "How to Prevent Atrocities: There is No Substitute for Presidential Leadership," *The Weekly Standard*, March 11, 2013, http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/how-prevent-atrocities_704957.html. Hamilton, "Samantha Power in Practice," argues that "The United States [was willing to draw] a red line around the use of chemical weapons but not around the mass killing of civilians."

¹³ James P. Finkel, "Moving Beyond the Crossroads: Strengthening the Atrocity Prevention Board," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 4 (2015): 139, <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1361&context=gsp>.

¹⁴ Ibid. The Executive Order was issued in May 2016. See Executive Order 13729 of May 18, 2016, A Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Response, 81 CFR 32611 <https://federalregister.gov/a/2016-12307>.

¹⁵ An April 2012 White House Fact Sheet promised that the Chair of the APB would "report on this work annually in a memorandum to the President." White House, "Fact Sheet: A Comprehensive Strategy and New Tools to Prevent and Respond to Atrocities," April 23, 2012, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/23/fact-sheet-comprehensive-strategy-and-new-tools-prevent-and-respond-atro>. See also Mark Landler, "Task Force Gives Insight on U.N. Nominee," *New York Times*, June 22, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/us/politics/work-on-task-force-gives-insight-on-un-nominee.html?action=click&contentCollection=Africa&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article&r=0>. The May 2016 Executive Order also instructs the Chair of the APB to "report, through the National Security Advisor, to the President by April 30 each year on the work of the U.S. Government in mass atrocity prevention and response, including the work of the Board." Executive Order 13729.

these equities, and you hope that, at the end of your presidency, you can look back and say, I made more right calls than not and that I saved lives where I could.”¹⁶

Such statements did little to mollify the President’s critics, but they did give hope to those inside the Administration who were as frustrated with the President’s failure to act in Syria as those on the outside. If the President wasn’t willing to intervene in Syria, perhaps he would do so elsewhere, in places where atrocities could be stopped before they started. Places like the Central African Republic.

Within days of the December 2013 decision to take action, White House officials began promoting the US intervention in CAR as proof that the new approach to atrocity prevention was working. This was particularly true immediately before and during Power’s trip. One official, speaking on background, went so far as to describe the US response as a “high water mark” for US atrocity prevention efforts, citing the APB’s role in preparing the ground for quick US action.¹⁷ Some outside observers agreed, with one calling the Board “Power’s signature achievement” and the US effort in CAR “quietly historic.”¹⁸ Over the past two-plus years, this narrative has taken hold, with both critics and defenders of the APB citing CAR as an example of how the APB made a difference.

This argument is not without merit. The Obama Administration deserves great credit for its efforts in CAR – and not just because of the December 2013 intervention. The United States is now the single largest bilateral donor in CAR: over the past three years, it has provided more than \$800 million to fund humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping operations, and peacebuilding and reconciliation programs.¹⁹ US officials have played an important role in pushing the country

¹⁶ Franklin Foer and Chris Hughes, “Barack Obama Is Not Pleased,” *The New Republic*, January 27, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112190/obama-interview-2013-sit-down-president>.

¹⁷ Hayes Brown, “Inside Story.”

¹⁸ Hamilton, “Samantha Power in Practice.”

¹⁹ There is no single USG office or NGO tracking US expenditures on CAR. Ambassador W. Stuart Symington, who has served as US Special Representative for CAR since May 2014, has cited this number to NGO representatives and in public fora. According to my calculations, the USG spent at least \$803 million through the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, including roughly \$528 million for peacekeeping, \$268 million for humanitarian assistance, and \$7 million for peacebuilding programs. Sources: USAID, “Central African Republic Complex Emergency Fact Sheet” (hereafter CAR CEFS) #2, Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, September 30, 2014, http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/car_ce_fs02_12-19-2013.pdf; USAID, CAR CEFS #21, FY 2014, September 30, 2014, https://scms.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/car_ce_fs21_09-30-2014.pdf; USAID, CAR CEFS #15, FY 2015, May 8, 2015, http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/car_ce_fs15_05-08-2015_0.pdf; Department of State (hereafter State), “Congressional Budget Justification, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs,” undated, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236395.pdf>; White House, “U.S. Support for Peacekeeping in Africa,” August 6, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-us-support-peacekeeping-africa>; State, “FY 2015 Budget Amendment Summary,” undated, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/228924.pdf>.

toward a resolution of the conflict. Perhaps most importantly, the United States took action for no reason other than to stop what some Administration officials feared could be a genocide. As one later put it, “I mean [CAR] is not a strategic target. Outside of ‘never again,’ why else would we have gotten involved?”²⁰

But if the point of PSD-10 and the APB was to make sure that the United States would take action “before the wood is stacked or the match is struck,” as then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton put it in July 2012, then the US response in CAR cannot be described as a victory for preventive action or the APB.²¹ The first sign of a potential mass atrocity crisis was not in December 2013, when Power visited Bangui to highlight the US response, but in early December 2012 – a full year earlier – when Séléka forces began looting, raping, and killing their way across the country. Throughout 2013, regional experts and senior officials did not act on repeated and often insistent warnings by NGOs, French and UN officials, and even the APB. Neither the Board itself nor the various prevention mechanisms that it helped put into place were able to prompt an earlier response. The United States acted only *after* events had spun out of control. As one NGO official later put it, “Once they didn’t have a choice, they responded pretty well.”²²

The story of how and why the Obama Administration did not follow its own prevention blueprint in the Central African Republic offers useful insights into the Administration’s US approach to atrocity prevention and provides important lessons for future efforts. To that end, this report looks at the US response to the crisis in CAR between December 2012, when Séléka began its march on Bangui and the United States decided to close its embassy, and September 2014, when the United Nations assumed control over peacekeeping operations and the United States reopened its embassy. Although the United States has devoted considerable time, attention, and funds to the crisis since September 2014, its efforts are based largely on decisions made during that period.

As of this writing, conditions in CAR remain unstable. MINUSCA, the UN peacekeeping force deployed in September 2014, is understaffed, often overmatched, and both discredited and badly shaken by appalling reports that French and African soldiers raped children in their care. Crises in South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Libya, and elsewhere have diverted US and international attention. The election of a new government is a hopeful development, but both sides continue to target civilians, including humanitarian workers. There is little evidence that *anyone* is prepared to

²⁰ US official, interview with the author, May 2015.

²¹ “Keynote Address by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton,” Symposium on Ending Genocide in the 21st Century, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, July 24, 2012, <https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/speakers-and-events/all-speakers-and-events/imagine-the-unimaginable-ending-genocide-in-the-21st-century/keynote-address-by-secretary-of-state-hillary-rodham-clinton>. The full quote is “The United States and our partners must act before the wood is stacked or the match is struck, because when the fire is at full blaze, our options for responding are considerably costlier and more difficult.”

²² Interview with NGO representative, May 2015.

prevent the next spasm of communal cleansing. Despite this, Obama Administration officials still describe the US response in CAR as a triumph. To understand why it was not, it is necessary to begin with the US decision to disengage from CAR at the very moment that the crisis began.

GOING BLIND

Late in the afternoon of December 27, 2012, a small caravan of vehicles left the American embassy near the center of Bangui and headed for M’Poko International Airport.²³ The government of President François Bozizé – incompetent, corrupt, and profoundly unpopular – was on the verge of collapse. Séléka, a new coalition of northern rebel groups, was marching on the capital, and no one was quite sure what would happen were they to take power.²⁴ Officials in Washington had concluded that it would be better to evacuate the embassy than put the remaining staff at risk. It was time for the Americans to leave – and to do so on very short notice.

Only a month earlier, few people had heard of Séléka. Then in early December, word began trickling into Bangui that the group had taken control of towns in CAR’s northern reaches. By mid-month, it was clear that this wasn’t just another small-time rebellion: Bozizé was in trouble. On Christmas Eve, the US embassy posted a notice on its website that it was relocating “non-emergency” personnel and that other Americans should consider leaving.²⁵ On Christmas Day, it announced that, as a result of “increasing insecurity,” the embassy was “suspending normal operations.”²⁶ Two days later, the remaining diplomats headed out the door.

There were several reasons that Washington moved so quickly. First and foremost, Séléka’s march south was taking place less than three months after the September 2012 assault on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya – an attack that had led to the death of four Americans, including the US ambassador, Christopher Stevens. On December 18 – just eight days before the decision to close the embassy – an independent review board had concluded that “Systemic failures and leadership and management deficiencies . . . resulted in a . . . security posture that was inadequate for Benghazi and grossly inadequate to deal with the attack that took place.”²⁷ Four State Department officials, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security (DS), resigned. Two days later, Congress held hearings on Benghazi. “I cannot imagine sending out

²³ This account is based on Laurence Wohlers (former US Ambassador to the Central African Republic), interview with the author, December 2015, as well as contemporary press reports and USG documents.

²⁴ Séléka means “alliance” in Sango.

²⁵ US Embassy Bangui, “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Departure of Non-Emergency Personnel,” December 24, 2012, <http://bangui.usembassy.gov/service/warden-messages/emergency-message--december-24-2012.html>.

²⁶ US Embassy Bangui, “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens: Recommendation to Depart,” December 25, 2012, <http://bangui.usembassy.gov/service/warden-messages/emergency-message--december-25-2012.html>. See also “After reopening in 2005, U.S. Embassy Bangui suspends operations. Again.” *Diplopundit* (blog), January 2, 2013, <http://diplopundit.net/2013/01/02/after-reopening-in-2005-u-s-embassy-bangui-suspends-operations-again/>.

²⁷ State, “Report of the Accountability Review Board,” December 18, 2012, 4, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/202446.pdf>.

folks to Benghazi if we did not have adequate security for them,” Senator Bob Corker (R-TN) said. “So my question, again, is why? Why did we do it?”²⁸

Given such a fraught political environment, it is understandable why many State officials wanted to close the US embassy in CAR and evacuate remaining personnel. From the beginning, officials in State/DS and the Office of the Under Secretary for Management strongly supported suspending operations. Shutting the mission in CAR would demonstrate to Congress that the Administration could move quickly to protect American personnel before they were in real danger.²⁹ As one official later acknowledged, Benghazi “was so much part of the bloodstream at that point, that it pretty much laid the groundwork” for the decision.³⁰ Linda Thomas-Greenfield (who became Assistant Secretary for African Affairs in August 2013) would subsequently admit that Benghazi was “ever-present.” There was, she said, “no stomach for an American losing their life overseas, particularly a civilian.”³¹ One NGO official was less charitable, later describing the decision as a “knee-jerk response” to Benghazi.³²

In addition, many State Department officials regarded CAR as France’s problem.³³ Until 1960, the country had been a French colony; since independence, French military interventions had repeatedly propped up regimes (or assisted in their overthrow). Recently, however, President François Hollande had announced that France was not going to save Bozizé: “If we have a presence, it’s not to protect a regime, it’s to protect our nationals and our interests and in no way to intervene in the internal business of . . . the Central African Republic. Those days are over.”³⁴ If even the French were distancing themselves from the current regime, the United States was better off leaving Bangui and letting the Central Africans sort things out on their own.

To the degree that CAR did attract US attention, it was largely due to the belief that the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) was operating in the vast ungoverned regions of eastern CAR. LRA leader Joseph Kony was wanted by the International Criminal Court; a grassroots campaign had

²⁸ “State Department official suggests Libya warnings went to the top,” Fox News, December 20, 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/12/20/sen-kerry-says-ack-funding-to-blame-for-benghazi-attacks.html>.

²⁹ Wohlers, interview. It is worth noting that on January 2, 2013, a reporter asked State spokesperson Victoria Nuland whether the closure of the embassy in Bangui had “anything to do or part of a policy of being more security conscious post-Benghazi.” Nuland replied that “we always look at these on a case-by-case basis.” State, Daily Press Briefing (hereafter State DPB), January 2, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/01/202436.htm>.

³⁰ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

³¹ Linda Thomas-Greenfield (Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs), remarks during a panel discussion on the crisis in the Central African Republic held in conjunction with *Our Walls Bear Witness: Crisis in Central African Republic*, a special photo exhibition at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 10, 2014, author’s transcription of an audio recording.

³² Interview with NGO representative, May 2015.

³³ Several current and former US officials characterized State officials’ views in this way. Interviews with current and former US officials, May, June, and December 2015.

³⁴ BBC, “Central African Republic’s Bozizé in US-France appeal,” December 27, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20845887>.

successfully pushed Congress and the White House to support efforts to capture him. In 2010, the Administration had made funds available to support peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives in eastern CAR. Two years later, it began providing military assistance (including the deployment of a small number of US special forces) to support the hunt for Kony. But these efforts did not require a US presence in Bangui.³⁵

To some, the question wasn't whether to suspend operations, but rather whether to close the embassy for good. On two previous occasions – in 1997 and 2002 – State had ordered the evacuation of the embassy due to fears of rebel attacks.³⁶ Filling the post's foreign service slots had become so difficult that at one point, the embassy went four years without an administrative officer. In February 2013, the Office of the Inspector General would recommend that "If the Department cannot adequately staff and protect the embassy, it needs to . . . find another way to maintain diplomatic representation . . . such as regional accreditation."³⁷

Despite the strong political winds, not everyone supported closure. On a series of conference calls with Washington, US Ambassador Laurence Wohlers fought against evacuating the embassy, arguing that it would damage US credibility, hinder efforts to find a peaceful solution, and make it look like the United States was abandoning CAR in its moment of need. He noted that there was no history of animosity toward Americans and no evidence that staying would put him or his staff at risk. As he later recalled, "This wasn't about us. And Séléka weren't Islamists. . . . [But] there was this perception in DC that CAR was this ungoverned, unstable country."³⁸

On the calls, Johnnie Carson, who was then the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, backed Wohlers. The French, he argued, wanted the United States to stay, and had offered to provide additional security. At first, he and Wohlers managed to carry the day: DS agreed to allow the ambassador and two other American nationals to stay on in Bangui. The embassy would

³⁵ For more on US support for Counter-LRA operations, see Ledio Cakaj, "The Unclaimed Land: The Lord's Resistance Army in CAR," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, eds. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London: Zed Books, 2015), 283-286; State, "U.S. Support to Regional Efforts to Counter the Lord's Resistance Army," March 23, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/03/186732.htm>; State, "U.S. Efforts to Counter the Lord's Resistance Army," December 7, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2011/178501.htm>; and US Africa Command (USAFRICOM), "U.S. Military Support to African-Led Counter-LRA Operations," (undated), <http://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/operations/u-s-military-support-to-african-led-counter-lra-operations>.

³⁶ According to the Office of the Historian at the Department of State, the embassy had suspended operations on March 27, 1997, resuming on June 1, 1998. It again suspended operations on October 31, 2002, reopening on October 26, 2004. Office of the Historian, interview with Meghaen Anderson, July 2015.

³⁷ State, Office of Inspector General, "Inspection of Embassy Bangui, Central African Republic" (hereafter OIG Report), ISP-I-13-13A, February 2013, <https://oig.state.gov/system/files/206519.pdf>, 1.

³⁸ Wohlers, interview.

temporarily suspend operations, but key staff would remain in place to reopen it once things calmed down.³⁹

But then on December 26, Bozizé committed a blunder that effectively ended any chance of the US embassy remaining open. Hoping to convince French and American diplomats that they should support him, he had his sympathizers stage demonstrations outside their embassies. The protest outside the US mission was a fairly tame affair: about a dozen men stood across the street and chanted pro-Bozizé slogans. At the French compound, however, things quickly got out of hand. Protestors breached the compound's walls, tore down a French flag, and smashed several bullet-proof windows. Although French officials were never at risk, the attack was soon enough after Benghazi to spook State officials. As Wohlers later acknowledged, "once I saw what happened to French, I knew we were going to close."⁴⁰

Soon thereafter, Carson telephoned Wohlers, telling him, "we've got to pull you out." A few hours later, Carson called a second time, informing Wohlers that he and his colleagues would be evacuated the following evening. He had less than twenty-four hours to close up the embassy and inform the Bozizé regime that he was leaving. "I didn't fight it," Wohlers recalled. "I thought we could have stayed, but after Benghazi, the decision was understandable. No one was going to take that risk."⁴¹

The next day, as his team scrambled to shut down the embassy, Wohlers met with Bozizé. "It was a very strange scene," Wohlers recalled. "Séléka is at the gates of Bangui and most of his ministers were sitting around watching France 24." At first, Bozizé thought that if he could convince Wohlers to stay, the embassy would remain open. When Wohlers finally got him to understand that the decision had been made in DC, Bozizé grew angry. "This is unbelievable," he shouted. "Here I am a democratically elected president, these people are coming to overthrow me, and the international community is doing nothing." Wohlers paused and then said, "That's true, Mr. President, but when you marched on Bangui [ten years earlier], we didn't intervene then either." The audience ended shortly thereafter.⁴²

³⁹ Carson's role is based on Wohlers, interview.

⁴⁰ According to Wohlers, it was Bozizé's son, not Bozizé himself who arranged the demonstrations. Wohlers, interview. See also Paul-Marin Ngoupana, "Central African Republic wants French help as rebels close on capital," Reuters, December 26, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/26/us-car-rebels-protest-idUSBRE8BP09X20121226>; and BBC, "Central African Republic's Bozizé in US-France appeal." Ngoupana reported that protestors at the American embassy also "threw a few rocks in the direction of "cars carrying white passengers," but Wohlers does not recall that happening.

⁴¹ Wohlers, interview.

⁴² Wohlers, interview. Bozizé had served as Army Chief of Staff under Ange-Félix Patassé, the previous president, until 2001, when he began a rebellion. In March 2003, he took power, marching on Bangui while Patassé was out of the country.

That night, around midnight, Wohlers and his team headed out the door. Although local staff continued to manage the facility and regularly report back to Washington, the American embassy in Bangui would remain closed for the next twenty-one months.⁴³

During the coming crisis, as the Obama Administration poured hundreds of millions of dollars into CAR and deployed troops to support an AU peacekeeping operation, policymakers would lament the fact that the United States lacked any local presence to provide accurate information. “It was really tough,” one official subsequently acknowledged. “Not having eyes and ears on the ground was probably the biggest limiting factor in our ability to drive issues [and] make decisions.”⁴⁴ What Thomas-Greenfield later called “the Benghazi effect” did not cause or exacerbate the crisis in CAR, but it did make it harder for the United States to analyze, recognize, and respond to conditions on the ground.⁴⁵ As Power had written prior to joining the Administration, “One of the side effects of the closing of US embassies in times of crisis is that it ravages US intelligence-gathering capabilities.”⁴⁶ Or as one former US official later put it, “When we walked out of Bangui, we blinded ourselves.”⁴⁷

PHANTOM STATE

It is impossible to discuss the US response to events in CAR without touching on the horrors that have unfolded there. Since December 2012, more than six thousand people have died and one million more have fled their homes.⁴⁸ At the peak of the crisis, roughly half the population – more than two million individuals – struggled daily to find food or shelter.⁴⁹ Attacks on civilians were a

⁴³ Wohlers, interview. Official USG announcements of the evacuation stated that the plane flew to Nairobi Kenya. Wohlers, however, said that the flight was diverted to Yaoundé, Cameroon when officials could not get the necessary overflight clearances quickly enough to allow the plane to depart quickly.

⁴⁴ Interview with US official, June 2015.

⁴⁵ Thomas-Greenfield, remarks at USHMM forum.

⁴⁶ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 109.

⁴⁷ Background remarks by a former US official, September 2014.

⁴⁸ There is no definitive tally of deaths or displaced in the conflict. My review of the disaggregated conflict data on CAR maintained by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) produced a total of 6,292 deaths between December 1, 2012 and December 31, 2015. See ACLED, “ACLED Version 6 (1997-2015),” <http://www.acleddata.com/data/version-6-data-1997-2015/>. A downloadable version of the CAR data set can be found at <http://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CAR.xlsx>. However, even this figure is not definitive. In September 2014, the Associated Press reported that “at least” 5,186 people had died in the conflict, based on their survey of survivors, humanitarian workers, and graveyards in the fifty largest communities in CAR. Krista Larson, “Central African Republic: Death toll in massacres far exceeds U.N. count,” *San Jose Mercury News*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.mercurynews.com/2014/09/12/central-african-republic-death-toll-in-massacres-far-exceeds-u-n-count/>. The AP figure probably includes deaths not recorded by ACLED, which relies on a daily review of media, NGO, and humanitarian agency reporting on individual incidents. In its final report, the UN Commission of Inquiry on CAR said that estimates of 3,000 to 6,000 deaths “represent a radical under-estimate.” The Commission also estimated that there were 825,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of January 2014 and 312,000 refugees as of March 2014. The refugee/IDP figures likely contain some overlap. United Nations, “International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic: Final Report” December 22, 2014, 26, 92, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/928.

⁴⁹ Food and Agricultural Organization and World Food Program, “Special Report: FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Central African Republic,” October 29, 2014, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4159e.pdf>.

near-daily occurrence. Killing often was not enough: both sides regularly dismembered and burned the corpses of their victims.⁵⁰

Over the past several years, a narrative has emerged, particularly in media reports, that the crisis in CAR is at heart a religious war. That is an oversimplification: although the conflict later became sectarian, its origins can be traced to multiple overlapping disputes over identity and territory that involve not only religion but also ethnicity, land ownership, regional politics, mining rights, and economic status.⁵¹ Since 1997, when the army mutinied over back pay, the country has suffered through a near-constant series of rebellions, regional conflicts, coups, and coup attempts, particularly in the north. Smugglers, poachers, soldiers of fortune, and pastoralists have exploited CAR's porous borders, in the process alienating locals and further destabilizing the country. Other actors in the region, most notably Chadian President Idriss Déby, have treated the country as little more than a tool to advance their own interests. CAR's politicians and coup-plotters have used the regional jockeying to their own ends. In 2003, for example, Bozizé took advantage of Déby's unhappiness with then-President Ange-Félix Patassé to march an overwhelmingly Chadian force into Bangui and take power.

Both before and after Bozizé's coup, the French, UN, and AU regularly sent diplomatic missions and peacekeepers to CAR to negotiate ceasefires, restore order, disarm and demobilize rebels, and rebuild government institutions. These efforts often brought a modicum of peace and stability to the capital and a few other towns, but did little to resolve the underlying structural issues driving the conflicts or address the grievances of those living elsewhere. An entire class of what Louisa Lombard of Yale University has called "political-military entrepreneurs" emerged to battle the government (and each other) over control of artisanal mines and northern towns.⁵² The international community periodically brought rebels, regime opponents, and regime officials together to negotiate, only to have Bozizé ignore or reject the results. This constant churn of low-intensity conflict and poor governance gradually hollowed out the country to the point that, as the International Crisis Group put it in 2007, CAR was not so much a failed state as a phantom one.⁵³

⁵⁰ While in CAR, Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch witnessed murder-dismemberments. See for example, Peter Bouckaert (@bouckap), Twitter, January 29, 2014, 1:56 pm, <https://twitter.com/bouckap/status/428474278128807936>.

⁵¹ For more on the origins of the conflict, see Cinq-Mars, *Too Little, Too Late*; Louisa Lombard, "Genocide-mongering does nothing to help us understand the messy dynamics of conflict in the CAR," *African Arguments*, January 24, 2014, http://africanarguments.org/2014/01/24/genocide-mongering-does-nothing-to-help-us-understand-the-messy-dynamics-of-conflict-in-the-car-by-louisa-lombard/#_jmp0; Louisa Lombard, "A Brief Political History of the Central African Republic," *Cultural Anthropology* (online), June 11, 2014, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/539-a-brief-political-history-of-the-central-african-republic>; and Lombard and Carayannis, *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*.

⁵² Lombard, "A Brief Political History."

⁵³ International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State*, Africa Report No. 136, December 13, 2007, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/Central%20African%20Republic%20Anatomy%20of%20a%20Phantom%20State.pdf>.

Into this vacuum came Séléka, which from the outside looked like little more than a loose network of northern rebel groups whose fighters remained loyal to their individual commanders. Michel Djotodia, the group's putative leader, had only limited control over its various factions, whose leaders agreed only on the need to get rid of Bozizé. At first, many of Séléka's fighters were Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries interested in little other than securing a share of the spoils. As a result, when the rebels marched on Bangui, plunder rather than politics was the primary objective of many of its units. Séléka forces looted and burned homes, schools, and churches, and beat up or killed those who objected (or were thought to be pro-Bozizé). Even before Séléka reached Bangui, reports of their atrocities had begun to circulate.⁵⁴

In late December 2012, when it had become clear that Séléka was a genuine threat, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the regional body that had been trying for years to broker peace in CAR, brought Bozizé and Djotodia to Libreville, Gabon to sign a power-sharing agreement that established a new government of national unity. But when Bozizé failed to implement its terms, the rebels used his actions to justify going back on the offensive, entering the capital on March 23.⁵⁵ If past were prologue, that would have been the end of it. After a brief spasm of retaliatory violence, Djotodia would have announced that he had restored order and that new elections would soon follow. MICOPAX – an ECCAS peacekeeping force that had been on the ground since 2008 – would have continued to provide security in the capital until the vote took place.⁵⁶ CAR would have remained a fragile, minimally governed kleptocracy until another rebel movement was strong enough to overthrow Djotodia.

As bad as that would have been, the reality proved to be much, much worse.

Determining the precise timing of when the conflict took on an explicitly sectarian tone is difficult. Some CAR watchers such as Evan Cinq-Mars of the Global Center for Responsibility to

⁵⁴ See, for example, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Looting, empty villages found in rebel-controlled region of Central African Republic," February 12, 2013, <http://www.unhcr.org/511a6a4f9.html>, and Human Rights Watch (hereafter HRW), *I Can Still Smell the Dead: The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic* (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 18, 2013), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/18/i-can-still-smell-dead/forgotten-human-rights-crisis-central-african-republic>, 33-34.

⁵⁵ France 24, "Rebels gain key posts in new Central African Republic government," February 4, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130203-central-african-republic-rebels-seleka-unity-government>; France 24, "Rebels seize CAR presidential palace," March 25, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130324-car-rebels-claim-seize-presidential-palace-bangui>; Louisa Lombard, "President Michel Djotodia?" *Foole's No Man's Land* (blog), March 24, 2013, <http://foolesnomansland.blogspot.com/2013/03/president-michel-djotodia.html>; France 24, "Michel Djotodia: Bangui's New Strongman," March 25, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130325-central-african-republic-michel-djotodia-coup>.

⁵⁶ MICOPAX: The ECCAS peacekeeping force is known as FOMAC (*Force multinationale de l'Afrique centrale*); it first deployed to CAR in 2008. The FOMAC mission to CAR was known as MICOPAX (*Mission de consolidation de la paix en Centrafrique*). To avoid unnecessary confusion, this report uses "MICOPAX" to describe both the force (FOMAC) and the mission (MICOPAX).

Protect point to early examples of inter-communal intolerance, including Bozizé's Christian chauvinism in the weeks before his fall, Séléka's early targeting of churches, and eliminationist rhetoric that began to appear on pro-Bozizé websites as early as March 2013.⁵⁷ What is clear is that, as Séléka drove south and its fighters moved into new towns and villages, they often targeted Christian neighborhoods and bypassed Muslim ones. When Séléka entered Bangui in March 2013, it embarked on a massive looting spree, killing hundreds. The capital's predominantly Christian districts – especially those perceived as pro-Bozizé – were a particular target, as were churches.⁵⁸

By May, Christians were increasingly viewing Séléka through a communal lens. Many began to refer to all Muslims – including those with no connection to the rebels – as foreigners, outsiders, or invaders. The fact that many Séléka fighters were Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries only reinforced this perception. In late spring and early summer, Christian communities began to organize into a loose, uncoordinated network of local self-defense militias, arming themselves with machetes, bows and arrows, tire irons, and guns. These groups, which later would be known collectively as the anti-balaka, started to target Muslim civilians.⁵⁹

The emergence of the anti-balaka militias changed the nature of the conflict. As one analyst later noted, their preference for bypassing Séléka to target Muslim communities engendered “a self-perpetuating cycle” of retaliatory violence.⁶⁰ Both sides campaigned for civilian support, encouraging them to participate into the fighting. Both also regularly attacked civilians, often with the explicit goal of provoking new confrontations, which then could be used to justify even more reprisals. Religious leaders on both sides called for an end to the violence, but to little effect. As the attacks accelerated, entire villages emptied as their residents fled into the bush.

Later on, some in the Obama Administration would claim that they could not have foreseen the mass violence, and that the devolution into communal conflict had come as a surprise.⁶¹ Such assertions ignore the fact that, starting in early 2013, numerous NGO, media, and UN reports were describing what Séléka was doing. As early as May, NGOs were warning that the violence was taking on an increasingly communal tone.⁶²

⁵⁷ Cinq-Mars, 16.

⁵⁸ HRW, “Central African Republic: Rampant Abuses after the Coup,” May 10, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/10/central-african-republic-rampant-abuses-after-coup>.

⁵⁹ The term, “anti-balaka” has variously been translated as “anti-machete,” “anti-AK-47 bullet,” and “the invincibles.” It refers to the *gris-gris* charms that fighters wear to ward off bullets. See IRIN Africa, “Who are the anti-balaka of CAR?,” February 12, 2014, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/99634/briefing-who-are-the-anti-balaka-of-car>.

⁶⁰ *Crisis in the Central African Republic: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives*, 113th Congress, 33 (November 19, 2013) (statement of Mike Jobbins, Senior Program Manager, Search for Common Ground) <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20131119/101520/HHRG-113-FA16-Transcript-20131119.pdf>.

⁶¹ See, for example, Hamilton, “Samantha Power in Practice,” who quotes an unnamed Administration official as saying it was “unclear” that mass atrocities were a possibility.

⁶² Cinq-Mars, 15-17, does a good job of summarizing these reports.

CANARY IN THE COAL MINE

The rise of Séléka did not go unnoticed in Washington, but most senior Administration officials did not regard it as a priority or even a concern. The exception was the Atrocities Prevention Board (APB), the body established by President Obama to track and push for action on potential atrocity situations.

The story of the APB's role in the CAR crisis is closely intertwined with that of Samantha Power, who from 2009 to early 2013 served as Senior Director for Human Rights and Multilateral Affairs on the President's National Security Staff (NSS) and chair of the APB.⁶³ Power's influence and access transcended her position. She had met Obama early in his Senate career, when he reached out to her after reading *A Problem from Hell*, her Pulitzer Prize-winning study of the US response to past genocides. By the end of their first meeting, the soon-to-be Presidential candidate had convinced her to join his staff.

Power's portfolio – human rights and the United Nations – was not a traditional path to the Oval Office door. But as the President's "conscience mascot," as she jokingly called herself, she worked to make herself an expert on the inner workings of the US government.⁶⁴ Unlike many of Obama's senior advisors, she did not hesitate to challenge the President's views, sometimes to the point of exasperating him.⁶⁵ As Dennis Ross, who was then serving as Obama's Middle East advisor, later told *The New Yorker*, "She never minded being the odd one out. She would argue her position regardless of what the lineup was."⁶⁶

If Power had come into the NSS with one goal, it was to build an effective US atrocity prevention architecture.⁶⁷ In *A Problem from Hell*, she had written that Presidents needed two things to stop genocide. The first was political will. The second was what she later would call the "toolbox" – a set of policy instruments that could help move decision-making in atrocity crises beyond the false

⁶³ This account of Power's time in the White House is derived from James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Viking, 2012), particularly 89-90 and 284-286; Osnos, "In the Land of the Possible"; Hamilton, "Samantha Power in Practice"; Landler, "Task Force Gives Insight on U.N. Nominee"; and interviews with current and former US officials.

⁶⁴ Mann, *The Obamians*, 285.

⁶⁵ According to Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama once grew so annoyed with Power that, in front of other staff, he snapped, "Samantha, enough, I've already read your book." Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁶⁶ Osnos, "In the Land of the Possible," 90.

⁶⁷ Media reports frequently referred to atrocity prevention as Power's top priority. See, for example, Landler, "Task Force Gives Insight on U.N. Nominee," which refers to the APB as Power's "signature project."

dichotomy of doing nothing or sending in the troops.⁶⁸ It was up to Obama to provide the former, but Power was determined to do what she could to provide the latter.⁶⁹

In April 2010, Power recruited David Pressman, a human rights lawyer who had come to prominence for his work on Darfur and other atrocity situations, to serve as the first-ever NSS Director for War Crimes and Mass Atrocities. Over the coming months, Power and Pressman worked with allies in State, USAID, and DoD to incorporate atrocity prevention into policy, including planning guidance.⁷⁰ Administration officials cited the need to prevent atrocities in its response to crises in Cote d'Ivoire, Kyrgyzstan, Sudan, and South Sudan, as well as its Counter-LRA initiative.

Pressman also began convening an informal interagency working group to discuss how best to institutionalize a comprehensive policy approach, preferably through some sort of presidential directive. He and others drew extensively on the work of the Genocide Prevention Task Force (GPTF), whose 2008 report had recommended a number of steps that the next Administration should take – including the establishment of “a standing interagency mechanism for analysis of threats of genocide and mass atrocities and consideration of appropriate preventive action.”⁷¹ Pressman was known to carry a copy of the report with him into meetings.⁷²

Power and Pressman did not face any real opposition to their efforts, but few others in the Administration regarded it as a priority. It was the 2011 Libya crisis, when Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi threatened to massacre tens of thousands of regime opponents, that proved to be a turning point. Power played a key role in convincing the President to take military action – and to justify it publicly as necessary to prevent a potential mass atrocity.⁷³ In his address to the

⁶⁸ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 511. See also, Mann, *The Obamians*, 285.

⁶⁹ Throughout the CAR crisis, she would repeatedly return to the toolbox metaphor. See, for example, Power's speech at a *Politico* event in late November 2013: “People have asked questions . . . about this internal, bureaucratic structure [the APB], and I happen to be eternally fascinated with bureaucracy and how it works and how one gets it to move. . . . I would view the . . . President's creation of [the APB] as a symptom of his larger commitment, again, to exploring every tool in the toolbox, to see are there new tools we can bring to bear?” Samantha Power, “Remarks at Politico's Women Rule Event,” *Politico*, November 21, 2013, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/11/samantha-power-remarks-women-rule-event-100205.html>.

⁷⁰ For examples of how atrocity prevention was integrated into key policy and planning documents, see White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, 48, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf; State, *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, December 2010, 22, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/153108.pdf>; and US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, February 2010, vi, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/ODR/ODR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.

⁷¹ Albright and Cohen, *Preventing Genocide*, 111.

⁷² For an account of the discussions that led to PSD-10 and the APB, see Finkel, *Atrocity Prevention at the Crossroads*, 9-11.

⁷³ Power's role in pushing for US intervention in Libya has been documented extensively. See, for example, Mann, *The Obamians* and Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.” According to one senior official, Power was “the first and most decisive advocate for aggressive actions in Libya, and she was a consistent voice before anybody else was . . . She really put on the

nation announcing the decision to intervene, Obama argued that the United States had a moral responsibility to act: “To brush aside America’s responsibility as a leader and – more profoundly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.”⁷⁴

Although the ultimate success or failure of the Libya intervention remains a hotly contested topic in policy circles, there is little doubt that at the time, it offered Power, Pressman, and others a singular opportunity to institutionalize atrocity prevention. Work on the directive kicked into overdrive. In August 2011, the White House issued Presidential Study Directive 10 (PSD-10), which determined that “preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and core moral responsibility of the United States” and established an Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) to coordinate policy and action.⁷⁵ The following April, the APB began to meet monthly, discussing a range of current and potential crises.

From the beginning, some NGO advocates had hoped that the APB would have the authority to push the interagency to take more effective action in Syria, Sudan, or other countries where atrocities already were taking place. But Power made it clear that the Board was designed to serve not as a crisis manager but rather what one former official would later describe as a “canary in the coal mine,” alerting the NSS and key agencies that they should pay more attention to a given situation before it spun out of control.⁷⁶ When, during an April 2012 event tied to the rollout of the APB, Power was asked which countries should be the top priority for the APB, she emphasized this point. Crises such as Syria and Sudan had not “suffered for lack of high-level attention,” she said. “I think what the Atrocities Prevention Board will ensure is that countries that may not be grabbing headlines . . . rise to the top, that they get before policymakers . . . [that] red tape and bureaucratic impasse doesn’t prevent that from happening.”⁷⁷

agenda the use of military power to respond to what was happening there, at a time when the President wasn’t sure.” Osnos, “In the Land of the Possible.”

⁷⁴ White House, “Remarks by the President in the Address to the Nation on Libya,” March 28, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/03/28/president-obama-s-speech-libya#transcript>.

⁷⁵ PSD-10.

⁷⁶ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

⁷⁷ White House, “Honoring the Pledge of Never Again: Introduction and Welcome,” YouTube video, April 23, 2012, 40:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHmVbIBHitg>. During her November 2013 remarks at the *Politico* event, Power made a similar point. “Syria [didn’t] suffer from a lack of meetings.” The APB, she argued, was designed not for Syria but for “those cases, like [CAR], that history shows would not necessarily rise within a bureaucracy on their own. . . . [Situations like that in CAR] will never fall through the cracks, I think, with this mechanism in place, because there’s a way to go directly to the President.” *Politico*, November 21, 2013.

At the same event, Andrew Hallman, then one of two Intelligence Community representatives on the APB, noted that “the whole objective here is to get on that continuum of conditions that lead to atrocities, to get to as far [to the] left as we can, because we want to, to the extent possible, prevent [atrocities] well before they get to the point that we have to respond to them.”⁷⁸ As Stephen Pomper, Power’s successor as APB Chair, would later tell the *New York Times*, the Board’s early warning capacity was what made it “a game changer.”⁷⁹ The APB could mobilize resources, advocate for greater attention through a more directed process, and monitor ongoing work – stepping in as necessary to push for additional action.

CAR would prove to be one of the first tests of this idea.

In mid-January 2013, less than a month after the embassy had closed, the APB met to discuss CAR. Wohlers joined by phone from Europe. According to those present, the discussion centered on the threat posed by Séléka and the need to support the Libreville power-sharing agreement, which had been signed only a few days before the Board met. Wohlers told Board members that Bozizé was incompetent, but that Séléka was far worse: a coalition of rent-seekers interested in little more than plunder. Judging by their systematic looting of the north, it wasn’t clear whether they were that interested in governing. Given that both sides had recently agreed to create a government of national unity, the United States should focus on finding ways to support it. When asked whether this was a Muslim-Christian conflict, Wohlers replied that it was much more of an economic one. When asked about the closure of the embassy, he said he was eager to get back as soon as possible.⁸⁰ At the meeting’s conclusion, the Board recommended that that NSS’s Africa directorate convene an Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) on CAR.⁸¹

There is some disagreement among those who attended the January APB meeting over its long-term impact. Participants concur that it put CAR on the policy map and that it clearly got Power’s attention (and perhaps inspired her later interest and advocacy). But some participants came out of the meeting with a sense that the Board hadn’t really appreciated the gravity of the situation. As one former official put it, “I walked out of there with a very bad feeling – kind of this almost whistling past the graveyard sort of feeling. Obviously something was very seriously wrong, but

⁷⁸ White House, “Honoring the Pledge of Never Again: Introduction and Welcome.” At the time, Hallman was Assistant Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Intelligence Integration in the Office of the Director for National Intelligence.

⁷⁹ Landler, “Task Force Gives Insight on U.N. Nominee.”

⁸⁰ This account is based on interviews with current and former US officials who attended the January 2013 APB meeting. Wohlers does not remember the specifics of what he said, but does not dispute the particulars as recalled by others present.

⁸¹ Although formal decision-making usually takes place at a higher level, most interagency coordination (and a significant amount of policymaking) is done at the IPC level. Early on, the APB was occasionally described as a super-IPC due to the seniority of those attending, but it has operated as an IPC in all but name, especially since Power’s departure.

State's attitude was 'don't worry about this, we've got it, even though there's no embassy.' . . . Any sense of urgency dissipated by the end of the meeting."⁸² Others challenged that view. "By the end, everyone was in agreement," one said. "Everyone was really worried."⁸³ Another agreed. "I'm not sure that the [CAR] IPC would have been stood up without the APB. It wasn't a priority for State's Africa bureau. It wasn't going to emerge as a priority through the usual processes."⁸⁴

As it turned out, the January APB meeting on CAR was Power's last. In early February, the White House announced that she was leaving the Administration to spend time with her family. Four months later, Obama nominated her to serve as the US Ambassador to the United Nations.

Power's departure had a major impact on the ability of the APB to influence policy. "Samantha has a theory of bureaucracy that is top down," one former official later observed.⁸⁵ In *A Problem from Hell*, she had argued that high-level attention was critical.⁸⁶ To that end, she had handpicked most Board members, ensuring that they were sufficiently senior to make sure that the APB's concerns would be heard.⁸⁷ The idea was that senior officials would ensure that "the entire foreign policy bureaucracy [would] become socialized to the idea that prevention of mass atrocities is a presidential priority and a core national security interest," as Pomper later told Rebecca Hamilton.⁸⁸

Early on, that process worked, but largely because of Power's own proximity to and influence with the President. "Samantha brought a lot of weight. She was so integral to the Board's standing," one former senior official later said.⁸⁹ Board members came to meetings not only because they were committed to atrocity prevention (which to a person they were) but also because Power had personally asked them to participate. More than one would later say that Power had a talent for convincing people to do things they didn't necessarily want to do.⁹⁰ As a result, the Board wielded an influence beyond its position in the bureaucratic firmament.

⁸² Interview with former US official, May 2015.

⁸³ Interview with US official, May 2015.

⁸⁴ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

⁸⁵ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

⁸⁶ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 504-506.

⁸⁷ Power's role in personally selecting Board members is highlighted in Landler, "Task Force Gives Insight on U.N. Nominee."

⁸⁸ Hamilton, "Samantha Power in Practice."

⁸⁹ Lindborg, interview.

⁹⁰ A senior official once told me that he was going to a meeting of the APB because, "I've already missed a couple of these and I don't want to let Samantha down." Once Power left the NSS, the official never again attended an APB meeting. Osnos tells a similar story, albeit in a non-APB context: "I'm pounding the table, and I'm thinking, What am I doing," [then-Deputy Secretary of State Tom] Nides said. "Part of it was that I didn't want to disappoint Samantha." Osnos, "In the Land of the Possible."

But when Power left the NSS, the Board's ability to influence policy declined. Regional experts such as those in the State Department's Africa Bureau (State/AF) had responded to the Board's prodding when she was there, but now were less likely to act on its recommendations.⁹¹ Pomper was widely respected, but he did not have the access or throw-weight to ensure continued senior engagement. Gradually, the senior officials drifted away. Their successors were often two or three rungs down the chain of command.

The crisis in Syria – and the increasingly vocal public criticism of the Administration's response – also had a negative impact on the APB's ability to influence events. According to a number of current and former officials, White House staff – particularly those in the press office – backed away from promoting the work of the APB, fearing that it would only invite a fresh round of unfavorable commentary on the Administration's failure to respond to atrocities in Syria. Those inside government who had never been happy with the Board – particularly those within State's regional bureaus – took notice.⁹²

Few countries on the APB's radar were as affected by these developments as CAR. Officials who had attended the January APB meeting became distracted by other, more pressing crises. State/AF, whose personnel (other than Carson and Wohlers) had never had much enthusiasm for greater US engagement on CAR, went back to paying minimal attention to it. Although APB and sub-APB members would participate in the CAR IPC process and play important roles in the lead-up to the December 2013 response, the Board itself would not meet again on CAR until November.

In the end, CAR remained largely on the backburner. “The APB raised the red flag,” one former official later recalled, “but it never followed up.”⁹³ As a result, the Obama Administration missed a rare opportunity to “prevent [atrocities] well before they get to the point that we have to respond to them,” as Hallman had put it in April 2012.⁹⁴

There were steps that the APB could have taken – or pushed others to take – in the months between its January meeting to discuss what could be done to prevent atrocities in CAR and the Administration's December decision to respond to what by then had become a rapidly metastasizing atrocity crisis.

⁹¹ Several former US officials said that the regional bureaus began to resist before Power's departure, but that they did so far more often after she left.

⁹² Interviews with current and former US officials.

⁹³ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

⁹⁴ White House, “Honoring the Pledge of Never Again: Introduction and Welcome.”

First, although it would have been an extraordinarily heavy lift given the political firestorm around Benghazi, the Board could have pushed State to let Wohlers return to Bangui. The ambassador already was lobbying Carson and other officials to do just that.⁹⁵ Had the APB gotten behind Wohlers in January – when Power was still at the NSS – it might have helped tip the scales. Conditions were then stable enough that Wohlers’ return would not have been the security problem it later would become. Furthermore, Wohlers’s presence in Bangui would have sent a strong signal that the United States was prepared to work with the transitional government to restore stability. Had he been on the ground, he could have pushed Bozizé and Djotodia to abide by the Libreville agreement.

Second, the Board could have pushed the State Department to warn that the United States would impose targeted economic sanctions on Bozizé, Djotodia, or anyone else who failed to adhere to the provisions of the Libreville agreement. Although any effort to freeze US-based assets held by specific individuals would have taken months, a public warning – especially if it had been combined with the announcement that Wohlers was returning to Bangui – could have sent an important message to both sides that the United States was closely watching events. In January 2014, in the midst of the violence surrounding Djotodia’s removal from office, Secretary of State John Kerry issued just such a message, announcing that the United States would “consider targeted sanctions against those who further destabilize the situation, or pursue their own selfish ends by abetting or encouraging the violence.” By that point, however, neither Bozizé nor Djotodia were in a position to control the violence. Taking a similar step a year earlier may have had a much greater impact.⁹⁶

Third, the Board could have pushed State/AF and USAID/AFR (the Africa bureau in the US Agency for International Development) to surge funds to support new programs in CAR. Instead, when Séléka took power in March, the United States suspended all non-humanitarian initiatives, totaling roughly \$5.5 million.⁹⁷ (Funding for Counter-LRA operations in eastern CAR also was

⁹⁵ A few weeks after the APB met, senior State officials did sign off on a week-long trip to Bangui by Brennan Gilmore, Wohlers’s chief deputy. But when Gilmore reported that political conditions in Bangui were “pretty fragile,” as Wohlers later put it, Diplomatic Security immediately shut down any further debate. Wohlers, interview.

⁹⁶ Lesley Wroughton, “U.S. threatens sanctions to curb Central African Republic conflict,” Reuters, January 26, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/27/us-centralafrican-kerry-idUSBREA001C20140127#_jmp0. In May 2014, the United States finally did impose targeted sanctions on Djotodia, Bozizé, and three other individuals. See Executive Order 13667 of May 12, 2014, Blocking Property of Certain Persons Contributing to the Conflict in the Central African Republic, *Federal Register* 79 no. 94 (May 15, 2014): 28387 - 28391, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-05-15/pdf/2014-11442.pdf>.

⁹⁷ The precise amount the United States was spending in CAR at the time of the embassy closure remains unclear. At a March 26, 2013 press briefing, State deputy spokesperson Patrick Ventrell said that non-humanitarian assistance consisted of \$1.5 million that was part of a regional property rights project and \$600,000 that was part of a regional anti-trafficking program. At the April 1, 2013 briefing, Nuland told reporters that the United States was spending \$28.3 million, \$22.8 million of which was for humanitarian relief programs. There also were a small DoD-funded International Military Education and Training (IMET) program (\$100,000) and three embassy-run programs (totaling \$165,000). See Alex Arieff,

put on hold, but resumed shortly thereafter.) Although the lack of an embassy would have made sustaining existing programming more difficult, it would not have been impossible. Nine months later, when conditions were far worse, State and USAID would manage to find \$7.5 million to support “conflict mitigation, reconciliation and peacebuilding, including interreligious peacebuilding efforts and using community radio to amplify peace messages and dispel rumors” and another \$325,000 to build an interfaith network of religious leaders and combat gender-based violence.⁹⁸ Had such programs been funded earlier in the year, they could have sent a signal to both sides that the United States was committed to the Libreville process and perhaps helped mitigate the growing violence.⁹⁹

Fourth, the Board could have pushed for greater US engagement with other key actors. Prior to September 2013, Wohlers was the only senior US official raising CAR in meetings with France, Chad, and ECCAS.¹⁰⁰ Other US officials were not pushing the United Nations to reinforce MICOPAX or urging France (or other parties) to send troops to support the regional force. Although it is unlikely that the Board could have convinced the President to order the Pentagon to airlift troops prior to December, it could have pushed State and the Pentagon to reallocate funds to provide non-lethal equipment, training, and logistics support to MICOPAX – another step that the US would take after the crisis had spun out of control.

Fifth, the Board could have worked more closely with the CAR IPC. The APB had successfully pushed for the IPC’s establishment, but did not engage it consistently until the following November.¹⁰¹ In fairness, Pomper’s team did track events – and did check in regularly with their counterparts in the NSS Africa directorate – but as far as is known, there was never a joint meeting in the ten months between January and December.

Had the Board pushed the interagency to implement these kinds of measures, stronger US action might have helped slow or stop CAR’s disintegration. In addition, it would have acted in a manner

“Crisis in the Central African Republic,” Congressional Research Service, May 14, 2014, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43377.pdf>, 9; State OIG Report, 7; State DPB, March 26, 2013; and State DPB April 1, 2013.

⁹⁸ White House, “FACT SHEET: U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic,” December 19, 2013, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/19/fact-sheet-us-assistance-central-african-republic>.

⁹⁹ That said, earlier action would likely have faced fierce bureaucratic resistance from State/AF and USAID/AFR, as it would have required them to find the money from their own funds. Nine months later, the money came not from the two bureaus (which continued to resist investing in CAR) but from the Complex Crises Fund and Human Rights Fund. See White House, “U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic.”

¹⁰⁰ Immediately after his evacuation, Wohlers stayed in Yaoundé, Cameroon for several weeks in the hope that conditions in Bangui would improve sufficiently to permit his return. During that time, he was regularly on his cell phone to key players inside and outside the region. He also represented the United States at the Libreville summit in early January, where he engaged with UN, French, Chadian, ECCAS, and other regional leaders. Wohlers, interview.

¹⁰¹ Current and former officials interviewed for this report disagree on how many times the CAR IPC met in the period between January and November 2013. Wohlers recalls attending only one IPC prior to his retirement in August 2013. The sub-IPC met much more regularly.

consistent with Power's vision of using "every tool in the toolbox" to prevent crises from spinning out of control.¹⁰² In fact, the Board would later utilize almost every one of these tools in responding to the November-December 2013 crisis.

But prior to November 2013, there was no sense of urgency among senior officials at the White House or in key agencies. As one official later put it, "We could have planned more and planned better . . . but it's certainly not clear we could have convinced anyone [more senior] to do anything earlier than we did."¹⁰³ Whether or not that was the case, the reality is that pushing for more effective action in the face of bureaucratic resistance and senior-level disinterest is exactly what the Board was created to do. Why it chose not to do so in CAR remains unclear.

NOT JUST CONCERNED, BUT DEEPLY CONCERNED

When rebels or coup leaders in small sub-Saharan African states come to power, US public statements follow a standard playbook. State Department spokespersons announce that the United States is "concerned." They urge those responsible to step down and restore some form of civilian rule, deplore any loss of life, and call on all parties to respect human rights. They often announce that the United States is suspending military and other forms of non-humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁴

After Séléka took Bangui in March 2013, State officials did not deviate from this script. In the days following Bozizé's overthrow, the Department issued several statements that the United States was "deeply concerned" about the deterioration in the security situation.¹⁰⁵ Department spokespersons condemned Séléka's "illegitimate seizure of power," called on the rebels to honor the Libreville agreement, and urged them "to establish law and order" and "restore basic services."¹⁰⁶ Shortly thereafter, the Department announced that it was reviewing existing funding but that it had no plans to suspend humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁷ These declarations had little impact in CAR, as there was no one on the ground to transmit or reinforce the message. In addition, there is no evidence that senior officials at State or the White House attempted to contact Bozizé or Djotodia directly.

¹⁰² Power, "Remarks at Politico's Women Rule Event," See also her comments in White House, "Honoring the Pledge of Never Again: Introduction and Welcome."

¹⁰³ Interview with US government official, May 2015.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, State, "Situation in Mali," March 22, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/03/186633.htm>; State, "Military Violence in Guinea-Bissau," April 14, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/04/187911.htm>; and State, "U.S. Calls on Military to Transfer Power to Civilian Authorities [in Burkina Faso]," November 1, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/11/233622.htm>. All three follow a similar template.

¹⁰⁵ State, "Deteriorating Situation in the Central African Republic," March 24, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/03/206596.htm>. See also State DPB, March 25, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/03/206637.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ State DPB, March 26, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/03/206703.htm>; State, "Deteriorating Situation in the Central African Republic."

¹⁰⁷ State DPB, April 1, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/04/206949.htm>.

When Carson retired in April, those working to draw greater attention to the crisis lost the only senior State/AF official who shared their concerns. “It was very hard to get any attention once Johnnie left,” Wohlers later recalled. “Department-wide, people were saying, ‘We have no interest in CAR, we have no embassy or USAID mission there, so we shouldn’t put in any money.’ That was a constant refrain. . . . I reiterated to them that we already were spending more money than they realized and warned if things got worse, we’d be spending a lot more.” Throughout the spring and summer, however, State continued to resist making CAR a higher priority. Wohlers was frustrated, but understood the argument. “State/AF had a full slate of other crises on their plate and the French weren’t then interested in intervening. It would have been surprising if they had taken a strong, proactive stance.”¹⁰⁸

In August, Wohlers retired from the foreign service. After he left, David Brown, a career foreign service officer, was named Senior Advisor. Although Brown would prove to be a strong advocate for CAR, he did not have ambassadorial rank. In addition, Maria Otero, who as Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights was the State Department’s representative to the APB, had departed in February. Her successor would not be confirmed by the Senate until a year later. In the interim, there was no single senior official or office responsible for tracking atrocity prevention; State’s seat at the APB was usually taken by Stephen Rapp, the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice. When he was traveling, Victoria Holt, a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, would sit in. Although both Rapp and Holt were widely respected and deeply dedicated to the cause of atrocity prevention, they did not have the seniority to force a recalcitrant regional bureau to change course.

It was a perfect storm: no embassy, no ambassador, and no senior State official or office pushing the atrocity prevention agenda. Rapp, Holt, and Brown did their best, as did mid-level and junior officials. But with no one with sufficient authority to raise the red flag, State officials were, as Wohlers later put it, “happy to keep thinking that CAR was France’s problem.”¹⁰⁹

The French, however, had for the most part disengaged, deferring to ECCAS, the regional organization that had brokered the Libreville power-sharing agreement. The problem was that ECCAS’s leaders did not necessarily have CAR’s best interests in mind. Several of the region’s rulers – particularly Chadian President Idriss Déby – operated as kingmakers as often as they did peacekeepers. Ten years after backing Bozizé’s rise to power, Déby had withdrawn his support;

¹⁰⁸ Wohlers, interview.

¹⁰⁹ Wohlers, interview.

many inside and outside CAR believed that he was now behind Séléka.¹¹⁰ Other ECCAS leaders appeared to have little appetite for propping up Bozizé even as they deployed troops to MICOPAX, the ECCAS peacekeeping force. Although Bozizé's fellow heads of state had brokered the January peace agreement that kept him in power, they treated him shabbily during the meeting and then refused to reengage after he failed to honor the terms of the deal.¹¹¹ When Séléka resumed its march on Bangui, Chadian and other MICOPAX units north of the capital stepped aside.¹¹²

MICOPAX also was part of the problem. It had no mandate to protect civilians. It never had sufficient forces and rarely deployed outside of Bangui. Most units did not have the training, equipment, or experience to conduct effective peacekeeping operations in non-permissive environments. Although some of contingents did perform bravely, others retreated to their compounds whenever serious violence broke out. Many soldiers were corrupt. Some had committed war crimes. Its Chadian contingents were viewed by Christians as pro-Séléka and unreliable.¹¹³

In theory, the United States should have been well-positioned to strengthen MICOPAX. Since 2002, the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) program had worked to strengthen the capacity of African units to conduct peacekeeping operations. In its first ten years, ACOTA trained 215,000 peacekeepers in 238 contingent units from 25 countries.¹¹⁴ Given

¹¹⁰ See, for example, John Irish and Daniel Flynn, "Chad emerges as African power broker as France steps back," Reuters, May 8, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-chad-idUSBRE94707C20130508>.

¹¹¹ Wohlers represented the United States at the Libreville summit. He said that Bozizé was "just flattened" and "devastated" by the way his fellow heads of state were treating him. Wohlers, interview.

¹¹² For more on ECCAS, MICOPAX, Chad, and peacekeeping politics, see Cinq-Mars, 12-15; Lombard and Carayannis, "Making Sense of CAR"; Nathaniel Olin, "Pathologies of Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding in CAR," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, 194-218; and Irish and Flynn, "Chad Emerges." One force did try to stop Séléka's march south: a small contingent of South African National Defense Force (SANDF) soldiers deployed to CAR by South African President Jacob Zuma in response to a request from Bozizé. On March 23, roughly 3,000 Séléka attacked a SANDF force of about 200. Thirteen SANDF soldiers died; the South African government withdrew its remaining troops shortly thereafter. See SABC Digital, "Thirteen SANDF soldiers were killed when rebels overran the capital on Saturday," March 25, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIR2J_xdGCE; Christopher Torchia, "Hard questions for South Africa over CAR battle," The Associated Press via Yahoo News, March 27, 2013, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/hard-questions-south-africa-over-car-battle-112238481.html>; and AFP, "Call for probe into S. Africa military presence in C. Africa," *Daily Nation* [Kenya], March 27, 2013, <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/africa/Call-for-probe-into-SAfrica-military-presence-in-CAfrica/-/1066/1731580/-/qrlmxoz/-/index.html>.

¹¹³ Cinq-Mars, 9, 13-14.

¹¹⁴ ACOTA was originally called the Africa Crisis Response Initiative. It is managed by State, which works closely with DoD and US Africa Command (USAFRICOM). According to a USAFRICOM fact sheet, ACOTA-trained units served with MICOPAX and two of its predecessors, but I was not able to confirm that with State or DoD officials. ACOTA-trained units did serve in subsequent African Union (AU) and UN operations. See USAFRICOM, "ACOTA – Africa Contingency Operations and Training Assistance," <http://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/security-cooperation-programs/acota-africa-contingency-operations-training-and-assistance>; USAFRICOM, "Fact Sheet: ACOTA," October 2012, <http://www.africom.mil/Doc/9836>; and State, "Africa Contingency Operations and Training Assistance (ACOTA) Program," February 6, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/02/203841.htm>. In his study of US support for peacekeeping in Africa, Paul D. Williams identifies thirty countries whose forces have received ACOTA training. Paul D. Williams, *Enhancing U.S. Support for Peace Operations in Africa*, Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 73,

that Gabon and Cameroon were the only countries in MICOPAX whose forces participated in ACOTA – and that only 1,123 of their troops received training – it is unlikely that US-trained personnel ever participated in MICOPAX operations.¹¹⁵

As far as is known, State and DoD officials never encouraged other ACOTA partners to join the ECCAS force. There are several possible reasons why. The first, as noted above, was a lack of interest. US officials simply didn't see CAR as their concern. The second was resources. The FY 2013 budget for the Global Peace Operations Initiative (of which ACOTA is a part) was \$75 million; since 2009, its total funding had been cut by one-third.¹¹⁶ The third was prioritization. The majority of ACOTA training supports nine partner militaries, none of which had deployed troops to CAR.¹¹⁷ In addition, it is likely that US officials regarded other AU and UN peacekeeping missions – particularly those in Somalia, Mali, Sudan (Darfur), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – as more important.

That said, additional ACOTA support would not have been a panacea for what ailed MICOPAX. ACOTA trainings are quite brief, usually cover only the basics, and are often taught by private contractors. As one Pentagon official later acknowledged, “pre-deployment training isn't everything. When you go in and train a battalion for ten weeks, they don't exactly turn into the [US Army] Rangers.”¹¹⁸ There were other challenges as well. By law, ACOTA can provide training only to those units that pass human rights vetting. On several previous occasions, the AU had identified units to serve in other operations, sought US training, and only then found out that they were ineligible for US support due to concerns raised during the vetting process.¹¹⁹

The period between January and September 2013 represented the best opportunity for the international community to take forceful action to stop Séléka's attacks on civilians. Unfortunately, it was US policy throughout that period to defer to France, which had publicly disengaged from CAR, and to ECCAS, whose leaders were unwilling to back the sitting government and whose peacekeeping forces couldn't keep the peace. Given that MICOPAX did not have the capacity to stop a determined force like Séléka, the APB and CAR IPC should have

May 2015, 18-20. Report accessible via <http://www.cfr.org/peacekeeping/enhancing-us-support-peace-operations-africa/p36530>.

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Peace Operations*. See also Paul D. Williams, “Four questions – and answers – about U.S. support of peacekeeping in Africa,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/15/four-questions-and-answers-about-u-s-support-of-peacekeeping-in-africa/>.

¹¹⁶ State, “Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 2: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2013,” 144. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/185014.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ Williams, “Four Questions.”

¹¹⁸ Interview with US official, May 2015.

¹¹⁹ Williams, *Peace Operations*, 18-20, 31n33, 32n36.

been pushing senior officials to pursue alternatives such as an AU or UN operation – or at the very least to support using ACOTA to surge additional training and materiel to the existing force. Instead, US officials continued to regard ECCAS – and by extension MICOPAX – as the only option. As one official later acknowledged, “I think we put too much stock in ECCAS. You do need the region to engage, but what if they fail?”¹²⁰ Left unasked was whether “the region” was in fact part of the problem.

"THE WORST CRISIS MOST PEOPLE HAVE NEVER HEARD OF"

Meanwhile in CAR, conditions had continued to deteriorate since Séléka had taken power and anti-balaka militias had started to fight back. An already bad situation got even worse in September after Djotodia announced that he was disbanding Séléka. Whatever little command and control he had vanished overnight. Freelance units mounted new attacks, killing hundreds along the way. Residents of Bangui and other towns increasingly lived in what the UN office in Bangui described as a “climate of terror.”¹²¹

The initial State Department response to Djotodia’s announcement was consistent with its previous statements. At the September 17 daily press briefing, spokesperson Jen Psaki said that the United States was “gravely concerned about the recent upsurge in violence,” “welcome[d]” Djotodia’s decree disbanding Séléka, and urged that the “rebels” be held accountable.¹²² Once again, the lack of an embassy led to a poor understanding of conditions on the ground. The United States was calling on a self-proclaimed President (whom the United States had never recognized) to bring to justice his own forces, over whom he had no control. There appeared to be no recognition of the dynamics of civil conflict, much less the growing risk of atrocities.

With senior officials in State/AF only minimally engaged, it was left to a small, informal group of mid-level and junior staff to take the lead.¹²³ Sometime in the late summer or early fall, they began to phone and email each other on a regular basis. In addition to tracking the growing chaos, the group discussed what the United States could do should senior leaders engage. “We had been doing our homework,” one later said.¹²⁴ “A lot of people worked really hard to make [the US response in CAR] happen,” another official recalled. “Samantha [Power] clearly made a difference, but she isn’t even remotely the whole story.”¹²⁵ As conditions deteriorated, the group’s efforts would drive much of the agenda.

¹²⁰ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹²¹ United Nations, “BINUCA gravely concerned by recent escalation of violence,” August 28, 2013, <http://binuca.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=0FmbSMacy5U%3d&tabid=5212&mid=8718&language=en-US>.

¹²² State DPB, September 17, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/09/214307.htm>.

¹²³ The story of the role of the informal group is based on interviews with current and former US officials as well as NGO representatives. To be clear, they never thought of themselves as a structured group.

¹²⁴ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹²⁵ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

They found an ally in Power, who was now US Ambassador to the United Nations (USUN). Sometime after arriving in New York in August, she had met with Charles Doubane, CAR's Ambassador to the UN. As she later told *The New Yorker*, his account of events "sounded so much like Bosnia and Rwanda before the genocides. . . . The sirens went off."¹²⁶ By late September, she was calling CAR "the worst crisis most people have never heard of."¹²⁷ As one mid-level official later put it, "We needed someone senior to care [about CAR] and she was the one."¹²⁸ Power asked Edgar Kagan, the Deputy Director of USUN's DC Office, to serve as her point person. In the coming months, he worked closely with members of the informal group.¹²⁹

Around the same time, human rights and humanitarian NGOs also began to push for greater US action.¹³⁰ In mid-September, Mike Jobbins of Search for Common Ground, one of the few groups still operating in CAR, worked with the National Endowment for Democracy to promote a panel discussion featuring Central African civil society representatives. Wohlers, now retired, served as moderator. As both he and the CAR NGO leaders described the growing violence, many of the NGOs in the room began to wonder what more they could be doing. "It was a 'holy shit' moment," one NGO representative later recalled. "We recognized that we needed to get our act together."¹³¹

Jobbins would later admit that at first, he wasn't quite sure what to do. His background was in designing programs in the field, not organizing advocacy campaigns. "I didn't even know what the APB was," he said.¹³² He reached out to Madeline Rose at the Friends Committee for National Legislation, who had an extensive network of contacts inside the Administration and on Capitol Hill. Rose organized a conference call for members of the Prevention and Protection Working Group (PPWG), a loose coalition of NGOs working on atrocity prevention. "We can play a critical role here," she told those on the call. "This is an opportunity to activate in real time the very structures and policies we've been lobbying for over the past five years." Others agreed. "This is precisely what they [the APB] were created to do," one said. "We need to push them to [be] accountable in real time."¹³³

¹²⁶ Osnos, "In the Land of the Possible," 97. It is not clear exactly when the meeting with Doubane took place.

¹²⁷ US Mission to the United Nations (USUN), "Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the EU/OCHA Ministerial Breakfast on the Central African Republic," September 25, 2013, <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/5805>.

¹²⁸ Interview with US official, June 2015

¹²⁹ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

¹³⁰ This account of the CAR NGO coalition's advocacy and engagement is based on interviews with NGO representatives. Some spoke on background in order to speak frankly about the Administration's efforts. Their views do not necessarily reflect those of their organizations.

¹³¹ Interview with NGO official, May 2015.

¹³² Mike Jobbins, interview with the author, June 2015.

¹³³ A transcript of the conference call was provided to the author by an NGO official and later confirmed by Rose.

As Jobbins put together a plan of action, Rose started working the phones. After one of her contacts told her that US officials hadn't had any reliable sources of information since the embassy closed, she started sending out regular compendiums of NGO and press reporting. More than one official later said that her emails were an essential resource at a time when there was only limited information through official channels. Rose's efforts weren't reciprocated, however. NGO leaders were finding it difficult to get US officials to tell them anything.¹³⁴

Members of the informal USG team were frustrated as well. They were pushing for greater attention, but they couldn't get any traction.¹³⁵ Power was the only senior official focused on the issue. Other than David Brown, there was little appetite in State/AF or USAID/AF for engagement. The Africa specialists "told us they were never going to make CAR a priority," one member of the group later recalled. "If we wanted to make prevention and response a thing, fine, but they were never going to make this a long-term priority."¹³⁶ It certainly wasn't lost on the NGOs that Brown was the only person from State/AF showing up at their meetings. "There was no internal locus of Africa people at State who cared," Jobbins later said. "Human rights and APB people cared, but it seemed like they didn't have the ability to move the needle."¹³⁷

On October 23, the NGOs met with members of the informal CAR group at an office near the White House. The room was packed. Jobbins and other activists warned officials that CAR was at genuine risk of mass atrocities. The United States needed a comprehensive strategy and it needed to move rapidly and decisively to protect civilians and de-escalate the conflict. Then the NGOs made their big ask: Would the United States support French efforts to pass a Security Council resolution authorizing deployment of a UN peacekeeping operation?¹³⁸

In response, US officials emphasized that a UN force was a non-starter.¹³⁹ Those higher up the chain – including Power – weren't ready to consider UN involvement; NGO advocacy wasn't about to change their calculus. As the meeting progressed, it became clear that the two sides, although equally committed to finding a way forward, were talking past each other. "I remember feeling sympathetic," one activist later said. "It was obvious that they were trying to do the right thing. It wasn't like they were ignoring our concerns. But it was clear that they weren't going to

¹³⁴ Madeline Rose, email exchange with the author, November 2015; Jobbins, interview; and interviews with former and current US officials.

¹³⁵ Jobbins, interview, and Rose, email exchange.

¹³⁶ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹³⁷ Jobbins, interview.

¹³⁸ Jobbins, interview; Rose, email exchange; interviews with additional NGO representatives and current and former US officials. As Jobbins later noted, not all the NGOs present supported asking the US to support a UN force. "There was a big ask for [a UN peacekeeping operation] . . . but it wasn't a unified NGO position." NGOs also raised other concerns, including increased humanitarian assistance and reopening the American embassy, but the main topic was peacekeeping.

¹³⁹ Jobbins, interview; Rose, email exchange.

change their bosses' minds. That's the problem with advocacy – you're trying to get the USG to do the right thing, but feel like you're bitching at the very people who care the most."¹⁴⁰

For their part, US officials were increasingly frustrated with what they saw as the NGOs' obsession with peacekeeping. "The NGOs were very shortsighted," one official later remembered. "There's this embedded assumption that a peacekeeping force is the gold standard. Send in the peacekeepers and it will solve everything. But it doesn't always work out that way. In the end, how has it worked out? Were the French, with the mandate they had, any better than MICOPAX?"¹⁴¹

The following week, the NGOs decided to go public but avoided direct criticism of the USG. In an open letter dated October 31, an ad hoc coalition of twelve groups warned that CAR had reached a tipping point. The country was "sliding into anarchy," including "large-scale interreligious and intercommunal violence." The groups called on the international community to "act swiftly to prevent atrocities and ensure civilian protection," "expand its presence in the country," and allocate sufficient resources to address the growing humanitarian crisis.¹⁴² Another two weeks would pass before the groups would call for direct US action.

THE G-WORD

In the meantime, the French had reengaged. In a September address to the UN General Assembly, French President François Hollande warned that "chaos [has] now taken hold" in CAR.¹⁴³ Less than nine months after refusing to save Bozizé, Hollande was now calling on the Security Council to give MISCA – a new African Union (AU) peacekeeping force scheduled to take over from MICOPAX in December – the mandate (and logistical and financial support) it would need to try to restore stability.¹⁴⁴

Shortly thereafter, the French moved from pushing for a stronger mandate for MISCA to urging the Security Council to authorize a UN operation. US officials thought the proposal premature. The AU had been working since July to prepare for MISCA to take over from MICOPAX, and many African states wanted the opportunity to demonstrate that the AU could do a credible job. Standing up a UN mission would take more time – and cost more money. On October 10, the

¹⁴⁰ Interview with NGO representative, June 2015.

¹⁴¹ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹⁴² PPWG, "Mass Violence and Imminent Threat to Civilians in Central African Republic," October 31, 2013, <http://fcnl.org/images/issues/ppdc/CAR-CoalitionPressRelease-Final.pdf>.

¹⁴³ François Hollande, Speech to the United Nations General Assembly, 68th Session, September 24, 2013, http://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/FR_en.pdf.

¹⁴⁴ MISCA stands for *Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique*.

Security Council adopted a revised French resolution that did not call for a UN force but left open the possibility of one in the future.¹⁴⁵

It did not take long for the French to renew their push. In the weeks following the resolution, conditions on the ground continued to deteriorate. Press and NGO reports were highlighting the cycle of attacks and counter-attacks by Séléka and the anti-balaka. On November 1, Gérard Araud, the French ambassador to the UN, invited Adama Dieng to speak at an informal Security Council briefing on CAR. Dieng, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, was very worried about what was happening in CAR. He made it clear to Security Council members that the growing crisis could easily spin out of control.

Speaking to reporters after the briefing, Dieng warned that "armed groups [were] killing people under the guise of their religion. My feeling is that this will end with Christian communities, Muslim communities killing each other. . . . If we don't act now and decisively I will not exclude the possibility of a genocide." When asked what it would take to stop the crisis, Dieng said that "African forces will not be sufficient. . . . The country has been totally destroyed. There is total chaos."¹⁴⁶

Suddenly, CAR was a major story. Press reports quoted Dieng's warning but not his careful qualifier. His genuine – and entirely legitimate – concerns about the escalating violence were obscured by his use of the G-word. Conditions on the ground hadn't really changed, but everyone now spoke as if they had. NGOs – including the PPWG – immediately incorporated Dieng's statement into their talking points. So too did the French. When Araud took his turn at the microphone, he said that it would take between 8,000 and 12,000 troops to stop the killing – a figure that he (and everyone else) knew was well beyond the capacity of the AU to deploy, equip, and sustain.¹⁴⁷

But if Araud thought Dieng's warning would be enough to get US officials to agree to UN peacekeepers, he had miscalculated. American diplomats continued to argue that the best course of action was to support MISCA. To that end, the State Department had identified roughly \$40 million that could be reallocated to provide non-lethal equipment, ACOTA training, and logistics planning to the AU force. In mid-November, Power was dispatched to Capitol Hill to meet with

¹⁴⁵ Rick Gladstone, "France Moves to Shore Up African State in Turmoil," *New York Times*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/world/africa/france-central-african-republic.html>; UNSC Resolution 2121, October 10, 2013, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2121\(2013\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2121(2013)).

¹⁴⁶ Michelle Nichols, "U.N. officials see risk of genocide in Central African Republic," Reuters, November 1, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/01/us-centralafrica-un-idUSBRE9A00Y120131101> and France 24, "UN warns Central African Republic at risk of 'genocide,'" November 2, 2013, http://www.france24.com/en/car-central-african-republic-seleka-genocide-united-nations-peacekeeping/#_jmp0.

¹⁴⁷ Nichols, "UN officials."

Congressional appropriators and secure their support.¹⁴⁸ On November 20, a statement attributed to Secretary of State Kerry announced the disbursement. “We believe that MISCA is the best mechanism to help quickly address the ongoing violence in the CAR and prevent further atrocities,” Kerry said. “MISCA is also in the best position to help establish an environment that allows for the provision of humanitarian assistance and an eventual political transition to a democratically elected government.”¹⁴⁹

Two days later, Robert Jackson, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, made sure that the French got the message, telling France 24 that “MISCA [is] the best way to restore security. We need to reinforce [MICOPAX] . . . and augment [it] with other African troops.”¹⁵⁰ Power would make the same point a bit more emphatically during an early December press stakeout. “What matters right now to the civilians whose lives are hanging in the balance is . . . not the color of the helmet of those tasked to protect them,” she said, “[but] . . . whether the troops there . . . [can] protect civilians [and] restore security.”¹⁵¹

Jackson and Power had a point. If the French thought CAR was a genocide, why not pursue the course most likely to get additional peacekeepers on the ground quickly? Given the 8,000 to 12,000 troops that Araud was insisting were necessary, it might take months to find countries willing to contribute troops to a UN force – and months longer to get the force up and running, especially given CAR’s remote location, poor roads, and sole functioning runway. In addition, most troop contributing countries already were overstretched: governments weren’t exactly lining up to send battalions to CAR. Wouldn’t it make more sense to find ways to strengthen MISCA now and *then* look at the question of a UN force?

For their part, the French believed that MISCA – even with US support – would never have the capacity to stop the violence. They were not alone in this view. Most of the AU contingent was going to be re-helmeted MICOPAX units, almost all of which already had either demonstrated their incompetence or (in the case of the Chadian forces) taken sides. As one observer of Council politics later noted, “By the spring of 2013, *everyone* at the Council knew that MICOPAX couldn’t do the job. . . . And a lot of [Council] members knew from the beginning that the AU wouldn’t be able to do it [either].”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Power’s trip to Capitol Hill was recounted in a December 2013 email to PPWG members, shared with author.

¹⁴⁹ State, “Support for the African Union International Support Mission in the Central African Republic,” November 20, 2013 <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217822.htm>.

¹⁵⁰ France 24, “Central African Republic in Crisis,” (video), November 22, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20131121-africa-news-denis-mukwege-joseph-kony-drc-state-department-robert-jackson/>, transcribed by author.

¹⁵¹ UN peacekeeping forces wear baby-blue-colored helmets to distinguish them from national or regional “green-helmeted” forces. USUN, “Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power at a Security Council Stakeout on the Central African Republic,” December 5, 2013, <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/218372.htm>.

¹⁵² Interview with NGO representative, June 2015.

At the time, both French officials and NGO representatives suggested that there was another reason for US opposition to a UN force: money. Their claim was not without merit. Yes, the Administration had just pledged \$40 million to support MISCA, but a blue-helmeted operation would cost the USG much more. The US share of the UN peacekeeping budget is 28.4 percent; even a small UN mission would leave the United States on the hook for hundreds of millions of dollars. Given that State's peacekeeping operations budget did not have anywhere near that amount for a new mission, and given that the Administration had just emerged from yet another bruising budget fight with Congress, the White House was not going to consider a UN force until all other options were exhausted.

But money wasn't the only issue. For all of the talk in the State Department that CAR was France's problem, many other US officials didn't trust the French to commit sufficient troops to stop the violence. The Obama Administration knew the French already were planning to deploy roughly 1,000 soldiers to supplement the small contingent currently guarding M'Poko International Airport and their embassy. US officials noted the discrepancy between Araud's talk of a large peacekeeping force and what his own government was doing. "Our attitude was, 'this is your baby and you need to do more than just protect the airport,'" one official later recalled.¹⁵³

Furthermore, US concerns about bad French behavior were not unfounded. In January 2013, French and US officials had clashed over the size of a French force deploying to Mali, the kind of assistance the United States would provide it, and who would pay for it. When Pentagon officials had told French counterparts that they would have to reimburse the United States for the cost of airlifting their forces, the French had taken the disagreement to the press, forcing US officials to announce they would not ask the French to foot the bill.¹⁵⁴ Memories of that dispute now influenced US thinking on CAR. "No, we didn't have \$400 million sitting around for peacekeeping, so yes, money was a concern," one official later said. "But the bigger issue was that we believed that the French wanted to get out ASAP and stick us with the bill."¹⁵⁵ Another official agreed. "They [wanted to do] just enough to look like they were doing something but not enough to discourage the UN from taking over."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Interview with US official, May 2015.

¹⁵⁴ David Gauthier-Villars and Adam Entous, "After French Criticism, Washington Drops Payment Demands," *Wall Street Journal*, January 20, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323301104578253824061131556>; Anne Gearan and Craig Whitlock, "Panetta 'confident' that US will clear legal hurdles to help France in Mali," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/mali-asked-us-for-military-aid-last-week-state-dept-official-says/2013/01/16/09b9f808-600c-11e2-b05a-605528f6b712_story.html; and Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes, and Drew Hinshaw, "Mali Exposes Flaws in West's Security Plans," *Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323301104578257943691567614>.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with US official, May 2015.

On November 25, the Security Council met again. Deputy Secretary General Jan Eliasson warned that CAR was “descending into complete chaos before our eyes.”¹⁵⁷ Still the Council did not act. Although the French would continue to push for a UN force in the coming weeks, they already had decided to move ahead with their own deployment. On November 26, Hollande announced that France would send 1,000 additional troops to CAR.¹⁵⁸ They began to arrive on December 2.¹⁵⁹

Although France deserves great credit for acting when it did, the troops it sent were only a fraction of what Araud himself had said was necessary. The reasons for this had nothing to do with the crisis in CAR and everything to do with domestic French politics. Hollande decided to send French forces to CAR despite considerable opposition at home. To prevent a political firestorm, he promised to limit both the size and duration of the deployment. To reinforce the point, the French named their mission *Opération Sangaris*, after a short-lived butterfly species found in Central Africa. The French push for a UN force therefore was not only a principled response to a potential genocide but also an exit strategy. And if the Security Council didn’t authorize a UN mission soon, the French likely would be stuck for a lot longer than Hollande had pledged.¹⁶⁰

The multiple statements by Hollande and members of his foreign policy team that *Sangaris* would be short-lived did nothing to reassure the Obama Administration. US officials appreciated the fact that the French “were willing to put their guys on the ground when nobody else was,” as one official later acknowledged, but they continued to worry that a premature French departure would seriously undermine MISCA’s limited capacity to end the growing violence.¹⁶¹

US officials weren’t willing to say it publicly, but they also knew that, for all their talk about MISCA being the only game in town, the AU did not have the troops or the training it needed to

¹⁵⁷ United Nations, “Deputy Secretary-General’s Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Central African Republic,” November 25, 2013, http://www.un.org/sg/dsg/statements/index.asp?nid=471#_jmp0.

¹⁵⁸ David Smith, “France to send 1,000 more troops to Central African Republic,” *Guardian*, November 26, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/26/france-1000-troops-central-african-republic>.

¹⁵⁹ Mike Pflanz, “France sends troops to Central African Republic,” *The Telegraph*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/centralafricanrepublic/10489936/France-sends-troops-to-Central-African-Republic.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, “France to send 1,000 more troops”; Kim Willsher and Andrew Sparrow, “French troops sent into [CAR] in effort to stop bloodshed,” *Guardian*, December 6, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/06/france-troops-central-african-republic-hollande-bangui>; Sara Miller Llana, “A brief French intervention in the Central African Republic? Maybe not,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 10, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Reality-Check/2013/1210/A-brief-French-intervention-in-the-Central-African-Republic-Maybe-not.-video>; John Irish and Daniel Flynn, “French Intervention in [CAR] May Prove Radically Different Than Mali Mission,” *The World Post*, December 9, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/09/french-army-central-african-republic_n_4411721.html; France 24, “France boosts troop levels to quell violence in CAR,” December 7, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20131206-france-military-violence-central-african-republic>; Rory Mulholland, “Central African Republic: Europe and UN ‘to foot bill’ for French intervention, says Hollande,” *Telegraph* (UK), December 8, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/centralafricanrepublic/10503953/Central-African-Republic-Europe-and-UN-to-foot-bill-for-French-intervention-says-Hollande.html>.

¹⁶¹ Interview with US official, June 2015.

stop the violence. MICOPAX “was a mess,” one former US official later said. “We needed to take steps to make sure that MISCA could do the job before we could even start thinking about a larger UN peacekeeping operation.”¹⁶² The Administration began to reach out to other African states – particularly those with units that had received ACOTA training – to urge them to contribute their own troops. Until additional forces could be found – and even afterwards – the United States needed French forces to stay put. Until the French committed to doing so, US officials were unlikely to support a transition to a UN-led operation.

The French-US disagreement was not yet resolved when, on December 5, the Security Council finally voted to give French and AU forces a Chapter VII mandate to protect civilians and restore order. The Council did not authorize a UN operation, but as a concession to the French, it instructed the Secretary-General to make recommendations on what it would take to deploy one.¹⁶³

That same day, anti-balaka militias launched a coordinated attack against Séléka positions in Bangui. Séléka fighters responded with a series of savage reprisals in Christian neighborhoods. Over the next several days, at least one thousand civilians – mostly Christians – were killed, and tens of thousands more fled to the muddy fields surrounding the airport. By the end of the month, more than 100,000 people were living in a sprawling makeshift camp surrounding the airport’s runways. Thousands of Muslims also fled their homes, many into the bush. To many observers, it looked like Dieng’s worst fears were becoming a reality.¹⁶⁴

DELIVERABLES AND DECISIONS

As conditions in CAR deteriorated, both the informal group of mid-level officials and their NGO counterparts began to ramp up their efforts. In early November, Jobbins, Rose, and other members of PPWG pushed their USG contacts to take action, but found them reluctant to share what steps the United States was considering. On November 13, the heads of eight NGOs sent a private letter to National Security Advisor Susan Rice, urging the APB “to use its convening and policy making power to spur board action across the interagency. . . . Mobilizing the interagency to act swiftly and with coordination in response to ‘red flags’ . . . is precisely what the [APB] was established to do.”¹⁶⁵ Reportedly, Rice did not react well to the letter. A senior NSS official later told NGO

¹⁶² Interview with former US official, May 2015.

¹⁶³ UN Security Council, Resolution 2127 (2013), December 5, 2013, <http://www.globalr2p.org/media/files/resolution-2127-car.pdf>.

¹⁶⁴ The fact that the anti-balaka staged its attack just hours before the UN vote probably was not a coincidence. For more on the attacks and reprisals, see Adam Nossiter and Somni Sengupta, “Clashes Erupt in the Central African Republic,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/06/world/africa/central-african-republic-fighting.html?_r=0; David Smith and Kim Willsher, “Clashes in Central African Republic as UN authorizes French intervention,” *Guardian*, December 5, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/05/central-african-republic-un-vote-french>; and Krista Larson, “Clashes sweep Central African Republic capital,” Associated Press, December 5, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/clashes-sweep-central-africa-republic-capital-214731746.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Diane Randall, John Prendergast, Mark Schneider, Michael Poffenberger, David Abramowitz, Tom Andrews, Ben Keeseey, and Andrea Koppel to Susan Rice, November 13, 2013. Copy provided to author.

leaders that they should spend less time pushing the APB to act and more time lobbying State/AF.¹⁶⁶

Officials may not have been ready to tell the NGOs what they were doing, but by the time the letter hit Rice's inbox, the informal group of mid-level officials already were working to increase US support. In addition to the \$40 million announced on November 20, the CAR team had been developing what one member later called a "checklist" of other potential actions, including additional funds for humanitarian assistance, support for in-country peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, and – most importantly – funds and authorization to airlift additional AU forces.¹⁶⁷ "We had a good sense of what was needed," one member of the team later remembered. "It's not like we woke up in November and said, 'What we are going to do?' We had had the checklist."¹⁶⁸ The team also took advantage of Power's interest in traveling to Bangui. "She was insistent that we have deliverables before the trip," another official said.¹⁶⁹

The biggest question was finding the funds to support the operation. The Obama Administration had just emerged from a series of bruising budget battles that had culminated in a two-week government shutdown. This was not the ideal time to find money to support a new peacekeeping operation in a far-off country about which Americans knew almost nothing. "My number one memory of those debates was that they were resource-oriented," one former official later said. "Some people felt that CAR was the kind of operation you had to think about long and hard before committing already limited resources. The question for everybody was, 'What do you want to rob for this?' We all agreed that it was the right thing to do. But we had to find creative ways to make it happen within [the current] budget constraints."¹⁷⁰ Another official recalled that the central question was finding "the most practical way to mobilize funding . . . The [memos] started flying."¹⁷¹

Another question was whether the United States would be able to identify African governments willing to send troops. Only a few countries had battalions with sufficient training, equipment, and capacity to deploy quickly. Discussions within State and DoD quickly homed in on Burundi, whose ACOTA-trained soldiers had served in Somalia. In addition, a US Marine task force already was in Bujumbura to teach marksmanship, first-aid, and basic infantry skills. They could easily be repurposed to help prep a battalion for deployment. State officials asked Dawn Liberi, the US Ambassador in Bujumbura, to meet with Burundian officials to assess their interest and

¹⁶⁶ Rice's reaction and the statement by the senior NSS official were related in a December 2013 email sent to PPWG members, shared with the author.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with US official, May 2015.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with former US official, July 2015.

¹⁷¹ Interview with former US official, April 2015.

work out details. In the meantime, the Pentagon identified US Army and Air Force teams to oversee the airlift.¹⁷²

Some Pentagon officials – particularly senior officers in J5, the Joint Staff’s Directorate for Strategic Plans and Policy – weren’t very happy about the idea of the United States using limited resources to airlift troops to CAR. They felt that, at a time when they were being asked to cut costs, the White House now wanted them to spend money on a new mission that they saw as having little or no impact on US national security.¹⁷³ “There were antibodies inside the [Pentagon] to anything that was going to draw money away from readiness,” one official later said. “Sequestration just made everyone even grumpy and more unwilling to share.”¹⁷⁴

Finding the money on short notice further exacerbated tensions. “It’s hard to budget for a crisis,” a former Pentagon official later acknowledged. “If it’s not an ongoing operation, it’s hard to come up with the funds. Even though it looks like DoD has a ton of money, it doesn’t mean that we could just redistribute it in the case of something you didn’t anticipate. . . . Surprise missions can create a tremendous amount of bureaucratic stress.”¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, however, Pentagon officials were able to identify \$60 million to cover the costs associated with the airlift of the Burundian (and come January, Rwandan) forces. That brought the total amount freed up to support MISCA to \$100 million.¹⁷⁶

Not every proposal passed muster. According to one former official, Power was pushing a French request for US helicopters to enable the rapid redeployment of peacekeepers from Bangui to other hotspots around the country. The problem was, as the former official later put it, that “helicopters are in high demand, especially in Africa. Who do you want to rob to make this operation possible?”¹⁷⁷ In the end, the Administration rejected the idea.

Staff in USAID’s Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) faced their own challenges. CAR was, as one official put it, “at the very end of a long line of

¹⁷² Interviews with current and former US officials. See also Peter Koerner and Campbell Kane, “US Assists Burundi with Deployment to Central African Republic,” December 13, 2013, US Army press release, http://www.army.mil/article/116916/u_s_assists_burundi_with_deployment_to_central_african_republic/.

¹⁷³ Interviews with current and former US officials.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with US official, May 2015. The Budget Control Act of 2011 had required Congress to cut the US deficit by \$1.2 trillion by the end of 2012. When that didn’t happen, it triggered across-the-board budget cuts, known as sequestration, at the Pentagon.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with former US official, July 2015.

¹⁷⁶ Interviews with current and former US officials. See also White House, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic,” December 19, 2013, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/19/fact-sheet-us-assistance-central-african-republic>.

¹⁷⁷ Helicopters: Interview with former US official, July 2015. Later on, the USG would provide both fixed-wing and rotary aircraft to peacekeepers; they likely were funded out of the \$60 million security package. However, they did not arrive until two months after MISCA ceased to exist. See US Embassy Bangui, “U.S. Supports Peacekeeping,” November 28, 2014, <http://bangui.usembassy.gov/pe-11282014.html>.

undeveloped, complex states that didn't get much attention from the [USAID] Africa bureau."¹⁷⁸ A former senior official agreed, but put it even more bluntly: "All basket cases elicit that response."¹⁷⁹ The attitude was that if DCHA officials wanted to find money for projects in CAR, they were welcome to go for it – as long as it didn't come from USAID Africa bureau's limited funds.

In addition to finding funds, the DCHA team had to overcome two additional challenges: the lack of a mission on the ground and the absence of a mechanism through which to route the money. USAID programs are usually managed through an in-country USAID mission that can provide a sense of the ongoing situation and work directly with local partners. With no local presence, the DCHA team had to come up with new ways to channel funding while also coordinating with the Africa Bureau. In the end, they were able to identify \$6 million from USAID's Complex Crisis Fund (CCF) and \$1.5 million from the Human Rights Grants Program to support conflict mitigation and social cohesion programs run by Mercy Corps, Catholic Relief Services, Internews, and Search for Common Ground. The CAR team had another deliverable.¹⁸⁰

Another proposal under consideration was something that NGO leaders had been pushing for weeks: have President Obama record and release a 'message to the people of CAR.' At first, State Department officials dismissed the idea. State/AF "literally laughed at us [for thinking] that the White House would ever do that in a place like CAR," one later recalled.¹⁸¹ But when NGOs brought it to the attention of Grant Harris, the Senior Director for Africa at NSS, he liked it.¹⁸² It too went on the checklist.

In November, both the IPC and APB met to brainstorm possible action. Somehow, they were scheduled on consecutive days, involving almost the same officials. Some APB participants believed that the decision to hold an IPC the day before a long-planned Board meeting was not an accident.¹⁸³ But instead of combining the two meetings, both went ahead as planned. The IPC reviewed the draft checklist and signed off on most of it. That left the APB little to do other than be briefed on (and endorse) the IPC's recommendations. "The SOC [Summary of Conclusions] for the APB was basically the same as [that of] the IPC the previous day," one participant later recalled.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁸ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹⁷⁹ Lindborg, interview.

¹⁸⁰ Bridget Moix, interview with author, May 2015. See also White House, "U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic."

¹⁸¹ NGO official, email correspondence with the author, November 2015.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Interviews with current and former US officials.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with US official, June 2015. A "Summary of Conclusions" is a report issued by the NSS that summarizes the findings of a meeting and any taskings that come out of it.

As the informal CAR team was teeing up the checklist for the IPC and APB, Power was lobbying Kerry and Gen. Martin Dempsey (the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) to ensure their buy-in. As one former official later put it, “Samantha got that [\$60 million] security package. From where I sat, her engagement made it happen.”¹⁸⁵ The combination of Power’s top-down lobbying and the CAR team’s bottom-up planning ensured that they would be able to move quickly once they had formal sign-off from senior officials.

On December 6, senior officials met in the White House Situation Room to review and sign off on the checklist. According to several individuals at the meeting, those present agreed to recommend to the President that he use his drawdown authority to reallocate \$60 million in DoD funds to provide materiel, training, and airlift support for MISCA. Participants also supported the idea of having the President record a message. The following day, NSS senior staff briefed the President, who signed off on the proposals. Senior officials then met a second time to discuss implementation.¹⁸⁶

On December 9, the White House released Obama’s “Message to the People of the Central African Republic.” It was a plea to end the killing: “The awful violence of recent days threatens the country you love. Innocent men, women and children have been killed. Families have fled their homes. And we know from the bitter experience of other countries what happens when societies descend into violence and retribution. Today, my message to you is simple: it doesn’t have to be this way. You—the proud citizens of the Central African Republic—have the power to choose a different path.”¹⁸⁷

White House officials regarded the message as a major achievement, but it is not clear what impact it had in CAR.¹⁸⁸ When asked why they thought a message from the President was helpful, one official shrugged and said, “Well, it worked in Kenya [during that country’s March 2013 election], so they thought it might help in CAR.”¹⁸⁹ Another said, “Did it make a difference? I don’t know how much it helped. A lot of time and effort went into it. I don’t think the time was poorly spent. It didn’t hurt.”¹⁹⁰ The NGOs were delighted. “It might not seem like the most

¹⁸⁵ Lindborg, interview.

¹⁸⁶ Interviews with current and former US officials. Those interviewed disagree on the timing of the two meetings. Given that the specific outcomes were announced on Monday the 9th, a Friday-Saturday or Friday-Sunday sequence is most likely.

¹⁸⁷ For the text and audio of the message, see Grant Harris, “President Obama’s Message to the People of the Central African Republic,” White House Blog, December 9, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/12/09/president-obamas-message-people-central-african-republic/>.

¹⁸⁸ According to one NGO activist, the message was distributed to radio stations in CAR, but it is not known to what degree it was heard.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with US official, June 2015.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

hardcore action,” one activist later recalled. “But to us, it felt like a huge lift and win for the interagency [atrocities prevention] team.”¹⁹¹

That same afternoon, Harris, Brown, and other US officials briefed NGOs on the US response at an office near the White House. Overall, activists were heartened by the breadth and depth of the response. But at least one later acknowledged that it still felt like the United States was “too late” in responding. “I think the fact that it took the December 5th attacks to finally get to the point of decisive action . . . affirmed for us the fundamental problem of ‘prevention’ and the APB agenda. Is there truly ever going to be a way to mobilize a proportional amount of resources and attention to a crisis without a major instance of violence happening first?”¹⁹²

Also on December 9, the Pentagon announced that it was airlifting the Burundian battalion. Less than twenty-four hours later, small US Air Force teams had deployed to Bujumbura and Bangui; one of the jobs of the Bangui team was to measure the runway to make sure that it was long enough for US planes to land. On December 12, two C-17s arrived in Bujumbura to begin the airlift. The first Burundian troops landed in Bangui that same day. US forces ultimately flew a total of 16 missions from Bujumbura to Bangui, transporting 857 troops, 73 pallets of equipment and 18 military vehicles. The White House announced that it would “support additional airlift requests from African partners who are committed to deploying forces to MISCA.”¹⁹³

Over the next several weeks, the United States also implemented many of the other ideas first developed as part of the checklist. These included the \$7.5 million in USAID funds for peacebuilding and reconciliation programs and \$325,000 in State Department funds to support small programs on interfaith cooperation and ending gender-based violence. Although the White House recognized “the importance of a sustained presence” in CAR, it announced that it had no immediate plans to reopen its embassy. The United States instead would “increase [its] presence through regular visits” by senior officials.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Email correspondence with NGO representative, November 2015.

¹⁹² Ibid. The account of the meeting is based on interviews with this and other NGO representatives.

¹⁹³ Department of Defense, “Statement of Additional U.S. Support to France and the African Union in the Central African Republic,” December 9, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=16411>; White House, “Presidential Memorandum – Central African Republic Drawdown,” December 10, 2013, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/10/presidential-memorandum-central-african-republic-drawdown>; State DPB, December 17, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/12/218861.htm#centralafricanrepublic>; Claudette Ruolo, “Airlift Operations Complete in Central African Republic,” *DoD News* (web), December 30, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121417>; White House, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic,” December 19, 2013.

¹⁹⁴ White House, “U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic.”

Seventy-two hours after the President gave the go order, US forces started airlifting Burundian peacekeepers. That is a remarkable (and frequently overlooked) achievement, one that was the result not only of Power's personal advocacy but also the hard work of a small team of mid-level officials whose members overcame bureaucratic resistance and technical obstacles to identify and deploy the necessary resources. As one former official later put it, "the fact that all this happened so quickly is pretty amazing."¹⁹⁵

That said, public statements on the US response to the crisis in CAR oversold the role of the APB. In the days leading up to Power's trip to Bangui, the White House made sure to credit the APB with pushing the Administration to take action – even though the Board had played almost no role in the decision to intervene. "If the White House oversold the role of the APB in CAR, it was because it was desperate [for the APB] to live up to and validate the original triumphalist branding," one former official later said. "We had been getting pounded on APB issues due to Syria. I don't fault them for embracing an inaccurate perception that was in our favor. I don't want to suggest that it was cynical, but . . . of course they were going to jump on it."¹⁹⁶

For many of those who participated in Board meetings, the fact that the Board wasn't directly involved in the events of December 2013 should not be regarded as a failure of the APB process. "It shouldn't have to be about the APB," one later said. "It's about a whole-of-administration response. The notion that the APB could have done this in isolation from the bureaucratic process doesn't make sense."¹⁹⁷

In addition, the APB had played a key role in helping to build the informal network of mid-level officials who had helped put together the checklist. These individuals – "atrocities prevention enthusiasts," as one sub-APB member jokingly called them – worked nights and weekends to ensure that senior officials had options – and then worked additional nights and weekends to make sure that the promised programs were implemented, the money was properly disbursed, and the troops successfully deployed.¹⁹⁸ "There were a whole bunch of people who gave a shit," one member of the informal CAR group recalled.¹⁹⁹ Only some of them had direct ties to the APB or sub-APB; the Board may not have been the mechanism through which they worked, but it created the framework for their efforts. The "toolkit" about which Power was so fond of talking turned out to include not only a set of processes but also a group of individuals dedicated to implementing them. But instead of the senior officials she had envisioned, the key players turned out to be much lower down the chain of command.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with US official, May 2015.

¹⁹⁸ A number of current and former officials recall this term being used. Interviews with current and former US officials.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with US official, June 2015.

Although Power and the informal CAR team would continue to explore ways to address the crisis, the events of December 6-10 represented the high-water mark of White House engagement. One week after senior officials met, civil war broke out in South Sudan. For the next several months, that crisis would consume the attention of most of the senior NSS and State officials who had been working on CAR. Few other than Power would again focus on events there. As one former official would later acknowledge, CAR was “never going to get that kind of attention again.”²⁰⁰

On December 19, Power arrived in Bangui. Conditions on the ground remained appalling, but there was hope that the arrival of French and Burundian forces and the formal transfer of authority from MICOPAX to MISCA would help bring an end to the violence. In public statements during her visit, Power acknowledged the grim reality on the ground, but also argued that the world was moving quickly to quell the violence. She highlighted the US contribution and promised that American officials would continue to “do what we can . . . to ensure that MISCA gets up to its full troop strength as quickly as possible.”²⁰¹

For all her public expressions of confidence, Power knew that the French-MISCA mission was not a sure thing. As she told one reporter after leaving CAR, “Now is the worrying time.”²⁰² Shortly after her plane took off, gunfire broke out near the airport.²⁰³

Power’s hope that the rapid deployment of French and Burundian forces would help quell the violence that gripped CAR proved illusory. Even with the subsequent US airlift of a Rwandan mechanized battalion, there were not enough troops to extend protection beyond Bangui and a few regional capitals. Growing tensions and poor communications between MISCA and the French only exacerbated matters. In the weeks following Power’s visit, both Séléka and the anti-balaka stepped up their attacks on civilians, driving thousands more out of their homes.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

²⁰¹ USUN, “Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at a Press Conference in Bangui, Central African Republic,” December 19, 2013, <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/219078.htm>. See also Somini Sengupta, “U.N. Ambassador, in Central Africa, Vows Aid and Hears of a Unity Shattered,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/20/world/africa/us-ambassador-visits-central-african-republic-amid-bloodshed.html?_r=2, and VICE News, “War in the Central African Republic” YouTube video, March 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoQAxQgevEA>.

²⁰² Manuel Roig-Franzia, “Samantha Power: Learning to play the diplomat’s game,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/samantha-power-learning-to-play-the-diplomats-game/2014/04/03/1ea34bae-99ac-11e3-b88d-f36c07223d88_story.html.

²⁰³ VICE News, “War in the Central African Republic.”

²⁰⁴ On January 14, two USAF C-17 transports began transporting an 850-person Rwandan mechanized infantry unit to Bangui. On January 31, the Pentagon announced that US forces had completed the airlift. Christine Guthrie, “U.S. Airlifts Rwandans to Central African Republic,” press release, January 21, 2014,

A SENSE OF TERROR

As peacekeepers struggled to contain the violence, the Djotodia regime was falling apart. On January 9, ECCAS leaders summoned the self-proclaimed President to N'Djamena, Chad and informed him that it was time to go. The next day, a formal communiqué announced that he had resigned and that the Transitional National Council, a vestigial remnant of the January 2013 Libreville agreement, would elect his successor.²⁰⁵ In response, the State Department issued a statement “commend[ing] the leadership of [ECCAS] in facilitating the political transition process in the CAR.”²⁰⁶

Stunningly, neither ECCAS nor MISCA (much less State/AF) appears to have anticipated the impact that such a move might have on the Séléka. Shortly after Djotodia’s removal was announced, Séléka units began to retreat north, leaving most Muslim civilians behind to fend for themselves. The anti-balaka pounced, driving thousands of civilians out of their homes. On January 20, the day that Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of Bangui, was sworn in as CAR’s new interim President, anti-balaka fighters rampaged through Bangui, looting and burning homes. Thousands of Muslims fled to Cameroon, Chad, or Séléka-controlled ‘safe zones’ in the north.²⁰⁷ Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch told the BBC that “entire Muslim communities are just being wiped off the map.”²⁰⁸ A few weeks later, he warned that “if the targeted violence continues, there will be no Muslims left.”²⁰⁹

As the violence escalated, whenever a MISCA convoy traveled from Bangui toward Cameroon, terrified Muslim civilians would emerge from the bush and beg to be escorted across the border. Even with AU troops present, anti-balaka fighters would regularly ambush trucks, pulling people off and hacking them to death. Peacekeepers, UN staff, and US-funded humanitarian groups alike

<http://www.africom.mil/newsroom/article/11659/us-airlifts-rwandans-to-central-african-republic>; Claudette Ruolo, “Air Force Transports Rwandan Troops to Central African Republic,” *DoD News* (web), January 17, 2014,

<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121510>; Jim Garamone, “Air Force Completes Airlift of Rwandan Peacekeepers,” *DoD News*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121591>; and Reuters, “U.S. to airlift Rwandan forces into [CAR],” January 16, 2014, <http://www.trust.org/item/20140116031621-wvldg/>.

²⁰⁵ ECCAS: Radio France International, “CAR President Djotodia faces grilling at regional summit in Chad,” January 9, 2013, <http://www.english.rfi.fr/africa/20140109-car-president-djotodia-faces-grilling-regional-summit-chad>; Agence France Presse (AFP), “CAR leader Michel Djotodia resigns over failure to end violence,” *The Telegraph* (UK), January 10, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/centralafricanrepublic/10564010/CAR-leader-Michel-Djotodia-resigns-over-failure-to-end-sectarian-violence.html>.

²⁰⁶ State, “Selecting Transitional Leaders in the Central African Republic,” January 15, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219770.htm>.

²⁰⁷ Emmanuel Braun and Paul-Marin Ngoupana, “At least 16 killed as Central African Republic swears in new leader,” Reuters, January 23, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/01/23/uk-centralafrican-idukbrea0m1if20140123>.

²⁰⁸ BBC, “Central African Republic: ‘Scene of absolute Horror’,” January 30, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25946920#_jmpl0.

²⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Central African Republic: Muslims Forced to Flee,” February 12, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/12/central-african-republic-muslims-forced-flee>.

found themselves confronting an impossible choice: facilitate communal cleansing or leave its victims to be “slaughtered en masse” by the anti-balaka.²¹⁰ A senior American official later told Congress, “We are not normally in the business of turning people into refugees. We normally try to prevent that situation from occurring. . . . These are extraordinary steps and they were not taken lightly. It was done to avoid massacres, frankly, and so very much as a last resort measure.”²¹¹

In mid-January – at the height of the post-Djotodia violence – Nancy Lindborg, the USAID Assistant Administrator responsible for overseeing a significant chunk of US humanitarian relief programming, arrived in Bangui. Lindborg was no stranger to disasters, but what she saw in CAR shook her. “There was such a sense of terror,” she later recalled. “It was an incredibly tense situation that could explode at any moment. . . . You had the feeling that [the anti-balaka] could rise up and attack again.” In Bossangoa, she passed through still-smoking neighborhoods that were “just completely empty.” Those with whom she met – even veteran relief workers – spoke openly of fearing for their own safety.²¹²

While Lindborg was in Bangui and Bossangoa, her team back in DC was working to implement the new peacebuilding initiatives promised by the White House back in December.²¹³ USAID humanitarian assistance was flowing into CAR, but procurement and fund disbursement bottlenecks were delaying distribution of program funds. In addition, the NGOs chosen to do the work were having problems hiring staff and deploying security. Funds did not start flowing until early February, nearly two months after the projects were first announced.

Although US relief efforts did not often feature in State Department press releases or generate much media coverage, both USAID and State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) played a central role in providing humanitarian assistance to those displaced by the violence. Long before Séléka’s emergence, they were funding programs for Congolese refugees in CAR. When the country began to fall apart, USAID and PRM both surged additional funds to their existing UN and NGO partners. These efforts accelerated in September 2013, long before other agencies began to engage. USAID-funded emergency airlifts delivered tons of critical

²¹⁰ UN, “Remarks by the High Commissioner for Human Rights during her mission to [CAR],” March 20, 2014, http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/76B7651DADEC4C63C1257CA10042599E?OpenDocument.

²¹¹ *The Central African Republic: From “Pre-Genocide” to Genocide?* Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 19 (May 1, 2014) (Testimony of Anne Richard, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration) <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg87715/html/CHRG-113hhrg87715.htm>.

²¹² All quotes from Lindborg, interview.

²¹³ The account in this paragraph is based on interviews current and former US officials.

supplies, including food, blankets, kitchen sets, water containers, and plastic sheeting. By the end of 2014, US support for humanitarian relief totaled \$150 million.²¹⁴

In early December, US officials had said that providing \$100 million to airlift, equip, and train peacekeepers would, together with the French and MISCA deployments, significantly slow or even stop the killing. As late as January 21 – ten days after the anti-balaka began methodically driving Muslims out of their homes – the State Department was still claiming that the United States had helped pull CAR “back from the brink.”²¹⁵ But as the scale of the post-Djotodia communal cleansing became evident, the tone changed. Power fired off a series of tweets condemning the violence.²¹⁶ State issued a new statement that the United States once again was “deeply concerned.”²¹⁷

The truth was that the \$100 million investment in MISCA was never going to produce the kind of results that the Obama Administration had promised. The French were right: there weren’t enough troops on the ground. The Rwandan and Burundian units were performing well, but few other troops had arrived. Despite US statements that it was prepared to airlift additional battalions, it never did – in all likelihood because other African countries were not willing to commit their forces. And for all of the rhetoric about training and equipping, actual, tangible US support was slow in coming. Between December 2013 and September 2014, the United States supplied MISCA with a total of 37 vehicles. Significant additional materiel ultimately did arrive, but only after the AU force had ceased to exist.²¹⁸

This gap between rhetoric and reality occasionally forced US officials into tortured explanations of how the Administration’s efforts to stop the violence were succeeding even as the violence

²¹⁴ The precise figure is \$149.968 million. See USAID, CAR CEFS #21, FY 2014, September 30, 2014, https://scms.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/car_ce_fs21_09-30-2014.pdf; USAID, “USAID transports critical relief supplies to the Central African Republic,” press release, May 16, 2014, <http://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/may-16-2014-usaid-transports-critical-relief-supplies-central-african-republic>; USAID, “USAID airlifts urgent relief supplies to Central African Republic,” press release, June 17, 2014, <http://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/june-17-2014-usaid-airlifts-urgent-relief-supplies-central-african-republic>; and USAID, CAR Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #17, FY14, July 25, 2014, http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/car_ce_fs17_07-25-2014.pdf.

²¹⁵ State, “U.S. Welcomes Selection of New Transitional President of the Central African Republic,” January 21, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/01/220501.htm>.

²¹⁶ See, for example, Samantha Power (@AmbassadorPower), Twitter, January 23, 2014, 7:31 am, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadorPower/status/426202893281017856>.

²¹⁷ State, “U.S. Condemns Renewed Violence in Central African Republic, January 26, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/01/220632.htm>.

²¹⁸ State DPB, August 21, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/08/230798.htm>. In November 2014, 257 vehicles, cargo planes, and helicopters valued at \$54.7 million were formally transferred at a ceremony in Bangui to contingents from Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, Burundi, and Rwanda. US Embassy Bangui, “U.S. Supports Peacekeeping,” November 28, 2014, <http://bangui.usembassy.gov/pe-11282014.html>.

continued to get worse. In a February 13 interview with National Public Radio, Power spoke about the important role US funding was playing in ending the violence but also admitted that “when mob violence takes hold, it is very challenging to put it back in a box.” Although the overall trend lines were “more positive,” Power said, “every day we see atrocities that shock the conscience.”²¹⁹

In late January, the APB again met to discuss CAR. Lindborg briefed the Board on her trip.²²⁰ “We talked circles around it,” one official recalled. “Everybody agreed that conditions were still really bad, but nobody had any suggestions on what else the US could do. . . . There were no policy outcomes.”²²¹

A PEACEKEEPING FORCE IS WHAT WE MAKE OF IT

The French-US spat over peacekeeping in CAR had never really ended. The French continued to push for a UN mission even as they deployed their own small force and the United States provided additional support to MISCA. By early February, however, it had become clear that MISCA did not have the troops or training it needed to end the fighting. US officials had begun to reconcile themselves to the fact that the UN would have to engage, but they remained worried that the French would withdraw once the Security Council authorized a UN peacekeeping operation.

Obama and Hollande were scheduled to meet in Washington in mid-February. Administration officials knew that the French president would push his American counterpart to support a UN peacekeeping operation in CAR. They worried that the issue would derail discussions on other matters. “It was a balancing act,” one former official recalled. “The French wanted our support in places that were peripheral to core US national security interests and we wanted to gain their support for our priorities – Iran, Syria, and NATO/EU security issues.”²²²

There also was lingering bitterness about the French whispering campaign that the United States hadn’t wanted to spend the money for a UN mission. “When [the French were saying that] we were supposedly in the way of a UN mission,” one US official later said, “we were actually helping to stand up a *real* peacekeeping mission [MISCA]. Far from being the problem, we were working to fix the crappy mission on the ground.”²²³ Left unanswered was whether US efforts to “fix” the AU force had any chance of success.

In the weeks leading up to the Obama-Hollande meeting, senior US and French officials met regularly to hammer out differences on a range of issues. In the case of CAR, the US focus was

²¹⁹ Morning Edition, “U.S. Tries to Limit Violence in Central African Republic,” National Public Radio, February 13, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/02/13/276276864/u-s-tries-to-limit-violence-in-central-african-republic>.

²²⁰ Lindborg, interview.

²²¹ Interview with US official, June 2015.

²²² Interview with former US official, July 2015.

²²³ Interview with US official, May 2015. Emphasis is the official’s.

how long the French would stay and what their role would be. US officials made it clear to their French counterparts that “there was no way that we would support spending \$400 million if they were going to bug out,” as one official put it.²²⁴ In early February, Power flew to Paris, where she made a point of publicly praising the French intervention. In an interview with France 24, she acknowledged that “This is not necessarily a politically popular mission for [Hollande].” French forces, she said, were doing a “tremendous job on the ground.”²²⁵ Other American officials were equally fulsome.²²⁶

At some point during the summit, Obama and Hollande discussed CAR. “The French believed that [Obama] would be poorly briefed and [that] they would roll him,” one official later recalled. “But POTUS was ready. There was a real substantive conversation.”²²⁷ Ultimately the two men struck a deal: The United States would support a UN peacekeeping force in CAR, in return for which the French would not withdraw their troops as quickly as Hollande had promised. A joint op-ed by Obama and Hollande in *The Washington Post* maintained that the current French-AU initiative – “backed by American airlift and support” – was making a difference.²²⁸ At a joint press conference, Obama praised France for its “courage and resolve” in CAR.²²⁹ Two weeks later, the French National Assembly voted 428-14 to extend *Opération Sangaris*, even though many parliamentarians worried that Hollande lacked an exit strategy.²³⁰

The extended discussions between French and US officials had the effect of freezing the overall international response. Negotiations over a new Security Council resolution authorizing a UN mission didn’t really get off the ground until after the summit. Even after the two sides had come to a general agreement, it still took until April 10 for the Security Council to authorize the establishment a new UN force, known as MINUSCA. Formal transfer of control over

²²⁴ Interview with US official, June 2015.

²²⁵ Power: France 24, “The Interview: Samantha Power, US Ambassador to the United Nations” (video), February 4, 2014, http://www.france24.com/en/20140203-interview-samantha-power-us-ambassador-un-security-council-mali-syria-human-rights-humanitarian-action-car?ns_campaign=editorial&ns_source=FB&ns_mchannel=reseaux_sociaux&ns_fee-0&ns_linkname=20140203_interview_samantha_power_us_ambassador_un#_jmp0.

²²⁶ See, for example, Tyrone C. Marshall, Jr., “Hagel, French Counterpart Discuss Mutual Interests, Challenges,” Armed Forces Press Service, January 24, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121540>.

²²⁷ Interview with US official, June 2015.

²²⁸ To be clear, the description of the response in CAR was merely one sentence in a longer op-ed on the overall US-French relationship. See Barack Obama and François Hollande, “France and the U.S. Enjoy a Renewed Alliance,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obama-and-hollande-france-and-the-us-enjoy-a-renewed-alliance/2014/02/09/039ffd34-91af-11e3-b46a-5a3d0d2130da_story.html.

²²⁹ White House, “Remarks by President Obama and President Hollande of France,” February 11, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/11/press-conference-president-obama-and-president-hollande-france>.

²³⁰ Agnus Mackinnon, “France extends CAR mission as UN warns of a bloodbath,” AFP, February 25, 2014, <http://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/france-extends-car-mission-un-warns-new-bloodbath>. As of this writing, the French have 350 soldiers remaining in CAR. See Ismail Akwei, “French Soldiers in CAR reduced to 350 as Operation Sangaris ends,” *Africa News*, June 22, 2016, <http://www.africanews.com/2016/06/22/french-soldiers-in-car-reduced-to-350-as-operation-sangaris-ends/>.

peacekeeping would not take place until September 15.²³¹ In the meantime, the collective efforts of MISCA and the small French contingent – mutually antagonistic, woefully understaffed and frequently outmatched – would remain the only game in town.²³²

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Just prior to the Security Council vote, Power made another whirlwind visit to Bangui, this time after traveling to Kigali to observe the twentieth anniversary of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Both during and after the trip, she contrasted the international community's response in CAR to its failures in Rwanda twenty years earlier. In a speech to MISCA forces assembled at M'Poko International Airport, Power noted that "It has been twenty years since the Rwandan genocide taught us the price of delay in responding to mass violence. The world has not delayed in reacting to the outbreak of horrific violence here, but it is evident . . . that what we are doing has not yet calmed the situation. Yet . . . it would be far worse if not for your efforts to protect civilians [and] disarm militias."²³³ She later tweeted that "Commemorating the #Rwanda genocide only underscores importance of doing all we can to prevent atrocities today in places like #CAR."²³⁴

Although Power acknowledged the continuing challenges facing peacekeepers in her speech to MISCA, she downplayed them in her post-trip media appearances. She instead argued that the vote at the UN demonstrated that the difference between CAR and Rwanda was "night and day."²³⁵ Whereas in Rwanda the UN had withdrawn its peacekeepers, it now was "seeking to get the heaviest and most capable force in [CAR] as soon as possible."²³⁶

Most interviewers weren't entirely convinced. After dutifully asking Power to contrast the two crises, some of them posed a second, more awkward question: Was the proposed UN force in CAR a case of too little, too late? Power's response was usually a variation on the answer she gave

²³¹ MINUSCA stands for UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic. UN Security Council, Resolution 2149 (2014), 7153rd Meeting, April 10, 2014, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2149\(2014\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2149(2014)).

²³² The French-MISCA conflicts are detailed in Graeme Wood, "Hell is an Understatement: A Report from the Bloody, Crumbling Central African Republic," *The New Republic*, April 30, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117519/central-african-republic-conflict-africas-bloodiest-fight>.

²³³ Samantha Power, "Remarks to Troops of the African-Led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA)," (hereafter "Remarks to MISCA") April 9, 2014, <http://www.effectivepeacekeeping.org/policy/updates/remarks-amb-power-troops-african-led-international-support-mission-central-african-re>.

²³⁴ Power, Twitter, April 10, 2014, 5:36 am, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadorPower/status/454062878861950978>.

²³⁵ Morning Edition, "African Responses Night and Day from Rwanda, U.N. Envoy Says," NPR, April 11, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=301564360&m=301749155>

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

to ABC's George Stephanopoulos: "Well, a peacekeeping force is what we make it."²³⁷ The international community, she said, needed to start moving forces to CAR as quickly as possible. As she told NPR's David Greene, "we don't want to wake up on September 15 . . . and start mobilizing troops."²³⁸

Given these statements, it is fair to ask why the United States never considered committing its own forces. When Stephanopoulos asked this of Power, she said that "the world recognizes that the United States does more than its fair share . . . and that we bring our unique capabilities to bear in flying troops in from other countries that are willing to go."²³⁹ This was consistent with the Obama Administration's general position on peacekeeping operations: we do our part, we're already overextended, and it's time for others to step up to the plate.

Such arguments are not without merit. In voting for a UN mission, the United States had committed itself to spending hundreds of millions of dollars. That obligation would not have disappeared had the United States decided to send its own troops as well. Furthermore, any deployment of US forces could have had a negative impact on other operations, an issue that the Pentagon would have had to address in considerable detail before it would have been willing to sign off on a deployment. Although Séléka had no connection to radical Islamists, the presence of US troops in a remote outpost could have become a tempting target for groups like Boko Haram and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Logistics also could have posed a significant (but not insurmountable) challenge: the closest US bases are in Italy, Spain, and the Horn of Africa. Multiple US administrations have been reluctant to place US forces under UN command. And Congress – particularly one controlled by Republicans hostile to all things UN – likely would have strongly opposed sending troops to a country where the only US national security interest was atrocity prevention and response. All of these would have been significant – perhaps insurmountable – obstacles to a US deployment.

That said, the reality is that the Obama Administration spent considerable time calling on other nations to deploy their troops while choosing not to commit its own. That has not gone unnoticed both at the UN and among troop-contributing countries (including France). Reservations over UN command and control could have been addressed by maintaining a parallel operation similar to what the French did in CAR. As Paul D. Williams of the Council on Foreign Relations has noted, "the lack of U.S. personnel in UN peacekeeping missions undermines Washington's attempts to

²³⁷ This Week with George Stephanopoulos, "Rwanda Remembered: Samantha Power Reconciles Past and Present on Genocide Anniversary" (video), ABC, April 13, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/rwanda-remembered-samantha-power-reconciles-past-present-genocide-23265552>.

²³⁸ Morning Edition, "African Responses," April 11, 2014.

²³⁹ This Week with George Stephanopoulos, April 13, 2014.

exercise leadership. Leading by example would likely produce better results than asking other states to do something the United States does not do itself.”²⁴⁰

In addition, the Obama Administration has not hesitated to deploy ground forces when it has concluded that national security is at risk. Even setting aside the troop surge in Afghanistan, the United States has on numerous occasions been willing to send a small force – usually special operators – to support counterterrorism operations or embassy evacuations. Recent examples include Mali, South Sudan, and support for Counter-LRA efforts.²⁴¹ And only a few months after the UN was struggling to identify forces for MINUSCA, the United States sent 2,800 soldiers to West Africa in response to the Ebola epidemic.²⁴² A similar sized force in CAR, especially if it had deployed in 2013, could have helped make a significant difference.

In *A Problem from Hell*, Power had said that, faced with evidence of mass atrocities, the United States has a moral obligation to send in troops. In the specific case of Rwanda, she had argued that “One of [America’s] most eloquent presidents . . . could have made the case that something approximating genocide was under way, that an inviolable American value was imperiled by its occurrence, and that United States contingents at relatively low risk could stop the extermination of a people.”²⁴³ In his March 2013 address on Libya, Obama himself offered a variation on that argument: “In this particular country – Libya – at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale. We had a unique ability to stop that violence: an international mandate for action, a broad coalition prepared to join us, the support of Arab countries, and a plea for help from the Libyan people themselves.”²⁴⁴

He made the same point in August 2014 – shortly after the United States intervened to stop the massacre of Yazidis on Mt. Sinjar in Iraq: “When we face a situation like we do on that mountain – with innocent people facing the prospect of violence on a horrific scale, when we have a mandate to help – in this case, a request from the Iraqi government – and when we have the unique capabilities to help avert a massacre, then I believe the United States of America cannot turn a

²⁴⁰ Williams, *Peace Operations*, 14.

²⁴¹ Nick Turse, “U.S. Special Operations Forces Deployed to 135 Countries,” *War is Boring*, September 24, 2015, <http://warisboring.com/articles/u-s-special-ops-forces-deployed-in-135-nations/>; Paul McLeary, “US Special Ops Build Bridges in Africa,” *Defense News*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/warfare/2015/01/26/special-operations-partnership-africa-terrorism/22104187/>; The Aspen Institute, “A Look into SOCOM,” July 2015, <http://aspensecurityforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/A-Look-into-SOCOM.pdf>; and “Special Operations Element Command and Control – Horn of Africa,” *Global Security*, undated, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/socce-hoa.htm>.

²⁴² Ebola: Ralph Ellis, “U.S. bringing home almost all troops sent to Africa in Ebola crisis,” CNN, February 27, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/10/us/ebola-u-s-troops-africa/>.

²⁴³ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 383.

²⁴⁴ White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to Nation on Libya.”

blind eye.”²⁴⁵ In a contemporaneous interview with Thomas Friedman, he said that “When you have a unique circumstance in which genocide is threatened, and a country is willing to have us in there, you have a strong international consensus that these people need to be protected and we have a capacity to do so, then we have an obligation to do so.”²⁴⁶

Conditions in CAR in late 2013 fulfilled almost all of the criteria used by the President to justify his decision to intervene in Libya (as well as those he cited in the case of Mt. Sinjar): US officials believed that there was a risk of genocide; there was a strong international consensus on the need to act; others were willing to take part; and the United States had the capacity (if not the “unique” ability²⁴⁷) to take action. Yet at no point did the Obama Administration ever seriously consider deploying US troops beyond the small number sent to ferry AU peacekeepers. Unlike Libya or Mt. Sinjar, air power alone would not have been enough to slow or stop the violence in CAR.

In both cases, Obama had acknowledged another reason he was willing to act – one that trumped all the others: he could do so without deploying US ground forces.²⁴⁸ This should not be surprising. In numerous interviews – most recently with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* – the President emphasized that he had serious doubts about using ground forces in situations where he believes that there is not a direct threat to US national security. The fact that the aftermath of the intervention in Libya was not going well – producing what Obama would later call a “mess” – was only reinforcing the President’s aversion to direct action.²⁴⁹

As far as is known, no one – not even Power – ever urged the President to put American boots on the ground beyond the very small number of airlift, logistics, and mission-support experts who have gone in on brief rotational assignments. With no clear counter-terrorism nexus, there was zero appetite in the White House or the Pentagon to send American troops to conduct kinetic operations in a non-permissive environment to backstop AU and French (and later UN) troops. In the end, the Obama Administration was not willing to send its forces on what some senior officials saw as an ill-defined mission with no clear end point in a place where atrocity prevention was the only national security interest.

²⁴⁵ White House, “Statement by the President [on Mt. Sinjar],” August 7, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>.

²⁴⁶ Thomas Friedman, “Obama on the World,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html?_r=0.

²⁴⁷ That said, it was one of only a very small number of countries who did have the ability.

²⁴⁸ In the case of Libya, he said, “We also had the ability to stop Qaddafi’s forces in their tracks without putting American troops on the ground.” White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to Nation on Libya.” In the case of Mt. Sinjar, he said, “And so even as we support Iraqis as they take the fight to these terrorists, American combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq, because there’s no American military solution to the larger crisis in Iraq.” White House, “Statement by the President [on Mt. Sinjar].”

²⁴⁹ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

Upon Power's return from Rwanda and CAR, NPR's David Greene asked her, "You know, a decade or so ago, you were famous for criticizing the Clinton Administration's response in Rwanda. . . . How does that Samantha Power from before feel [about] working inside the government now?" Power, sounding rueful, replied,

Well, the old Samantha Power is the new Samantha Power. They get to talk to each other every day. . . . I mean, look, if I were outside government now I'd be writing editorials, seeking meetings with the UN ambassador, seeking meetings with the secretary of state. . . . I'm in a much better position now to try to affect both the pace and the scope of our response. And we've come a long way, but no, neither the new Samantha Power nor the old Samantha Power can be satisfied when you still have Muslim and Christian civilians [in CAR] who are living in great fear.²⁵⁰

Power has been an extraordinary advocate for CAR. Thanks in large part to her consistent, impassioned public (and private) activism, the Obama Administration did far more there than it otherwise would have. But in the end, the United States did not send ground troops to support a peacekeeping mission that was struggling to field sufficient forces to stop a crisis that Power herself was comparing to the genocide in Rwanda. It is not unreasonable to ask whether the "old Samantha Power" would have written editorials and sought meetings with US officials to decry that decision.

AS QUICKLY AS SECURITY CONDITIONS ALLOW

By mid-2014, US financial pledges and contributions to the broader international effort to end the crisis in CAR were extraordinarily robust: \$100 million for MISCA, \$7.5 million for peacebuilding and reconciliation programs, \$150 million for humanitarian assistance, and \$428 million for MINUSCA. One issue remained unresolved: whether to reopen the US embassy in Bangui.

At the time of Power's first visit to Bangui in December, the question had been a non-starter. Both the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) and the Office of the Under Secretary for Management strongly opposed reopening. They pointed out – correctly – that the situation on the ground remained precarious at best. Conditions in Bangui were both dangerous and unpredictable. Reopening an embassy in such circumstances would be challenging and costly.²⁵¹ As a result, the

²⁵⁰ Morning Edition, February 13, 2014.

²⁵¹ Sources disagree as to who, in early 2014, continued to express reservations about reopening the embassy. Not surprisingly, whom people blame depends on where they sat: some State Department officials said that the White House

White House fact sheet issued at the time of Power's trip had only promised to reopen the embassy "as security conditions allow."²⁵²

On the other side were members of the informal CAR team, who felt that not having an embassy open when the Administration was paying so much attention to the country was "pretty embarrassing," as one former official later put it.²⁵³ They didn't dispute that security conditions were difficult, but believed that the United States had maintained missions in far more dangerous environments in the past. Furthermore, as Wohlers had pointed out at the time of the decision to close the embassy, Americans weren't the target. Working through both the IPC and the APB, the CAR team continued to push the idea. Over time, their arguments drew the support of more senior officials, including Power, Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and Stu Symington, State's new Special Envoy on CAR.²⁵⁴

By the time of Power's second visit in April, the question was no longer whether, but when. "It was important that we do it right," one official later said.²⁵⁵ The talking point changed to "We are moving to reopen our embassy in Bangui as *quickly as* security conditions allow."²⁵⁶ Although that may seem like a small difference, it was consistent with the message that NGOs were hearing: State officials were moving toward reopening, but there was still significant opposition. By early May, a senior State Department official was telling Congress that "we are looking into . . . restoring the diplomatic presence in Bangui." Shortly thereafter, members of the informal CAR team began telling NGOs that the embassy would indeed reopen – but did not yet commit to a specific timetable.²⁵⁷

By early summer, senior officials were ready to sign off on reopening. Once the decision was made, there remained the question of funding – which meant seeking Congressional signoff. State asked for \$60 million to open the embassy and staff it with as many as ten US nationals. Resistance came from a surprising source: Senator Patrick Leahy, a long-time human rights champion who had supported the Administration's previous atrocity prevention efforts. His staff expressed concern that the proposed figure was excessive. Leahy put a hold on the legislation until State could come back with answers. After a concerted lobbying campaign by NGOs – and a

remained nervous, while former White House officials as well as those in State and elsewhere working on atrocity prevention believe that Diplomatic Security was the biggest obstacle.

²⁵² White House, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Assistance to the Central African Republic."

²⁵³ Interview with former US official, May 2015.

²⁵⁴ A career foreign service officer whose previous posts had included US Ambassador to Rwanda, Symington proved to be an effective advocate for CAR within State. Equally important, as a career Ambassador, he had the rank to represent the United States in meetings with foreign dignitaries. See State, "Appointment of U.S. Special Representative for the Central African Republic," April 22, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/04/225058.htm>.

²⁵⁵ Interview with US official, June 2015.

²⁵⁶ USUN, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Support for the Central African Republic," April 9, 2014, <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/224627.htm>.

²⁵⁷ From "Pre-Genocide" to Genocide, 25.

revised budget proposal from State that cut the proposed cost to \$40 million – Leahy lifted the hold. Congress approved the appropriation in early August.²⁵⁸

The embassy formally resumed operations on September 15 – the same day that MINUSCA took over from MISCA. David Brown, who as Senior Advisor on CAR had played a central role in pushing for an effective US response to the crisis, flew to Bangui to serve as acting ambassador. Power, however, did not travel with him. On the day the embassy reopened, she remained in New York, attending an emergency Security Council meeting on the growing Ebola epidemic.

EPILOGUE: "HAD WE KNOWN ENOUGH..."

In the four years since Séléka first emerged from the bush and three years since the United States mobilized to stop what some US officials feared could be a genocide, the Obama Administration has continued to describe its response in CAR as a success. Officials have regularly cited the intervention as an example of the US capacity to take swift action to help bring an end to mass atrocities.²⁵⁹ As one official speaking on background put it at the time of Power's December 2013 trip, "What's critically important is that when the cork started to come out of the bottle, the administration was completely poised and ready to act. . . . Part of the reason for that is because you had senior people from all these agencies coming together every month and seeing the CAR on a piece of paper as a place where things could go bad."²⁶⁰ Intervening events have not changed the narrative: in May 2016, a US official, again speaking on background, cited CAR as "a great example" of the effectiveness of the APB.²⁶¹ Several opinion writers have agreed, citing the APB's work on CAR as an example of its relevance and efficacy.²⁶²

These assertions do describe the Obama Administration's response to the situation in CAR in the last months of 2013. When the crisis was at its worst, the United States moved quickly to support international efforts to end the violence. Obama's recorded message and Power's two visits ensured significant media coverage of the increasingly desperate situation on the ground. Rapid

²⁵⁸ This account is based on interviews with NGO representatives.

²⁵⁹ In addition to the statements cited throughout this report, see Anthony J. Blinken, "Remarks at Partners in Prevention: A Global Forum on Ending Genocide Conference," State, May 19, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/s/d/2016d/257398.htm>; State, "Background Briefing on the U.S. Government's Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Response," May 18, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257366.htm>; USUN, "Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at a Special Event to mark the 70th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz- Birkenau," January 21, 2015, <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/236170.htm> and Fareed Zakaria's GPS, "UN Ambassador Samantha Power believes that there could be a possibility of Russian invasion of Ukraine," CNN, June 14, 2015, <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/06/14/un-ambassador-samantha-power-believes-that-there-could-be-a-possibility-of-russia-invasion-in-ukraine/>.

²⁶⁰ Hayes Brown, "Inside Story."

²⁶¹ State, "Background Briefing on the U.S. Government's Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Response."

²⁶² See, for example, Hamilton, "Samantha Power in Practice" and Tod Lindberg and Lee Feinstein, "Arresting Atrocity: Obama's Agenda to Prevent Genocide," *Foreign Affairs*, September 11, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-09-11/arresting-atrocity>.

deployment of US airlift capabilities helped bring effective peacekeeping units to the country. A surge of humanitarian assistance helped UN agencies and NGOs take swift action to respond to the explosion of displaced persons and refugees. Within weeks of the decision to intervene, the US already had pledged several hundred million dollars to the broader international effort.

Furthermore, CAR is no longer an afterthought in US policy. The United States has remained heavily engaged since the initial intervention. As noted above, it is now the single largest bilateral donor in CAR, having contributed more than \$800 million to support humanitarian and peacekeeping operations; by the end of 2016, that number could exceed \$1 billion.²⁶³ In the months since the American embassy reopened, US officials have been working closely with the UN, MINUSCA, and local leaders to try to find solutions that can return the country to a modicum of stability. After the United States and the United Nations negotiated an agreement enabling the UN to purchase materials to construct forward operating bases, US specialists and engineers worked with UN contingents to build them.²⁶⁴ In October 2015, Jeffrey Hawkins was sworn in as the first US Ambassador to the country since Wohlers departed.²⁶⁵ Power has traveled to CAR on two additional occasions, first in March 2015 as part of a visit by members of the Security Council and then in March 2016 to lead the US delegation attending the inauguration of Faustin-Archange Touadéra, CAR's new President.²⁶⁶ The CAR IPC now meets regularly.²⁶⁷ No doubt many Americans would be stunned to learn that the United States has done – and spent – so much to try to stop atrocities in such a faraway place where it has no other compelling national interests.

In addition, it is doubtful that the United States would have gotten so deeply involved had President Obama not determined that preventing mass atrocities is a core national security interest of the United States and established the Atrocities Prevention Board. Although Power's personal interest and advocacy played an essential role in speeding the US response, it was the APB that created the necessary space for action. The Board's early advocacy led to the establishment of an IPC process, which in turn gave an informal group of mid-level officials the space they needed to develop policy options. Had the APB not existed, it is highly unlikely that the United States would

²⁶³ Single largest donor: Alexis Arieff and Thomas F. Husted, "Crisis in the Central African Republic," Congressional Research Service, August 17, 2015, 10, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43377.pdf>. \$1 billion: author's estimate, based on expenditures since the November-December 2013 intervention and expected annual contributions to support MINUSCA and ongoing humanitarian operations.

²⁶⁴ Interview with US official, May 2015. See also Bob Reinert, "Natick provides base camps for U.N. peacekeepers," March 4, 2015, https://www.army.mil/article/143854/Natick_provides_base_camps_for_U_N_peacekeepers_in_Africa/.

²⁶⁵ See US Embassy Bangui, "Jeffrey Hawkins, U.S. Ambassador-designate [sic] to the Central African Republic," undated, <http://bangui.usembassy.gov/about-us/ambassador.html>.

²⁶⁶ See Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations, "Report of the Security Council Mission to Africa (9-13 March 2015)," March 18, 2015, <http://www.franceonu.org/Report-of-the-Security-Council>; Caroline Weisser, "The Central African Republic's Historic Day," *Dipnote U.S. Department of State Official Blog*, March 30, 2016, <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2016/03/30/central-african-republic-s-historic-day>; and USUN, "Remarks on 'Crafting Peace by the Way We Live Our Lives' at a Reception Honoring President Faustin-Archange Touadéra," March 30, 2016, <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7211>.

²⁶⁷ Interviews with current and former US officials.

have been in a position to act as quickly or authoritatively as it did in November-December 2013. In that sense, the APB process worked.

But there are several reasons why it would be a mistake to regard the overall US response as a model for future efforts. First, despite the ample warning signs – and early efforts by the APB to draw attention to events – the Administration acted, to paraphrase former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, only *after* the wood was stacked, the gasoline was poured, and an entire box of matches was lit. Power’s April 2014 claim that “the world [had] not delayed in reacting to the outbreak of horrific violence” in CAR doesn’t tell the whole story: the killing started not in November 2013 when “the world” began to respond, but in December 2012, almost a full year earlier.²⁶⁸ As Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield later acknowledged, the United States was responding to a “humanitarian crisis that already had gotten out of hand.”²⁶⁹ Almost every individual interviewed for this study bemoaned the fact that the Administration took action only after thousands had died and hundreds of thousands had fled their homes. Despite the best efforts of the APB to draw interagency attention and resources to the crisis – to utilize the early warning capacity that was supposed to make it “a game changer.” – the delayed US response represented not only a failure to prevent atrocities, but also a failure to act before the threat of mass violence had become a reality.²⁷⁰

Second, despite claims to the contrary, the US response was not a case of “#AllHandsOnDeck,” as Power tweeted in December 2013.²⁷¹ At a time when anti-balaka and Séléka gangs were terrorizing civilians and thousands were fleeing their homes, the United States chose to provide financial, technical, and airlift assistance to a floundering African Union peacekeeping operation rather than support rapid deployment of a larger UN mission or send its own troops. For all the Administration’s talk of surging \$100 million to MISCA, the hard reality is that the only immediate result was the airlift of two battalions – 1,700 troops – to help police a country the size of Texas. Although the forces the United States helped deploy may have proven to be among the most effective peacekeepers in CAR, they represented only a tiny fraction of what was needed to stop the violence.²⁷²

²⁶⁸ Power, “Remarks to MISCA.”

²⁶⁹ Thomas-Greenfield, remarks at USHMM forum.

²⁷⁰ Landler, “Task Force Gives Insight on U.N. Nominee.”

²⁷¹ Power, Twitter, December 9, 2013, 11:20 pm, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadorPower/status/410134257906876416>.

²⁷² Early reports of sexual abuse by UN, AU, and French peacekeepers did not implicate either the Rwandan or Burundian forces airlifted by the United States. In March 2016, however new allegations that Burundian troops participated in the rape of children emerged; it is unclear whether those implicated were among the troops that were part of the US airlift operation. See Rick Gladstone, “U.N. Peacekeeping Hit by New Allegations of ‘Sickening’ Sex Abuse,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/world/africa/un-peacekeeping-hit-by-new-allegations-of-sickening-sex-abuse.html>. In June 2016, the UN announced that Burundian police units deployed to Bangui would not be replaced once their deployment ended in September due to concerns that Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza was rewarding security personnel who attacked his political opponents by sending them on UN missions. Deutsche Welle, “UN terminates

Third, the lengthy French-US dispute over the color of peacekeepers' helmets, as Power put it in December 2013, significantly delayed the deployment of a UN force. Obama Administration officials have argued that the negotiations were necessary to ensure that the French did not withdraw their own troops prematurely, and that at the time, MISCA was the only game in town. Others (including the French) have contended that the United States did not support a full UN operation in December 2013 because it did not want to foot the bill. Regardless of the real reason, the French-US negotiations delayed Security Council authorization of a full UN force by as much as seven months – and its deployment by almost a year. Given that consenting to a UN force in the fall of 2013 would not have prevented the United States from surging support to MISCA or aggressively negotiating with the French to prevent their premature withdrawal, it is unclear why the delay was either necessary or justifiable.

Fourth, the Obama Administration's claims that a rapid US response helped prevent a genocide hindered ongoing efforts to end the conflict. This was particularly true of Power's tendency to compare the international community's response in CAR to its non-response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. As one former official later noted, "There were a lot of people who had been in the Clinton Administration during the Rwandan genocide who were saying in meetings 'we don't want another Rwanda on our watch.'" ²⁷³ It's not surprising, then, that some officials succumbed to the temptation of taking credit for preventing a genocide. ²⁷⁴

By telling journalists that US support for the international intervention had helped prevent another Rwanda, Power and other American officials encouraged the perception that, since no genocide had taken place, the crisis was over. In fact, some of the worst killing – as well as the widespread cleansing of CAR's Muslim population – came *after* AU and French peacekeepers had deployed and US officials were characterizing the operation as a success. Long-term attempts to end the conflict – particularly efforts to fully fund and staff AU and UN operations – suffered from this misperception. Had there subsequently been a real risk of mass killing, those initially deployed to CAR in order to prevent an alleged genocide would not have had the troops, capacity, or training to stop one from happening.

Fifth, the Obama Administration did not fully engage diplomatically in CAR until the middle of 2014. The decision to close the embassy ensured that there were no Americans on the ground to warn that Washington's understanding of events often did not comport with reality. Even after

Burundi police mission in Central African Republic," June 4, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/un-terminates-burundi-police-mission-in-central-african-republic/a-19305993>.

²⁷³ Interview with former US official, June 2015.

²⁷⁴ For more on whether genocide was the right word to characterize what was happening in CAR, see Louisa Lombard, "Is the Central African Republic on the Verge of Genocide?" *Africa is a Country* (blog), December 5, 2013, http://africasacountry.com/2013/12/is-the-central-african-republic-on-the-verge-of-genocide/#_jmp0.

senior officials decided to commit funds and troops, the locus of decision-making remained in Washington. Throughout the crisis, the lack of a US presence led many outside the USG to question its willingness to engage. Periodic visits by Power and other senior officials only highlighted the lack of a permanent presence. Only with the appointment of Ambassador Stuart Symington as Special Envoy and the reopening of the embassy in September 2014 did CAR begin to receive a level of diplomatic attention commensurate with the Administration's description of its commitment.

Although the United States is likely to continue to spend several hundred million dollars each year to support peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, it has set aside only limited funds – somewhere in the range of \$30 to \$50 million – to disarm and demobilize the militias, promote communal reconciliation, and rebuild government institutions.²⁷⁵ Sustained US engagement beyond peacekeeping and relief is highly unlikely. As one senior State Department official has acknowledged, “the issue isn't what is in the FY16 budget, but what will be in the FY19 one. And I doubt it's going to be much.”²⁷⁶ As far as is known, the only funds definitely committed to support peacebuilding and atrocity prevention beyond FY16 is a five-year, \$5 million USAID public-private partnership funded in part by the Complex Crises Fund and USAID's Africa bureau. It is likely that the US will continue to provide small sums for other projects, but that total probably will taper off over the coming years.

The best-case scenario may be one where the United States and other donors surge support to the newly elected government, secure a modicum of stability, declare victory, and go home – at least until the next crisis comes. As Louisa Lombard has noted, “Everyone comes [into CAR] with this grand idea that they're going to fix things, but then they realize it's an extraordinarily difficult place to fix. Then they just want to get out of there as fast as they can.”²⁷⁷ A final surge of funds may help bring a sense of closure to what many in the USG have regarded as an open-ended disaster, but it will do almost nothing to alter the overall course of events.

²⁷⁵ It is difficult to determine a precise figure. According to an August 2015 Congressional Research Service Study, the Administration in FY16 requested \$14.7 million for programs in CAR, including \$10 million for support for peacekeepers and security sector reform, \$2 million for peacebuilding programs, \$2.5 million to rebuild the criminal justice system, and \$150,000 in IMET. Arieff and Husted, “Crisis,” 11. Those numbers do not appear to include a \$7 million public-private “Peacebuilding Partnership” established by USAID in November 2014. See USAID, “USAID sustains commitment to peacebuilding in the Central African Republic,” November 10, 2014, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/nov-10-2014-usaid-sustains-commitment-peacebuilding-central-african-republic>. US officials interviewed for this study provided different figures when asked how much the United States is spending on non-humanitarian, non-peacekeeping programs. In fairness, this is in part because what constitutes such non-humanitarian assistance depends on which official you ask. For example, one official told me that the figure was \$50 million, but also said that some of that was going to assist refugees.

²⁷⁶ Interview with US official, June 2015.

²⁷⁷ Louisa Lombard, interview with author, July 2015.

It also will not change the fact that the United States failed to respond to the crisis until atrocities already were taking place. In November 2014, during a panel discussion at the US Holocaust Museum, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield was asked whether the United States had known enough to have prevented what happened in CAR. “I think that is a difficult question for us to answer,” she replied. “I think had we known enough to prevent it, we would have. So I don’t think we knew enough to prevent this from happening. We certainly saw it coming. . . . I think that if we could have prevented it we would have.”²⁷⁸

In the conclusion to *A Problem from Hell*, Power bemoaned the fact that during crises like Bosnia and Rwanda, senior US officials had repeatedly used the “we didn’t know” defense to justify inaction: “Instead of aggressively hunting for deeper knowledge or publicizing what was already known, [US officials] have taken shelter in the fog of plausible deniability,” she wrote. “They have used the search for certainty as an excuse for paralysis and postponement. In most of the cases of genocide documented in this book, US officials who ‘did not know’ . . . chose not to.”²⁷⁹

In the case of CAR, US officials knew more than enough. As Thomas-Greenfield herself acknowledged, they “certainly saw it coming.”²⁸⁰ The Obama Administration deserves great credit for what it did in CAR starting in December 2013. But those accomplishments cannot obscure the fact that prior to November 2013, it chose not to take action when doing so may have helped prevent the country’s descent into violence.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF ATROCITY PREVENTION

As the US response to the crisis in CAR demonstrates, preventing and responding to mass atrocities is a noble, important, and very necessary idea that has proven easy to conceptualize but extraordinarily difficult to implement. Although the Atrocities Prevention Board has struggled to make its voice heard, it has not stopped pushing the interagency to pay attention to situations that otherwise would remain under the radar. The fact that its efforts have not always led to immediate results should not detract from its determination to draw attention to potential atrocities. The Board was not able to mobilize a more timely US response to the emerging crisis in CAR, but it did so on other occasions – including the emerging Rohingya crisis in Burma, concerns about ethnic cleansing in South Sudan’s Jonglei state, ethnic and electoral violence in Guinea, and the electoral crisis in Burundi. Although the outcomes in these situations were mixed, the fact remains that the APB’s advocacy helped lead to earlier US attention and action.

The Obama Administration also deserves credit for its efforts to institutionalize a culture of atrocity prevention in the face of significant and entrenched bureaucratic resistance and cynicism.

²⁷⁸ Thomas-Greenfield, remarks at USHMM forum.

²⁷⁹ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, p. 504-506.

²⁸⁰ Thomas-Greenfield, remarks at USHMM forum.

Since its first meeting in April 2012, the Board has helped implement a number of changes to the way the USG tracks and thinks about atrocities. These include the first-ever National Intelligence Estimate on the Global Risks of Mass Atrocities and the State Department's new Global Atrocity Risk Ranking; the integration of atrocity prevention concepts into military planning guidance and doctrine; new visa restrictions that make it harder for perpetrators to enter the United States; the increased use of targeted sanctions in atrocity situations; development of several atrocity-focused tabletop exercises; expanded rewards for information leading to the arrest of indicted war criminals; and new training and materials on atrocity prevention for US personnel, including a USAID field guide and courses at the Foreign Service Institute, war colleges, and military academies.²⁸¹ Many of these measures were institutionalized in May 2016, with the issuance of Executive Order 13729, "A Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Response."²⁸² And perhaps most importantly, the APB's efforts have helped build a cadre of mid-level foreign service officers and civil servants dedicated to the cause of atrocity prevention and response.

In addition, the Board clearly has learned from some of the challenges it faced during the CAR crisis. The APB and the relevant IPC now usually meet jointly when discussing a particular country of concern (as do the sub-APB and relevant sub-IPC). An interagency atrocity risk assessment mission to Burundi drew early attention to the potential risks there and led to development of a comprehensive action plan fully supported both by the US embassy in Bujumbura and State and USAID's Africa bureaus. The establishment of a secretariat in the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations also has helped the APB in its efforts to engage and secure the cooperation of regional bureaus.

There is a certain irony to the fact that the Board's most significant achievements have been in the area of prevention. As James P. Finkel has noted, despite the fact that "prevention" is part of the APB's name, most of those involved in the initial establishment of the Board "would have conceded that prevention, if it was going to be pursued at all, would still most likely be limited to crisis and post-conflict situations."²⁸³ In fact, the Board has had greater success building capacity than responding to crises.

²⁸¹ For more on the Administration's efforts, see Finkel, "Atrocities Prevention at the Crossroads" and "Moving Beyond the Crossroads"; White House, "Fact Sheet: The Obama Administration's Comprehensive Efforts to Prevent Mass Atrocities Over the Past Year," May 1, 2013, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/fact_sheet_-_administration_efforts_to_prevent_mass_atrocities5.pdf; and Steven Pomper, "A Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention, Three Years On," April 30, 2015, <http://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/2015/04/a-comprehensive-approach-to-atrocity-prevention-three-years-on/>. For the USAID field manual, see USAID, *Field Guide: Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities*, April 2015, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Field%20Guide%20Mass%20Atrocities.pdf>. For more on USG training on atrocity prevention and the potential to do more, see Charles J. Brown, "An Assessment of USG Atrocity Prevention Training Programs," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, January 2016, <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/03282016-USG-Atrocity-Prevention-Training-Assessment.pdf>.

²⁸² Executive Order 13729.

²⁸³ Finkel, "Moving Beyond the Crossroads," 140.

Despite the Board's relative success in implementing reforms, there is still much that the next Administration could do to strengthen US atrocity prevention and response policy and mechanisms. A good start would be to reaffirm the recent executive order and amend it to provide the APB with the necessary funds and authority to determine rather than merely advise on policy. In addition, the next Administration should explicitly include the APB in its preliminary directive outlining how it intends to organize the National Security Council.²⁸⁴

There are also a number of other steps that the next Administration could take to help ensure that atrocity prevention and response is an integral component of US foreign and national security policy.²⁸⁵

1. *Strengthen the APB's ability to force action.* Today, the APB is largely a hortatory body, reduced to monitoring "potential or ongoing violence that might escape focused attention in existing policy fora," as Under Secretary of State Sarah Sewall put it in March 2015.²⁸⁶ Tracking crises is all well and good, but doing so without being able to bring its concerns to senior officials is the policy equivalent of whistling in the wind. Given that it is unlikely that APB meetings will again attract senior officials the way they did when Power was Chair, the Board should be given the explicit authority to request a Deputies Committee meeting whenever it believes a country of concern is not receiving sufficient attention, particularly in those cases where the relevant regional experts do not share the Board's view.

In theory, that capability already exists: the new Executive Order mandates that Deputies "meet at least twice a year . . . to review and direct the Board's work."²⁸⁷ This provision should be revised to permit the APB to seek DC-level reviews of countries of particular concern without requiring signoff from regional experts. Such a move also could have the effect of forcing regional bureaus

²⁸⁴ Every Administration issues a preliminary directive on how the National Security Council will be organized to communicate "presidential decisions about national security policies of the United States." In the Clinton Administration, they were called Presidential Decision Directives; in the George W. Bush Administration, they were National Security Decision Directives; in the Obama Administration, they have been called Presidential Policy Directives. Quote from White House, Presidential Policy Directive 1, "Organization of the National Security Council System," February 13, 2009, <http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/ppd/ppd-1.pdf>.

²⁸⁵ In addition to the recommendations that follow, I want to endorse the specific recommendations in Finkel, "Atrocity Prevention at the Crossroads" and "Moving beyond the Crossroads" as well as those yet-to-be implemented recommendations of the PSD-10 study and Albright and Cohen, *Preventing Genocide*.

²⁸⁶ Sewall: Council on Foreign Relations, "Charting the U.S. Atrocities Prevention Board's Progress: A Conversation With Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Sarah Sewall," (video), March 30, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/charting-us-atrocities-prevention-boards-progress/p36332>.

²⁸⁷ Executive Order 13729. A similar recommendation was included in the PSD-10 report but, as far as is known, was not implemented. Although Deputies have reportedly met on countries of concern to the APB, the twice-yearly review meetings have not happened. White House, "Fact Sheet: A Comprehensive Strategy and New Tools to Prevent and Respond to Atrocities," April 23, 2012, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/23/fact-sheet-comprehensive-strategy-and-new-tools-prevent-and-respond-atro>.

and offices to take the APB more seriously: if they knew that the APB could go over their heads, they would be more amenable to seeking effective solutions rather than blocking every action.

2. *Give Embassies the capacity they need to track and respond to crises.* The decision to close the US embassy in Bangui had a profoundly negative impact on the timing and scope of the US intervention. But even if the embassy had remained open, it would not have had the resources it needed to mobilize or manage a more effective on-the-ground response. Unsurprisingly, this is not uncommon: the very countries that, according to Sewall, the APB should be tracking most closely are also the ones where the United States has the most inadequately funded and staffed missions.²⁸⁸ The State Department's post-Benghazi instinct to draw down embassy personnel when a country is at risk of atrocities means that even those missions with the existing capacity to monitor a crisis often find themselves short-staffed at the very moment that the APB is pushing for greater attention and action.

Although the Department's desire to protect its personnel is laudable – and its increased risk aversion post-Benghazi understandable – it should be *surging* personnel and resources (including additional security) into at-risk countries, not drawing them down. To its credit, the Obama Administration proposed to do just that when it moved to reopen the American embassy in Bangui, requesting \$60 million to fund both additional security and personnel. As a result of Congressional objections, however, State subsequently cut that figure to \$40 million. Although the precise breakdown of those funds is not publicly available, it is very unlikely that the \$20 million cut came out of the security budget.²⁸⁹

3. *Use the power of the podium early and often.* It is unclear why, but no senior Obama Administration official engaged either Bozizé or Djotodia until December 2013, long after both

²⁸⁸ According to the Department's 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Report, "More than 25 percent of State and USAID's personnel serve in the 30 countries classified as highest risk for conflict and instability." However, the vast majority of these are serving in a handful of countries – including Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria – where the United States has an outsized presence. Many of the remaining embassies on the list have more in common with CAR: small missions with limited budgets and personnel. See State and USAID, *Leading through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (hereafter QDDR-2010), 2010, p. 122, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/153108.pdf>.

²⁸⁹ There are other things that the State Department could do to help ensure that embassies are prepared for potential atrocity crises: mandate that embassies in countries at-risk of mass atrocities track and regularly report on risk factors; require that personnel deploying to those countries take a mandatory course on how to identify, anticipate, and prevent atrocities; and provide additional incentives to encourage Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) to deploy to such posts. Doing so could help draw talent to missions in high-risk countries that have traditionally struggled to retain a full complement of FSOs or have been regarded as career killers. Salary-based incentives are not the only example, but they are illustrative. Current danger pay allowance rates – which provide a bonus as a percentage of the FSO's salary – are slanted in favor of those countries where the United States is heavily engaged in counter-terrorism activities. As of February 2015, FSOs posted in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen earned a 35 percent danger pay allowance. Their colleagues in Somalia and Libya (before its closure) received 30 percent. Those in Bangui received only 20 percent. See "Snapshot: The State Department's Danger Pay Locations (as of February 2015)," *Diplopondit* (blog), February 18, 2015, <http://diplopondit.net/2015/02/18/snapshot-the-state-departments-danger-pay-assignments-as-of-february-2015/>.

the Séléka and anti-balaka were out of control.²⁹⁰ No one above Wohlers and Brown engaged ECCAS until after the regional body unilaterally dismissed Djotodia. Although the State Department repeatedly issued official statements saying the United States was “concerned” or “deeply concerned,” no senior White House official ever stepped up to a podium or called a reporter to convey the message that the United States would not tolerate atrocities.²⁹¹ There was no public threat to sanction those responsible until January 2014. The reasons for this reluctance remain opaque, especially given the White House’s subsequent willingness in July 2013 to use similar tactics in South Sudan, where public statements by senior officials in the summer of 2013 may have helped avert a mass atrocity event in Jonglei state.²⁹²

4. *Strengthen the link between APB’s early warning efforts and US assistance to fragile states.* As far as is known, the APB has largely avoided involving itself in determinations on where the United States should invest its limited bilateral foreign assistance dollars, focusing instead on working the margins to shave off small sums to fund short-term needs. Given that more than 60 percent of US foreign assistance goes to roughly fifty countries “in the midst of, recovering from, or trying to prevent conflict or state failure,” it is surprising that the APB has not explored how its own early warning efforts could be used to inform USG decision-making on assistance to fragile states.²⁹³

For the APB, wading into debates over foreign aid budgets will be a difficult, time-consuming, and often contentious process; those responsible for determining how aid is divided will resist yet another voice at the table. But if the APB wants to make a genuine difference in the way the USG thinks about atrocity prevention, it should more closely examine how State, USAID, and DoD prioritize development and security assistance (particularly that going to fragile states), and then push agencies to include atrocity prevention as a key factor in evaluating results. Connecting APB analysis and advocacy to tangible resources also can help rationalize foreign assistance decision-making and help sell Congressional appropriators on its importance.

5. *Fully fund the few USAID and State Department programs used to respond to crises.* Similarly, the APB needs to be more engaged in the internal and Congressional debates on funding innovative cross-regional programs that have been used effectively in CAR and other crises. Every year, the Complex Crises Fund (CCF) – which represents roughly one-tenth of 1 percent of the

²⁹⁰ Even then, it was Power calling from New York, not Obama, Kerry, or Rice, who called Djotodia. See USUN, “Readout of Ambassador Power’s Call with Central African Republic Transitional President Michel Djotodia,” December 8, 2013, <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/5903>.

²⁹¹ Although Power began to tweet and speak out in September 2013, it reflected her own interest and concern, not a broader US decision to engage.

²⁹² For more on the White House’s use of public shaming in South Sudan, see “Mark Landler, “U.S. Pushes for Global Eye in South Sudan Conflict,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/us/us-pushes-for-global-eye-on-south-sudan-conflict.html>.

²⁹³ QDDR-2010, 122.

overall USAID budget – has faced intense budgetary pressure even within the Obama Administration.²⁹⁴ It could benefit greatly from a strong internal advocate. As one former senior official put it, “The bottom line is that there’s not enough flexible money that can be invested into non-humanitarian programs. Yet programs like the CCF are always the first to get cut.”²⁹⁵

What makes this particularly absurd is that Congress regularly tries to slash CCF (and similar programs) but rarely objects to authorizing hundreds of millions of dollars for peace operations and reconstruction in post-conflict situations. As a former APB member said, “We’ve spent \$1 billion [in CAR] and conditions on the ground are not substantially different. We would have been much better off spending one-tenth of what we did before the crisis. But let’s say we had. What would Congress have said? Does anyone really think they would have gone along with it?”²⁹⁶

The challenge is that programs like the CCF are drawn on only as needed, which can result in unused funds at the end of the year – the budgetary equivalent of a mortal sin in a restrictive fiscal environment where failure to spend is regarded as sufficient justification to cut a program’s funding. As one former official acknowledged, “If you’re going to take atrocity prevention seriously, you’re going to have to budget for it. The problem is that [atrocities crises] are rare events. If you budget for it [and nothing happens], you’re going to leave money on the table, and Congress is going to notice.”²⁹⁷

6. More closely link support for peacekeeping operations to atrocity prevention efforts. Eighteen months after MINUSCA assumed control of peacekeeping operations, there are still not enough peacekeepers to end the violence in CAR. The force remains undermanned and frequently overmatched – so much so that former interim CAR President Catherine Samba-Panza regularly complained of its ineffectiveness. Credible reports that French and African peacekeepers raped Central African children in their care has led to the withdrawal of implicated units, further shrinking the number of available troops. More critically, it has badly damaged MINUSCA’s credibility, making it exponentially more difficult for the remaining peacekeepers to do their job. The French decision to withdraw its contingent – leaving the UN stuck with the bill, just as US officials had feared – has only made matters worse.

This points to a fundamental question: Why was the Obama Administration unable to push other partner militaries to deploy sufficiently trained units to participate in MISCA and MINUSCA? When the White House decided to provide materiel and airlift support for MISCA, officials had to

²⁹⁴ PPWG, “Letter to Members of the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations,” March 2, 2016, copy provided to author.

²⁹⁵ Lindborg, interview.

²⁹⁶ Interview with US official, June 2015.

²⁹⁷ Interview with former US official, January 2016.

scramble to identify countries that were willing to deploy their forces – and had battalions with the necessary capability and experience. Ultimately only Burundi and Rwanda met those criteria. The same thing happened in the period between April 2014, when the Security Council authorized MINUSCA, and September, when it finally deployed. Although the United States was able to convince some non-African countries to contribute units, it did not succeed in securing enough commitments to ensure that sufficient troops were deployed. Since then, the UN force has continually struggled to maintain a full contingent. Both the UN’s decision to expel units implicated in the child rape scandal and the French decision to withdraw its forces have exacerbated the shortfall, but they did not cause it.

In August 2014, the Administration announced one possible solution: the African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership (APRRP), which is designed to help ensure that six key ACOTA partner militaries (Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda) have “forces and equipment ready to rapidly deploy and state their intent to deploy as part of UN or AU missions to respond to emerging crises.”²⁹⁸ As Paul D. Williams has noted, the explicit purpose of APRRP is “to fill one of the most commonly cited peacekeeping needs: rapidity of effective deployment in crises when the difference between deploying a force in two weeks or six months could mean tens of thousands of lives.”²⁹⁹ Had a successful APRRP program been in place in 2013, it could have played an important role in surging additional troops into CAR. That said, the APRRP has not addressed gaps in the six partners’ existing airlift/transport capabilities – a mission component that the United States had to provide not only in the deployment of Burundian and Rwandan battalions to CAR but also during the 2013 French-AU operation in Mali.³⁰⁰

It also remains unclear whether the APB has input on which troop contributing countries’ units are trained and otherwise supported. If it is not already doing so, the Board should work with State and DoD officials to prioritize training for those militaries with sufficient capacity located in close proximity to countries currently identified as at significant risk of mass atrocities. APRRP is a good start, but as Williams points out, it the six targeted militaries may not have any additional capacity to surge support beyond that they already are providing.³⁰¹ In addition, APRRP is Africa-centric at a time when some of the worst current or potential atrocity events are taking place elsewhere. The Board should examine whether there are ways to address these concerns. It also should aggressively push for increased funding, both for APRRP (whose budget does not match its ambitions) and more traditional ACOTA programming.

²⁹⁸ White House, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Support for Peacekeeping in Africa,” White House, August 6, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-us-supportpeacekeeping-africa>, as quoted in Williams, *Enhancing US Support for Peace Operations in Africa*, 21

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ The USG did provide one C-130 transport to the Ethiopian army. Williams, email to author, February 2016.

³⁰¹ Williams, *Enhancing US Support for Peace Operations*, 22.

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.

Cover: Rwandan soldiers serve in the African Union mission known as MISCA. March 2014.
Michael Christopher Brown



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