

## **U.S. Promises on Darfur Don't Match Actions**

Bush Expresses Passion for Issue, but Policies Have Been Inconsistent

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In April 2006, a small group of Darfur activists -- including evangelical Christians, the representative of a Jewish group and a former Sudanese slave -- was ushered into the Roosevelt Room at the [White House](#) for a private meeting with [President Bush](#). It was the eve of a major rally on the [National Mall](#), and the president spent more than an hour holding forth, displaying a kind of passion that has led some in the White House to dub him the "[Sudan](#) desk officer."

Bush insisted there must be consequences for rape and murder, and he called for international troops on the ground to protect innocent Darfuris, according to contemporaneous notes by one of those present. He spoke of "bringing justice" to the [Janjaweed](#), the Arab militias that have participated in atrocities that the president has repeatedly described as nothing less than "genocide."

"He had an understanding of the issue that went beyond simply responding to a briefing that had been given," said David Rubenstein, a participant who was then executive director of the Save Darfur Coalition, which has been sharply critical of the administration's response to the crisis. "He knew more facts than I expected him to know, and he had a broader political perspective than I expected him to have."

Yet a year and a half later, the situation on the ground in [Darfur](#) is little changed: More than 2 million displaced Darfuris, including hundreds of thousands in camps, have been unable to return to their homes. The perpetrators of the worst atrocities remain unpunished. Despite a renewed [U.N.](#) push, the international peacekeeping troops that Bush has long been seeking have yet to materialize.

Just this weekend, peace talks in [Libya](#) aimed at ending the four-year conflict appeared to be foundering because of a boycott by key rebel groups.

Many of those who have tracked the conflict over the years, including some in his own administration, say Bush has not matched his words with action, allowing initiatives to drop because of inertia or failure to follow up, while proving unable to mobilize either his bureaucracy or the international community.

The president who famously promised not to allow another [Rwanda](#)-style mass murder on his watch has never fully chosen between those inside his government advocating more pressure on Sudan and those advocating engagement with its Islamist government, so the policy has veered from one approach to another.

Meanwhile, a constant turnover of key administration advisers on Darfur, such as former deputy secretary of state [Robert B. Zoellick](#) and presidential aide [Michael Gerson](#), has made it hard for the administration to maintain focus.

"Bush probably does want something done, but the lack of hands-on follow-up from this White House allowed this to drift," said one former [State Department](#) official involved in Darfur who did not want to be quoted by name criticizing the president. "If he says, 'There is not going to be genocide on my watch,' and then 2 1/2 years later we are just getting tough action, what gives? He has made statements, but his administration has not given meaning to those statements."

Since the United States became the first and only government to call the killing in Darfur genocide, Bush and his aides have grappled with how to provide security for civilians in a large, remote area in the heart of [Africa](#).

While almost everyone involved in Darfur policy agrees that an [African Union](#) peacekeeping force of just 7,000 troops is not up to the task, the United States has refused to send troops and, despite promises of reinforcements, has yet to secure many additional troops from other countries. At the same time, it has been unable to broker a diplomatic resolution that might ease the violence.

Even Bush has complained privately that his hands are tied on Darfur because, with the U.S. involvement in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#), he cannot be seen as "invading another Muslim country," according to people who have spoken with him about the issue.

"It's impossible to keep Iraq out of this picture," said Edward Mortimer, who served as a top aide to then-U.N. Secretary General [Kofi Annan](#) and says resentment over Iraq caused many countries to not want to cooperate with the United States on Darfur.

Bush advisers argue that the lack of success reflects the limitations of working through institutions such as the United Nations, [NATO](#) and the African Union. They cite the billions of dollars of U.S. relief aid that has kept millions of Sudanese alive. They say U.S. pressure has kept the issue on the world's agenda.

"If there was ever a case study where the president sees the limitations and frustrations of the multilateral organizations, it is the issue of Darfur," said [Dan Bartlett](#), former White House counselor. "Everybody for the most part can come to a consensus: Whether you call it genocide or not, we have an urgent security and humanitarian crisis on our hands. Yet these institutions cannot garner the will or ability to come together to save people."

There is no doubt that responsibility for inaction on Darfur can be spread around. The Sudanese government has resisted cooperation at every step in the saga and has been shielded at the United Nations by [China](#), its main international protector. Few other Western nations, with the notable exception of [Britain](#) and some [Nordic countries](#), have shown much interest in resolving the crisis. The process of raising peacekeepers from U.N. members has proved tortuously slow.

"There's an enormous stain on the world's conscience," said Mitchell B. Reiss, former State Department policy planning chief. "We collectively stood by and let it happen a decade after it happened in Rwanda."

### **A President's Passion**

In late 2005, Bush gathered his most senior advisers to discuss what to do about Darfur. He wanted to know whether the [U.S. military](#) could send in helicopter gunships to attack the militias if they launched new attacks on the refugee camps. Could they also shoot down Sudanese military aircraft if necessary? he asked. His aides worried that the United States could get involved in another shooting war, and the president backed off.

"He wanted militant action, and people had to restrain him," said one senior official familiar with the episode. "He wanted to go in and kill the Janjaweed."

The meeting underscored both Bush's personal investment in Sudan, dating back to the beginning of his administration, and his instinct, which aides have kept in check, to take direct action.

Many close to Bush believe that this intense interest in the issue was heavily influenced by American evangelicals, who have adopted the cause of Christians in southern Sudan. Even before the crisis in Darfur, in western Sudan, one of Bush's foreign policy goals was to try to end the civil war between the Muslim government in [Khartoum](#) and rebels in the south, a conflict that had lasted more than two decades and cost more than 2 million lives.

Former senator John C. Danforth (R-Mo.), whom Bush appointed as his special envoy for Sudan, said the president's interest in the country is rooted in a larger sense of morality. "This isn't a country that has much strategic interest for the United States," he observed.

Bush's initiative to broker a north-south deal worked. Despite difficult negotiations, Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir agreed in January 2005 to a plan to share power and oil revenues with the rebels -- and even gave the south the right to secede in six years if the leadership could not reconcile their differences.

But by then a separate conflict had exploded in Darfur, as long-standing conflicts between African farmers and Arab herders over land, and a failure by the Khartoum government to redress local grievances, boiled over into armed rebellion.

The government turned to a tactic it had employed in fighting the southern rebels: arming local Arab militias, the Janjaweed, to carry out a counterinsurgency on its behalf. The militias rampaged throughout Darfur starting in mid-2003, burning hundreds of villages, raping women and summarily executing African villagers, according to numerous human rights reports. More than 200,000 people have died in Darfur since the crisis erupted, according to U.N. estimates. Some estimates place the figure as high as 450,000.

Many familiar with Sudan believe that Bush and his aides initially averted their gaze to the flaring violence in Darfur because raising the issue might interfere with the difficult negotiations with Bashir. Some U.S. officials saw another reason for the reluctance to get involved: preserving a burgeoning intelligence relationship with Khartoum, which had begun sharing critical information about [al-Qaeda](#) and other Islamic extremists.

"There was a tendency not to see Darfur initially for what it was," said Gerard Gallucci, who served in 2003 and 2004 as the top U.S. diplomat in Khartoum. It was well known among Western governments, he said, that Sudan "was using terror to cleanse black Muslim Africans from land that they had promised the Janjaweed."

Such claims are vigorously contested by Danforth and other Bush advisers, who say the president repeatedly warned Bashir about the consequences of sending Arab militias after defenseless civilians.

Over time, Bush has become increasingly outspoken about the situation in Darfur, raising the issue with foreign leaders and meeting privately with dissidents and other little-known political players in Sudan to encourage a solution. In recent months, he has singled out Bashir for harsh condemnation, accusing him of subverting efforts to bring peace to Darfur.

Meeting with the Darfur activists, Bush acknowledged that Sudan had cooperated in anti-terrorism initiatives -- but he insisted that Khartoum could not "buy off" the United States, Rubenstein said.

Last spring, when the White House worked on a new plan to try to press Sudan's government to accept international peacekeepers, it was the president himself who was the driving force in the interagency process, many officials involved in the debate said. According to national security adviser [Stephen J. Hadley](#), Bush refused to accept a program developed to confront Sudan because he was concerned that it was not tough enough. He kicked it back to the bureaucracy.

"I've had it with this incrementalism," Hadley quoted the president as saying in the Oval Office. "We're going to lead, and if people don't want to follow us, they're going to have to stand up and explain why they are willing to let women continue to be raped in Darfur."

At one point, one senior official said, Bush wanted action to crimp Sudan's booming oil business, a move that would have severely aggravated relations with China -- and that no one else in the government favored.

There was stunned silence in the room, the official said, when Hadley disclosed Bush's idea to other government officials. Hadley made clear he was not interested in having a discussion, but the administration never went as far as the president seemed to be demanding. Instead, Treasury officials came up with a sanctions plan aimed at tracking

and squeezing key individuals and companies in the Sudanese economy, including the oil business.

## **Wary of Sending Troops**

At an appearance in [Tennessee](#) this summer, Bush raised a question many have asked about the situation in Darfur: "If there is a problem, why don't you just go take care of it?" But Bush said he considered -- and decided against -- sending U.S. troops unilaterally. "It just wasn't the right decision," he said.

With the United States tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan, skepticism about using U.S. soldiers, even in a limited way, cut across agencies and bodies that often disagree, from the State Department to [the Pentagon](#) to [Vice President Cheney's](#) office, according to many current and former officials.

Advisers say Bush came to accept, albeit grudgingly, the arguments against using U.S. military assets -- especially the possibility that they might attract al-Qaeda. "In my mind, there would never be enough troops to impose order on this place," former secretary of state [Colin L. Powell](#) said in an interview. "The only way to resolve this problem was for there to be a political settlement between the rebels and the government."

Sharing this belief was Powell's bureaucratic nemesis, then-Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#), who advocated sending troops to Iraq but not to the middle of Africa, according to many officials in the government.

This aversion to any use of force was frustrating to some lower-ranking government officials, who saw a modest U.S. military effort as indispensable to making the Sudanese take American diplomacy seriously. Early in the crisis, in the summer of 2004, the U.S. mission in Khartoum made clear to Washington its belief that the African Union was incapable of dealing with the security problem in Darfur on its own.

It recommended that several hundred U.S. troops help fly in African Union forces and provide other assistance, according to a former State Department official. The idea was never seriously entertained, the official said, and it was not until two years later that the United States began making efforts at the United Nations to bolster the overmatched African mission.

Roger Winter, a former State Department official who was intimately involved with Sudan policy during the Bush administration, argues that the United States has never been serious about pressuring the Sudanese government. "They know what we will do and what we won't do," he said. "And they don't respond unless there is a credible threat. And they haven't viewed everything that has happened up until now as credible."

## **Carrots vs. Sticks**

Over the course of the conflict, Bush has found himself torn between different factions in his administration over how to handle Sudan -- whether, simply put, to try carrots or sticks.

In early 2006, Bush empowered Zoellick to seek a peace deal between Khartoum and the Darfur rebel groups. Zoellick, now president of the [World Bank](#), was essentially pursuing what one senior U.S. official described as a policy of engagement with the Sudanese government, even though the Bush administration believed it was involved in perpetrating the atrocities in Darfur.

Zoellick worked closely with senior Sudanese officials and dangled the possibility of improved relations and other incentives should Khartoum cooperate in bringing peace to Darfur. And he came close to pulling it off: An agreement to end the violence was negotiated in the spring of 2006, but it fell apart after key rebel leaders refused to sign on.

Some U.S. officials say Bush never completely bought into Zoellick's approach. He seems to have been influenced in that regard by Gerson, the then-speechwriter who was given a wide-ranging policy berth in the early part of Bush's second term.

Gerson, now a [Washington Post](#) columnist, is a devout Christian who was especially animated by the part of the Bush agenda that focused on alleviating suffering in Africa. He traveled to Sudan with Zoellick in late 2005, a trip that included a meeting with Bashir, and came back convinced that Khartoum was not seriously interested in efforts to improve conditions in Darfur.

"There was always a series of incremental steps, and nothing changed on the ground," Gerson said later.

Returning to Washington, Gerson told Bush that Bashir was feeling no pressure to cooperate and that the African Union peacekeepers were not up to the task of protecting civilians. He also suggested that it might be useful to establish a no-fly zone to prevent the Sudanese government from flying bombing missions in support of Janjaweed attacks.

Several months later, Gerson sent Bush some articles criticizing the U.S. approach as anemic, and Bush summoned his aide to the Oval Office, a little hot under the collar because he did not agree with the criticism. But he assured Gerson, as the former aide remembers, "I want you to know we are acting on this."

In February 2006, Bush proposed using NATO forces to help quickly bolster the beleaguered African Union mission. The president seemed so excited about the idea that he mentioned it, almost casually, in response to a question about [Uganda](#) during a public appearance in [Florida](#). The statement stunned some in the U.S. bureaucracy.

But even Bush's efforts to promote the idea did little to move the process along. The French were leery of a new NATO mission outside its normal sphere of operations, and there was no interest from Sudan or the African Union in a major role for this

quintessentially Western military alliance, according to U.S. officials. The plan went nowhere.

Now, 20 months later, with Zoellick and Gerson gone, new administration figures are working with other countries on new plans for peace and peacekeepers in Darfur. Given the track record, those who have handled Darfur over the years are cautious.

"Overall," concluded [John R. Bolton](#), the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, "Sudan is a case where there's a lot of international rhetoric and no stomach for real action."