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A Wimp on Genocide

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President Bush doesn't often find common cause with Cuba, Zimbabwe, Iran, Syria and Venezuela. But this month the Bush administration joined with those countries and others to eviscerate a forthright U.N. statement that nations have an obligation to respond to genocide.

It was our own Axis of Medieval, and it reflected the feckless response of President Bush to genocide in Darfur. It's not that he favors children being tossed onto bonfires or teenage girls being gang-raped and mutilated, but he can't bother himself to try very hard to stop these horrors, either.

It's been a year since Mr. Bush - ahead of other world leaders, and to his credit - acknowledged that genocide was unfolding in Darfur. But since then he has used that finding of genocide not to spur action but to substitute for it.

Mr. Bush's position in the U.N. negotiations got little attention. But in effect the United States successfully blocked language in the declaration saying that countries have an "obligation" to respond to genocide. In the end the declaration was diluted to say that "We are prepared to take collective action ... on a case by case basis" to prevent genocide.

That was still an immensely important statement. But it's embarrassing that in the 21st century, we can't even accept a vague obligation to fight genocide as we did in the Genocide Convention of 1948. If the Genocide Convention were proposed today, President Bush apparently would fight to kill it.

I can't understand why Mr. Bush is soft on genocide, particularly because his political base - the religious right - has been one of the groups leading the campaign against genocide in Darfur. As the National Association of Evangelicals noted in a reproachful statement about Darfur a few days ago, the Bush administration "has made minimal progress protecting millions of victims of the world's worst humanitarian crisis."

Incredibly, the Bush administration has even emerged as Sudan's little helper, threatening an antigencide campaigner in an effort to keep him quiet. Brian Steidle, a former Marine captain, served in Darfur as a military adviser - and grew heartsick at seeing corpses of children who'd been bludgeoned to death.

In March, I wrote a column about Mr. Steidle and separately published photos that he had taken of men, women and children hacked to death. Other photos were too wrenching to publish: one showed a pupil at the Suleia Girls School; she appeared to have been burned alive, probably after being raped, and her charred arms were still in handcuffs.

Mr. Steidle is an American hero for blowing the whistle on the genocide. But, according to Mr. Steidle, the State Department has ordered him on three occasions to stop showing the photos, for fear of complicating our relations with Sudan. Mr. Steidle has also been told that he has been blacklisted from all U.S. government jobs.

The State Department should be publicizing photos of atrocities to galvanize the international community against the genocide - not conspiring with Sudan to cover them up.

I'm a broken record on Darfur because I can't get out of my head the people I've met there. On my very first visit, 18 months ago, I met families who were hiding in the desert from the militias and soldiers. But the only place to get water was at the occasional well - where soldiers would wait to shoot the men who showed up, and rape the women. So anguished families sent their youngest children, 6 or 7 years old, to the wells with donkeys to fetch water - because they were least likely to be killed or raped. The parents hated themselves for doing this, but they had no choice - they had been abandoned by the world.

That's the cost of our passivity. Perhaps it's unfair to focus so much on Mr. Bush, for there are no neat solutions and he has done more than most leaders. He at least dispatched Condi Rice to Darfur this summer - which is more interest in genocide than the TV anchors have shown.

One group, www.beawitness.org, prepared a television commercial scolding the networks for neglecting the genocide - and affiliates of NBC, CBS and ABC all refused to run it.

Still, the failures of others do not excuse Mr. Bush's own unwillingness to speak out, to impose a no-fly zone, to appoint a presidential envoy or to build an international coalition to pressure Sudan. So, Mr. Bush, let me ask you just one question: Since you portray yourself as a bold leader, since you pride yourself on your willingness to use blunt terms like "evil" - then why is it that you're so wimpish on genocide?

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