

# Could President Bush Have Said More about Genocide?

by Lawrence Woocher

Feb. 6, 2006

Competition among presidential advisors and cabinet officials seeking to insert language into the [State of the Union](#) address is famously fierce. The speech is a unique opportunity to broadcast a message on virtually any public issue directly from the president's lips to the eyes and ears of millions of Americans and citizens around the world. Proposed paragraphs are quickly whittled down to single sentences and short phrases. Many worthy ideas get no mention at all.

In this context, it is notable that President George W. Bush uttered the word "genocide" in his State of the Union address on January 31. Only Harry S. Truman before him used the word in a State of the Union address when, in 1950, [he cited](#) the "Convention on Genocide" as evidence of the vital work of the United Nations.

More than half a century later, President Bush said, "We show compassion abroad because Americans believe in the God-given dignity and worth of a villager with HIV/AIDS, or an infant with malaria, or a refugee fleeing genocide, or a young girl sold into slavery."

It is doubtful that "genocide" was included in this sentence because of a speechwriter's rhetorical judgment. More likely, it survived the 30-plus drafts of the speech because someone in the president's foreign policy circle advocated for it skillfully. For Americans who believe the US—as the sole superpower and an ardent proponent of liberal values—has a unique responsibility in preventing genocide, its inclusion in the address may be a small sign of progress.

At best, however, it is meager progress. Referring to genocide in passing, as part of a recitation of issues for which "we show compassion," indicates that preventing genocide barely cracks the Bush administration's list of foreign policy priorities.

Given the continuing violence in the Darfur region of Sudan—[which President Bush himself has said constitutes genocide](#)—it would not have been a great stretch for the president to say far more than he did. He could have strongly condemned the mass rape, killing and forced displacement of Darfuri civilians and pledged US leadership in forging a renewed international response. This would not have begun to solve the complex problems in Darfur, but it would have made a difference. In a single paragraph, the president could have focused world attention on the deteriorating crisis in a way that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, human rights groups and student activists simply cannot.

There is no easy or costless solution to the situation in Darfur. Though local Darfuri tribes have suffered the worst by far, both the government-supported militias and rebel groups have committed brutal crimes. Attempts to foster a negotiated political solution

are stalled. This should not, however, be a recipe for silence, neglect or band-aid solutions. The international community has the means to provide greater security; without such a strengthened global effort, many more will die.

The minimal security that civilians in Darfur currently enjoy is provided by a 7,000 strong African Union (AU) force, which was deployed with logistical support from Western states, including the US. The effectiveness of the AU Mission in Sudan has been limited from the start by its relatively small numbers (Darfur is the size of Texas), its lack of a robust mandate to protect civilians and its modest military capabilities. More acutely troubling, the AU will exhaust all of its funds for the mission by the end of March. Unless action is taken to reinforce or replace the AU security force in Darfur, tens of thousands will be further imperiled.

The most promising strategy is to transition the AU force to a UN operation. Even [the AU has come to accept this](#), albeit grudgingly. A transition to the UN would at least put the operation on firmer institutional and financial footing. To protect civilians effectively, the new force needs to be substantially larger, more agile and have a stronger mandate.

The Security Council took a first step in this direction on February 3, when US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton issued a [statement](#) as president of the council requesting the secretary-general “to initiate contingency planning without delay...on a range of options for a possible transition from AMIS to a United Nations operation.” Assistant Secretary of State Kristin Silverberg indicated that the US anticipates “a [robust, strong Chapter VII mandate](#)” for civilian protection, and an expansion in the number of troops on the ground.

Sudan and its friends on the Security Council—China and Russia among them—will almost surely see force expansion and strengthening of its mandate as confrontational and resist, as they have opposed forceful measures in the past. Vigorous and creative American diplomacy will be crucial in gaining Khartoum’s consent and support from other Security Council member governments.

President Bush could have eased the difficult diplomatic tasks ahead by making a bold statement in his State of the Union address. Just a few choice words would have further energized sympathetic governments and human rights advocates while signaling to the rest of the world that genocide rises to the level of presidential importance. Having passed up an opportunity to communicate to the world America’s commitment to ending genocide in Darfur in words, it is now up to President Bush to demonstrate US leadership through swift and determined action.

*Mr. Woocher is UNA-USA’s program manager for Global Policy Programs.*

United Nations Association of the United States of America