The Rwandan Genocide of 1994: A Comparison of Why the United Kingdom and the United States Did Not Intervene

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The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is unquestionably one of the most horrific events of the late twentieth century; in the space of one hundred days, at least 750,000 men, women and children were killed. The literature largely concentrates on condemning the international community for failing to intervene to stop the genocide in a more timely and robust manner, but the subject has received relatively little attention in studies of British foreign policy. Whilst there is existing literature relating to the US response, including works by Samantha Power, Holly Burkhalter and Jared Cohen, the British response to events in Rwanda has been largely ignored, and what there is misinterprets the actions and motives of the British government. As Mark Curtis suggests in rather emotive language, Rwanda ‘has been apparently written out of [British foreign policy] history [and] there has been’, he continues, ‘complete silence by the media and academics [on] Britain’s role in the slaughter’. This paper investigates how the US and British governments shaped and reacted to UN Security Council debates on Rwanda, compares the responses of the two governments to the genocide and addresses the issue of why they apparently remained passive throughout the killing.

The criticism of the international community

With very few exceptions, the existing literature is critical of the international community’s response to the events of 1994. Recalling the Genocide Convention of 1948, Ingvar Carlsson notes, ‘[t]he members of the Security Council have a particular responsibility, morally if not explicitly under the Convention, to react when faced with a situation of genocide’ and they failed to do so in Rwanda. Similarly, Linda Melvern suggests that, having established a peace-keeping mission in the country in 1993, the UN had a responsibility to stop the genocide when it

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began in 1994 but did not even try. Amongst all members of the international community, the USA, along with France, is held up for special criticism for failing to intervene earlier or for not having done more to halt the killing in Rwanda. Holly Burkhalter writes: ‘The Clinton Administration, facing what was the clearest case of genocide in fifty years, responded by downplaying the crisis diplomatically and impeding effective intervention by UN forces to stop the killing’. Even more critically, Cohen finds that ‘the US role was monumental in the collective failure and its moral shortcoming was substantial’. Whilst criticism of the United Kingdom’s lack of response is less widespread, the government of John Major is also held up as having failed the people of Rwanda. General Romeo Dallaire, who commanded the UN peace-keeping force in Rwanda, accuses both the American and British governments of ‘shirking their legal and moral responsibilities’ in Rwanda by failing to act sooner. Michael Barnett, an American academic and a secondee to the State Department in 1994, argued that ‘Britain fought against the initial push for intervention in April and then shifted position in May when it had overwhelming evidence of the genocide’.

In terms of motivation, it has been widely assumed since 1994 that British action, or perhaps more accurately inaction, was driven by the United States’ reluctance to become involved. Cohen, for example, suggests that the role of the United States is ‘essential to understanding the failure of major powers to intervene’. Whilst for some analysts like Mark Curtis, there is nothing unusual about the United Kingdom following the American lead—the Security Council, as he sees it, ‘is a tightly run ship organised by the British on behalf of the Americans’—this specific theory possibly arose out of UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s publicly stated belief that there was a deliberate ‘US effort to prevent the effective deployment of a UN force for Rwanda’, and that this blockage ‘succeeded with the strong support of Britain’. Both Alison Des Forges, the Human Rights Watch expert on Rwanda, and Richard Dowd, the current director of the Royal African Society, agree, suggesting that US policy was firmly

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6 BURKHALTER, op. cit., p. 44.
7 COHEN, op. cit., p. 3.
10 COHEN, op. cit., p. 3.
supported by the United Kingdom. Des Forges notes that throughout the early discussions at the Security Council, the American point of view was shared by other members ‘described as “Western” and “permanent”—a fairly unambiguous indication that here she means the United Kingdom. Dowden, more explicitly, states: ‘The US, backed by Britain and Belgium, forced the UN Security Council to cut the peace-keeping force as the genocide plan was rolled out across Rwanda’. Melvern and Williams also reach this conclusion and even suggest that both the United Kingdom and the United States were ‘demanding stringent cost-cutting’ at the UN following an escalation of peace-keeping missions in the previous five years, and that Rwanda was a victim of this cost-reduction process. The response to the crisis is then, for some, an example of what Henry Kissinger suggested is the best role for Britain in foreign policy: acting as an arm of the US administration. The existing literature, therefore, argues that the British representatives simply cast their votes on the Security Council as directed by the United States.

This article, however, contends that this interpretation is an over-simplification of the actual position of the United Kingdom. Firstly, it seeks to add to the scant work on Britain and Rwanda. Secondly, it seeks to understand what motivated the United States and the United Kingdom to respond in the way that they did. Finally, the paper challenges the assumption that the United Kingdom had no Rwanda policy independent of the United States. Although it is evident that neither the Major government nor the Clinton administration proactively intervened to stop the genocide, the two countries responded in quite different ways and with quite different motivations.

**Background to the crisis**

Formerly a Belgian colony, Rwanda gained its independence in 1962, but the end of empire was not a peaceful one. Throughout the colonial period, the Belgians had favoured the Tutsi minority, who made up only fifteen per cent of the population. In 1959, the Hutu majority rebelled: in a violent revolution, hundreds of Tutsi were murdered, thousands were forced to flee to refugee camps in neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania, and a new Hutu elite came to power. Despite some ethnic violence, the Hutu domination of Rwanda continued essentially unopposed until 1990. Then, in October of that year, in an effort to force a return to their homeland, and capitalising on the domestic disputes amongst the newly-legalised political parties in Rwanda, the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) crossed the border from bases in Uganda. The assault was only halted when a French commando unit, sent on the personal instructions of President François Mitterrand, reinforced the government’s army. The civil war between the RPF and

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the Rwandan government forces continued for the next three years, and the French military, on the orders of Mitterrand, slowly increased the number of 'advisers' sent to the country. Although French troops were not technically involved in the civil war, there are numerous eye-witness accounts of French soldiers directing artillery fire onto the RPF, flying military helicopters or manning check points across Rwanda.

In 1993, under pressure from regional leaders as well as the French and the US governments (both leading aid donors to Rwanda), the RPF and the Rwandan government met to negotiate a peace settlement. Due to the fact that the Rwandan government was largely represented by leaders of political parties opposed to the President but with seats in Cabinet, the settlement, known as the Arusha Accords, was not particularly favourable to the President and his supporters. At the request of the two parties, the UN agreed to send a peace-keeping force to Rwanda in October 1993 (the United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda—UNAMIR) and the French troops which were still in the country withdrew. UNAMIR was mandated to oversee the establishment of a transitional government and the merger of the two armies. However, by April 1994, little progress had been made towards either goal, and ethnic violence was openly escalating, particularly on the streets of Kigali, where unemployed youths were being formed into militias. On 6 April 1994, the plane of President Juvenal Habyarimana, flying home from a conference in Dar-es-Salam, was shot down. Immediately, a massacre of Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu began. Amongst the first victims of the killing spree were eleven Belgian peace-keepers serving with UNAMIR. Within days, all foreign nationals had been evacuated by French, Belgian and Italian paratroopers; the Belgian government announced that its troops would be withdrawn; and Bangladeshi troops within UNAMIR mutinied, refusing to leave their barracks. It was in these circumstances that the UN Security Council met to define a response to the crisis.

**UN Resolution 912—Disagreement on withdrawing UNAMIR**

Other than statements deploring the renewed violence and calling on both sides to return to the negotiating table, the first significant response from the UN Security Council came two weeks after the outbreak of violence and was, to the astonishment of experts familiar with Rwanda, a decision to reduce UNAMIR’s troop levels from 2,500 to approximately 270. Both the Americans and the British voted in favour of Resolution 912. But over the days preceding the vote, they demonstrated quite different approaches to the situation in Rwanda.

With violence flaring up across the country and the death of the Belgian peace-keepers, the Clinton administration immediately foresaw another ‘Somalia’. In October 1993, eighteen US Rangers, operating in the country as part of a UN-mandated peace-enforcement mission, had been killed in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, on a mission to capture a warlord accused of killing Pakistani peace-keepers a few months earlier. The horror of the deaths was magnified in the United States: images of a captured US pilot were first shown on Somali television, before footage of one dead soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu appeared on CNN. In response to this incident, and under immense public pressure, Clinton promised to withdraw all American troops from Somalia. The tendency to
fight the last war meant that the events in Rwanda so soon after this fiasco were viewed through a ‘Somali lens’, and the fear of another Mogadishu terrified American decision-makers, especially in the Pentagon. Viewing Rwanda through this lens, and taking into account the perceived limited short-term prospects for peace, as well as the apparent threat to UN peace-keepers, the US State Department concluded that the only feasible option was for UNAMIR to be withdrawn immediately. Instructions were sent to the US Ambassador to the UN, Madeleine Albright, on 15 April:

*Department has considered the prospect of additional wide scale conflict and violence in Rwanda, and the threat [...] to remaining foreign civilian and military personnel [...] Taking these factors into account Department believes that there is insufficient justification to retain a UN peace-keeping presence in Rwanda and that the international community must give highest priority to full, orderly withdrawal of all UNAMIR personnel as soon as possible.*

With no peace to keep and violence increasing, the State Department believed the mission would inevitably fail and this was seen as a threat to the reputation of UN peace-keeping. Another failed mission so soon after failure in Somalia, they concluded, would be fatal to the concept of UN peace-keeping.

The British, on the other hand, did not automatically support full withdrawal and instead called for various options to be considered. The British delegation at the UN suggested that there were four possible responses available to the Security Council: authorise a reinforcement of UNAMIR; maintain the status quo; withdraw UNAMIR completely; or partially withdraw, leaving a small UN force in the capital, Kigali. David Hannay, the United Kingdom’s Permanent Representative at the UN, conscious of the Belgian withdrawal from UNAMIR, concluded that maintaining the status quo was not a feasible option, and recognising the obvious US reluctance to become involved, was also realistic about the likelihood of reinforcing UNAMIR. Left with the option of either full or partial withdrawal, Hannay concluded that there was a role for UNAMIR in Rwanda, both to protect civilians and to facilitate new ceasefire talks. The United Kingdom delegation therefore argued strongly in favour of the fourth option—partial withdrawal only. Whereas the United States argued that anything short of full withdrawal risked damaging the reputation of the UN, the British maintained that a full withdrawal would instead highlight the impotence of UN peace-keeping and indicate to warring parties across the globe that killing a few western soldiers would automatically lead the UN to withdraw. In direct contradiction to the US view, Hannay therefore argued that to withdraw completely would harm the reputation of the UN.

Hannay recalls how he was approached by Madeleine Albright in the Security Council chamber before the vote on Resolution 912. Albright explained how she had been instructed to vote in favour of a full withdrawal. Hannay continues: ‘I said [to

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Madeleine Albright] I thought that would really not do. The peace-keeping force might not be able to carry on with its original mandate, but it might be able to perform some humanitarian tasks and to save lives. The UK would not be supporting any requests for a full withdrawal. Could she not get her instructions changed?18

Despite not fully appreciating the situation in Rwanda, the British realised that UNAMIR was doing key work in protecting civilians at a handful of sites across Kigali and that UNAMIR was well placed to negotiate between the warring parties. The British view prevailed. Albright, bypassing the State Department, phoned a senior official at the National Security Council: ‘I first asked them for more flexible instructions, then yelled into the phone, demanding them’.19 Albright eventually voted in favour of a partial, rather than a full and immediate, withdrawal. The intervention of David Hannay alone was probably not sufficient to change the American vote on Resolution 912, but it can certainly be said to have been timely and influential.

**Alternative views on UNAMIR II**

By early May, it was apparent to policy-makers across the world that what was happening in Rwanda was more than civil war spilling over into the deaths of civilians. There was by now clear evidence of genocide. In the first two weeks of May, opinion at the UN therefore began to shift and discussions on what should be done in Rwanda were renewed. Again, the United States and the United Kingdom had quite different approaches to this question.

Despite the evidence of genocide, Washington, and again especially the Pentagon, remained paralysed by the fear that the United States may actually have to become involved. Although there is ample evidence that the United States was fully aware of what was happening in the country and that some junior officials in the State Department were arguing for action, the US government appears to have made every effort to avoid its own involvement. Although options were considered, the response was always the same—there was a reason why direct US involvement should be avoided. In one example, the State Department briefly considered jamming Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, a privately-owned radio station which was broadcasting ferocious anti-Tutsi and genocidal propaganda across Rwanda. However, the idea was quickly rebutted by officials and military advisers at the Pentagon, who initially raised legal arguments against the right to free speech and was therefore in breach of the US constitution. A Department of Defense internal memorandum of 11 May highlights the fact that the Pentagon was simply not prepared to risk US military assets: ‘Joint Staff and we strongly object to signing up for open-ended missions that could lead to troops being in life-threatening situations

without proper arms’ or rules of engagement.\textsuperscript{20} The memo continues to suggest that it was not just US involvement that was opposed; the United States did not support any troops being deployed so that it would not, ultimately, have to rescue any mission sent to Rwanda.

The one option that the United States was willing to pursue at this stage was the establishment of safe havens in neighbouring countries. Under this option, UN troops would deploy to Tanzania and Burundi and would ensure the safety of any refugees that could make it to the protected areas—a plan Samantha Power has dubbed ‘outside-in’.\textsuperscript{21} Although no definitive offer was made, there was a clear implication that the US military would be willing to contribute to such a mission by providing airlift and logistical support. But despite the fact that this option was sponsored by the United States, it was not acceptable to the British. On 3 June, a Foreign Office telegram to the United Kingdom Mission at the UN in New York stated: ‘We are not clear where, for example, it is envisaged that the secure areas will be established given that massacres continue behind RGF [i.e. government] lines’\textsuperscript{22} David Hannay recalls his response to the American plan: ‘People were being killed inside Rwanda, not outside. You weren’t going to stop the genocide by operating in Uganda or Tanzania’.\textsuperscript{23} Hannay goes as far as to question whether even the Americans actually believed the outside-in strategy was a feasible idea, or whether it was just a diplomatic ploy to look less obstructive at the UN.

What the British were now championing, instead, was the deployment of a new reinforced UNAMIR II, made up of African troops. Whilst the US State Department had considered this idea briefly, the Pentagon had already concluded that Africa did not have the capability to undertake such an operation.\textsuperscript{24} The British, however, were actively encouraging African nations to contribute troops.\textsuperscript{25} For Britain, this was an African problem that required an African solution. An editorial in the Scottish newspaper \textit{The Herald} reflected this belief, arguing: ‘If there is to be intervention in Rwanda it would be best under the aegis of the Organisation of African Unity and come from other African states. These collectively have the appropriate military force and their troops might not encounter the animosity which would greet the arrival of Western soldiers’.\textsuperscript{26} The British plan, in direct contradiction to the US plan, therefore called for African troops to deploy to Kigali.

\textsuperscript{22} FCO telegraph to UK Mission to UN (New York), 3 June 1994; released to the author under the Freedom of Information Act.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview with David HANNAY, 23 April 2010.
\textsuperscript{24} Discussion paper, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Middle East/Africa Region, Department of Defence, 1 May 1994, <www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB53> (accessed 12 June 2010).
\textsuperscript{25} Interview with David HANNAY, 23 April 2010; interview with Malcolm RIFKIND, 22 March 2010.
\textsuperscript{26} Anon, ‘Intervention in Rwanda’, \textit{The Herald}, 2 May 1994, p. 10.
and work their way from there across the country; ‘inside-out’ rather than ‘outside-in’.

**Opposing views on Operation Turquoise**

Eventually, the Security Council approved the creation of UNAMIR II in late May. However, the United States continued to stall the mission by demanding various reports from the UN Secretary-General before agreeing to actual troop deployment. The military response to the crisis was therefore stalled as the Secretary-General first dealt with the US demands, and secondly, sought to find nations willing to contribute troops to the new force when it was apparent to all that the United States did not support the mission. At this time, Mitterrand announced that France would seek UN approval to deploy a unilateral Chapter VII mission to protect civilians in Rwanda. Operation Turquoise deployed on 23 June 1994, having been approved by the UN Security Council the previous day. Although officially a humanitarian mission, Turquoise was made up of over 3,000 elite troops, 100 armoured personnel carriers, jet fighter aircraft, helicopters and light artillery—a troop mix more suited for fighting a small war than protecting refugee camps. The US and the UK responses to the French mission again show some differences. Whilst the US State Department appears to have warmly welcomed the proposed intervention, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was clearly suspicious of France’s intentions.

Correspondence between the FCO and Hannay in New York shows that the mission did not have the wholehearted support of the government. Although heavily phrased, one telegram, released under the Freedom of Information Act, begins: ‘[We are] ready to support a resolution backing the French plan, but remain concerned about its effect on UNAMIR and on the credibility of UN peace-keeping generally’.27 The document continues to warn that despite the FCO’s nervousness, the mission in New York should not be ‘associated with any attempts to sabotage’ France’s proposed resolution. In interviews with the author, various British officials, both within the FCO and the Ministry of Defence (MOD), confirmed that whilst the United Kingdom was suspicious of French motives, no serious consideration was given to vetoing the plan. Aware of France’s close links with Rwanda and the Hutu elite which was leading the genocide, the FCO expressed concerns that any French involvement would lead to the perpetrators of the genocide being given safe passage out of Rwanda or the government forces being given support in their war against the RPF as had happened previously (there is, however, no evidence that anyone in the government was aware that France actually continued to supply arms to the Rwandan government even after the genocide began). At the UN, British officials were therefore instructed to informally caution other Security Council members against the French mission but ultimately to vote in favour of Operation Turquoise if it looked to have general support.28

28 FCO telegram to UK mission to the UN (New York), 21 June 1994; released to the author under the Freedom of Information Act.
Despite deep reservations, the FCO did recognise that with UNAMIR II still to deploy, blocking Operation Turquoise would have meant that the killing of Rwandan civilians would continue or that retaliatory attacks against ordinary Hutu would break out. FCO officials did believe that the French-led mission, although it was not ideal, had the potential to prevent some deaths. The FCO was also conscious that obstructing any sort of humanitarian mission, however ill-conceived they thought it, would not be well received by the media. Equally important in the decision to support Turquoise, however, appears to have been the fact that the FCO did not want to oppose any French proposal openly. France had tabled a motion and it was ultimately taken for granted that the United Kingdom would support its ally on the Security Council.29

The State Department, on the other hand, appears to have been very quiet about Operation Turquoise. Although information may yet be released, there is currently no publicly available evidence to suggest that the US government shared the British concerns. Madeleine Albright, for example, actively put pressure on non-permanent Security Council members to vote in favour of the resolution.30 Albright is quoted as having told her colleagues ‘The grave humanitarian crisis […] demands a swift response from the international community, and we commend the French for acting to address this need’.31 Similarly, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher is recorded as having told the French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppé: ‘Not only do I support you, I admire you’.32 The American press was also supportive of the French intervention. The Washington Post, for example, suggested that ‘the French should be congratulated’.33 The Americans appear to have welcomed seeing someone else do something. Suddenly, any moral obligation for them to intervene was removed; the Clinton Administration had been let off the hook. The conviction that the French military could be trusted to look after itself also removed the Pentagon’s fear of having to launch a rescue mission. So whilst the British held their council and let the French-led resolution pass so as to appease their European ally, the Clinton Administration breathed a sigh of relief.

**The US response—official opposition to intervention**

What is evident throughout the crisis is that although there were a few mid-level US officials who argued for some form of response, at a senior level, the Clinton administration actively took steps to avoid becoming involved. This is demonstrated by the internal debate on whether what was happening in Rwanda was genocide. As early as mid-April, the State Department’s legal advisers were considering this question. Although they did eventually admit that ‘acts of genocide’ were happening, their advice in April was to avoid the use of the word ‘genocide’ as

29 Interview with Malcolm RIFKIND, 22 March 2010.
this could ‘commit the [US government] to actually do something’. Secretary of State Christopher finally authorised officials to use the word ‘genocide’ on 21 May, six weeks after the killing began.

Four main factors can explain why the United States was so hostile to any intervention. Firstly, the US response was dominated by the events in Somalia in late 1993. As Graham Allison has argued, ‘[t]he best explanation of an organisation’s behaviour at $t$ is $t-1$; the best prediction of what will happen at $t+1$ is $t$.’ The White House, and Washington generally, looked to the recent experience of the United States in Somalia and decided that such a disaster could not be repeated. As Darren Brunk has stated, ‘Somalia was a dominant framing analogy for many policy-makers trying to form an impression of the violence in Rwanda’. The death of the eighteen US Rangers and the subsequent withdrawal of US troops meant that any hope of US intervention in Rwanda was negligible. The events in Somalia led to an almost universal American backlash against the UN and peace-keeping—the UN had been used as the scapegoat for the US deaths, even though the mission in Somalia was US-initiated, US-led and US-resourced. The public, the press and the majority of Congress were no longer prepared to countenance involvement in another African civil war. This was especially the case in the Rwandan case, which to Americans seemed, like Somalia, to involve state failure and inter-tribal fighting. More than anywhere, this view dominated thinking at the Pentagon. As early as 11 April, internal Pentagon documents showed that the military were not willing to get involved until peace had been restored. As National Security Adviser Tony Lake was to suggest subsequently, ‘Rwanda was a casualty of chronology’. Without the shadow of Somalia hanging over the United States, the response would perhaps have been different.

Secondly, Congress heavily influenced the US response. When the Clinton administration had taken office, it seemed better disposed toward peace-keeping than any other administration in US history. But by 1994, Congress had already made it clear that it did not support the rising cost of UN peace-keeping and that it felt the UN had to learn to say ‘no’. Clinton was not inclined to approach a hostile, Republican-dominated Congress to ask for more funding for the UN, especially for Africa. Although there were a few politicians in Congress who called for greater US involvement, the majority were keen for the United States to keep out. For instance, after the evacuation of American nationals in early April, Republican leader in the Senate Bob Dole declared on the CBS news programme *Face the Nation*: ‘I don’t think we have any national interest here [...] I hope we don’t get involved there.

38 COHEN, op. cit., p. 60.
don’t think we will. The Americans are out, as far as I am concerned in Rwanda. That ought to be the end of it’. 39 Whilst Congress did not actively prevent US intervention, Clinton remained conscious of the need for Congressional support in order to push through his domestic policy, and was highly unlikely to be prepared to incur the hostility and wrath of Congress over Rwanda. As Leonie Murray suggests, Clinton did not believe involvement in UN missions was worthwhile enough to justify a fight in Washington. 40

The third factor, Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD 25), was influenced by the first two. The administration was already reviewing future US involvement in, and support of, UN peace-keeping missions in 1993, but this review was radically influenced by the events in Somalia. Although not published until after the genocide had begun, PDD 25 was all but complete by April 1994 and was obviously at the fore of senior decision-makers’ minds. The directive established that US support of UN missions would be conditional on the presence of set criteria, including: US national interests being at stake; a threat to world peace; a clear mission goal; acceptable costs; congressional, public and allied support; a working ceasefire; and a clear exit route. Rwanda failed all of these and passed only one of the criteria, evidence of a humanitarian emergency. In the absence of clear instructions to the contrary from the President, no senior government official was likely to champion intervention when it so clearly failed to satisfy the new policy.

The final factor was the fear in Washington that the United States was assumed to be the last resort peace-keeper. Having seen what had happened in Somalia, the administration feared that supporting any mission would ultimately, and inevitably, lead to US involvement, even if it was only to extract a failed mission from the land-locked country. The Pentagon had seen foreign troops at first-hand in Somalia and did not believe in the capability of African troops to mount a mission to Rwanda. The logic ran that if the Belgians had been forced to withdraw, what hope did African troops have? The United States was also aware that only the Americans had the necessary logistical resources to support such a mission; no other nation had the airlift capacity to transport troops and equipment to central Africa. It was for this reason that the United States opposed not only its own involvement, but also that of other nations.

The British response—official disinterest

Whilst the US response can be seen as an active desire to avoid involvement, largely driven by failure in Somalia, the British response is best summarized as lack of interest and knowledge. Somalia seems to have had much less significance for British decision-makers. The British response can instead be explained by five key factors: lack of interest, national or otherwise; the absence of information; the French government; a misinterpretation of the crisis; and political ideology.

Historically, the United Kingdom had had very little involvement with Rwanda. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom had not been involved in the Arusha process, had no embassy in Rwanda, and trade links were minimal. In his Annual Review of 1994, the British High Commissioner in Kampala, Edward Clay, who was also non-resident Ambassador to Rwanda, wrote: ‘Rwanda was the classic small country far away, of which we knew nothing and wished to know nothing’. Nor was this dismissive attitude towards the small African country anything new. Britain’s relations with, and interest in, Rwanda had variously been described by the FCO as ‘minimal’, ‘tenuous’ and ‘insignificant’. In 1975, the then non-resident Ambassador had been criticised for showing too much interest in the country. The FCO response to his annual report stated: ‘Considering the peripheral nature of our interests in Rwanda [the Annual Review] is far too long’—that year the review ran to less than 1,500 words.

As a Francophone country, Rwanda was a low priority in a continent that was itself considered a low priority. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the FCO had reduced staffing levels across Africa, and the number of Africanists had been reduced—at the UK mission to the UN, just one member of staff was responsible for all African issues. If the attention paid to Africa was minimal, the attention focused on Francophone Africa was even less. For instance, the United Kingdom’s bilateral aid figures show that whilst Commonwealth countries in Africa received an average £4.24 per capita in bilateral aid in 1991, Francophone countries averaged only £0.10 per head. The consequence of this was that the United Kingdom had paid very little attention to developments in Rwanda from 1990 onwards. There was no British observer at the Arusha peace talks. When the genocide did begin, British understanding of the history of the violence and what was happening on the ground was minimal.

In terms of the second factor, absence of information, it is clear that the very limited intelligence the FCO had on Rwanda did not reach the top levels of government. Despite suggestions by Wayne Madsen and Hazel Cameron to the contrary, there is no credible evidence that the British intelligence community showed any interest in Rwanda before, or even once, the genocide broke out. Instead, official intelligence seems to have been limited to a report written by Edward Clay following his one and only visit to the country before the genocide began. Britain’s lack of intelligence on Rwanda is perhaps best demonstrated by the

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41 In 1993, UK imports from Rwanda were only £1.9m and exports were £3.3m (Overseas Trade Statistics, HM Customs & Excise).
43 The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/181953, Foreign Office note, 1 April 1965; FCO 31/291, FCO Annual Review 1968; FCO 31/1801, Briefing note to Secretary of State, April 1974.
fact that during that visit, Clay, failing to find any map of the country, was ‘dependent on photocopies of the relevant page of The Lonely Planet guide to East Africa’. The FCO therefore seems to have depended on open source intelligence. Back in London, Douglas Hurd is alleged to have been briefed on the genocide by officials whose only source of information was CNN. Whilst Baroness Chalker, the Minister for Overseas Development at the time, dismisses this claim as an ‘exaggeration’, she agrees that the government had limited knowledge of Rwanda, calling it a ‘territory with which we had very little connection’. The lack of first-hand intelligence on the country was compounded by the fact that British media coverage of events in Rwanda was relatively scant. Editors seem to have made the decision that events in Bosnia and South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was elected the first black President, were more important. Politicians looking to the British press for a reliable analysis of what was happening in Rwanda would, unfortunately, be poorly served. As David Hannay has said, the United Kingdom was ‘extremely unsighted’ over Rwanda.

This absence of information led the British to look to Belgium and France for guidance. As the old colonial power and the new great-power sponsor in Rwanda, these two countries were seen by the FCO as having responsibility for Rwanda. Yet whilst, as noted above, the FCO was aware of France’s historical links with the regime which was perpetrating genocide, one FCO official has said: ‘We [still] tended to believe what the French were telling us’. Malcolm Rifkind, the Secretary of State for Defence in 1994, concurs, suggesting that given Rwanda’s history, the British government ‘would naturally look to [the French] for a lead’. Although records of any correspondence remain restricted, it is evident from FCO documents already released under Freedom of Information that throughout the crisis there was contact between London and Paris.

This reliance on France and Belgium leads to the third factor influencing the British response: Britain’s support for UNAMIR and Operating Turquoise, although tentative, came about largely as a result of French pressure. There are two reasons why such support would be given. First, France was the United Kingdom’s ally in Europe and in the peace-keeping mission in Bosnia. Placing the debates on Turquoise into context, it can be seen that just two days after the vote, European leaders would be meeting in Corfu to agree on the next President of the European Commission. Knowing that John Major and Mitterrand disagreed vehemently over the nominees, it is almost unimaginable that the British would do anything to further jeopardise Anglo-French relations. Secondly, the French and Canadian governments were privately accusing the British of supporting the RPF rebels. Mitterrand, in particular, believed, apparently solely on the basis that the RPF were based in Uganda where the British, for historical reasons, had strong links, that the RPF

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47 Report from Edward Clay to FCO, London (undated); released to the author under the Freedom of Information Act.
48 DOWDEN, op. cit., p. 236.
49 Interview with Baroness CHALKER, 18 August 2010.
50 Interview with David HANNAY, 23 April 2010.
51 MELVERN, A People Betrayed, p. 271.
52 Interview with Malcolm RIFKIND, 22 March 2010.
supported by Uganda were part of what Asteris Huliaras describes as an ‘Anglo-
Saxon plot to eject France from Africa’.53 Because of this, Rwanda did have some
importance for the United Kingdom: the crisis had the potential to spark diplomatic
problems with France. It could therefore be suggested that in some ways, this made
Rwanda not an African problem for the British government, but actually a European
one.

A second consequence of the lack of information, leads to the fourth factor: the
misinterpretation of the crisis. Whilst US lawyers debated whether the events in
Rwanda constituted genocide almost as soon as the violence began, there is no
evidence of similar discussions in the United Kingdom. The reason for this seems to
be that the crisis, until late May, was genuinely seen as renewed civil war: there was
therefore no reason to consider whether it was genocide. Clay reported increased
levels of violence in February, but this was presented as the inevitable breakdown of
the peace talks and evidence of the imminent resumption of civil war. The fact that
both the French and Belgian governments continued to describe the crisis
throughout as civil war only added to this interpretation. In the United Kingdom, the
Prime Minister therefore talked of a ‘bitter civil war’ as late as 17 May.54
Repeatedly, FCO ministers indicated that the only way to end the crisis was through
a return to the negotiating table. This misinterpretation of events also dominated the
British press, which, falling back on racial stereotypes, described the crisis
throughout as being an ethnically or a tribally motivated war. The initial response of
the press was therefore to describe the violence in Kigali as ‘random’,55 a form
of ‘anarchy’56 or ‘chaos’.57 As late as 21 May, The Economist was still calling events in
Rwanda a ‘civil war’.58 Certainly until late May, British policy-makers, with limited
evidence to the contrary, seem to have misinterpreted the events in Rwanda. Instead
of seeing genocide, they saw civil war and African savagery.

Finally, the British response was also heavily influenced by the personality and
ideology of key decision-makers. Despite having been previously (albeit briefly)
Foreign Secretary, John Major appears to have been happy to leave foreign policy to
others (with the obvious exception of Europe, which was to prove the defining issue
of his time in Downing Street). One minister close to the senior levels of
government suggested that he would be ‘extremely surprised’ if the Prime Minister
had paid much attention to Rwanda: ‘he would have assumed that Douglas [Hurd]
was dealing with it’.59 Baroness Chalker, the minister closest to the events in
Rwanda, recalls once having a brief, private discussion with Major about the crisis,
but continues that there was no great pressure from him to do more.60 With no
pressure being exerted by Major, who at the time was personally leading the

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54 Hansard, House of Commons Debate, series 6, vol. 243, c. 672.
55 S. LAMBERT, ‘Rwandan pillaging and killing out of control’, The Independent, 9 April
1994, p. 10.
59 Interview, 10 July 2009.
60 Interview with Baroness CHALKER, 18 August 2010.
Conservative Party campaign for the local authority elections, it seems that no-one in government championed intervention. Added to this is the fact that neither of the two Cabinet ministers with a direct interest in foreign issues, Douglas Hurd at the FCO and Malcolm Rifkind at the MOD, was naturally inclined to support intervention. Rifkind, for example, has said that he views all intervention with suspicion, seeing intervention generally as doing more harm than good.\(^\text{61}\) In his memoirs, Hurd also recalls the difficulty he and Major had in obtaining Cabinet support for British involvement in Bosnia. He writes: 'My colleagues in government and all parties in the Commons were, with individual exceptions, sceptical of the need for even the limited intervention we undertook'.\(^\text{62}\) For the Conservative Cabinet, intervention to stop genocide in Africa simply did not meet the national-interest test that dominated their realist view of foreign policy.

**Conclusion**

Although *prima facie* the British and American response to the genocide was similar—passivity—there are significant differences behind the failure to intervene. In the United States, the failure to respond was certainly deliberate and was heavily influenced by the events in Somalia. For the United Kingdom, there is less evidence of deliberate non-intervention and opposition. There was certainly caution at the rising expense of UN peace-keeping and the risks involved in a mission to Rwanda. But it appears that at senior levels, the United Kingdom simply had no interest in Rwanda. The United States could not honestly say this: the Americans had an embassy in Kigali, had clear intelligence about the country and had been heavily involved in the Arusha peace process—they had committed to the country and turned their back only when they feared the involvement of their own troops. So whilst neither country rushed to the aid of Rwanda, the United States acted consciously and deliberately, whilst the United Kingdom’s response appears to have been characterized by ignorance, indifference and a general hostility towards intervention.

Finally, there is little evidence that Kissinger and Curtis were right this time. The United Kingdom did not act as an arm of the Clinton administration. The United Kingdom argued in favour of retaining a small force in Rwanda despite US demands for a full withdrawal; the United Kingdom opposed the United States ‘outside-in’ mission; and the United Kingdom actively sought an African response to the genocide whilst the United States continued to stall. If anything, the British acted to influence the Americans. What can be seen is that rather than being influenced by the United States, the British government was actually more conscious of appeasing the French government. In 1994, the United Kingdom seems to have been more willing to support its European partners than its ally across the Atlantic.

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\(^{61}\) Interview with Malcolm RIFKIND, 22 March 2010.

\(^{62}\) HURD, *op. cit.*, p. 492.
Bibliography


