

## **The Auschwitz Analogy: Holocaust Memory and American Debates over Intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s\***

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**This article examines the use of analogies to the Holocaust in debates over the propriety and morality of American intervention in the Balkan crises of the 1990s. Both the proponents and the opponents of intervention invoked the Holocaust precedent, drawing very different conclusions about its applicability to Bosnia and Kosovo. The debates demonstrate how ostensible lessons from the Holocaust experience were deployed to mobilize public opinion behind a humanitarian intervention. On the other hand, they also show how the application of Holocaust analogies to a controversial public policy often resulted in gross simplification of a complex past.**

Consciousness of the Holocaust rose dramatically in the United States during the decade of the 1990s. This cultural shift was reflected in several developments: the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and formidable (if smaller) Holocaust museums in New York, Los Angeles, and other cities; the popularity of high-profile Holocaust-related films—most notably Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* and Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful*; the broad media attention accorded Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s sensationalistic and controversial book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*;<sup>1</sup> the establishment of university professorships specializing in the history of the Holocaust; and the creation of high-school and college-level Holocaust studies curricula. The reasons for this general trend, which has been labeled the “Americanization of the Holocaust,” are numerous and complicated, deriving from social and cultural developments within American Jewry as well as within the broader American public. A substantial scholarly literature has emerged to examine this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The present contribution explores one particular dimension of Holocaust consciousness in America: the use of comparisons and analogies with the Holocaust in debates over foreign policy, and, more specifically, in debates over the wisdom and morality of American and NATO intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Scholars of the history of American foreign relations have observed that Americans have a tendency to interpret complex situations around the world as confrontations between good and evil. One historian has characterized the predicament arising

out of this reductive tendency as a “Manichean Trap.”<sup>3</sup> This cultural trait, which has deep and complex roots in American history and religious tradition, has at times prevented Americans from recognizing serious problems in their early stages of development, and at other times has led them to exaggerate the threat posed by certain leaders, regimes, or ideologies. On the positive side, the determination to confront “evil” has enabled the United States to mobilize its vast energies and resources to help bring an end to fascism and communism. In the past decade, the Holocaust and the Nazi regime that perpetrated it have established themselves as the paradigmatic evil in American historical memory. American understanding of dictatorial regimes and human rights violations in diverse parts of the world, and debates over how best to respond to them, have been colored by references to Nazi Germany and to the Nazi persecution and mass murder of Europe’s Jews before and during the Second World War. One might go so far as to say that analogies to the Holocaust have become part of the normal language in which American foreign policy is debated in the public sphere. Much as a “Munich Analogy” and other references to the “appeasement” of the late 1930s influenced American foreign policy thinking and rhetoric vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, an “Auschwitz analogy” has now become a recurrent theme in American discussions about how best to confront genocide and other systematic atrocities.

But while there has been a pronounced tendency to examine contemporary events through the historical lens of the Holocaust, there has been no agreement on the lessons to be drawn from it. Perceived lessons of the Holocaust have been used both to justify American military intervention and to oppose it by the left and the right, by Jews and non-Jews, by those who were sincere in their invocation of the historical precedent and by those whose uses of it were more purely instrumental.

The Bosnian catastrophe that began in 1992 was the first international crisis during which the American foreign policy debate routinely invoked Holocaust imagery and analogies. There are three reasons for this. First, the end of the Cold War just a couple of years earlier had removed the political and ideological structure in which most international disputes had been understood, or at least framed, for the previous several decades. Second, the situation in Bosnia represented the first large-scale “ethnic cleansing” in Europe in the decades since the Second World War. Third, a consciousness of the history and perceived lessons of the Holocaust had gradually emerged in American culture in roughly the decade preceding the Bosnian conflict. Thus, the event itself, which possessed some of the qualities of genocide, the absence of an alternative framework for explaining it, and, finally, the receptivity of the American public, media, and political elite, all played important roles.

Two scholars have documented the extensive recourse to Holocaust imagery during the debate over whether the United States should have intervened in Bosnia. In his widely discussed and sometimes controversial 1999 book *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick presents his evidence in the context of explaining the development of Holocaust consciousness in the United States. In her recent study “A

*Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*,<sup>4</sup> Samantha Power examines Holocaust imagery in the context of explaining American responses to instances of genocide around the world since the Second World War. Although the two authors tell essentially the same story, they draw different conclusions about the wisdom of invoking the Holocaust in debates over interventions to halt genocide or mass expulsions.

The Bosnian crisis began to unfold in the early and middle months of 1992. Media coverage in Europe and the United States was extensive, but, as Power summarizes the story, “for the next three and a half years the United States, Europe, and the United Nations stood by while some 200,000 Bosnians were killed, more than two million were displaced, and the territory of a multiethnic European republic was sliced into three ethnically pure statelets.”<sup>5</sup> Only in 1995, after Serbian units ignored United Nations peacekeepers and then slaughtered thousands of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica, did the United States and NATO allies intervene to stop the bloodshed.

In the United States, the presidential election campaign of 1992 ensured that Bosnia would become a subject of public debate. The administration of George H. W. Bush wanted to avoid direct American involvement in the Balkans; with a foreign policy dominated by so-called strategic realists, they saw no compelling American interest in a Bosnian intervention. American officials framed the conflict as an ancient, intractable ethnic rivalry, a mess that could not be pacified through external intervention. Moreover, they argued, it was a European problem. As evidence of Serbian atrocities mounted, however, Holocaust analogies appeared more frequently in public discourse, intensifying political pressure on the Bush administration to act. In July 1992 the New York newspaper *Newsday* compared the Omarska concentration camp, where Serbian forces were holding Bosnian prisoners, to Nazi camps. The article, which bore the headline “Like Auschwitz,” described how Bosnians were deported to the camp in sealed box-cars, evoking a particularly horrifying image drawn from Holocaust memory. A Bosnian interviewed for the article stated that “we all felt like Jews in the Third Reich.”<sup>6</sup> In August, a British television network broadcast film of emaciated Bosnians imprisoned behind barbed wire at the Trnopolje camp, another strongly evocative image.<sup>7</sup>

But it was not only the media that were sounding the alarm. In August 1992 the respected international human rights organization Helsinki Watch reported that it had found “prima facie evidence that genocide [was] taking place” in Bosnia.<sup>8</sup> The Bush administration acknowledged Serbian atrocities against Bosnians, but insisted that the seriousness of the incidents was not clearly established, and, moreover, that atrocities were being committed on all sides of the conflict. The California Democratic congressman Tom Lantos, who had survived the Holocaust in Hungary, lambasted the administration. Publicly scolding a State Department official for covering up US government knowledge of the Serbian actions, Lantos would not permit his government to fall back on “the old excuse” that the world didn’t know “while the gas chambers were in full blast killing innocent people.”<sup>9</sup> A short while later, during a visit to the

White House, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reiterated Lantos's comparison of Serbian actions to the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

Lantos was representative of the significant segment of Jewish opinion in the United States that advocated military intervention. Several major Jewish-American organizations jointly published an advertisement in the *New York Times* stating, "to the blood-chilling names of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and other Nazi death camps there seem now to have been added the names of Omarska and Brcko." "Is it possible," the Jewish organizations asked, "that fifty years after the Holocaust, the nations of the world, including our own, will stand by and do nothing, pretending we are helpless?"<sup>11</sup> Peter Novick has pointed disapprovingly to such statements as evidence of how thoroughly consumed American Jews had become by their memory of the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> But a somewhat different interpretation is possible as well.

To be sure, for many American Jews the Holocaust had become the governing analogy for thinking about such events, but an alternative interpretation of the Jewish calls to action is that they reflected the deep and abiding liberal Jewish-American concern for human rights. The Bosnians, whose rescue was now in question, were, after all, Muslims. Furthermore, American Jews were aware that the Serbs had been anti-Nazi during the Second World War and that collaboration with the Nazi regime had been common among other ethnic groups in Yugoslavia—most notably the Croats. There was no specifically Jewish (or Israeli) interest in coming to the rescue of the Bosnians, aside from a moral one, which the Holocaust experience had brought into focus. Many Jews understood themselves as possessing a special responsibility to speak up and to compel action against genocide. This self-perception was illustrated in especially dramatic fashion in April 1993 by Elie Wiesel: at the opening ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, he publicly implored President Clinton, who was present at the ceremony, to "do something to stop the bloodshed."<sup>13</sup>

In Samantha Powers's "*A Problem from Hell*," Jewish appeals for intervention in Bosnia are presented in a generally positive light. She portrays them as gestures that helped move the United States towards a realization of the vision of Rafael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish refugee from Nazi Europe who coined the term "genocide," and who agitated for the creation of a framework of international law to prevent it and punish its perpetrators. For Peter Novick, such gestures are more problematic. Using the Holocaust as a yardstick for comparison, Novick argues, can actually desensitize Americans to atrocities of lesser magnitude than the horrific events of the Second World War. During the crisis in Bosnia, some Jewish observers objected to comparisons with the Holocaust, asserting that such analogies trivialized the latter. For example, *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen claimed that comparing Bosnia to the Holocaust was "like calling a traffic cop a Nazi for ticketing your car."<sup>14</sup> American officials picked up on such arguments and used them to justify their decision to stay out of the conflict. Warren Christopher, Clinton's secretary of state, specifically rejected the Holocaust analogy in testimony before a congressional committee.<sup>15</sup>

As an additional problem, Novick raises the possibility that all of the discussion of a possible intervention, spurred on by the Holocaust analogy, may have actually exacerbated the suffering of the Bosnians. Citing a journalistic account, Novick states that some United Nations officials believed that unrealistic hopes for outside intervention may have led the Bosnians to continue their struggle, and thus suffer greater losses, rather than accept a peace settlement.<sup>16</sup> While Novick questions the wisdom and effectiveness of organizations and individuals who, out of sincere motives, invoke comparisons with the Holocaust, he reserves his most stinging criticism for the “hollowness of high-sounding phrases mouthed by political leaders,” including, by implication, Bill Clinton.<sup>17</sup>

As the Democratic presidential candidate in 1992, Bill Clinton had invoked the Holocaust precedent to justify intervention, thus creating a foreign policy disagreement with the incumbent, President Bush. “If the horrors of the Holocaust taught us anything,” he declared, “it is the high cost of remaining silent and paralyzed in the face of genocide.” Clinton advocated economic sanctions against Serbia, as well as the bombing of Serb military units. Whether Clinton’s position reflected a sincere determination to put a halt to the atrocities or a more instrumental interest in attracting votes in the upcoming election must remain a matter of conjecture. The fact that Clinton, once in office in January 1993, did little more than his predecessor had would suggest that his rhetoric had been opportunistic. On the other hand, the American military elite, most notably the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, had been extremely hostile to humanitarian interventions that were not demonstrably in the nation’s national security interests. Clinton’s standing with the military elite was weak during the early phases of his presidency, owing in part to his own record in regard to the draft during the Vietnam War, and in part to his attempt, early in his administration, to have the military accept a liberalized policy toward homosexual soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he had won election as the result of a campaign that had emphasized economic questions, and he entered office determined to use the post-Cold War “peace dividend” as a basis for important domestic reform (including a massive overhaul of the health insurance system). Additionally, the European allies, sitting only an hour or two by air from the site of the atrocities, seemed willing to stay on the sidelines and let events run their course. The reluctance of the European allies features prominently in Clinton’s own presentation of these events in his 2004 memoir.<sup>19</sup> All of these factors constituted obstacles to a potential American intervention; President Clinton’s ultimate decision not to intervene in Bosnia in 1993 should, therefore, not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that his allusions to the Holocaust had been as cynical as Novick describes them.

The United States and its NATO allies were finally provoked to intervene in 1995, when the Serbians shoved aside a United Nations force, conquered Srebrenica, and perpetrated massacres of Bosnian Muslims. The American discussion of the event was, once again, very much shaped by Holocaust references. Writing in

the *New York Times*, William Safire referred to the events in Srebrenica as a “Nazi-style ethnic cleansing” that had to be stopped.<sup>20</sup> In *Newsweek*, George F. Will compared the arming of the Bosnian Muslims to Lend-Lease during World War II, without which the British “today might be obeying German traffic laws.”<sup>21</sup> Leon Wieseltier, critical of Bill Clinton’s cautious approach, wrote in the *New Republic* that “the American president is an accomplice to genocide.”<sup>22</sup> Many American newspaper columnists compared the methods of Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević to those of Adolf Hitler, noting that both excelled at neutralizing critics by making promises that they never intended to keep. In the *New York Times*, Anthony Lewis invoked the analogy of the 1938 Munich agreement, implying that Bill Clinton ran the risk of going down in history as a Neville Chamberlain-like figure if he failed to act against Milošević.<sup>23</sup>

A number of factors must be cited to explain why the United States and NATO decided on military intervention in 1995. The new Serbian atrocity dramatically shifted public opinion in the United States and Europe in favor of intervention. Inside the United States, Bill Clinton’s caution was widely criticized as an abdication of American leadership, and even “realists” who had opposed action in 1992 and 1993 now understood that what was at stake was not only the lives of Bosnian Muslims, but the credibility of the Western alliance. This notion was reinforced by the fact that European leaders, most notably the recently inaugurated President Jacques Chirac of France, were now urging the United States to organize a NATO response to Srebrenica. Even if the intervention that did take place had more to do with maintaining NATO’s credibility than with saving Bosnian lives, domestic support among Americans for military action rested on a moral outrage that was fueled by comparisons of Serbian actions to those of the Nazis during the Holocaust.

The insertion of tens of thousands of NATO troops stabilized the situation in Bosnia, but not in the entirety of the former Yugoslavia. A potential flash-point was the Serbian province of Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians strove for greater autonomy. The crisis that many had feared finally occurred in early 1999. This time the response from NATO came relatively quickly, but in a form that ignited a more complex kind of debate in the United States and Europe: the bombing of Serbia, including non-military targets. This measure raised new questions about the effectiveness and morality of the methods used to prevent genocide; critics charged that atrocities should not be answered with atrocities. In the American debate over this latest intervention, the bombings raised the rhetorical stakes, as it were, further intensifying disagreements over whether Serbian actions could justly be compared to those of the Nazis.

In his response to the Kosovo situation, President Bill Clinton did not prevaricate as he had in the case of Bosnia. No longer convinced that ethno-religious conflicts in the Balkans were intractable, as many had argued, he now believed that they were the creations of political leaders who could and should be resisted.<sup>24</sup> Another

important factor affecting Clinton's thinking was the pro-interventionist position of his secretary of state, Madeleine Albright. As American Ambassador to the United Nations earlier in the 1990s, Albright advocated the use of American military force against Milošević—famously criticizing Colin Powell for his reluctance. Powell had, in the interim, retired from military life, and his successors proved more willing to apply military force in the Balkans. Much has been made of Albright's background as the daughter of Czech Jewish refugees from Nazism, and of the possibility that this family experience made her more amenable to intervention against "ethnic cleansing." But such influence is difficult to prove. One could, for example, point to other refugees, most notably Henry Kissinger, whose approach to foreign policy tended to be less humanitarian and more "realist." Whatever the case, Albright was, in general, positively disposed to use American power to halt genocide. In her memoirs, published in 2003, she was not averse to underscoring "parallels" between the Holocaust and what she termed the "horror in the Balkans."<sup>25</sup>

A few weeks into the operation against Serbia, Clinton delivered a speech to a convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. This speech embodied many of the ideas that have become paradigmatic in American thinking about the Holocaust, and especially about America's role in defeating Nazi Germany. Addressing himself specifically to World War II veterans sitting in the audience (and, no doubt, to tens of millions of newspaper readers and viewers of television news), Clinton noted that Americans had fought "to prevent the world from being dominated by tyrants who use racial and religious hatred to strengthen their grip and justify mass killing." In the Second World War "American and allied troops helped to end a nightmare, rescue freedom, and lay the groundwork for the modern world." Turning to Kosovo, Clinton distinguished the situation there from the Holocaust, but emphasized that the "two are related": both were instances of "vicious, premeditated, systematic oppression fueled by religious and ethnic hatred." He admonished American opponents of the Kosovo intervention with the assertion that "we do no favors to ourselves or to the rest of the world when we justify looking away from this kind of slaughter." Clinton was particularly critical of the argument that the conflicts in the Balkans were so deeply rooted historically that no intervention could make a difference. In responding to this view he invoked a Holocaust analogy of an unusual sort. "Political leaders do this kind of thing," he observed; "You think the Germans would have perpetrated the Holocaust on their own without Hitler? Was there something in the history of the German race that made them do this? No."<sup>26</sup>

Support for the military intervention came from several prominent persons and organizations associated with Holocaust memory. The most celebrated of these was Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Several weeks into the bombing of Serbia, Wiesel participated in a "Millennium Evening" at the White House. Wiesel made some remarks, "The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned from a Violent Century," one of which was that the world must act when innocent people are faced with

slaughter. He spoke at length about the failure of the United States to bomb the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, attributing it not to a lack of knowledge, but rather to indifference to the fate of the victims. Wiesel, who had always insisted on the historical “uniqueness” of the Holocaust, distinguished between the situation of 1944 and that of 1999, but claimed that the lesson learned from the Holocaust nonetheless compelled action in the present. President Clinton, whose decision to bomb Serbia was subjected to withering criticism from both the left and the right, was pleased to have Wiesel’s moral authority behind him. “Elie has said that Kosovo is not the Holocaust, but that the distinction should not deter us from doing what is right,” Clinton told his White House audience. “When we see people forced from their homes at gunpoint, loaded onto train cars, their identity papers confiscated, their very presence blotted from the historical record, it is only natural that we would think of the events which Elie has chronicled tonight in his own life.” Clinton concluded that “the efforts of Holocaust survivors to make us remember and help us understand, therefore, have not been in vain.”<sup>27</sup>

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum weighed in as well. Some critics have condemned the Museum as an element in a systematic campaign to maintain American public support for the state of Israel.<sup>28</sup> This perception, however, fails to take into account the liberal, internationalist, human-rights agenda associated with many of the Museum’s founders and incorporated into the Museum in the form of its “Committee on Conscience.” According to the website of the Holocaust Museum, the “mandate” of the committee is to “alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to confront and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity.” The committee consists primarily, although not exclusively, of prominent Jewish Americans drawn from business, academia, and human rights organizations. It monitors situations as they develop around the world, and, when circumstances warrant, issues a “watch” to “indicate a serious potential for the eruption of mass violence,” a “warning” when “organized violence is underway that threatens to become genocide or related crimes against humanity,” or an “emergency” when “acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity are occurring or immediately threatened.” In the past several years, the committee has rarely spoken out to condemn governments publicly, but has sponsored a number of symposia and “briefings” on Chechnya, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Sudan. In response to the situation in Kosovo, the committee sponsored an intellectually impressive symposium at which both pro- and anti-interventionist positions were presented. Ultimately, however, the committee did not remain neutral, issuing a statement condemning the “barbaric and genocidal acts perpetrated against civilians in Kosovo,” and commending “the efforts of NATO to stop these crimes against humanity.”<sup>29</sup>

When analogies to the Holocaust were used to justify the NATO military operation, they usually focused on the responsibility of Slobodan Milošević and other Serbian leaders, and not on that of the Serbian people as a whole. One exception to this general pattern was the contribution of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. Applying the

central paradigm of his best-selling (but methodologically highly flawed) book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* to the situation in the Balkans, Goldhagen depicted the Serbs as Milošević's willing executioners. The Serbs, Goldhagen wrote in the *New Republic*, "harbor the burning hatred of ethnic nationalism and are afflicted with delusions about themselves, their neighbors, and the rest of the world." He suggested that Milošević be removed, and that his supporters, who constituted "a large percentage of the Serbian people," be subjected to a program of re-education and rehabilitation.<sup>30</sup> Goldhagen was not alone in alleging the existence of widespread xenophobia among the Serbs. What was unusual about his argument was that he saw the incorrigibility of the Serbs as a justification for intervention, whereas others cited it as a good reason for the United States to keep out of the Balkans.

Some American Jews were disturbed by the frequency and facileness with which Holocaust analogies were being invoked in the debate over policy on Kosovo. This was true of those who supported intervention as well as those who opposed it. A prominent figure in the former category was Michael Berenbaum, a theologian and scholar of the Holocaust who had been instrumental in setting up the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and who then directed its research unit for several years. Berenbaum was concerned that consciousness of the Holocaust in American society, which he believed was now "at an all-time high," had created confusion. Kosovo is not a Holocaust, he emphasized, and Milošević is not Hitler. He suggested that the "ethnic cleansing" underway in Kosovo could be compared to Nazi efforts to make Germany "judenrein" before 1939, but not to the systematic genocide of the Jews, wherever they might have lived, during the war. "As awful as Milošević's policies of ethnic cleansing are, they are not the Holocaust," he concluded. "Yet," he added, "just because Kosovo is neither Warsaw nor Auschwitz does not free us from an obligation to respond. A consciousness of the Holocaust must not raise our threshold of tolerance for evil."<sup>31</sup>

Jewish-American writers who opposed the NATO action were often more scathing in their denunciations of the Holocaust analogy. Some wrote from the perspective of Americans who had grown disillusioned with Clinton's presidency in the wake of the Lewinsky scandal and impeachment crisis. In the *New York Times*, Abe Rosenthal dismissed Clinton's appeals to Holocaust memory as cynical political posturing. When Clinton talks about morality, Rosenthal observed, "I am moved to nausea"—implying that the Kosovo intervention had more to do with shoring up Clinton's domestic image than with ending the torment of Kosovar Albanians.<sup>32</sup> Other Jewish critics took Clinton's Kosovo policy more seriously, condemning it as a departure from *Realpolitik*. In *Time* magazine, the conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer characterized the humanitarian intervention as "impossibly moralistic" despite "all the ringing moral satisfaction" it might provide. "Highfalutin' moral principles are impossible guides to foreign policy," wrote Krauthammer. "The essence of foreign policy," he continued, "is deciding which son of a bitch to support and which

to oppose—in 1941, Hitler or Stalin; in 1972, Brezhnev or Mao; in 1979, Somoza or Ortega. One has to choose. A blanket anti-son of a bitch policy, like a blanket anti-ethnic cleansing policy, is soothing, satisfying, and empty.” Krauthammer suggested that all of the ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia were guilty of atrocities, and that Clinton, America, and NATO had erred by deciding to oppose Milošević rather than the other sons of bitches in the region. In effect, Krauthammer implied, the United States had labeled Milošević the Hitler of the Balkans while it should have labeled him their Stalin. This decision reflected the “extreme naiveté” of Clinton’s foreign policy.<sup>33</sup> The conservative activist David Horowitz proposed a similarly unorthodox analogy to the Second World War. The Kosovar Albanians, he wrote, should be resettled outside Serbia much in the same way that Germans had been relocated westward from Poland in 1945.<sup>34</sup>

An especially blistering Jewish attack on the analogizing of Kosovo to the Holocaust appeared in November 1999, several months after the bombing. The conservative writer Sam Schulman alleged that Serb atrocities against the Kosovar Albanians had been greatly exaggerated in the American media. Not only had there been “no Holocaust of Albanians,” but there had also been “no genocide” and “no mass extermination,” and only “a handful of mass graves” had been discovered in the region. Suggesting that at most 2,500 Albanians had been killed by the Serbs, Schulman depicted the Serbs, who endured 89 days of NATO bombardment, as the real victims of the conflict. “Those among us speaking in the name of the Holocaust bear responsibility for this outcome,” he admonished fellow Jewish-Americans. He argued that the legacy of the Holocaust had been squandered to justify an unwise and dishonest policy. “The age of the Holocaust may be coming to an end,” he predicted, “and the Kosovo warriors have hastened its demise.”<sup>35</sup>

If the proponents of intervention had been too ready to invoke what they believed to be analogies to the Holocaust, the opponents of intervention, on both the right and the left, often erred on the side of cynicism, some engaging in rhetorical hyperbole of their own. What had begun as an apparently sincere, albeit often simplistic, attempt to draw usable lessons from the past had thus devolved into a game of rhetorical one-upmanship, the goal of which was to see who could come up with the cleverest historical analogy.

A seeming readiness of the administration of George W. Bush to instrumentalize Holocaust memory was signaled in April 2002, when Condoleezza Rice, the President’s National Security advisor, delivered a speech in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington on the occasion of the annual Holocaust “Days of Remembrance” ceremony. The slogan “Never Again,” she suggested, applied as much to the lessons of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as they did to the Holocaust.<sup>36</sup> In the lead-up to the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the familiar analogies arose once again, with Saddam Hussein now compared to Adolf Hitler.<sup>37</sup> The conservative journalist Bill O’Reilly, who wrote that Saddam was “just a Hitler with a bigger moustache,” was typical of

the cruder commentators. In a more sober tone, Elie Wiesel compared the crisis over Iraq to the situation in Europe before 1939, and gave his blessing to an American attack, stating, "I believe it is our moral duty to intervene when evil has power and uses it."<sup>38</sup> Much as Bill Clinton's administration had done in 1999 during the Kosovo crisis, the Bush White House embraced Wiesel's comments in its public relations campaign to generate support for war against Iraq.<sup>39</sup> Prominent Jews who opposed the war dismissed the relevance of the Holocaust. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, characterized Saddam as a "paper tiger that we have turned into a mortal enemy."<sup>40</sup>

These examples demonstrated the continuing resonance of the Holocaust in public debates over American policy, but it should be emphasized that the Holocaust did not become a dominant theme before and during the Iraq war. Unlike Kosovo, no genocide seemed either underway or imminent in Iraq, even though the Iraqi gassing of Kurd villages in the late 1980s received a good deal of attention. It is also possible that by 2003, Americans of all faiths and backgrounds had grown weary of Holocaust analogies.

Michael Berenbaum probably was correct when he observed in 1999, when the debate over Kosovo was raging, that Holocaust consciousness in the United States was at an all-time high. He did not say that interest in the Holocaust in American society was likely to decline from that point onward, but this may well be the case. The life-span of most Holocaust survivors is reaching its end, as is that of Americans who fought against the Nazis in the Second World War. Jewish communities in the United States have turned their attention recently to other issues, such as the security of the state of Israel and the perceived threat posed by assimilation and intermarriage. For the past several years, an internal dialogue among Jewish Americans has focused on the question of whether the Holocaust has indeed come to loom too large in Jewish identity.<sup>41</sup> To be sure, the Holocaust will continue to color American and Jewish thinking about world affairs for some time to come, but the near-obsessive interest of the 1990s is likely a thing of the past.

Over time, a historicized Holocaust may well lend itself less to simple-minded analogizing and cynical instrumentalization. We can hope that American politicians and the American public will come to the realization recently articulated by a leader of the Jewish community in Germany: "When a decision is correct, one does not need Auschwitz to make it more correct. And when it is wrong, it is not made better when Auschwitz is invoked."<sup>42</sup> But while we should look forward to the day when such clarity prevails, we should also not make light of the essential idealism of many who have invoked the Holocaust analogy. In the United States, Holocaust consciousness has provided a usable past to a nation that prefers to see its military operations as moral crusades. In the case of Kosovo, the mobilization of popular support for American intervention might well have saved thousands of lives, a result that hardly could be considered an insult to the memory of those who died in the Holocaust.

With a small number of exceptions, scholars with expertise on the Holocaust kept their distance from the policy debates described in this essay. Scholars, and historians especially, often look askance at the mobilization of historical analogies in contemporary political debates. They are reluctant to make what they see as a sacrifice of intellectual subtlety and depth in order to engage in the public discussion, a reluctance reinforced by the fear that their own complex positions might become associated with the crasser ones expressed by journalists and politicians. The danger here, of course, is the one encapsulated in the old cliché about scholars who prefer to float above the fray while remaining beside the point. Whether we like it or not, politicians and pundits will continue to mobilize (or reject) historical analogies for their own purposes, and if scholars do not endeavor to lend a modicum of nuance and sophistication to the debate, then who will?

## Notes

\*This article updates an argument made earlier in “Die Auschwitz-Analogie: Die Erinnerungskultur des Holocaust und die Aussenpolitischen Debatten in den USA während der 1990er Jahre,” in *Deutschland und die USA in der internationalen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts: Festschrift für Detlef Junker*, ed. Manfred Berg and Phillip Gassert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004), pp. 542–58.

1. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
2. A large literature has recently grown up around this question. Key works include Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
3. Detlef Junker, “The Manichean Trap: American Perceptions of the German Empire, 1871–1945,” Occasional Paper no. 12, German Historical Institute, Washington, 1995.
4. Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 271–72.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
12. Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, p. 251.
13. Power, *Problem from Hell*, p. 297.

14. Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, p. 252.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
18. David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Scribner, 2001).
19. Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004), chapter 32.
20. Power, *Problem from Hell*, p. 433.
21. George F. Will, "A Dog in that Fight," *Newsweek*, June 12, 1995.
22. Power, *Problem from Hell*, p. 431.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
24. Sidney Blumenthal, *The Clinton Wars* (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 631.
25. Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary* (New York: Miramax, 2003), p. 177. See also Thomas W. Lippman, *Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy* (Boulder: Westview, 2000).
26. President Clinton, Remarks to Veterans of Foreign Wars, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 13 May 1999, [http://www.state.gov/policy\\_remarks/1999](http://www.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999).
27. "From Sighet to Kosovo: The President Clinton-Elie Wiesel Dialogue, April 1999," *Jewish Post of New York Online*, <http://www.jewishpost.com>.
28. See most notably Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (London: Verso, 2000).
29. <http://www.ushmm.gov/conscience>.
30. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, "A New Serbia," *The New Republic*, May 17, 1999.
31. Michael Berenbaum, "Making Sense of Kosovo," *Atlanta Jewish Times*, April 2, 1999, <http://www.atljewishtimes.com/archives/1999>. Notably, it was precisely this fear of a raised tolerance for "non-holocaustal" human rights abuses that was near the core of Peter Novick's critique of Holocaust consciousness in America, which was in press at the time of the debate over Kosovo.
32. Abe Rosenthal, "On Killing Serbs," *New York Times*, March 26, 1999.
33. Charles Krauthammer, "The Clinton Doctrine," *Time*, March 29, 1999.
34. David Horowitz, "Stop this War," *Salon Magazine*, May 12, 1999, <http://www.salon.com>.
35. Sam Schulman, "The un-Holocaust," *Jewish World Review*, November 12, 1999, <http://www.jewishworldreview.com>.
36. "Remarks by Condoleezza Rice," April 10, 2002, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases).
37. This was not the first time that Saddam Hussein was likened to Hitler. Such comparisons were common during the lead-up to the first Gulf War. See for example the 3 September 1990 issue of *The New Republic*, the cover of which depicted Saddam in a Hitler-like pose and featured the headline "Furor over Iraq."

38. "Holocaust Survivor Wiesel says Saddam must be confronted," Associated Press, February 27, 2003. See also "Elie Wiesel on Facing Evil," *Chicago Jewish News*, March 25, 2003, [www.chicagojewishnews.com](http://www.chicagojewishnews.com).
39. See, for example, "Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer," February 28, 2003, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases).
40. "For Rabbis, It's No Coincidence War on Iraq again Linked to Purim," *Chicago Jewish News*, March 25, 2003, [www.chicagojewishnews.com](http://www.chicagojewishnews.com).
41. See for example David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
42. Interview with Michael Friedman, *Chrismon*, June 24, 2003. The original German reads: "Wenn eine Entscheidung richtig ist, dann braucht man nicht Auschwitz um sie richtiger zu machen. Und wenn sie falsch ist, dann wird sie nicht besser, wenn man auf Auschwitz zurückgreift."