

## Fighting for Darfur: Public Action and the Struggle to Stop Genocide

By Rebecca Hamilton. Palgrave/MacMillan, 2011. 250 pages with index. \$26.00/hardcover.

Among the flurry of recent Darfur books, Rebecca Hamilton's *Fighting for Darfur: Public Action and the Struggle to Stop Genocide* is exemplary and should be of special interest to Friends. Darfur remains a litmus test of how, in the 21st century, the international community responds to a genocide when there is time to ascertain the facts and find the political will to intervene to save innocent lives.

Darfur, in western Sudan, has been called "Rwanda in slow motion." The carnage, in which Janjaweed militiamen attacked civilians, lasted from early 2003 to mid-2005. This was Muslims killing Muslims. Often the conflict is portrayed as "Arabs" killing "black Africans," but the ethnicity is more convoluted, since generations of intermarriage have left everyone pretty much the same color, and the "Arabs" arguably no less African than the "black" Africans. They're all Sudanese. Reasons for the conflict are not purely ethnic, but include a complex of causes, including competition for water, failure of the central government to help marginalized ethnicities, and efforts by Islamists to overthrow the government.

Did the Darfur advocacy movement in the U.S. succeed or fail? That judgment is especially relevant in light of the probability of future wars, genocides, famines and mass migrations spawned by global climate change, as this one was, in large part owing to a drought in the 1980s. The drought exacerbated ethnic tensions, which the central government in Khartoum exploited in pursuit of a radical Islamist agenda. This is shorthand for future conflicts.

Rebecca Hamilton addresses the question of efficacy from a purely secular perspective: How much impact can ordinary citizens exert on American foreign policy? To what extent did the six-year long multibillion dollar U.S. advocacy movement succeed or fail, and what does it offer as a model for the future?

A pioneering activist, Hamilton visited Darfur in 2004. That visit inspired her as a first-year Harvard law student to help mobilize her fellow students to pressure the university into divesting its holdings from PetroChina and other firms doing business in Sudan. With encouragement from professors and The Open Society Institute, Hamilton traveled widely, conducting scores of interviews with key players at various points on the spectrum – from the International Criminal Court to founders of advocacy organizations and perpetrators of the genocide. She was driven, she says,

*by a need to ascertain the meaningfulness of the advocacy efforts so many were involved in. If we were wrong in believing our actions could make a difference, then I wanted to know. If we were becoming unnecessarily despondent about the role we were playing, then it was important to know that too. Most of all, I felt that by understanding what influenced US Government decision-making on Darfur – the first genocide to have prompted such sustained public action – I could start to understand how ordinary people like me might be able to help prevent genocide and mass atrocity in the future.*

Hamilton's prodigious homework and interviews with a dazzling array of people is the book's great gift, and her exertions are anything but ordinary. She takes the reader into the inner workings of the Save Darfur Coalition and the Genocide Intervention Network, and into the bowels of the United Nations and the Hague, where she interned at the International Criminal Court as it was preparing an arrest warrant for Sudan President Omar al-Bashir on charges of war crimes.

She describes instances when the advocacy movement's pressures on the Bush administration may have hampered its ability to offer unilateral incentives to Khartoum such as normalization of relations if certain conditions were met. Such a moment came in the spring of 2006. At the time, activists (including this reviewer) were adamant that the U.S. not retreat from its 2004 pronouncement that what was happening in Darfur constituted "genocide." As a consequence, following the "Million Postcard" campaign leading up to mass demonstrations in Washington D.C. and other cities at the end of April, the U.S. may have rushed peace talks to a precipitous conclusion. The Darfur Peace Agreement, signed on May 1 by only two of the multiple combatants, was doomed to failure.

The book's downside is the error of omission. In recounting the history of the North-South conflict, Hamilton neglects the substantial role played by the discovery of oil in South Sudan in the early 1980s. Missing more subtly is any comprehensive view of the intrusive role the U.S. has played in Sudan over the past three decades. The U.S.-led World Bank funded a couple of huge projects in Sudan – environmental follies involving water that put the Sudanese people deeply in debt. U.S. policy-makers later used that debt as a lever. Jimmy Carter used debt-forgiveness to win Sudan's approval of his 1978 Camp David peace accord for Israel-Palestine and Egypt. Ronald Reagan used it in the 1980s as a Cold War strategy, siding with Khartoum against socialist-leaning South Sudan and Soviet-backed Communist Ethiopia. Both presidents contributed unwittingly to the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalism, as did Bill Clinton when he bombed the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum.

But these are understandable omissions. In its main thrust, the book succeeds magnificently. Hamilton contextualizes Darfur both historically and as an American domestic cause. For readers new to Darfur, the book stands alone nicely. For veteran readers, it contains a trove of hitherto unreported information.

Hamilton concludes, "It is not much of an oversimplification to say that most of those, myself included, who first got involved in advocacy for Darfur believed that it was our outcry that would mark the dividing line between life and death for Darfuris. Hubristic? Yes. But we humans are apathetic unless we believe that our actions will make the movement lifted Darfur into visibility. A government official told Hamilton that "citizen advocates turned Darfur into a domestic issue, an achievement that cannot be overstated." Did our advocacy save lives? Almost certainly. The humanitarian effort directed at feeding more than two million displaced Darfuris was the largest anywhere.

But one has to ask: What of the other, less publicized conflicts?

Appropriately, Hamilton ends on a note of restraint. "The cautionary tale for the future is not to let the lessons of the Darfur story overdetermine advocacy efforts for the next crisis. Critical reflection on the past is essential, and lessons can and should be learned from the exercise. But the experience in Darfur also reminds us that such lessons must be applied thoughtfully, not dogmatically, and always modified in light of a new context."

*Fighting for Darfur* lives up to its title. It is the quintessential testimony to the struggle so many of us embraced. Accurate and unsentimental, it is destined to become a classic in peace studies.