

Golden Silences in the U.S. Propaganda System

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Image: Thousands of bodies lie on the ground after the Kibelho Massacre, photo by George Gittoes

Propaganda shapes the flow of information in many different ways, including, obviously, the choice of the news fit to print, its placement, and the selection of authorities to make those facts credible. But equally important, and implicit in news choices, especially where there are political interests at stake and possible varying interpretations of the news, is omitting facts and ignoring sources that call the chosen (often official) perspective into question. Such Golden Silences and bypassing of inconvenient sources is incompatible with honest journalism but is standard operating procedure in mainstream journalism, with variations mainly in severity and depth of burial of the awkward facts. These latter are often not completely hidden but put so deep in an article and in such cautious or qualifying language as to be effectively buried or suppressed.

This is dramatically illustrated when we compare the treatment of “worthy” and “unworthy” victims, categories that Noam Chomsky and I stressed in *Manufacturing Consent*. (Chapter 2 is entitled “Worthy and Unworthy Victims”). Worthy victims are victims of enemy and target states, whereas unworthy victims are killed by us or one of our allies or clients. We gave details on the huge media attention to the murder of a Polish priest in Communist Poland in 1984, a single worthy victim who, as we showed, got more U.S. media attention than 100 religious victims of U.S. client states in Latin America (1965-1985), taken together. The latter were treated as unworthy by virtue of the client status of the killers, although eight of the 100 were actually U.S. citizens.

Rwanda has provided a stream of cases of worthy and unworthy victimhood. Paul Kagame and his Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) were (and remain) U.S. clients serving U.S. power-projection aims in the Great Lakes region of Africa. He has therefore had a free hand to kill, which he has done so lavishly in both Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), that his victim toll runs into the millions (see Herman and Peterson, *Enduring Lies: The Rwanda Genocide in the Propaganda System, 20 Years Later*, Real News Books, 2014. chaps 4 and 9). His killings of this vast number of unworthy victims have been given the Golden Silence treatment, and he has been portrayed in the United States, Britain, and Canada as a savior against “Hutu Power” violence, a genuine miracle of successful upside-down propaganda. In September 1994, after Kagame had won his war of conquest in Rwanda, a State Department memo indicated that Kagame’s forces were killing Hutu civilians at the rate of some 10,000 per month. This memo had no effect on Kagame-supportive U.S. policy and was never picked up by the mainstream media. Imagine what would have happened if such a memo had described the behavior of the Iranian, North Korean, Russian or Venezuelan governments!

Another Golden Silence on Rwanda was displayed this past month, with the 20th

anniversary of the massacre at Kibelho, a Hutu refugee camp in south Rwanda. This took place mainly between April 19 and 23, 1995 but continued somewhat later as refugees fled the camp. This was long after the Rwanda Patriotic Front had conquered Rwanda, but with many displaced Hutu still housed in refugee camps, perhaps as many as 100,000 in Kibelho. The Kagame government decided to close this and other refugee camps and force the refugees to return to their home towns. This was accompanied by a slaughter, by gunfire, grenades, mortars, and artillery, watched in horror by a contingent of 32 UN-assigned Australian medics and soldiers. Australian Terry Pickard wrote in his memoir *Combat Medic*:

“We could only hope the RPA [Rwandan Patriotic Army] would let us leave after what we had just witnessed. They had just murdered thousands of unarmed, starving, thirsty and helpless men, women and children. Even babies had not been spared. Some of those who had survived the lethal onslaught of 50 caliber machine guns, AK47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars were ruthlessly hunted down and bayoneted to death where they lay injured.”

The Australians tried to save some Hutu, but were forced by numbers and UN rules mainly to merely observe. A photo taken by one of them shows a vast field of dead bodies, and in the aftermath, at UN instruction some of them went out with pace-counters to count the dead bodies. They reached 4,000 and felt that they had covered less than half of the killing toll when their count was called off by RPF pressure.. Several of them estimated that the full count would run to 8,000 or more (See Hugh Riminton. “Rwandan massacre still a burden for Diggers,” *Herald Sun* [Australia]. April 20, 2015).. The UN, however, eventually put out an estimate of 2,000. This lower estimate was preferred by the mainstream media. The *New York Times*, for example, repeated the phrase “as many as 2,000” in their modest news and editorial coverage throughout April and May 1995.

This massacre, like the September 1994 slaughter memo, had no effect on U.S. or UN policy toward the Rwandan government and has essentially disappeared from Rwandan history in the West, except in Australia. With the twentieth anniversary of the Kibelho massacre on April 22, 2015 (the biggest killing day), there was not one article or editorial on that event in the U.S. or UK mainstream media. This was clearly Golden Silence territory, with Kagame still a U.S. client and celebrated in the West as a savior of Rwanda, an African “Abe Lincoln” in Philip Gourevitch’s warped vision. Only in Australia, where the Medic team had suffered as helpless observers of the mass killing, were there a number of media accounts of the Kibelho events.. Several of these were moving and dramatic (e.g., reports entitled “The killings just went on and on;” “Our time in hell on earth;” books like Kevin O’Halloran, *Pure Murder* and Paul Jordan, *The Easy Day Was Yesterday*); but the drama and authenticity of these reports could not breach the Golden Silence in the United States.

It is notable that the estimated possibly 8,000 or more at Kibelho is the same as the mainstream’s oft-repeated number for victims of the Srebrenica massacre, which took place in the same year and only a few months after Kibelho (from July 11, 1995 on). Of course a profound difference in the two cases is that the Srebrenica massacre was carried out by Bosnian Serbs, who, along with the Milosevic government of Serbia, were declared villains and targets of the United States and NATO. It follows that the Srebrenica victims were worthy and that the U.S.-NATO-dominated UN and its arm the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) would pursue the villains responsible for the massacre. And the mainstream media of the West would regularly feature this episode, with July 11th of

each year a time to remind Western publics of the horrors of the Srebrenica massacre, with articles about it and photos showing graves and grieving family members, and reiterating the lesson to be learned on the need for early and vigorous humanitarian intervention.

There is also a propensity to inflate the numbers of worthy victims at Srebrenica, in contrast with the treatment of the number of unworthy victims at Kibeho, which as noted was quickly reduced by the UN and media from possibly 8,000 or more to “as many as 2,000.” With Srebrenica, although body counts have never supported a figure of 8,000 executed, that number was produced early and has been maintained up to the present as an act of faith and for its political serviceability (one can never have too many worthy victims).

The high Srebrenica executions toll has also been helped by other bits of Golden Silence methodology. One is the burying of the fact that many bodies recovered in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina were almost surely of men killed in combat, which raged in the Srebrenica vicinity and beyond from around July 11 for some days thereafter as several thousand Bosnian Muslim soldiers of their 28th division fled the town and tried to reach Muslim safe territory at Tuzla. In a study of the forensic reports produced by ICTY experts on the 1,920 bodies in 20 mass graves exhumed between 1996 and 2001, forensic analyst Ljubisa Simic showed convincingly that the injuries in at least half of the cases point to combat deaths. In a coup of Western propaganda, however, these combat deaths are ignored and all bodies found in the vicinity are taken as victims of execution.

The task of getting the numbers of victims up to that long-standing target of 8,000 has turned more recently to the DNA identification of bodies. A figure of 6,924 is the July 2014 total put forward by the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) based on this methodology. Apart from the fact that this Commission is not truly “international” but is dominated by the United States and Bosnian Muslim authorities, those offering this new claim have refused to allow its methodology to be checked and verified by independent and defense analysts. And while the forensic data on bodies allows some limited judgments on the cause and possible time of death, DNA tells us nothing on these matters or anything about the place of its occurrence.

The main witness for the ICTY on the Srebrenica massacre was an alleged participant, the Croatian Drazen Erdemovic. He was badly compromised by a mercenary background, the circumstances of his participation in the killings, and contradictions in testimony, but he was willing to implicate high Bosnian Serb authorities and hence was protected by the ICTY prosecutors and judges and kept almost completely free of serious cross-examination. A compelling study of Erdemovic’s history, role, and protection by the ICTY was written by the journalist Germinal Civikov (*Srebrenica: The Star Witness* [Belgrade, 2010]). This is a devastating critique of the man and the ICTY, but although copies were made available to mainstream Western media, including Marlise Simons of the *New York Times*, this book was given the full Golden Silence treatment.

Another element of Golden Silence as regards Srebrenica is the blackout of background facts that would make ruthless Serb treatment of prisoners comprehensible. Although Srebrenica was a Security Council designated “safe area” protected from attack, that designation also required that it be disarmed. This did not happen, and from 1992 into July 1995, incursions by Bosnian Muslim cadres, led primarily by local commander Naser Oric, attacked many Serb inhabited towns and killed several thousand Serb civilians.. Lt. Colonel Thomas Karremans, who commanded the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica in 1995, stated on July 23, 1995 that “We know that in the area surrounding the Srebrenica enclave alone, 192

villages were razed to the ground and all the villagers killed.” UN Sarajevo Commander Philippe Morillon was asked directly by Judge Patrick Robinson of the ICTY, whether what happened in Srebrenica in July 1995 “was a direct reaction to what Naser Oric did to the Serbs two years before?” To which Morillon replied, “Yes your honor, I am convinced of that.” This was not picked up in the mainstream U.S. media. (For a fuller account, see George Bogdanich, “Prelude to the Capture of Srebrenica,” in Herman, ed., *The Srebrenica Massacre: Evidence, Context, Politics* [Alphabet Soup, 2011]). In short, the background context, interfering as it did with the demonization process and U.S.-NATO war plans, was ignored by the mainstream media.

It is not that the media black out history in every case. In fact, in connection with the recent Baltimore police killing and riots an editorial in the New York Times was entitled “What Came Before Baltimore’s Riots” (April 29, 2015) . Here the editors’ liberal policy stance made a focus on context and root causes permissible. With Srebrenica the demonization and regime change agenda disallowed balance and inconvenient context. This is commonplace in mainstream media coverage of foreign policy, and is dramatically evident in the treatment of the demonized Putin and the Ukraine conflict. where a Russian expert like Stephen Cohen, who wants to talk about the Russian-NATO background and root causes, cannot get as much opinion or news space as the Russian Pussy Riot members, who want to denounce Putin.

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