

# **Why the High Road? The Mission and Strategies of High Road for Human Rights**

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What do the following have in common?

- The Holocaust
- The genocides in Turkey, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Darfur region of Sudan
- The enslavement of millions of women, many of them young girls, who are forced into the sex trade against their will – many of them beaten, gang-raped, and threatened into submission
- The enslavement of laborers who have no way out of their miserable conditions
- The kidnapping of young boys in Uganda and neighboring African countries, who are forced to become soldiers and commit horrendous atrocities, sometimes against their own families
- The state-sanctioned killing of people, almost all of them poor and without experienced legal counsel – in a system that is so flawed that at least 135 people who had been found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of a capital offense have been exonerated, some of them posthumously, on the basis of DNA evidence
- The kidnapping, disappearance, and torture of people as a matter of unprecedented official policy, all in violation of domestic and international law, including the Geneva Conventions and the Covenant Against Torture, and all without any accountability for the unlawful misconduct

- The rendering of our planet as a far less habitable, far more dangerous place, particularly for our children and later generations, as a result of catastrophic, human-caused climate change

All of those share at least three major elements in common:

1. All entail fundamental violations of human rights and the most basic precepts of international law
2. All involve astounding, yet preventable, human misery
3. All have been allowed to occur because of (1) inadequate coverage by the news media; (2) a failure to act by elected and other government officials; and (3) the failure by each of us, acting in an organized fashion, to push effectively for action to be taken to prevent or stop these human rights atrocities.

That's why I founded High Road for Human Rights – and why our dedicated staff and Board members are working so hard to build an infrastructure that will result in people all over the country pushing together – all on the same issues, advocating for the same steps toward solutions through reform of US human rights policies and practices.

The world agreed, following the Holocaust: “Never Again.” Never again will we stand by and fail to act in the face of horrendous human rights abuses against men, women, and children anywhere in the world.

That was a sacred promise – but one that has been broken time and time again.

Why do we say “never again,” but allow our nation and the international community to turn a blind eye repeatedly to human rights atrocities?

It's because of a cycle of complacency in which there are three main culprits:

**First, the media fails consistently to provide adequate coverage to these issues.** This is nothing new.

- The Jewish Labor Bund in Poland compiled a summary of verified massacres in May 1942, tracing the path of Nazi genocide through Poland, with compelling descriptions. The Bund report described the Chelmno killing center as follows: “For gassing a special vehicle (gas chamber) was used in which 90 people were loaded at a time. . . . One the average, 1,000 people were gassed every day.” The Bund “estimated the number of Polish Jewish victims to be 700,000 already. Their conclusions: Germany had set out to ‘annihilate all the Jews in Europe’ and millions of Polish Jews faced imminent death.”
- What was the response of the US press? About what one would expect for a report about a broken sewer pipe. Probably the first newspaper account of the Bund report was in the *Boston Globe* – at the bottom of page 12. The *Seattle Times* published an article about the Bund report . . . on page 30, under a small headline (imagine, a *small* headline!), “700,000 Jews Reported Slain.” The *New York Times* condescended to devote two inches to the Bund report, noting that 700,000 Polish Jews had been slain, quoting the BBC’s disclosure that “to accomplish this, probably the greatest mass slaughter in history, every death-dealing method was employed – machine-gun bullets, hand grenades, gas chambers, concentration camps, whipping, torture instruments and starvation.” Two inches to report “the greatest mass slaughter in history”!
- David Wyman wrote an outstanding book, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust*. This is how he described the US press treatment of the release of information about Hitler’s plan to systematically murder all European Jews:

*This historic announcement, informing the press for the first time of Germany’s campaign to exterminate the European Jews, appeared in The New York Times the next day in a seven and one-half inch report on page 10. The Washington Post allotted the news less than three inches, buried on page 6. Coverage in the rest of the American press was similarly sparse. . . . [A]s additional information became available in the weeks and months that followed, the press continued to treat the systematic murder of millions of Jews as though it were minor news. Information about the European Jewish catastrophe, though readily available, was almost never adequately covered in the American news media until the concentration camps were opened in the closing days of World War II.*

- During the bloodbath in Cambodia, when some 2 million people died as a result of Pol Pot's brutality, in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* "[o]nly two or three stories a year focused on the human rights situation under the Khmer Rouge." And the television coverage was even worse. "Between April and June 1975, when one might have expected curiosity to be high, the three major networks combined gave Cambodia just under two and a half minutes of airtime. During the entire three and a half years of Khmer Rouge rule, the networks devoted less than sixty minutes to Cambodia, which averaged less than thirty seconds per month per network. ABC carried onw human rights story about Cambodia in 1976 and did not return to the subject for two years."
- We saw the same regarding Rwanda, and now Sudan – and even worse coverage regarding worldwide slavery, when there are more slaves on our planet than at any other time during human history.
- And here's what Ross Gelbspan has said about the complicity of the media in connection with the failure of the US to combat climate change:

*Although the scientific community has known since 1996 that we are changing our climate, the U.S. press has done a deplorable job in disseminating that information, and all its implications, to the public. . . . For many years, the press accorded the same weight to the "skeptics" as it did to mainstream scientists. This was done in the name of journalistic balance. In fact, it was journalistic laziness.*

**The second major player in the cycle of complacency is, of course, our elected and other government officials.**

Historically, elected officials do not act to stop major human rights atrocities unless they perceive that there are going to be political costs to them if they fail to act. FDR took no steps to rescue European Jews and failed to stand up to a largely anti-Semitic State Department. Bill Clinton sat on his hands during two major genocides. If Rwandans had a powerful lobby like AIPAC – the American Israel Public Affairs Committee – the genocide in 1994 would have been stopped in a day. Sad to say, elected officials will not act to stop human misery, particularly if it is occurring outside of the US, unless there is a public call for them to do so.

Congressman Frank McCloskey wanted Congress to take action to stop the killing, torture, rape, and ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Bosnians. However, he was rebuffed repeatedly by his Congressional colleagues who said that they hadn't heard from their constituents about the genocide. Hence, since they perceived their constituents didn't care about it, they were not going to do anything about it. There is little question but that if the American people had pushed for effective international leadership by the US to stop the human rights outrages in Bosnia, it would have happened. *We* could have stopped the tragedies, but we did not.

**That leads us to the third and most crucial player in the cycle of complacency: And that is the American people – ordinary people in local communities who, if organized and willing to take action, could make *all* the difference.**

Two weeks into the Rwandan genocide, President Clinton's National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, responded to pleas by human rights workers for action by saying, you have to make more noise. We have to hear from the public if we are to do anything. No noise was made, the public remained quiet, and 800,000 people were killed while the US and the rest of the international community stood by without lifting a finger – exactly what the Hutus were counting on as they killed at the average rate of 8,000 people every day for 100 days.

The mission of High Road for Human Rights is to organize people throughout the nation to make more noise – to take effective grassroots actions – so that elected officials are never again able to excuse their failures to act on the ground that they are not hearing from their constituents.

We ask High Road members to join with us in committing to at least one grassroots action – to join with others to meet with editors, editorial boards, or reporters to gain improved reporting on High Road issues; to provide presentations to local classes, faith groups, or civic organizations; to write letters to the editor or op-ed pieces, or to join with others and participate in every public meeting attended by any members of Congress.

High Road was formed because the essential grassroots organizing, education, and advocacy were not being done. We invite you to join in and support our efforts. Embrace your democracy – use the tools we are fortunate to have in this great nation, but which are so under-utilized. Join

us on the High Road and, together, we will help bring about changes that will make this a healthier, more just and peaceful world.