

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. . . . On 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”! And that’s how it went in the US mainstream media throughout the Holocaust.
- 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 one 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 same thing has been happening with respect to climate change and the enormous human rights implications.

As we were developing High Road for Human Rights, and discussing with various people our unique approach, we often saw them nod in agreement as we talked about genocide, human trafficking, and torture as being part of our human rights agenda. But as we mentioned climate change as being one of the areas of human rights focus for High Road, we often noticed a confused look on the faces of many of those with whom we were discussing the issue. They would say things like, “Climate change is an environmental, trade, or economic issue.” “Why would you combine climate change with those human rights issues?” we were often asked.

Although many of the human rights threatened by climate change have been well established since at least the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and although anthropogenic climate change has been recognized by much of the mainstream scientific community for decades, the discussion about whether human activities resulting in climate change should be viewed through a human rights lens has, amazingly, barely begun. The human rights community has been astoundingly derelict, ignoring the greatest human rights threat ever faced.

On December 11, 2007, John von Doussa, President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in Australia, noted:

Whilst there is now plenty of discussion about the responses that governments should be making to address the predicted consequences of climate change, the focus seems to have been largely on the economic, trade and security issues. The social and human rights implications rarely rate a mention.¹

¹ John von Doussa, “Climate Change: Catastrophic Impacts and Human Rights,” University of Adelaide Research Tuesday, December 11, 2007 (<http://www.safecom.org.au/climate-change-human-rights.htm>)

The consequences experienced already from human-caused global warming include the severe melting of glaciers around the world, the Arctic Ice Cap, parts of Greenland, and the Antarctic; rising oceans; desertification of millions of acres of previously productive lands; the killing of major coral reefs; the destruction of major forests by bark beetles that now survive warmer winters; major droughts; and significantly reduced snowpack in areas that depend upon snowpack for water supplies.

Business-as-usual spells disaster for our Earth and for many, if not most, of its inhabitants. Hundreds of millions of people will be driven by rising oceans from their coastal-area homes; water will be unavailable to farmers and others depending on major glacial systems, including the Himalayas and the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau, which feed all the major rivers of Asia; forests will be killed off at a rapidly-increasing rate; deserts will expand; fisheries will collapse; many species will become extinct; and heat waves will kill more and more people. Planet Earth will be a very different, far less habitable place for our children and those who follow. The earliest and most severe effects will be sustained mostly by particularly vulnerable people in many parts of the world.

The Australian Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission provides an extraordinary conclusion with respect to the crucial role of the human rights community in successfully combating climate change:

The values that inspired the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provide a powerful point of reference in the climate change context. That document was an international response to the human tragedy of extreme nationalism, fascism and world war. It established a set of entitlements and rights – civil, political, cultural, social and economic for ‘all members of the human family’ to prevent the ‘disregard and contempt for human rights that have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind’. While the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were looking back at a human tragedy that had already happened, we are now looking at a human rights tragedy *in the making*. Allowing that tragedy to evolve would represent ‘a systematic violation of the human rights of the poor and of future generations’.²

² “Human Rights and Climate Change,” 2008 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, at 15.

Let us all join to “make more noise” about what could be the most devastating violations of global human rights in history, to breathe life into the long-ignored principle of “Never Again,” and to effectively and collaboratively act with the urgency necessary to combat catastrophic climate disruption and the resulting world-wide tragedy that will occur if we fail to meet our most basic moral imperatives.

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.