

The president speaks genocide

Timothy Snyder

“A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again.”

These are not the words of Hitler, or Stalin, or Mao, or Pol Pot, or Assad, or Putin. These are [the words](#) of the president of the United States, today.

Do not be distracted by circumstances. Of course there are emotions, personalities, politics, a war. None of this excuses that sentence. The reason we have a notion of genocide, and a convention on genocide, is to define certain actions as always and definitively wrong.

Are these “only words”? No, they cannot be “only words.” As any historian of mass atrocity knows, there is no such thing as “only words.” The notion of killing a whole civilization, once spoken, remains. It enables others to say similar things, as when another elected representative compared the entire country of Iran to a [cancer](#) that had to be removed.

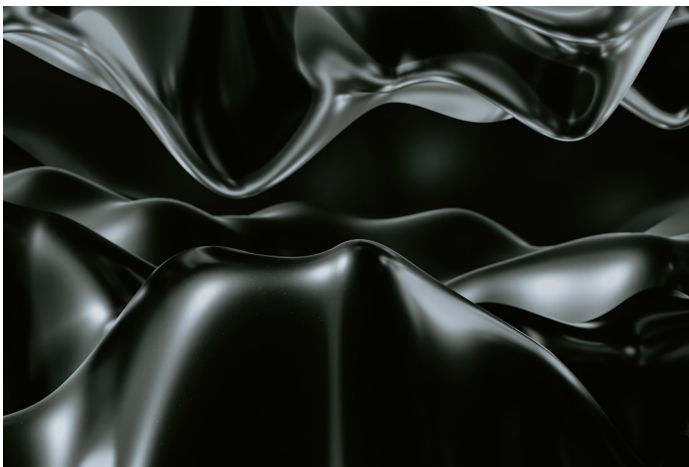
Whatever happens tonight, the president, by saying such things, has already changed the world for the worse, and made acts of mass violence more likely. If we are Americans, he has also changed our country. He has changed us, because he represents us; we voted for him, or we didn’t vote and allowed him to come to power, or we didn’t do enough to stop him. These words are America’s words, until and unless Americans reject them.

Yes, there have been other genocides, and there are other politicians who endorse genocide. That makes the words of the president worse, not better. Yes, the United States has undertaken atrocities before. That makes it all the more important, all the more urgent, that we catch ourselves now. Neither the evil nor the good in our history determines who we are. It is what we do now.

If we do not say something ourselves about this horror, we allow ourselves to be changed.

Around the president there will be people, sadly, who work deliberately to normalize the language of genocide. There will be other politicians who find the right words to reject it. One can hope that there will be politicians who find the courage to remove the man who speaks genocide from office. And these words should lead to resignations by everyone who works closely with the president.

But we cannot count on politicians. This is ultimately up to us, the citizens: for our own sake, for the sake of the future of the country, for the sake of a possibility of new beginnings, we need to say something, to someone else, to ourselves: this is simply wrong.



Whatever happens tonight, or any other night in this war, is now legally defined by the president’s statement. In the practical application of the law of genocide, the Genocide Convention of 1948, the difficulty is usually in proving “the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Henceforth the intent is on the record, in the published words of the president of the United States and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces about the death of “a whole civilization.”

Article III of the Genocide Convention makes it clear that not only the person who issues the genocidal order is guilty. Genocide itself is of course a crime, where genocide means the intent that Trump expressed, and actions such as killing members of a group, causing members of a group serious harm, or “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part” -- which would of course include actions such as destroying access to energy or water. But also defined as a crime are conspiracy to commit genocide, incitement to commit genocide, attempts to commit genocide, and complicity in genocide.

We all have good ethical and political reasons to reject the president’s words. But those who serve in government, and in the armed forces, have been placed under the legal shadow of genocide by what Trump wrote. To bomb a bridge or a dam or a power plant or a desalinization facility, very likely a war crime in any event, could very well have a different legal significance, a genocidal one, if it takes place after the expression of genocidal intent by the commander and head of state.

The concept of genocide was created by a survivor and an observer of atrocities, Rafał Lemkin, so that we could see ourselves, judge ourselves, stop ourselves. But genocide is not only a concept. It is also a crime under international law, signed by the United States in 1948 as a convention, ratified by the United States as a treaty in 1988. That makes the words I have quoted here the law of the land.

The president speaks genocide. And so we too must speak. Not only about crimes, but about their legal punishment.

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