

Let's bullshit! Arguing, bargaining and dissembling over Darfur

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Abstract

The crisis in Darfur led to one of the most powerful advocacy campaigns in recent US history. Responding to intense political pressures from this campaign, the US engaged Sudan in a heated public confrontation, increasingly echoing the rhetoric of an advocacy campaign that was surprisingly indifferent to realities on the ground in Darfur. This article examines how the exceptional mobilization around Darfur affected US policy and diplomatic outcomes, using the case to explore larger theoretical questions around deception and truthfulness in International Relations. There was a curious disconnect between the exceptionally strong language US leaders used during the crisis, and the failure of these public claims, promises and threats to achieve the desired diplomatic outcomes. Such strong language should have bolstered US arguments to persuade allies to support measures against Sudan, given the US bargaining leverage with Sudan, and opened opportunities for activists to rhetorically entrap US officials into defending the norms they publicly invoked. Instead, I argue that US leaders bullshitted their way through the crisis in response to advocacy and the demands it generated. Far from being a harmless form of moral posturing, this complicated US diplomatic efforts and undermined the prospects for a political solution in Darfur.

Keywords

Arguing, bargaining, bullshitting, Darfur, hypocrisy, lying, rhetorical action, truthfulness

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Introduction

In mid-2003, the government of Sudan responded to an escalating rebellion in Darfur with shocking violence. The first news reports of killing in the spring of 2004 coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, drawing massive media coverage, Congressional lobbying and grassroots activism that launched one of the most powerful advocacy campaigns in recent US history. The campaign was premised on the thesis that ‘the battle to prevent genocide has been lost in the realm of domestic politics’ (Power, 2003: 509). Stopping genocide thus required activism targeting the government to create political costs and moral stigma for inaction. The largest organization in this campaign, the Save Darfur Coalition, eventually comprised a membership of 180 faith-based groups, 1000 community groups, a million activists and a contingent of Hollywood celebrities (Thomas-Jensen and Spiegel, 2007/2008: 849). The campaign organized rallies headlined by celebrities, sent one million postcards to the White House demanding action, sold green wristbands with the slogan ‘Save Darfur: Not on Our Watch’, kept tab of legislators’ votes and lobbied for Darfur-specific appropriations and legislation. The campaign relied on simplifications to render Darfur’s complexities in terms that would encourage and sustain public engagement, framing the conflict in terms of ongoing genocide long after one-sided mass killing had stopped.

Responding to intense political pressures from this campaign, the US engaged Sudan in a heated public confrontation, increasingly echoing the rhetoric of this powerful advocacy campaign. The US extended sanctions while threatening further measures, coordinated international pressure and played an important role mediating between the rebels and the Sudanese government. Yet the Sudanese government generally prevailed in these diplomatic contests. Sudan successfully played for time, reduced the impact of policies that ran counter to its interests and delayed the deployment of a more robust international presence in Darfur. The conflict remains unresolved.

Why was US diplomacy so ineffective during the crisis? This article examines how the exceptional mobilization around Darfur affected US policy and diplomatic outcomes, using the case to explore larger theoretical questions around deception and truthfulness in International Relations (IR). There was a curious disconnect between the exceptionally strong language US leaders used during the crisis, and the failure of these public claims, promises and threats to achieve the desired diplomatic outcomes. Such strong language should have bolstered US arguments to persuade allies to support measures against Sudan, given the US bargaining leverage with Sudan, and opened opportunities for activists to rhetorically entrap US officials into defending the norms they publicly invoked. Instead, I argue that US leaders effectively bullshitted (BS) their way through the crisis in response to advocacy and the demands it generated. Far from being a harmless form of moral posturing, this complicated US diplomatic efforts and undermined the prospects for a political solution in Darfur.

The article begins by defining bullshitting (BSing) and discussing how it differs from lying and hypocrisy. BS is pervasive in international politics, yet has received little theoretical attention. I attempt to understand it as a social practice with a different logic and expectations about truthfulness than the dominant discursive interactions in IR theory. The article then explains how BS potentially undermines the mechanisms and distorts

the purposes that make for effective arguing, bargaining and rhetorical action. The second section examines US foreign policy around Darfur to show how this matters. Under the pressure of a powerful advocacy campaign, and constrained by commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, US leaders were frequently indifferent to facts in managing impressions regarding their commitment to defending the values at stake in Darfur. While it proved relatively harmless at home, this dissembling exacted diplomatic consequences abroad. I conclude with the theoretical and normative implications of thinking harder about truthfulness. We ought to pay far more attention to truth, deception and BS given their implications for how we think about IR theory and for the normative value we attach to truth more generally.

The performative logic of bullshitting

There are varieties of untruthfulness in politics, perhaps especially in diplomacy. I have in mind a type of dissembling closest to what Harry Frankfurt (2005) defines as bullshitting. This has two elements: the first is ‘indifference to truth’, which deals with content; the second is the ‘intention to convey a misleading impression’ and concerns purposes.¹ Thus, substantively, the speaker’s statements are indifferent to truth, but not necessarily false. The veracity of what is said matters only so far as it relates to the speaker’s interest in accomplishing his purpose, which is to shape how people think of him. His performance must maintain the pretence of conveying information, hiding his lack of justification for this information from the audience, and perhaps even from himself, in order to make the right sort of impression. It is a performance guided by ‘impression management’ in which the boundaries between contrived, deceptive representations and genuine, earnest representations are not always apparent to the audience or even the speaker (Goffman, 1959).

A number of factors make us susceptible to BSing that exploits our vulnerability to self- and collective deception (Bailey, 1991; Smith, 2007; Trivers, 2011), particularly when an issue engages emotions and self-image and causes us to misread evidence that might affirm inconvenient truths (Mele, 2001). BS often invokes ‘frames’ that constitute identities, interests, and assumptions taken as truths that ‘authorize, enable, and justify specific practices and policies while precluding others’ (Autesserre, 2009: 255). While BS can be cynical, it tends to be most effective when it responds to the strenuous social criteria of sincerity and authenticity (Trilling, 1970). This tends to shift the discussion from objective facts to subjective beliefs, not least because it is harder to falsify statements about personal values than those about the state of affairs — especially when the speaker is sincere about holding these values, we share them with him and we want to believe that they are true. Comedian Stephen Colbert has satirized this as the hollow earnestness of ‘truthiness’ — something we want to be true and that we feel intuitively to be true regardless of the facts. Uncritical or ignorant audiences are also more likely to be deceived when authoritative elites and celebrities dissemble, especially when abetted and encouraged by uncritical media. Taken together, these mechanisms mean that BSing is far more likely to be effective with domestic audiences for whom the frames and ideologies resonate. Foreigners and distrustful segments of the domestic audience, on the other hand, are far more likely to be sceptical, seeing phoniness rather than earnestness.

Deception and diplomacy: Lying, hypocrisy and bullshitting

Among categories of dissembling, recent work on deception has focused on lying and hypocrisy. John Mearsheimer's recent book (2011: 106) even disregards BSing as a significant category of deceptive behaviour in international politics. He claims, first, that statesmen are seldom required to speak on matters of which they are ignorant, and, second, that people are able to easily recognize BS. But Mearsheimer underestimates the endemic nature of ignorance in decision-making, and overestimates our ability to detect BS, whether other people's or our own.² Though overlaps between lying, hypocrisy and BSing complicate the typology, they can be distinguished in ways that help identify the distinct outcomes each produces.

Liars, hypocrites and BSers all pretend to be engaged in conveying true information and are successful to the extent that they deceive others. But there are important differences. Mearsheimer defines lying as 'when a person makes a statement that he knows or suspects to be false in the hope that others will think it true' (2011: 16). The liar uses falsehoods to deceive an audience about the veracity of particular statements or facts. But whereas lying is about falsity, BSing is about fakery: the speaker's pretence of concern for the truth is fake, but what is said is not necessarily false. 'Telling a lie is an act with a sharp focus', explains Frankfurt, 'It is designed to insert a particular falsehood at a specific point in a set or system of beliefs, in order to avoid the consequences of having that point occupied by the truth. ... [A] person who undertakes to bullshit his way through has more freedom' (2005: 51). Unlike lying, the successful deception in BSing is not in misleading the audience about the particular facts. Rather, it is successful when one misleads the audience — and perhaps even oneself — about one's indifference to the distinction between true or false, and misrepresents the broader context for the exchange, focusing on conveying an impression while pretending to do something else.

This emphasis on fakery places BS close to hypocrisy. Both attempt to mislead, often through moralistic proclamations that bear on actor identities, and involve the 'construction of a persona that generates some kind of false impression' (Runciman, 2008: 9). Yet there are important differences. Martha Finnemore defines hypocrisy in terms of three elements: 'First, the actor's actions are at odds with its proclaimed values. Second, alternative actions are available. Third, the actor is likely trying to deceive others about the mismatch between its actions and values' (Finnemore, 2009: 75).³ What is at stake in hypocrisy is the inconsistency between 'the virtue of what we say and the venality of what we do' (Finnemore, 2009: 73). By comparison, what is at stake in BSing is the inconsistency between the pretence of our concern for the truth and our actual indifference to it. Both are instances of impression management, but for different ends: when hypocritical, because we want to hide what we actually do; when BSing, to hide the lack of justification for our statements. One gets away with hypocrisy when one cynically deceives others about the conflict between actions and commitments. Sincerity is thus antithetical to hypocrisy. To escape the charge of hypocrisy, our actions must be seen to correspond to our prior commitments and proclaimed values, though an actor possessing deep legitimacy can sometimes get away with hypocrisy if 'others believe deeply in the value claims that legitimate its power' (Finnemore, 2009: 83). Conversely, sincerity is often the cause of BS that seeks to convey an earnest representation. An actor gets away

with BSing when the audience perceives this representation as sincere, or if they deceive themselves about the actor's indifference to facts, perhaps knowing that what is said has no basis in fact but earnestly wishing for it to be so (Frankfurt, 2005: 65).

The ways we judge liars, hypocrites and BSers also varies. Lying tends to be condemned when leaders lie to their citizens. However, the expectation of deception in foreign policy means that leaders tend not to be judged too harshly for lying in pursuit of national interests (Mearsheimer, 2011: 86). Hypocrisy tends to be condemned by those with an interest in exposing the contradictions between an actor's proclaimed values and actions, generally other states and foreign publics. Those benefiting from hypocritical violations of rules and norms domestically tend to be far more generous, seeing hypocrisy as a way of honouring the rules in the breach (Bukovansky, 2010). BS is treated differently. Whereas statements exposed as lies or hypocrisies potentially damage a state's reputation and legitimacy abroad, the social sanctions for BSing are lower. At home, many citizens are unlikely to notice, while those who do are likely to dismiss it as hot air. Abroad, BS does not provoke the same sense of indignation as lies, and is judged far less harshly than hypocrisy, possibly because it tends to be aimed at domestic audiences and involves ignorance of reality rather than the distortion of it.

All three forms of dissimulative rhetoric potentially legitimize untruthfulness, erode the quality of public debate and thus harm civic life. Sensible policy depends on leaders' respect for the distinction between true and false; democratic accountability depends on the ability of publics to discern the difference. For this reason, we tend to be on guard for untruthfulness, both our own and others'. But tolerance of BS makes it dangerous by generating possibilities for individual and collective self-deception. Liars have to maintain a firm hold on the truth and hypocrites need to be aware of the realities they hope to disguise. It is the disarming combination of sincerity and looseness with the truth, however, that renders BSers especially prone to self-deception and leaves their audience vulnerable to collective deception.

A long line of thinking alerts us to the dangers of dissembling and BSing as defined here. Truth was also an important concern of classical realists, who realized that leaders had to deceive in order to legitimate their positions to the public and to themselves, but warned of the dangers of leaders and the public misleading themselves. On the one hand, E.H. Carr advocated deception in the service of higher ends. He regarded diplomacy in terms of the systematic manipulation of meanings — and not incidentally, worked on British propaganda at the outset of World War II (Jones, 1998: 14). On the other, he was a relentless critic of the tendency of statesmen to be taken in by their own deceptions and of publics to idly follow (Carr, 1939). Hans Morgenthau thought misrepresentations were intimately linked to the pursuit of prestige and power through propaganda and ideology. Yet he considered moralizing public diplomacy as a worrying development: 'Public diplomats speak to the world rather than to each other. Their aim is not to persuade each other that they could find common ground for agreement, but to persuade the world and especially their own nations that they are right and the other side is wrong and that they are and always will remain staunch defenders of the right' (1948: 375). Like Carr, Morgenthau worried that the struggle for power led people to delusion, as these simplifications blind them to their own ignorance. Simplifying ideologies make the pursuit of power psychologically acceptable to those engaged in it and endow foreign policy

with moral legitimacy, but lead to a potentially reckless indifference to the truth and the pursuit of misleading priorities (Morgenthau, 1948: 99–101). Hannah Arendt (1971) lamented policymakers' 'truly amazing and entirely honest ignorance of the historically pertinent background', which she credited to our 'active, aggressive' capabilities of self-deception: 'Whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid ... to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case.' The pertinent danger is less that we linguistically construct alternative realities based on self-serving facts, and more that we embark on a linguistic flight from reality and lose sight of the importance of facts altogether.

Arguing, rhetorical action, bargaining and bullshitting

Discursive processes involve multiple logics. Speakers shift the content, audiences and purposes of their speech while moving closer to the truth or further from it. But disentangling these processes conceptually helps us locate the mechanisms and scope conditions that make each speech act effective. Each reflects a different orientation towards truthfulness and a predominant social logic: communicative action to truth and a logic of arguing; bargaining to lying and a logic of consequences; rhetorical action to hypocrisy and a logic of appropriateness (see Table 1).⁴ Below, I argue that BSing, with its indifference to truth and performative logic, represents a type of discourse that works to the

Table 1. Predominant social logics, truthfulness and communication.

	Communicative action	Bargaining	Rhetorical action	BSing
<i>Logic</i>	Arguing	Consequences	Appropriateness	Performance
<i>Truthfulness</i>	Truth-telling	Lying	Hypocrisy	Indifference
<i>Content</i>	Genuine validity claims about truth and normative rightness	Promises, threats and information, whether true and false	Manipulated claims about normative rightness	Claims, threats and promises, whether true or false, especially about values
<i>Purpose</i>	To persuade; reach a reasoned consensus through deliberation	To agree; maximize gains through joint action	To persuade audience; maximize gains through rhetorical entrapment	To impress; affect perceptions through (mis-) representation
<i>Causal mechanism</i>	Trust	Credibility	Shaming	Self-/collective deception
<i>Scope conditions</i>	Consensus-seeking; willingness to be persuaded; common life world	Agreement-seeking to maximize gains; instrumentally rational	Seek to change behaviour; audience perceives inconsistencies; target cares about norms at stake	Impression-seeking; ignorance or indifference; emotions engaged

detriment of persuasion, bargaining and rhetorical action, before demonstrating how these processes played out in the case of Darfur.

Arguing, premised on Habermas's theory of communicative action, consists of genuine validity claims regarding what is objectively true or morally right. The purpose is persuasion, which helps participants reach a 'reasoned consensus'. Research suggests that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can increase the likelihood of diplomatic persuasion by framing the issue, introducing arguments and invoking existing norms and understandings (Deitelhoff, 2009). A key causal mechanism is the trust participants have in one another to tell the truth. Important scope conditions thus include the sincerity of participants, their willingness to be persuaded and a common life world of shared understandings and interpretations that defines the boundaries of legitimate argument and generates trust (Crawford, 2009; Risse, 2000).

Bargaining involves promises, threats and strategically conveyed information, aiming for agreements that divide the gains of joint action (Powell, 2002). Given asymmetric information, actors expect one another to lie, making it hard to establish credibility. However, actors can use costly signalling and hand-tying to convey information, bolster credibility and increase leverage. Thus, actors in international bargaining can manipulate domestic constraints to increase leverage in 'two-level games', either by making public threats that generate audience costs if leaders back down (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007), or by claiming that their hands are tied by those whose support is required for a particular foreign policy (Putnam, 1988). Likewise, a mediator's ability to bring about a negotiated peace settlement should increase with his ability to make credible threats and promises to the belligerents, particularly when biased towards one side or committed to the issue (Favretto, 2009; Kydd, 2003).

In rhetorical action, strategically motivated actors use a logic of appropriateness to their advantage. Actors manipulate norms-based arguments to change behaviour through social shaming exposing hypocrisy. Arguments that are more truthful tend to be more powerful, but even false arguments can be effective when the speaker is credible and can devise a compelling frame for the audience that exposes prior normative commitments to the test of hypocrisy (Hurd, 2005; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Morin and Gold, 2010; Schimmelfennig, 2001). Key scope conditions include the willingness of the audience to be persuaded, their perception of inconsistencies between words and deeds, and the extent to which the target cares about its reputation and the norms at stake.

BSing relies on a performative logic in which impressions are paramount. Though one might pretend to be attempting to persuade others or reach agreements with them, the impression is an end in itself and not — as in arguing and bargaining — a means to an end. Claims, promises and threats are conveyed without concern for their credibility, and norms are invoked to attach one's identity to them rather than to defend them. In emphasizing the limits to rationality, BSing raises issues of cognitive bias and fallible reasoning that set it apart from reasoned argument, instrumental bargaining and strategic shaming. BSing often works to the detriment of the same mechanisms upon which arguing, bargaining and rhetorical action rely: words lose their persuasiveness as partners reject the validity of arguments and cease to trust one another; credibility erodes as bargaining partners realize the search for agreement is a cover for conveying impressions; and as the audience focuses on values honestly invoked rather than actions inconsistent

with them, it becomes harder to shame by exposing cynical hypocrisy. In terms of scope conditions, BSing is likely to be effective in complex situations where ignorance and indifference are widespread, especially where collective values and identity are implicated, and where the ostensible search for consensus or agreement is a lower priority than the need to impress.

When viewed in terms of these discursive processes, the Darfur crisis poses a number of theoretical puzzles. First, why was the US unable to persuade allies to support its policies at key turning points? Despite the power of activists to shape US diplomacy, understandings of the situation and policy preferences in foreign capitals resisted Washington's public arguments until activism in those countries caught up with the US campaign. Second, why did the US have so little leverage in negotiations with Sudan and mediations between the government and rebels? The mechanism of audience costs suggests that the public threats issued by US leaders were a form of costly signalling that should have increased leverage through audience costs, while politicization of the issue by a powerful advocacy campaign should have tied hands in ways that also enhanced leverage. These same mechanisms should have expanded the bargaining space between disputants in ways that made a workable agreement more likely as obvious US bias towards the rebels and concern for the issues at stake became evident during mediation. However, the US failed to strike deals with Sudan at key turning points, the terms were unfavourable to the US in the few agreements eventually reached and US mediation proved unsuccessful in peace negotiations. Finally, with American leaders emphasizing the need for robust action to stop the violence, why were advocates unable to entrap them in their rhetoric? Despite the power and resources of the campaign around Darfur, activists were unable to shame officials into going beyond symbolic quick fixes, and advocacy did little to substantively affect policies relevant to improving the situation in Darfur beyond sustaining high levels of funding for humanitarian assistance.

Bullshitting over genocide in Darfur

These outcomes make much more sense when we recognize the role of BS. The puzzles above presume that when doing things with words, US leaders prioritized persuading allies and reaching agreements with the Sudanese government and rebels, and that their loaded language left them vulnerable to activist shaming. But as Darfur became entangled in domestic politics, the response to the crisis in Washington increasingly became a performance concerned with impression management — to the detriment of these other discursive processes unfolding simultaneously. It is impossible to know whether an approach that resisted pressures to dissemble would have made US diplomacy more effective in meeting American aims and contributing to a political solution in Darfur. I argue, however, that the tendency to BS was unhelpful diplomatically and present evidence supporting this interpretation in two important episodes: the debate over genocide and the pursuit of a protection force and peace agreement. In each, I first locate elements of BS in the response of US leaders to Darfur, and then examine how this affected parallel processes of arguing, bargaining and relations between activists and US officials.

I concentrate on US policy not because dissembling was absent in the statements of other actors, not least the government of Sudan, though it relied more on lying and

hypocrisy. Nor do I focus on the US because other states were unimportant; Sudan's neighbours, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and China played key diplomatic roles alongside the US (Black and Williams, 2010). I focus on the US because it was the only actor that potentially combined the leverage and political will to compel Sudan to change its behaviour. My argument confronts two important inferential challenges. The first is how to identify types of discourse. While the mental processes that allow us to identify specific speech acts are unobservable (Krebs and Jackson, 2007), we can infer the relative priority of arguing, bargaining and BSing by observing what people say, gauging whether they base this on what they know to be true, and attempting to discern their purposes. US diplomacy might also have been less persuasive and credible because of lying and hypocrisy. I therefore focus on whether the relevant deceptions concern particular facts (lying), the gap between words and deeds (hypocrisy), or indifference to facts (BS), and whether the deception is cynical (potentially all three) or sincere (only BSing).

A second problem is how to isolate the causes of these outcomes and rule out alternative explanations for the ineffectiveness of US policy. First, the centrepiece of Washington's Sudan policy for much of the past decade was a peace agreement to end the decades-long civil war in South Sudan, which was eventually signed on 9 January 2005. The desire to broker the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and see it implemented required a more cautious approach towards Sudan. A second factor was Sudan's cooperation on counter-terrorism, which also counselled against taking steps that would complicate this intelligence channel. Third, Darfur exposed the limits of US power in the region. Sudan had been the target of US missile strikes in 1998. But the shadow of the war in Iraq, commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and strained relations with other states limited Washington's options, requiring attention to what was diplomatically possible. There were also problems of incoherence engendered by an interagency process that decentralized control over Sudan policy across different dossiers, agencies and competing officials in Washington. While these factors posed obstacles largely beyond the control of US leaders, however, the tendency to BS was not, making it important to understand its independent effects. In addition, there is the larger argument that US diplomacy was not ineffective, but rather consistent with overall US interests in avoiding costly intervention in Darfur and realizing gains elsewhere. Yet this argument misses the extent to which BSing made it harder to attain outcomes that clearly were in the US interest in Darfur while complicating core US interests in counter-terror cooperation and implementation of the North–South peace process.

The failure to prevent atrocities and broker a political solution in Darfur was overdetermined and a significant part of the explanation can be linked to the factors listed above. Rather than constituting alternative explanations for the same outcomes, these factors can be seen as part of a political context that encouraged BSing to divert attention from contradictions and ineptitude in Washington's Sudan policy, and reinforce a belief in US power and human rights leadership when both were clearly waning. Over time, however, rather than insulating US diplomacy from the demands of an activist campaign, a number of US leaders came to believe its delusional claims and pursue its irrelevant policy fixes to the detriment of both US diplomacy and peace in Darfur.

The genocide debate

The first media reports of atrocities in Darfur in the spring of 2004 coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Responding to a growing media outcry, legislators passed a joint Congressional Resolution in July determining that events in Darfur were genocide and calling for action. After resisting calls to publicly declare Darfur a genocide for several months while engaging Sudan's government on Darfur behind the scenes, the Bush administration relented. On 9 September 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared 'that genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility and genocide may still be occurring'. President Bush followed suit at the United Nations, stating that 'the world is witnessing terrible suffering and horrible crimes in the Darfur region of Sudan, crimes my government has concluded are genocide'. Yet the accusation of genocide in Darfur was consistently coupled with a refusal to commit to concrete actions. Internal deliberations in the State Department preceding the determination found that the Genocide Convention conferred no real legal obligations on the US (Taft, 2004). Powell's dramatic genocide allegation thus included the disclaimer that 'no new action is dictated by this determination'.

BSing: Impression management and the Darfur crisis. There was an element of BS in the administration's claim that genocide was occurring while resolving that this would prompt no change in US policy. The initial accusations of genocide by US officials were not entirely indifferent to facts in Darfur. Well-intentioned officials with experience in Sudan pushed for an investigation and Powell's genocide determination built on the preliminary report of an investigation team (Natsios, 2012: 156–158; US Department of State, 2004a). The interpretation of the emerging evidence was nevertheless highly politicized and interpreted through the frame of the Rwandan genocide. In fact, the report was highly flawed, with the Government Accountability Office (2006) later calling its findings into doubt after an expert panel found it to have been based on 'unrealistic assumptions'. Secretary Powell admitted that he knew the case was a shaky one, with his legal counsel advising him that 'we can justify it one way, or we can justify it the other' (Hamilton, 2011b).

One purpose of the genocide determination was impression management. The link to the Rwandan genocide activated a coalition that cut across typical political divides and mobilized important constituencies of evangelical Christian, Jewish and African-American groups, and students calling for tougher actions to end genocide in an election year (Heinze, 2007). Former special envoy to Sudan and UN ambassador John Danforth remarked that the statements about genocide were meant 'for internal consumption'. It was, he said, 'something that would appeal to the constituency' mobilized around Sudan, particularly the evangelical right (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2005). After the 2004 elections, the administration's use of the genocide label diminished sharply (Prunier, 2007: 140).⁵ At least one senior UN official said that in a closed meeting shortly after the genocide Powell 'as much as admitted it was made in response to domestic pressure, that he was personally sceptical and that the issue was proving to be a distraction' (author interview, 2 February 2010). A cynic would expect the order to publicly declare

Darfur a genocide to have come from the White House in response to polling data, but the decision was made by Secretary Powell without consulting other senior members of the administration or the president (Hamilton, 2011b). Indeed, the decision seems to have been more instinctive and sincere than calculating and cynical, expressing genuine frustration and moral outrage with Sudan — feelings shared by many in the administration, in the advocacy community and in the American audience beginning to mobilize around Darfur. The administration was not so much manipulating truths as failing to treat them with the legal and moral seriousness they deserved.

This was closer to BSing than hypocrisy, and distinct from lying. Unlike the government of Sudan, which responded to the accusations by lying — that is, with statements its leaders knew to be untrue — Secretary Powell and President Bush were not trying to mislead anyone about the gravity of the atrocities. US leaders invoking genocide in coming years were faking the context, pretending to publicly rebuke Sudan and persuade allies abroad when they were more concerned with public perceptions at home. To burnish the administration's human rights credentials in the wake of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal by talking tough on Darfur bordered on hypocrisy according to the administration's critics. As influential activist John Prendergast argued, the genocide declarations were 'less demonstrative of policy and more of a political ploy to be seen as being tough on the [Sudanese] regime' (*American Prospect*, 19 June 2005). It was indeed hypocritical to neglect to mention the facts that senior US officials initially ignored and then suppressed reports of what was happening in Darfur,⁶ and that US officials were working closely with Sudan on counter-terrorism.⁷ However, the charge of hypocrisy, which relies on identifying efforts to hide the gap between values and actions, ignores the risks that taking further action entailed and the administration's honesty about these risks. The initial genocide finding contained a clear statement that no new actions would follow and administration officials tended to reiterate their opposition to the deployment of US troops. President Bush raised the possibility of military action early but was convinced by advisers worried about the consequences (*Washington Post*, 29 October 2007). Most experts and activists agreed that military intervention would have aggravated the situation in Darfur and derailed the North–South peace process. Thus, while the ambiguities of Washington's priorities were defensible, for both activists and politicians it was far more expedient to BS with simplifications than grapple with moral complexities.

Facts on the ground in Darfur, convincing other states about what was happening and building leverage in bargaining with Sudan eventually became less important than the broader impression the repeated invocation of genocide conveyed to American audiences about the administration's commitment to human rights. However, it exacted a diplomatic cost by separating the US from its allies at a crucial period and diminishing US credibility in negotiations with Sudan even as it foreclosed opportunities for rhetorical entrapment.

Arguing: The unpersuasiveness of the genocide finding. Another explanation for the shift away from quiet diplomacy invokes the logic of arguing, interpreting the genocide declaration as an attempt to persuade other states to support stronger measures. Secretary of State Powell's legal adviser argued in a memo that the determination could act 'as a spur

to the international community to take immediate and forceful actions to respond to ongoing atrocities' (Taft, 2004: 3). Powell himself claims that he made the genocide determination to convince the Security Council to act (Hamilton, 2011a: 38). In advance of the genocide finding, American embassies in EU member states received a cable requesting them to push European governments for their 'public support' in order 'to help build pressure on Sudan to act on its commitments' (US Department of State, 2004c). The genocide charge came just a day after the US circulated a draft resolution with proposed sanctions against Sudan and a ban on military flights over Darfur. However, the subsequent Security Council Resolution 1564 of 18 September was far weaker than American diplomats had pushed for, merely reiterating the Council's previous demands and launching an official inquiry into the genocide.

There are multiple explanations for this failure to persuade other states, but the American case was not helped by the perception that US leaders were loose with realities in order to pander to public pressures. AU officials saw the genocide charge cynically, as a 'political' move made 'under pressure', and the Arab League's special envoy to Sudan argued that 'the Bush administration is against the Sudanese government. ... They didn't show us any evidence which convinced us' (Hamilton, 2011a: 39). Even close American allies avoided using the term genocide, making it harder for the US to bring pressure to bear on other states on the Security Council in bargaining over the imposition of sanctions against Sudan (Smith, 2010: 224). France, for example, rejected the term outright, claiming that Darfur was in the midst of a civil war (Prunier, 2007: 157). In the UK, where contingency planning for sending troops to Darfur in mid-2004 ran far ahead of US plans, officials still declined to use the term genocide (Williams, 2010: 199). Sweden's Prime Minister observed that the label was 'irrelevant', while the Belgian Cooperation Minister commented that the term was 'inappropriate and simplistic' (Smith, 2010: 224). There was a consensus between the US and its allies that the situation in Darfur was dire and that they needed to avoid measures that would inflame the situation. But in the absence of comparable domestic pressure from activists, US allies perceived American statements as morally and factually suspect — particularly in the wake of debates over Iraq on the Council — because they seemed to be indifferent to the facts and the broader implications of invoking the genocide label.

Bargaining: Genocide and the credibility gap. Another interpretation considers the genocide charge as a way to increase bargaining leverage in two ways: first, by politicizing the issue and shrinking the domestic 'win set' of legislators, journalists and activists whose support the administration sought for its Sudan policy; and, second, by generating audience costs through public threats. Declassified documents indicate that the US had been privately pressuring Sudan over Darfur. Confidential notes on Secretary of State Powell's visit to Khartoum in June 2004 reveal that he threatened a UN Security Council resolution against Sudan if there was not an 'immediate improvement'. Employing a two-level bargaining strategy, Powell told his Sudanese counterpart that normalization of relations could not happen because 'the US Congress would not allow the president to move forward without resolution of Darfur' (US Department of State, 2004b). An audience cost interpretation would see the failure of these earlier attempts to privately

threaten the Sudanese government as proof that a more credible public threat had to be issued.

However, a number of facts cast doubt on the bargaining interpretation. First, the administration adopted the genocide label in order to *reduce* rather than *increase* domestic pressure, allowing the administration to refocus its Sudan policy on cooperation over North–South peace and counter-terrorism (Prunier, 2007: 140). Second, patterns of violence indicate that increased international scrutiny over Darfur, including Powell’s private pressure, was working. Sudan reined in militias in Darfur and improved humanitarian access in the summer of 2004, suggesting that the US genocide declaration had more to do with appeasing criticism at home than compelling Sudan to change its behaviour. Finally, there was no real threat beyond moral condemnation in the genocide finding’s insistence that no new actions were required. Whatever discursive logics US threats reflected, Sudan increasingly treated US threats as lacking in credibility. After the public genocide determination, the US pushed a series of unrealistic demands on Sudan at the UN (De Waal, 2007b: 1041). Sudan’s rulers, recognizing that US statements were aimed at an American audience rather than them, and consequently that Washington’s statements would be ‘strong rhetorically but without much specific action’, hunkered down and weathered the storm (International Crisis Group, 2004: 7).

Rhetorical entrapment: Hollow victories? Finally, the inability of activists to entrap the administration in its genocide language begs explanation. Though the mass movement around Darfur had not yet emerged, the administration was under considerable pressure to concede that genocide was under way. In proposing that the US act unilaterally if necessary to stop what the administration described as an ongoing genocide, some advocates ignored the profound scepticism of unilateral uses of American power in the wake of the Iraq war (Williams and Bellamy, 2005). With experienced activists sharing the Bush administration’s assessment that unilateral coercive measures would make things worse rather than better in Sudan, activists found little hypocrisy to expose. BSing over genocide could thus be an effective rhetorical strategy for occupying the moral high ground, attaching American identity to a standard of legitimacy without the risks of acting in its defence and deflecting accountability for outcomes to the more hesitant European states, China and the UN.⁸

The one clear instance of rhetorical entrapment for which activists can take some credit — which also owes much to European diplomatic pressure — was the US decision to abstain from vetoing referral of the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In January 2005, Ambassador to the United Nations John Danforth warned of a ‘train wreck’: ‘In view of our role in trying to put a stop to the human catastrophe in Darfur and our use of the term “genocide” to describe what has occurred there, we may be placed in an awkward and politically untenable position’ (Danforth, 2005). Having publicly defined Darfur as genocide and committed to punish its architects, and seeking to repair transatlantic ties after Iraq, Washington could not publicly refuse the Security Council referral despite the administration’s staunch opposition to the ICC. Activists welcomed Washington’s acquiescence to the referral, again reinforcing the impression of morally commendable action despite its limited impact on the situation in Darfur and deflection of accountability away from Washington.

As the Bush administration's entrapment in conceding to the ICC referral suggests, the strategy of dissembling in the genocide debate proved unhelpful diplomatically and backfired politically. During a crucial period, US statements sidetracked the international reaction towards a debate over the legal characterization of the violence rather than measures to actually deal with it. When only US leadership could coordinate multilateral pressure on Sudan, the US was isolated from its allies and was not taken seriously by Sudan. In January 2005, an international inquiry into Darfur that the US had called for concluded that genocide was not in fact occurring given the difficulty of proving genocidal intent (United Nations, 2005). The Commission's non-finding on genocide became the story, rather than the report's emphasis on the scale and seriousness of war crimes committed in Darfur, publically vindicating Sudan's disingenuous claims and contradicting the US position. Most consequentially, rather than appeasing activists, the invocation of genocide catalysed activism around Darfur, ultimately leading to delusions about what could and should be done in Darfur.

Protection and peace talks

The genocide declaration inadvertently raised expectations and fed collective illusions in the public. Intense media coverage framed the conflict in the highly emotive terms, tapping into guilt over Rwanda and catalysing a mass movement that would increasingly influence policy. The pressures of a mobilized public increased demands for impression management and encouraged delusional thinking marked by an indifference towards realities on the ground in Sudan and in international diplomacy, most notably through calls for a force to protect civilians in Darfur.

Bullshitting: Activism and delusional thinking. In the year from October 2006, the Save Darfur coalition spent \$33.8 million on advertising to broaden the movement (Hamilton, 2011a: 102), with remarkable effects on public interest and engagement. Figure 1 juxtaposes the best estimates of mortality rates in Darfur with the explosive growth of interest around Darfur in the US, as measured by US-based Google searches for the term 'Darfur'. The figure demonstrates growing public interest in Darfur preceding the genocide declaration and then the explosive growth in relative public interest in Darfur during 2006. The campaign to stop genocide in Darfur emerged in July 2004 after the one-sided mass killing had already peaked, then grew into a mass movement as the conflict transformed into a much messier multisided insurgency.

Much advocacy increasingly misrepresented Darfur in order to prompt action on what was a tragically unexceptional African crisis. The campaign's evocative but distorting emphasis on genocide was indifferent to changing patterns of violence in Darfur but was crucial to engaging public interest. As the coordinator of the campaign reflected, 'after many hours mulling over policy alternatives, we realized that the closer we could get to a bumper sticker, the better we'd be as an organization' (in Hamilton and Hazlett, 2007: 344). This meant portraying Darfur in terms of evil Arab villains, innocent African victims and heroic Western saviours, and calling for a protection force (Lanz, 2009: 8). The techniques of activism around Darfur — advertising, celebrity endorsement, online 'clicktivism', feel-good gestures and an emphasis on symbolic, media-friendly outcomes — lowered

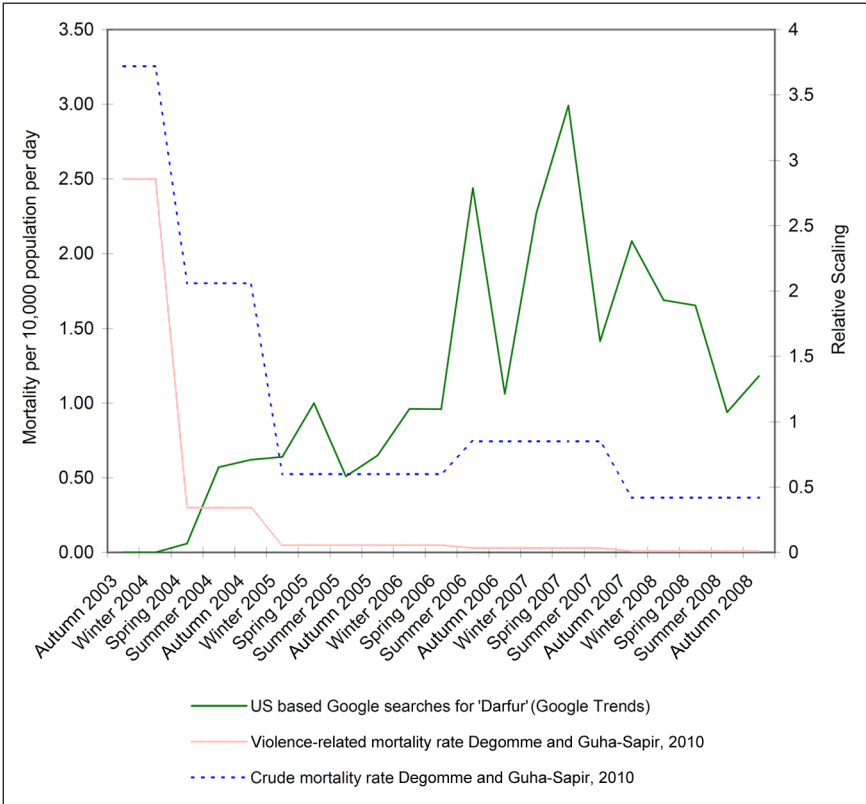


Figure 1. American public interest and violence in Darfur

the barriers to participation, but crowded out expert knowledge and critical voices. One tally of statements by prominent activist groups calculated that between April 2005 and August 2007, ‘assertions or predictions of deterioration’ appeared in 127 of 134 activist statements, notwithstanding improving conditions and a sharp decrease in violent deaths in Darfur (Flint and De Waal, 2008: 187). The campaign insisted that the administration echo its own doomsday portrayals. In April 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick cited estimates of 60,000 to 160,00 deaths in Darfur, earning him a public rebuke from activists then citing a figure of 400,000 deaths; today, the most accurate estimates vindicate Zoellick’s figures.

However inaccurate, the campaign’s framing proved highly appealing to the coalition of evangelicals, Jewish groups, students, and hawkish liberals that formed the Darfur advocacy movement’s core constituencies, foreign policy elites with little knowledge about Sudan, and ultimately the politicians who sought their support. Opinion polls consistently found that ‘many Americans have only a loose grasp on the details of the Janjaweed massacres of Sudanese civilians’ (International Crisis Group, 2005: 1). But a lack of knowledge did not prevent Americans from endorsing stronger action. In one poll, even as 36% of respondents claimed not to be aware of events in Darfur at all (with only 18% indicating they were ‘very aware’), 80% were of the opinion that genocide or

crimes against humanity were occurring and agreed that the US should establish a 'no-fly zone' over Darfur (International Crisis Group, 2005).

Indeed, calls for a no-fly zone illustrated the increasing tendency of US leaders to BS. The Save Darfur campaign called for the imposition of a no-fly zone in Darfur in full-page ads in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on 14 February 2007. Senators Clinton, Obama and McCain all endorsed this call while campaigning in presidential primaries during 2007. There had been calls for a no-fly zone dating back to 2004, which arguably might have made sense given the levels of violence and patterns of attacks at the time. However, as noted Darfur expert Julie Flint observed, "A no-flight zone would do little or nothing to address the reality that the greatest threat to civilians in Darfur today comes on the ground — not from the air... A no-flight zone would be recklessly dangerous and would not address the real problems in Darfur." (*New York Times*, 9 July 2007). Rather than skillfully manipulating the domestic politics of the campaign around Darfur, US leaders were sustaining collective deception in response to a powerful lobby making unrealistic and irrelevant demands, and perhaps even deceiving themselves.

Many US officials engaged in the actual diplomacy of arguing with allies and bargaining with the Sudanese found the growing influence of advocacy groups in Washington frustrating (Stedjan and Thomas-Jensen, 2010: 172). As the US special envoy for Sudan Andrew Natsios (2007) complained in a personal memo to Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte in 2007:

The media, beltway, think tanks, Congress, and advocacy groups believe that 'the slaughter continues' on a genocidal scale, a belief which is driving us towards policies which may not get us where we need to go to 'save' Darfur. The field data does not support the image. ... Openly trying to correct this misperception is politically dangerous given the emotions around the issue and funding raising [*sic*] imperatives of the advocacy groups which rely on apocalyptic language. (See also Natsios, 2012: 151–158)

Unlike leaders further removed from the consequences of their words, officials with responsibility for dealing with Darfur could not be indifferent to the accuracy and implication of what they said. The same pattern also was true of humanitarian workers on the ground in Darfur: when the Save Darfur campaign called for a no-fly-zone, it provoked objections from humanitarian organizations whose operations to feed 2 million people in Darfur were endangered by what was effectively a call for war with Sudan (Hamilton, 2011a: 133). Sam Worthington, head of InterAction, complained to Save Darfur in an email that the group's advertising confused the public and damaged the relief effort: 'I am deeply concerned by the inability of Save Darfur to be informed by the realities on the ground and to understand the consequences of your proposed actions' (*New York Times*, 2 June 2007).

BSing over Darfur at this stage had a number of consequences. First, I argue that BSing undermined the US role in failed peace talks while the emphasis on genocide led the administration to focus on deployment of a protection force unable to make a difference in the absence of a workable peace agreement. Second, I argue that the late emergence of a transnational campaign around Darfur eventually supported arguments

between the US and its allies and fostered a consensus on how to proceed — even if the consensus lacked a realistic plan for improving the situation. Third, I argue that the depoliticized and publicity-seeking character of activism that helped make Save Darfur a mass movement also made it easier for US officials to escape rhetorical entrapment.

Bargaining: Complicating mediation and negotiation. BSing over Darfur was intended for the American public mobilized around Darfur, yet parties to the conflict in Sudan paid close attention. Research suggests that the increased salience of Darfur in US politics should have made US mediation more effective through two mechanisms increasing American credibility: first, by evident bias towards the rebels, in terms of the closer alignment of their bargaining preferences; and, second, by the high degree of public concern for the issue displayed by American leaders (Favretto, 2009; Kydd, 2003). But statements exaggerating US resolve and the likelihood of intervention for domestic audiences contributed to the failure of a Darfur peace process by misleading Darfur's rebels about the chances for Western intervention and regime change. Activists talked up the prospects of intervention and encouraged rebels to keep up the fight rather than compromise (Cockett, 2010: 235–241; Natsios, 2012: 187). As former UN special envoy to Sudan Jan Pronk observed, 'these young Americans were running all over Darfur encouraging the rebels to wait for intervention. The rebels would echo them, telling me "the worse it gets, the better it is for us"' (interview, 25 February 2011). One advocacy group at talks in Abuja reportedly encouraged a key faction not to sign (Natsios, 2012: 187). During AU-mediated peace talks in Abuja, President Bush publicly supported an expanded NATO role in Darfur. But while Sudan's canny leaders had stopped taking US threats seriously after almost two years of continuous threats with little follow-through, the uneducated, politically naive and inexperienced rebel leaders perceived calls for intervention and regime change as credible. The most popular rebel leader, Abdel Wahid, refused to sign without NATO troops and security guarantees 'like in Bosnia' for the peace agreement (Flint and De Waal, 2008: 222).

BSing may have prolonged the violence by encouraging rebel intransigence, perhaps even inadvertently contributing to a 'moral hazard problem' that raised expectations of intervention amongst rebel leaders in ways that made them reluctant to compromise (Johnston, 2007; Kuperman, 2009; cf. Bellamy and Williams, 2012). Despite a personal letter to the rebel leaders from President Bush and public threats from Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick at the deadline for a settlement, a workable peace deal eluded mediators (De Waal, 2007a: 277). The Darfur Peace Agreement was signed in May 2006 by only one of the three major rebel factions. Rather than bringing peace, it increased fighting, fractured rebel movements and provided the Sudanese government with the cover of a Western-sponsored framework for peace that would never be implemented. President Bush hailed the flawed agreement as 'the beginnings of hope for the people of Darfur'. Even as fighting escalated dramatically, the rebel leader who signed, Minnie Minnawi, was invited to Washington for a photo opportunity with the President. Yet the US never committed to the agreement, with repeated missed deadlines passing without a reaction from the administration (Hamilton and Hazlett, 2007: 364). But, then, the peace deal was less about a workable peace process than creating an agreement that would permit the deployment of UN peacekeepers in response to intense activist pressure to replace an AU mission seen as ineffective with a more robust protection force.

Despite the failure to achieve a workable peace deal, the US continued to pursue a force to protect civilians from genocidal violence — notwithstanding the far more complex reality of violence in Darfur. Washington circulated a draft resolution on deploying UN peacekeepers just three days after the agreement was signed. Sudan was unwilling to allow the UN to deploy, however, setting the stage for another diplomatic showdown. The UN force was not mandated until four months later, as Resolution 1706 on 31 August 2006. Khartoum remained intransigent, dooming the mission to be the first in UN history that failed to deploy after being authorized. The impasse lasted another year, until a new ‘hybrid’ AU–UN force was mandated with Resolution 1769 of 31 July 2007. Though activists hailed this as a victory, it was a hollow one: with some superficial face-saving modifications, the resolution mandated essentially the same force as Resolution 1706 11 months earlier and came almost three years after the violence had ebbed. It was another year before the mission deployed in force, attaining only half of its authorized strength by the end of 2008, four years after the worst violence and still without a workable peace deal.

There were multiple reasons for Washington’s lack of leverage over Sudan in bargaining over deployment of the force. But the activist campaign’s increasing influence over US policy, and the extent to which it exaggerated American power, foreswore compromise with a genocidal regime and overemphasized symbolic, media-friendly outcomes, contributed to weakening the US position. In an April 2007 speech at the US Holocaust Museum at the height of the impasse over deployment of the UN force, President Bush threatened stiffened sanctions against Sudan in retaliation for its refusal to allow the force to deploy: ‘The time for promises is over — President Bashir must act. ... The world needs to act. If President Bashir does not meet his obligations to the United States of America, we’ll act’ (*New York Times*, 19 April 2007). Contrary to the mechanism of audience costs, however, Sudan’s leaders realized that repeated failure to follow through carried no real political costs for American leaders. When Sudan failed to comply, the US imposed relatively weak financial sanctions that merely extended existing measures rather than far more threatening capital market sanctions called for by some advisers (Hamilton, 2011a: 142). ‘One characteristic of US diplomacy was to leave [Sudan] with the sense that they didn’t have to do anything different because of the US’, argued former US ambassador to Sudan Gerard Galluci; ‘We were mostly talk’ (author interview, 19 April 2011). Even as the US had no real sticks to back up its threats, activist pressure made it impossible to offer Sudan’s leaders carrots. Stephen Morrison, who worked on Sudan in the Clinton administration, observed: ‘the campaigners only have one gear and have a lock over Congress. It left our diplomacy helpless, left the US without the ability to put much on the table with Khartoum’ (Cockett, 2010: 220).

Arguing: A new consensus. In terms of arguing with allies, BSing proved much less detrimental to efforts to persuade allies during peace talks and in the debate over protection than it did during the genocide debate. The rise of transnational activism around Darfur in Europe meant that Western states were increasingly proceeding from the same basic understandings of the situation in Darfur and the policies to improve it. As groups such as *Collectif Urgence Darfour* in France and various faith and student groups in the UK exercised increasing influence, European leaders began to mirror the rhetoric of

US leaders, even if it was frequently as empty as what their American counterparts were saying. Outgoing UN Deputy Secretary General Mark Malloch Brown, for example, accused the US and UK governments of ‘posturing and grandstanding’ over Darfur, pursuing a type of ‘megaphone diplomacy’ in which ineffective threats were not backed by credible actions (*The Independent*, 29 September 2006). In France, *Urgence Darfour* became the most powerful campaign outside the US. France was one of the countries with the highest levels of public support for UN intervention in Darfur, at 55% (compared to 48% in the US) (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2007). The French campaign pushed candidates in the 2007 French presidential election to commit to an international peace force and the establishment of humanitarian corridors, echoing the misguided emphasis placed on protection (Pohl, 2012). A consensus among Western powers nevertheless paid diplomatic dividends, if belatedly. Notably, it was crucial to breaking the long impasse over deployment of the UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur in April 2007 by mobilizing pressure on China, which provided cover for Sudan on the Security Council.

Rhetorical entrapment: Depoliticization and shamelessness. For all its impact on the language and substance of US policy, the campaign on Darfur failed to rhetorically entrap leaders. Rhetorical action relies on exposing hypocrisy. Yet even as the campaign overestimated the impact of US leadership to mobilize citizens, many activists privately conceded that the administration had few good options in Darfur. Nor did activists ever really test the Bush administration’s commitments by exposing inconsistencies between bold talk and tepid actions. The decision to create as broad a movement as possible required the Save Darfur movement to concede to evangelical groups’ demands to stop criticizing the Bush administration (Hamilton, 2011a: 81), while the movement’s emphasis on demonstrating close access to high-level policymakers dampened criticism. The effect helped depoliticize Darfur domestically. Barack Obama and John McCain, for example, publicly agreed not to disagree on the issue during their campaign.

The shamelessness of some activist stunts also reduced its substantive influence with officials and influential Sudan experts. The performances sometimes seemed surreal. George Clooney addressed the UN Security Council at the invitation of the US, arguing that ‘You will simply need men with shovels and bleached white linen and headstones ... this genocide will be on your watch’ (*Washington Post*, 15 September 2006). At the time, however, mortality rates in Darfur were a fraction of what they had been at the height of the killing. Thus, even as officials conceded to activist demands on symbolic issues, such as increased humanitarian funding, the ICC referral, appointment of special envoys and the imposition of weak sanctions, the Bush administration successfully resisted calls to do more to defend the norms activists considered to be at stake in Darfur.

Why bullshit? If BSing proved detrimental to the pursuit of US interests, why was it so prominent in the American response? At its most cynically hypocritical, dissembling served an important propaganda purpose in distracting public attention from policies that were far more complicated — more complex practically insofar as Darfur was merely one file in the thick dossier of Washington’s Sudan and Africa policy, and more complex morally to the extent that the US was at the same time seeking the cooperation of the Sudanese

government on counter-terrorism and the North–South peace process. As George Orwell (2010 [1946]: 17) once observed, such policy priorities could indeed have been defended ‘but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties’. Likewise, activists chose to overlook inconvenient facts because admitting that Darfur exposed the limits of US power would have made for a poor strategy to build and sustain a campaign premised on making a difference through mass engagement. But the most important examples of BS appear to have been instances of earnest self- and collective deception, far more naive than cynical. Well-meaning activists put the promise of ending genocide within the reach of the average American and US leaders both indulged and succumbed to this fantasy. As a book authored by activist John Prendergast and actor Don Cheadle (2007: 98) argued:

The only way the US will take the kind of leadership necessary to end the horrors ... is for there to be a political cost to inaction, at the voting booth. As American citizens increasingly raise their voices and write their letters about Darfur, the temperature has indeed risen. But not enough. We need to make it a little warmer, a little more uncomfortable for those politicians who would look away. Just a few more degrees. Just a few more thousand letters. It is, frankly, that simple.

This was an appealing story for citizens mobilized around Darfur. On the left, it assuaged anxieties about America’s image after the invasion of Iraq, detentions at Guantanamo and torture at Abu Ghraib; on the right, it bolstered a belief in the righteousness of American power and the moral failings of the UN and Europeans. Perhaps it was also a psychologically and politically convenient story for US leaders to tell themselves — by all accounts, President Bush was emotionally invested in Darfur, personally upset by activist critiques of his inability to do more, and regularly pushed a reluctant bureaucracy for stronger actions.⁹ But, frankly, it was not that simple. The story was wrong, and could only be believed by disregarding the complicated background of Darfur and the ethical foreign policy dilemmas it posed.

Conclusion

The analysis above contributes to critiques of activism around Darfur and locates an important cause of these failures in the posture the campaign adopted towards truth (De Waal, 2008; Mamdani, 2009). Save Darfur launched a campaign to fundamentally reorient foreign policy in the US through the creation of a historically unique mass movement. But this required simplifications, exaggerations and appeals to emotion that led to an indifference to the complex facts and context of the violence, despite many activists’ best intentions. For Mahmood Mamdani, one of the movement’s most trenchant critics, the campaign substituted ‘moral clarity for knowledge’ and allowed its participants to ‘feel virtuous even when acting on the basis of total ignorance’ (2009: 6). In constituting a set of understandings indifferent to realities, the politics around Darfur inadvertently made diplomatic problem-solving secondary to managing advocacy pressures. The costs of dissembling were felt most immediately in Darfur and secondarily in relation to the pursuit of American interests in Sudan, compared to which the meagre damage to America’s reputation abroad or civic life at home has been slight. The risk, however, is that because BSing appears relatively

harmless from our perspective, we fail to learn the right lessons. Indeed, the debate opened up by #Kony2012, the controversial activist campaign by Invisible Children to capture Joseph Kony in Uganda, illustrates once more the hazards of ignoring context and complexity in the attempt to generate a broad public outcry (Taub, 2012).

The episode also generates two sets of insights for theoretical research, beginning with implications for debates on particular discursive processes. The analysis draws attention to the coincidence and interaction of multiple discursive strategies. The failures of US diplomacy around Darfur were shaped in part by the perception that US officials were playing loose with the truth and focused more on impression management for domestic audiences than devising a plan for dealing with Darfur. American arguments with allies fell flat when US activism outpaced efforts in other countries, drawing attention to the role of trustworthiness, credibility and legitimacy in persuasion (Grobe, 2010). Activists were indeed late to realize the importance of transnational advocacy in multilateral diplomacy (Hamilton and Hazlett, 2007: 365), but the more coordinated diplomacy that followed the rising political influence of transnational advocacy in Europe supports the finding that activists can indeed promote consensus (Deitelhoff, 2009). However, the case shows that misdirected activism can have ambivalent or negative effects on moral progress (Bob, 2005). In terms of bargaining, the analysis here is consistent with recent work calling for attention to self-deluding beliefs and the role of domestic interest groups (Lake, 2010/2011). It also casts doubt on audience cost mechanisms (Snyder and Borghard, 2011) insofar as the mobilized public cared more about the feel-good rhetoric of Washington's Sudan policy than about consistency. While going public in crisis bargaining might sometimes reveal credible information, when this takes the form of BSing, it makes for transparent bluffing abroad, even if it works at home. In terms of rhetorical action, the case indicates that the causal force of shaming is more limited, even in the domestic context, than this literature supposes. Arguments that invoke norms and principles shamelessly, inconsistently and without regard for commonly accepted understandings are unlikely to be effective in shaming others, especially if those meant to feel shame share the target's interest in sustaining the audience's delusions.

The findings have broader implications for how we think about communication, deception and truth more generally. What ultimately matters is less the contrasting theoretical logics of different discursive practices, which overlap in many speech acts, but the conditions under which forms of discourse are effective and the ways in which one type of speech undermines others. Research has focused on arguing, bargaining and rhetorical action but has largely missed their different orientations to truthfulness. Attention to the performative logic of BSing, and the uncritical way people respond to it, fits a broader shift towards recognizing that many important instances of social action reflect neither instrumental nor normative calculations. Recognition of indifference to truth opens new possibilities, calling attention to how rational instrumentalism discounts cognitive biases and heuristics, reasoned truth-seeking overlooks emotion, and shaming misses the possibility that audiences willingly ignore gaps between words and deeds. In 2006, after failing to prevent the worst violence in Darfur, President Bush defended his record on Sudan: 'Our country was the first country to call what was taking place a genocide, which matters — words matter' (*New York Times*, 18 February 2006). He was right, words do matter, just not in the way he intended.

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Notes

- 1 See Carson (2010: 58–63) for a critique of this definition.
- 2 For decision-making, see Jervis (1976), Vertzberger (1990) and Duelfer and Dyson (2011). On public competence, see Lippmann (1922), Mueller (1973) and Holsti (2004).
- 3 On hypocrisy, see Shklar (1984), Krasner (1999), Chomsky (2000), Glaser (2006), Owens (2007) and Waever (2008).
- 4 See Müller (2004). These do not of course exhaust logics of social action, including recent attention to practice and habit. See Pouliot (2008) on practice and Hopf (2010) on habit.
- 5 See Nicolas Kristof, 'Day 141 of Bush's silence', *New York Times*, 31 May 2005.
- 6 Officials who tried to raise the issue of Darfur at the UN found their efforts blocked. Multiple author interviews. See also Cockett (2010: 196–198).
- 7 See, for example, 'Official pariah Sudan valuable to America's war on terrorism', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 April 2005; 'US relies on Sudan despite condemning it', *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 2007.
- 8 As David Chandler (2003) notes, ethical foreign policy is ideal for shoring up the moral authority of governments precisely because there is no accountability for outcomes.
- 9 See, for example, 'US promises in Darfur don't match actions', *Washington Post*, 29 October 2007; Hamilton (2011a: 78) Curiously, Bush's biography (2010) makes no mention of Darfur.

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