Angelina Jolie: History Teacher?
Charles Cadwell, Jack Goldstone

Abstract
Angelina Jolie's movie, "In the Land of Blood and Honey," does not purport to tell us how such conflicts can be avoided, but it builds a mighty strong case for worrying about that question. It cries out for us to think about which present-day tensions or low-level conflicts are Bosnias-in-waiting, says the Institute's Center for International Development and Governance director Charles Cadwell in this commentary for the McClatchy News Services.

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Angelina Jolie's movie writing and directing debut premiered in Washington several weeks ago at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. No vanity production to simply expand the resume of an already-famous actor, "In the Land of Blood and Honey" packs a war into a couple of very tense hours.

The dark and disturbing story starts in an upscale Sarajevo dance club and, as war breaks out, descends to genocide, mass rape and international inaction. Using local actors, all touched by the real war in one way or another, the film graphically shows how families, communities, and lives are lost as neighbor turns on neighbor. A former BBC correspondent who had lived through the war in Bosnia introduced the film to the Washington audience as authentic down to the smallest detail.

The quiet among Washington's self-confident, sometimes cynical, policy elite as they left the Holocaust Museum auditorium measured the film's deep impact. But to what end should this or any audience be moved? That Europe and the United States did not intervene in Bosnia for three years is certainly tragic, and some of the roots for last year's intervention in the Libyan uprising are found in Bosnia.

"In the Land of Blood and Honey" does not purport to tell us how such conflicts can be avoided, but it builds a mighty strong case for worrying about that question. It cries out for us to think about which present-day tensions or low-level conflicts are Bosnias-in-waiting.

Our review of post-conflict state-building suggests some difficult pre-conflict steps policymakers should try to prevent future civil wars and genocides:

1. Supposed friends who rule with increasingly autocratic or corrupt hands, even while they maintain regional stability by forgoing foreign adventures and suppressing internal conflict, do the United States no long-term favors. U.S. leaders need to be ready to openly call the Hamid Karzsains, Paul Kigames and Yoweri Musevenis of this world on their human rights abuses and political shenanigans.

2. Dealing with a growing conflict is extraordinarily hard, and even more so when decision-makers lack a deep understanding of the historical, social, and political backgrounds of key actors and issues. We know this is essential. The post-conflict scrambling in Libya demonstrates the gaps in this sort of investment.

3. Although emerging genocide and ethnic conflict involve individual combatants and victims, we need more than body count measures of a conflict's impact. We need informed metrics of state legitimacy and effectiveness and to attend to their trajectories.

Beyond the sheen of elections or participation in international organizations, is the state addressing the sources of conflict, reducing societal disparities, and respecting the rights of all? Is the space for resolving
disputes of all sorts more, or less, available to significant sectors of society?

Balkan history before the war broke out in 1992 was not hidden (see the extensive 1913 Carnegie Commission report on this topic for an early version), but it took a long time to use that knowledge to build agreements and institutions that would protect people from the chaos that followed the fall of Tito.

Angelina Jolie motivates us to invest a lot more in figuring out how to avoid or divert such conflicts, even while she clearly also believes that the United States and Europe could have and should have intervened much earlier.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Charles Cadwell is the director of the Center on International Development & Governance at the Urban Institute. Jack Goldstone is the Virginia E. and John T. Hazel Jr. professor and director of the Center for Global Policy at George Mason University. Readers may write to them in care of The Urban Institute, 2100 M Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20037; website: www.urban.org

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- Charles Cadwell
- Jack Goldstone

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