Letter From the Convenor

Over time, we the American people have been driven by our thirst for freedom, our mission to right wrong and to serve man. We have known periods of darkness in the past. But those difficult times triggered giant leaps towards a greater civilization for the benefit of our fellow men. Our ancestors rose in the face of turmoil and overcame formidable challenges. Their own consciences drove them to aspire to the best possible human behavior and to ascertain the high moral ground. Two hundred years ago, on March 2nd, 1807, the American people took the first historical step that would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery. And it was led by the conviction that racial segregation was immoral, that the American people outlawed this abhorrent practice nearly half a century ago.

There is no doubt in my mind: the desire for peace, justice and human dignity is written in the hearts and minds of all the American people. It is deeply rooted in our tradition. And it must remain so. Yet today, as mass atrocities repeatedly stain humanity, the world no longer turns to America for those moral inspirations that lie at the basis of freedom and human security. The abuses in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo remind us that moral decay can be contagious and that we are not immune to evil behavior. And it should not come as a surprise that people around the globe have come to disbelieve that our country puts human rights above all other rights and that its flag is the flag not only of America but of humanity. Today, indeed, the claim that America is the greatest nation on earth and the leader of the civilized world is held in abeyance until we, the people of America, reestablish our country’s moral authority.

I was born in the age of genocide and other mass atrocities. I grew up and led my life truly believing that “never again” would, indeed, never be heard again. Yet, nestled in the comfort of a prosperous country where people lived in peace, I remained a bystander as sheer barbarity wrecked various corners of our world: Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda. When told or reminded of these atrocities, my senses were revolted, my soul was in turmoil, my heart bled, and with all my might – or so I thought - I condemned humanity for being so full of evil. I am today a senior citizen, and I still live in the age of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. I realize that I can no longer be an occasional witness, a sincere yet superficial enemy of some of the most monstrous behaviors ravaging Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Darfur. Because mass atrocities not only disgrace their perpetrators. They shame all of us who, whether by calculation or indifference, default on our duty to uphold the lives and dignity of men.

Yet as I write, a quiet revolution is under way. In September 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a declaration - the World Summit Outcome - whereby each and every State in the world accepted its responsibility to protect populations from genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and war crimes. The declaration also emphasizes that if a State relinquishes its responsibility to protect – whether by will or lack of capacity - this responsibility must be borne by the international community that can decide to intervene as a last resort. In the face of mass atrocities, every nation and thus every people on earth have pledged to be our brothers’ keepers. Without fanfare and with little notice, the obsolete principles underlying the Westphalian ordering of world affairs have been dramatically rewritten. We can no longer hide behind State sovereignty, a 400-years old shield, to excuse the shameful reflex and ongoing practice of remaining passive in the face of the most outrageous behaviors.

The United Nations has given us a historical opportunity. And we, the American people, must seize it now. We owe it to our ancestors. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to future generations. We owe it to humankind.

It is prophecies and rebels that make history. In this case, the prophecy has already been uttered: atrocity crimes will be abolished. We all know this must be. We cannot afford to relegate the principle of the responsibility to protect to a set of enlightening words, an empty theory. What we need are for rebels against indifference and rebels against intolerance to gather and fulfill this prophecy. These rebels are the people who reject the horror of mass atrocities, wherever they occur. They are the people who believe that lofty ideals and high-mindedness must continue to drive the destiny of their country and of humanity. These rebels are the people who embrace their responsibility to protect any population from atrocity crimes. These rebels will turn a grand declaration into deeds. They will free humanity from hell on earth. These rebels are me … and you. The responsibility to protect is ours.

Yours respectfully,

Richard H. Cooper