

Roy Gutman

Remarks at Academy Awards Luncheon, November 30, 2016

This is a high honor, all the greater for me because of the esteem in which I hold the people sitting here today, the men and women in your profession, what this building stands for and the history incorporated in this very room.

Journalists are outsiders, and our job is not the same as yours. We don't defend and promote the interests of the state. Our job is to be the watchdog, to point out when the state's interests are not being defended. This means digging out the facts about situations gone wrong and putting them before the public. And that's what I want to talk about.

Since you're honoring me as a commentator today, I will take that as license to comment.

I had the luck to cover the end of the Cold War. It was a peaceful outcome, a transformative success. In retrospect, that was the golden era of diplomacy -- and of journalism.

A combination of two factors led to that outcome. One was coercive diplomacy, that is diplomacy backed by the threat of the use of force. But there was also soft power, a path to peaceful change, centering on human rights as laid out in the Helsinki accords.

Just two years after the fall of the Berlin wall, when Yugoslavia came apart, the lessons of the Cold War were forgotten. What drove my coverage was not the bang-bang of conflict but the human suffering and the crimes as the world looked on. Bosnia was a war crime masquerading as a war.

The other defining event of that decade was the emergence of security vacuums in places we were not watching, such as Afghanistan. Having engaged heavily in the 1980s, we departed the scene in the 1990s. The power and security vacuums were filled by the Taliban and by Al Qaida, leading to 9/11.

For the past five years, I have focused on Syria. It seems to me that, once again, the lessons of the Cold War and the post-Cold War era have been forgotten. First there was the U.S. pullout from Iraq in 2011. Then as the Syrian state lost control of much of its territory in 2012 and 2013, the U.S. developed a policy of having no policy. Others filled the vacuum – Iran and then ISIS.

My other concern is the seeming abandonment of humanitarian law. The parties to this body of law have pledged not only to uphold it but see to it that it is upheld. We relearned that in Bosnia and Rwanda, only to forget it again in Syria. Syria is like Bosnia, a war crime masquerading as a war.

It's baffling to observe that our president has been almost mute as crimes against humanity are committed before our eyes. Soon, we'll have as his successor, a man who wants to join the side of the perpetrators. Something has gone truly wrong.

I see enormous values at stake – in shorthand, the lessons of the Holocaust and of Nuremberg. And I see a big failure looming for American interests here.

Diplomacy has descended into empty meetings and endless process. Everyone here knows it will fail if it's not backed by the threat of the use of force. On the other hand, force not linked to the search for a political outcome will run the nation's interests aground. I fear we're failing on both counts in Syria: we have diplomacy without force and in the fight against ISIS, force without diplomacy.

My observation from a long journalistic career is this: The United States is the keystone in the arch of world order; on the other side are those who are only too eager to fill the security vacuum we have left: rogue states and non-state actors. They want to pull down the arch. It will be an error of historic proportions if the United States abandons the field to them.

I think it's time we all spoke up about this. For this purpose I will gladly become a commentator.

-- Roy Gutman