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Finally, we're beginning to understand what it would take to galvanize President Bush, other leaders and the American public to respond to the genocide in Sudan: a suffering puppy with big eyes and floppy ears.

That's the implication of a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people good, conscientious people aren't moved by genocide or famines. Time and again, we've seen that the human conscience just isn't pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.

()Evidence is overwhelming that humans respond to the suffering of individuals rather than groups. Think of the toddler Jessica McClure falling down a well in 1987, or the Lindbergh baby kidnapping in 1932 (which Mencken described as "the biggest story since the Resurrection").

Even the right animal evokes a similar sympathy. A dog stranded on a ship aroused so much pity that \$48,000 in private money was spent trying to rescue it and that was before the Coast Guard stepped in. And after I began visiting Darfur in 2004, I was flummoxed by the public's passion to save a red-tailed hawk, Pale Male that had been evicted from his nest on Fifth Avenue in New York City. A single homeless hawk aroused more indignation than 2 million homeless Sudanese.

()So, yes, we should develop early-warning systems for genocide, prepare an African Union, U.N. and NATO rapid-response capability, and polish the "responsibility to protect" as a legal basis to stop atrocities. (The Genocide Intervention Network and the Enough project are working on these things.)

But, frankly, after four years of watching the U.N. Security Council, the International Criminal Court and the Genocide Convention accomplish little in Darfur, I'm skeptical that either human rationality or international law can achieve much unless backed by a public outcry.

One experiment underscored the limits of rationality. People prepared to donate to the needy were first asked either to talk about babies (to prime the emotions) or to perform math calculations (to prime their rational side). Those who did math donated less.

So maybe what we need isn't better laws but more troubled consciences pricked, perhaps, by a Darfur puppy with big eyes and floppy ears. Once we find such a soulful dog in peril, we should call ABC News. ABC's news judgment can be assessed by the 11 minutes of evening news coverage it gave to Darfur's genocide during all of last year compared with 23 minutes for the false confession in the JonBenet Ramsey case.

If President Bush and the global public alike are unmoved by the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of fellow humans, maybe our last, best hope is that we can be galvanized by a puppy in distress.

Full text is available at:

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