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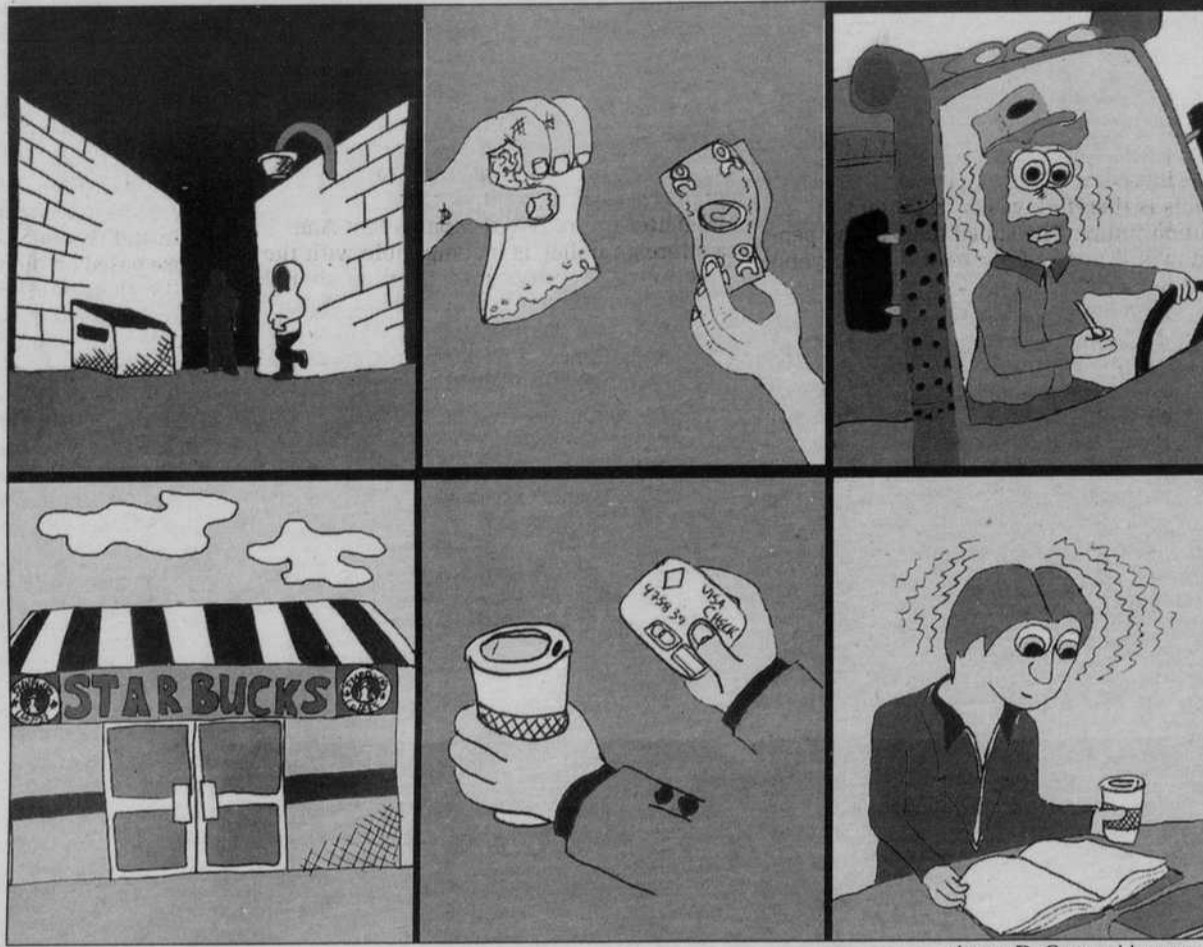
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AARON DUCHATEAU | ILLUSTRATOR

In my opinion

Numb in the face of genocide

Acts of genocide are routinely described as "incomprehensible." This descriptor may be more accurate than we know.

In the last several years, hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians have been murdered in the Darfur region of Sudan. It has been underreported in the American media and underrepresented on the American foreign policy agenda. The rest of the world has been just as reluctant to take action. Now, a University psychology professor seems to have found an answer: Our brains just can't understand genocide.

Professor Paul Slovic recently delivered a paper in which he claims the emotional side of the human brain numbs in response to mass murder, according to an article in Monday's Register-Guard.

Slovic says this is a "fundamental deficiency in our humanity," because the numbing effect prevents a person from feeling empathy and taking action. This could help explain why people across America and the world have yet to formulate a substantial response to the genocide in Darfur.

"The only reason to know how many have died is to have a number to report when we memorialize another genocide 10 years after the fact," said Slovic in the article.

What does this say about our humanity? Do we, as Slovic says, have a fundamental deficiency? I believe the answer is yes. Moving away from the physiological and psychological science of the issue and into the realm of philosophy, the fact that we are virtually unable to respond to acts of genocide is a serious problem.

Certainly the fact that humans have organized for the purpose of exterminating one another since the dawn of recorded history suggests that there is something fundamentally corrupt, or at least corruptible, in our nature. However, a small minority of the world's population actually plan and participate in genocide. For



GABE BRADLEY
THE WRITING ON THE WALL

every country in the world where genocide is taking place, there are hundreds where there is currently no genocide.

So it's easy for us to ignore genocide, especially when it's on the other side of the world, because the refugees rarely end up here. But in this era of information technology, there's nothing keeping us in the dark except for our own unwillingness to care.

I say the American media have underreported the Darfur genocide. The media, though, are only giving the people what they want. If average American viewers gave even a slight inkling that they cared about the situation in Darfur, we would be bombarded with information about Darfur 24/7.

Can you imagine the ratings on genocide coverage? There's no need to sensationalize that story. The problem is, people across the country and the world are so totally apathetic that the media have no incentive to provide substantial coverage.

Both the media and our government are affected by the same forces that shape our markets: supply and demand. Until there is significant demand for information and action with regard to genocide throughout the world, the powers that be will have no incentive to supply any solutions; right now, there just isn't the demand.

For those of us who believe that being complacent in the face of genocide is a breach of our obligations to one another as humans, this is a problem.

Slovic's finding that we are paralyzed to the point of inaction by genocide is interesting because it presents

us with a situation wherein the right thing to do is to struggle against our natural inclinations — to do the right thing despite how we're wired.

Most people would agree that we're not perfect the way we are. That's why so many of us seek to change, learn and grow. For many of us, this means living the beautiful life, the good life, the excellent life.

So perhaps it's not breaking news that in our struggle to live life in the best way we can, our biggest obstacles come not from our circumstances or from others, but from ourselves. This fact has been so well-documented in the realm of exercise and sport that it has become a cliché. However, in the realm of moral philosophy, this point is very much in dispute.

Irish philosopher Edmund Burke is often quoted as having said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." We now know that it's incredibly easy for good people to do nothing.

I don't particularly care for the movie "Schindler's List." However, the final scene is one of the most emotionally powerful scenes I have ever watched in any movie. Though Liam Neeson's character has risked his life and livelihood to save Jews from the death camps and sabotage the Nazi war effort, he still breaks down in tears, bemoaning the fact that he could have done more. The implication here is not merely that he could have done more but that he should have done more.

Now we are faced with yet another genocide. Most of us could do more. Most of us should do more.

Slovic will be one of the speakers at a forum tomorrow night on how local residents can help stop the Darfur genocide. The forum, sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council, will take place at 7 p.m. at Temple Beth Israel.

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Editorial

We need to wake up to global warming

Scientists around the world are coming to the same conclusion: Global warming is real, it is at one of its highest points ever and it is increasing.

Geophysicists from Oregon and Utah recently published study results indicating that temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere, especially North America, have increased nearly 2 degrees Fahrenheit since the industrial revolution began about 150 years ago. It only stands to reason that greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, produced heavily since then, are indeed contributing to depletion of the ozone layer.

The National Center for Atmospheric Research recently reported that rising global temperatures may lead to bigger, more frequent storms within the next century, and a separate Purdue study supported those findings.

According to a European study that analyzed Antarctic ice, the amount of carbon dioxide — a greenhouse gas — in the atmosphere is at a 650,000 year high.

Yet Americans still don't seem to buy into the idea that global warming exists.

On Monday, delegates from the United States and other U.N. nations began a 10-day conference in Canada to discuss global climate change. Harlan L. Watson, senior climate negotiator for the State Department, defended the Bush administration's decisions not to join the Kyoto Protocol — an international treaty signed by 156 countries that aims to reduce heat-trapping gases by 7 percent below 1990 levels. But representatives of other nations blasted the United States for not joining, according to The Associated Press.

This international criticism is merited. The United States is resisting current and future Kyoto regulations. Chief environmental advisor to the president, James Connaughton has expressed his reluctance to agree to any sort of binding treaty, stating U.S. economic development as the main factor behind his reasoning. This line of reasoning is confusing and disheartening. We acknowledge the severe economic repercussions of reducing U.S. emissions, especially as our nation strives to compete with growing powers that lack tough environmental restrictions, such as China. But shouldn't the president receive environmental advice from someone concerned more about economic factors than global warming?

The Bush administration has shown general disregard for the environment, and consequently, human health after scientific research has indicated dangers. For example, this administration relaxed regulations involving the use of methyl bromide, a chemical pesticide which has been shown to damage the ozone layer. And like other pesticides, methyl bromide can be responsible for serious neurological damage. Although the nation is part of a treaty designed to decrease the use of methyl bromide, the U.S. administration has demanded treaty exemptions to prevent "market disruption."

When the United States refuses to join global environmental coalitions or requires provisions to prevent any economic harm, our country sets an irresponsible example for the rest of the world. We need to demonstrate environmental sensibility while we remain the most powerful economic nation on the planet. The United States needs to show solidarity with the fight against global warming. Working with the U.N. to reach a compromise on anti-climate change regulations, and ending the use of dangerous pesticides, would be great ways to get started.