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# PRESSWATCH

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## NOSING AROUND

by John O'Sullivan

For a week in August, all Washington was glued to the President's nose. One was reminded of the remark that the entire history of the world might have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been half an inch longer. Now, as a result of minor surgery, the President's nose is marginally smaller. To the Washington press corps, this was history.

Now there are reasons for this nosiness. President Reagan's operation for cancer had ended with the doctor's assurance that he had a better than 50 percent chance of surviving for a normal life span. The press drew the conclusion that this meant he had an almost 50 percent chance of not surviving. It therefore became the bounden duty of newsmen to watch hawk-like for any signs of the illness recurring. And according to the canons of post-Watergate journalism, the very fact that the press is interested in any subject is plain proof that the government must be trying to conceal it. So the White House press corps was waiting anxiously for two things: signs that the President was still suffering from cancer and evidence of a "cover-up."

Indeed, charges of a cover-up had already been leveled in the *Other Spectator* by Christopher Hitchens, Washington correspondent of both the *Spectator* and the *Nation*. Mr. Hitchens, citing the medical correspondent of the *London Observer*, suggested that the President's cancer had been discovered in 1984 but that the news of it had been suppressed in the interest of winning the election. Of this suggestion two remarks may be made. First, it shows the President in a more heroic light than that in which he normally appears in Mr. Hitchens's columns. He risked his life to keep Walter Mondale out of the White House! To be fair to all concerned, I cannot really imagine that the President regarded Mondale as such a threat to America and democ-

racy that martyrdom was necessary to stop him. Then, having won the election, why did the President not rush into hospital for a life-saving operation? Instead he dawdled around governing the country for eight months. In short, the Hitchens theory of an earlier cover-up fails to grip. But it shows how some people in the press were thinking. They had—I feel a phrase coming on—a cover-up mind-set.

To return to the nose, Mr. Reagan had an operation to remove a pimple, or "pampoule," from it on a Tuesday, and the fact was announced to the media on Thursday. At once they wanted to know if the growth removed had been "cancerous" since the main anxiety after the colonic operation was that the cancer might have spread to other parts of the body. As we now know, the nose pimple was a minor skin cancer, medically unrelated to the colon cancer and probably the result of too much sun bathing. This was known on Friday but not announced to the press. An "Iron Curtain" was brought down on the nose—but only for one weekend. At a Monday press conference, the President gave a very full account of the medical facts, skin cancer and all. No concealment of

anything was attempted. The nose issue should by rights have been brought to a halt then and there.

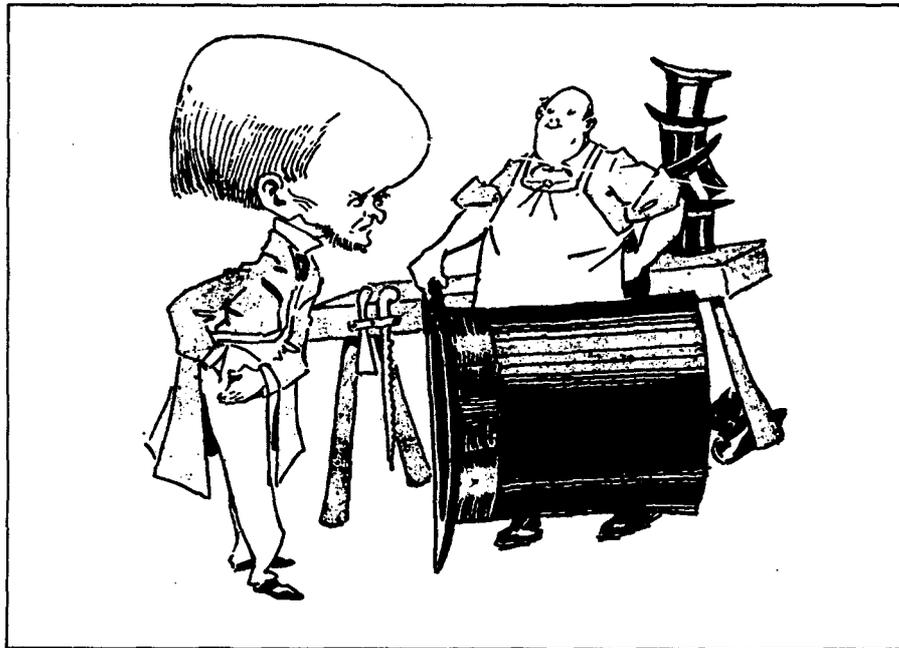
Instead, what we got was "Nosegate." The press corps began to question the "credibility" of presidential press spokesman Larry Speakes because he had not informed them of the skin cancer as soon as the tests had disclosed it. Worse, he had concealed the fact at his Friday press conference. Speakes replied he had not "lied" (even though he had not been forthright) and that his credibility was in excellent shape. Storms, flouts, jeers, and recriminations ensued. One needed to pinch oneself to recall that these angry exchanges concerned a delay of one weekend in reporting the fact of a harmless skin cancer!

But why even that delay? The reasons are hardly mysterious. The President himself was not told the results of the tests until that weekend. His advisers, including Mrs. Reagan, did not want him to learn the news from possibly misleading or exaggerated reports on television. And they may have felt that the announcement of the skin cancer should reflect its medical unimportance. What better than to have the President himself, apparently in good health, reveal the news and then go on to emphasize its true

triviality by lamenting that he would no longer be able to get a good suntan. That would surely be an improvement on some doctor bounding out, declaring "the President has cancer of the nose," and then going on to explain at length that this was a medical term which meant he had had a harmless cancer removed. These respectable arguments struck the White House press corps as sinister harbingers of censorship and deceit.

"Nosegate," then, describes a phenomenon of journalism which deserves attention. It is the journalistic conviction that the same standards of intrusiveness and suspicion of government which determine reporting of the State Department or the Environmental Protection Agency also apply to revealing the truth about somebody's nose. This is justified by the argument that, if lesser standards are applied, we might end up with a Woodrow Wilson White House in which Nancy's finger is on the nuclear trigger while a sick President repines upstairs. Like most arguments which see a dire threat to the First Amendment, this is hysterical exaggeration. If the President really were disabled by illness, there would be no way of concealing the fact in the present day. A modern President is, quite simply, much more regularly on public display than were his predecessors of sixty years ago.

But a President, though on display, is entitled to the minimum privacy of not having his bladder function described to the world. Mrs. Reagan is quite right to feel that some of the press attention to Mr. Reagan's entrails went beyond legitimate curiosity. So if the press, intent on safeguarding the nation from serious medical deception, is to be allowed full access to all the details of the President's medical condition, then it must accept the corresponding restraint that doctors accept—namely, confidentiality (a.k.a. "self-censorship"). It can either know everything or it can tell everything, but it cannot do both. We must distinguish between the



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right to know and the right to nose. (Sorry, I just couldn't resist.)

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At the July conference of the American Bar Association in London, Mrs. Thatcher called for the media to adopt a voluntary code of conduct that

would deprive terrorists of the "oxygen of publicity." A week later, she was asked by a London *Sunday Times* reporter at a Washington press conference if, in view of this, she would condemn the BBC if it were to screen an interview with an IRA terrorist.

"Yes," she said, speaking hypothetically. She would "condemn it utterly."

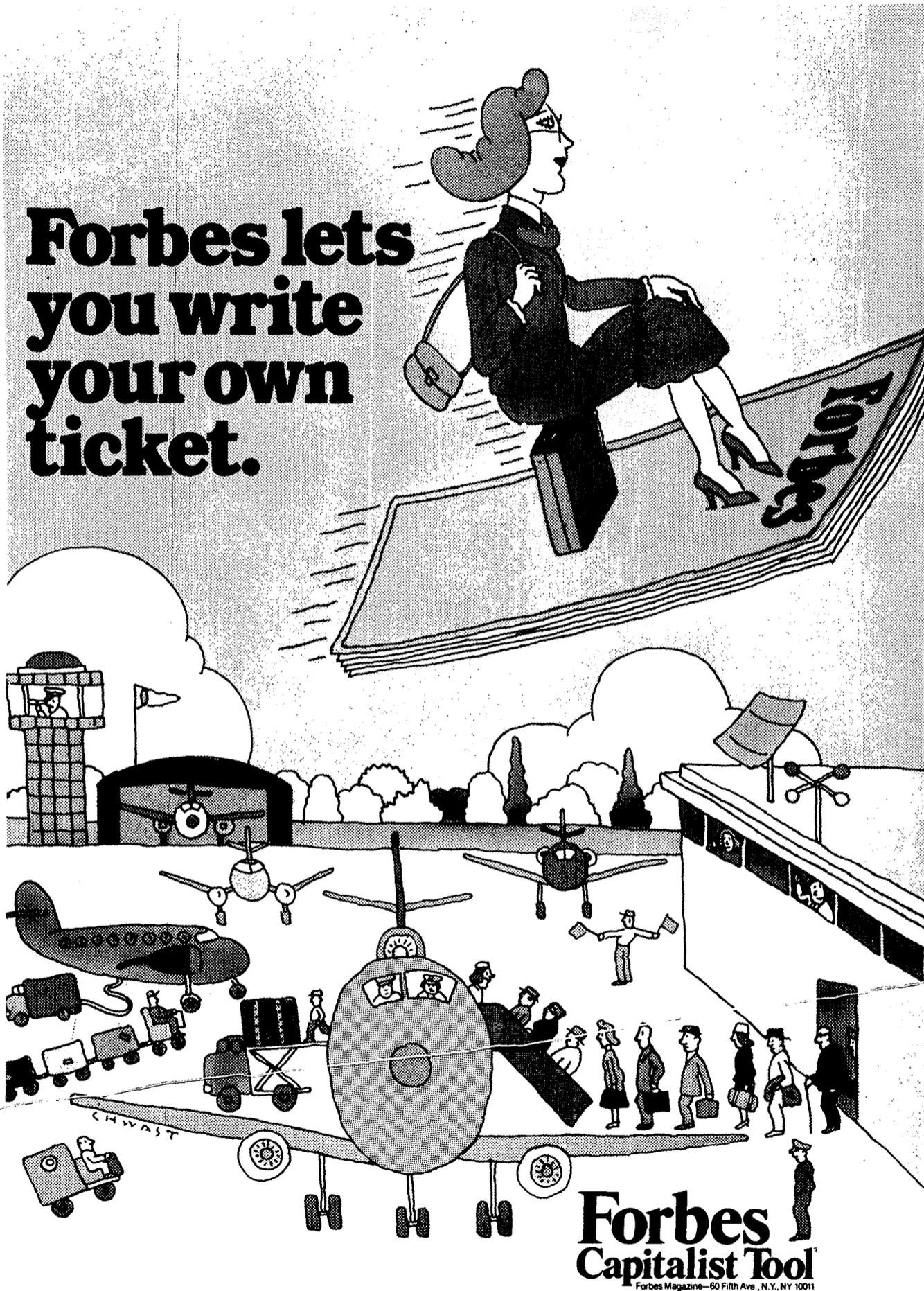
What Mrs. Thatcher did not know—but what the *Sunday Times* did know—was that the BBC was planning to do a documentary that included such an interview with Martin MacGuinness, formerly the IRA's "chief of staff" (to use the inflated jargon) and now a Sinn Fein member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since much was later made of

MacGuinness's status as a "democratically elected politician," it should be made clear that Sinn Fein is simply the Public Relations Department of the terror machine. Sinn Fein members advocate murder and terrorism, but they graciously agree to leave their guns in the cloakroom.

The *Sunday Times* duly splashed the story: Thatcher condemns BBC interview utterly. And a major political row began. The British home secretary, Leon Brittan, actually has the legal authority to instruct the BBC to cancel a particular program. But this formal power has never been used. Nor was it used on this occasion. Instead, Brittan wrote to the BBC governors denouncing the idea of the BBC granting such respectability to a terrorist. At this point everybody—possibly including Brittan himself—expected the BBC governors to issue a ringing declaration of the BBC's independence and announce that the interview would go ahead. Instead they canceled it.

We now know that they did so for two reasons unrelated to Brittan's letter. They discovered that the program had been made in contravention of the BBC's own internal guidelines on programs concerning terrorism. These stipulate that any such program dealing with Northern Ireland terrorism must be shown to the Northern Ireland governor of the BBC, in this case Lady Faulkner. This was not done, it was said, for the incredibly feeble reason that Lady Faulkner was due to retire soon. Almost certainly the real reason was that the bureaucrats in charge thought that she would object to the program and thus decided to avoid any such obstacle. Secondly, the governors were appalled at the program when they saw it. It depicted MacGuinness as a moody but quiet young man, given to dandling children in his lap in the best Yassir Arafat tradition, while glibly defending the IRA's right to kill people.

Nonetheless, the governor's decision to ban the program was greeted with loud cries of "censorship," "bowing to government pressure," and so on. The National Union of Journalists, which itself tries to censor any opinions on racial and sexual matters of which it disapproves under the guise of upholding "professional standards" (it never somehow reproves bad spelling, bad punctuation, or rolling up dead drunk to cover the town council), then got into the act. NUJ broadcast journalists called a one-day strike to protest government censorship—oblivious to the fact that a journalists' strike is itself a form of censorship. Promulgating the general principle that all journalists have a professional duty to oppose any limitation on free speech, they pulled the plugs on radio and television sets.



This sheep-like orthodoxy is disturbing. Journalists should have no such thing as a collective opinion. They are not bound together by opinions at all. They are simply people who write for journals. If journalists were forced by their professional standards to believe in completely unfettered freedom, there could be no Communist, fascist, conservative, or moderate liberal journalists. All journalists would then be libertarians—a very boring state of affairs.

In this particular case, the BBC journalists were on especially weak grounds in crying censorship. After all, journalists are generally subject to that form of censorship called editing. But the procedures laid down for editing programs on Ulster terrorism had been previously ignored. The governors were simply correcting that omission—which we might classify as omission by stealth. Nor were the BBC governors, as some implied, acting *ultra vires*. Finally, the BBC is accountable to the public through the governors. They are its final editorial court of appeal. In trying to deny the governors any editorial control, even *in extremis*, the BBC journalists were asserting their right to receive large sums of public money and then to spend it exactly as they wished with no questions asked. Asking questions was “censorship.” These journalistic attitudes amounted to professional arrogance of almost medical proportions.

But what of the question of substance raised by Thatcher: Should television broadcast interviews with terrorists? The argument that it should not is based on the theory that such interviews confer legitimacy and respectability upon the terrorist. A television interview, however harshly conducted, inevitably treats its subject as someone whose contribution to public debate is worthy of attention. By discussing his political aims, “motivation,” and philosophy, it blurs the vital distinction between murder and legitimate political struggle, between crime and opinion. Gradually the terrorist ceases to seem like a criminal and becomes a sort of politician. Certainly the terrorist thinks so. He never passes up a chance to get on the box.

In reply to this, the journalists argued that “we need to know our enemy.” We must learn what the terrorists stand for. This is poppycock. No one has the slightest doubt what the IRA (or the PLO, or the Sandinistas, or the Red Brigades) believes in. And if we did not know, a reporter’s précis would be a more efficient way of telling us than a televised interview of terrorist and baby. Besides, it is naive in the extreme to imagine that such an interview would tell us what terrorists “believe.” It would be sugared prop-

aganda. Their philosophy and motivation are better revealed by what they *do* than by what they *say*. After all, as Conor Cruise O’Brien has pointed out, some people like killing, hurting, and frightening others. They are not likely to stand up and say so on the evening news, but their actions can be judged to point to that conclusion.

But the objection presented with especial passion was that banning an

interview with a terrorist was the start of a slippery slope leading to general political censorship, dictatorship, dark night, and old chaos. Alarmist hysteria of this kind was the staple of speeches at a special showing of the BBC documentary under NUJ auspices.

It is refuted by the example of the Irish Republic. The Irish government introduced a formal government ban on interviews with the IRA on the Irish

National Network, RTE, in 1972. What has happened since then? Has the Republic sunk into the dark abyss of fascism? Not in the least. During the intervening years, Ireland has moved quite far in a liberal direction. No additional censorship has been imposed.

As with “Nosegate,” the lesson is clear. The right to know is important. But the right not to be murdered takes precedence over it. □

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# AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS



## ROCK AROUND THE DOCK

by P.J. O'Rourke

When the "We Are the World" video first slithered into public view, I was sitting around with a friend who himself happens to be in show business. The thing gave him the willies. Me too. But neither of us could figure exactly why. "Whenever you see people that pleased with themselves on a stage," said my friend, "you know you're in for garbage art." And the USA for Africa performers did have that self-satisfied look of toddlers on a pot. But in this world of behemoth evils, such a minor lapse of taste shouldn't have upset us. We changed the channel.

Half a year later, in the middle of the Live Aid broadcast, my friend called me. "Turn on your television," he said.

*P.J. O'Rourke's cover story on Lee Iacocca appeared in the May American Spectator.*

"This is horrible. They're in a frenzy."

"Well," I said, "at least it's a frenzy of charity."

"Oh, no," he said, "it could be anything. Next time it might be 'Kill the Jews.'"

A mob, even an eleemosynary mob, is an ugly thing to see. No good ever came of mass emotion. The audience that's moved to tears by a rubber E.T. figurine is as easily moved to sadistic dementia by the idiot Rambo character. People are not thinking under such circumstances. And poor, dreadful Africa is something which surely needs thought.

The Band Aid, Live Aid, USA for Africa concerts and records (and videos, posters, T-shirts, lunch buckets, thermos bottles, bath toys, etc.) are supposed to illuminate the plight of the Africans. Note the insights provided by these lyrics:

*We are the world [solipsism], we are the children [average age near forty]*

*We are the ones to make a brighter day [see line 6 below]*

*So let's start giving [logical inference supplied without argument]*

*There's a choice we're making [true as far as it goes]*

*We're saving our own lives [absurd]*

*It's true we'll make a better day [unproven]*

*Just you and me [statistically unlikely]*

That's three palpable untruths, two dubious assertions, nine uses of a first-person pronoun, not a single reference to trouble or anybody in it, and no

facts. The verse contains, literally, neither rhyme nor reason.

And these musical riots of philanthropy address themselves to the wrong problems. There is, of course, a shortage of food among Africans, but that doesn't mean there's a shortage of food in Africa. "A huge backlog of emergency grain has built up at the Red Sea port of Assab," says the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Food sits rotting in Ethiopia," reads a headline in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. And according to hunger maven William Shawcross, 200,000 tons of food aid delivered to Ethiopia is being held in storage by the country's government.

There's also, of course, a lack of transport for that food. But that's not the real problem, either. The authorities in Addis Ababa have plenty of trucks for their military operations against the Eritrean rebels, and much of the rest of Ethiopia's haulage is being used for forcibly resettling people instead of feeding them. Western governments are reluctant to send more trucks for fear they'll be used the same way. And similar behavior can be seen in the rest of miserable Africa.

The African relief fad serves to distract attention from the real issues. There is famine in Ethiopia, Chad, Sudan, and areas of Mozambique. All these countries are involved in pointless civil wars. There are pockets of famine in Mauritania, Niger, and Mali—the result of desertification caused mostly by idiot agricultural policies. African famine is not a visitation of fate. It is largely man-made, and the men who made it are largely Africans.

Enormous irrigation projects have been put onto lands that cannot support them and into cultures that cannot use them. Crack-brained nationalism puts borders in the way of nomadic peoples who used to pick up and move when things got dry. Rural poverty drives populations to African cities where governments keep food prices artificially low thus increasing rural poverty. Bumbling and corrupt

central planning stymies farm production. And the hideous Ethiopian regime uses hunger as a weapon to suppress rebellious provinces. People are not just starving. They are *being* starved.

"Socialist" ideals infest Africa like malaria or dengue fever. African leaders, lost in the frippery of centrist thinking, fail to deal with market forces or any other natural phenomena. Leave it to a Marxist to see the world as the world is not. It's not unusual for African intellectuals to receive their education at such august bodies of learning as Patrice Lumumba U. in Moscow. That is, they are trained by a nation which intentionally starved millions of its citizens in order to collectivize farming.

Death is the result of bad politics. And the Aid concerts are examples of the bad logic that leads to bad politics. It's probably not going too far to say that Africa's problems have been produced by the same kind of dim, ignorant thinking in evidence among American pop artists. "If we take, say, six months and not spend any money on nuclear weapons, and just spend it on food, I think we could make a big dent," says Waylon Jennings in the USA for Africa publicity packet. In fact, a small nuclear weapon placed directly under Lt. Col. Haile Mariam Mengistu and his pals would probably make a more beneficial dent than a whole U.S. defense budget worth of canned goods.

Anyway, money is not going to solve the problem. Yet the concert nonsense is all put strictly in terms of cash. Perhaps it is the only thing the greasy famous understand.

Getting people to give vast amounts of money when there's no firm idea what that money will do is like throwing maidens down a well. It's an appeal to magic. And the results are likely to be as stupid and disappointing as the results of magic usually are.

But, say some, Live Aid sets a good example for today's selfish youth,

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