

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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reminding them to be socially concerned. Nonsense. The circus atmosphere of the Live Aid concerts makes the world's problems seem easy and fun to solve and implies that the solutions are naturally uncontroversial. As an example of charity, Live Aid couldn't be worse. The Live Aid performers are sacrificing nothing. Indeed, they're gaining public adulation and a thoroughly unmerited good opinion of themselves. Plus it's free

advertising. These LP's, performances, and multiform by-products have nothing in common with charity. Instead they levy a sort of regressive alms tax on the befuddled millions. The performers donate their time which is wholly worthless. Big corporations donate their services which are worth little enough. Then the poor audience pledges all the contributions and buys all the trash with money it can ill afford to spend. The worst nineteenth-

century robber barons wouldn't have had the cheek to put forward such a bunco scheme. They may have given away tainted money, but at least they didn't ask you to give away yours.

One more thing, the music's lousy. If we must save the world with a song, what's the matter with the Metropolitan Opera Company?

Rock 'n' roll's dopey crusade against African hunger has, I posit, added to the stock of human misery. And not

just audibly. Any religious person—whether he worships at a pile of gazelle bones or in the Cathedral of St. Paul—will tell you egotism is the source of sin. The lust for power that destroys the benighted Ethiopians has the same fountainhead as the lust for fame that propels the lousy pop band. "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." Let alone everyone that saith sha la la la and doobie doobie do. □

THE PRESIDENT'S PULSE

NO WAY TO TREAT A PRESIDENT

by Harry Schwartz

From the 1950s through the early 1970s, I was the *New York Times'* Kremlinologist. In that capacity I met and sometimes became friendly with individual Soviet journalists, especially one whom I shall call Yuri here.

Yuri was one of *Pravda's* chief commentators on international politics; his articles appeared frequently. Then they suddenly stopped appearing. After a long time I learned he was very ill. So I was surprised one day to get a call from Yuri. He was in New York and asked if we could get together. When we did meet, I was taken aback by how ill he looked and the amount of weight he had obviously lost. He laughed at my reaction and said he was much better than he had been in years. Then he added he might be dead already if he had stuck to the services of the doctors in the fancy clinics and hospitals reserved for the Kremlin elite. But he had been lucky, he told me, and had found an extraordinary doctor in the major part of the Soviet medical establishment that treats ordinary citizens. Yuri was convinced he had survived because of the doctor's care. But to use this doctor, Yuri had had to get care in the dismal surroundings available for ordinary Soviet citizens without any of the luxurious ambience of the elite medical system.

Yuri is now long since dead. But by finding his special doctor he had won a remission in his cancer which extended his life and permitted him to visit the United States and Western Europe one more time. And he told me something he shouldn't have: that the doctors who serve the Soviet elite are picked more for their political soundness than for their medical skills. As in

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Yuri's case, sometimes the best medical care in Russia comes from one of the underpaid physicians in the general medical system whose knowledge is great but whose politics are considered unreliable.

I thought of Yuri's story frequently last summer as I followed President Reagan's medical treatment by the most socialized part of American medicine: the military medical system. The Presidential Suite at Bethesda Naval Hospital, I read, costs \$450 a day, a sum less than the single room rate at several New York City hospitals. Presumably the President, as a federal employee, has health insurance which paid the hospital bill as well as any physicians' fees he may have been charged. But the same health insurance policy would have paid for his hospital and doctor bills if had gone to a top-notch hospital in the private sector. Certainly he had no reason to complain about the superb treatment he received at the private George Washington University Hospital where his life was saved after the 1981 assassination attempt against him. So why did Ronald Reagan, who used to tour the country making speeches denouncing Socialized Medicine, decide to use the socialized military medical system one of whose prime incarnations is the Bethesda Naval Hospital?

My puzzlement grew as I recalled that earlier this past summer there had been an unusual amount of publicity about the military medical system, almost all of it bad. There was, for example, the congressional furor over the legal prohibition against servicemen suing a military hospital or doctor for malpractice. A committee hearing on this topic produced several examples of shocking military medical malpractice

on servicemen who could not sue. But civilians—veterans and members of the families of people belonging to the armed forces—who are treated by military medical personnel can sue. Last April, for example, a woman whose cancer went undiagnosed for a year and a half at Bethesda Naval Hospital was awarded \$1 million. The cost of malpractice suits against military hospitals and physicians has risen from \$29 million in 1982 to \$41 million in 1984.

Bethesda Naval Hospital, where the President went, has had more than its share of publicity about its problems. Thus in 1982 both the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals and the Navy Inspector General's office found serious deficiencies there, particularly in medical record keeping. Only after Bethesda was reorganized and some key personnel were reassigned did it regain full accreditation in 1983.

Then there is the astonishing case of



Navy Commander Donald M. Billig, M.D., former chief of cardiovascular surgery at Bethesda. According to news reports, Dr. Billig had been removed from the staff of a New Jersey civilian hospital several years ago on the basis of charges which reflected on both his integrity and his competence. Officials at the New Jersey hospital said his full records had been sent to the Navy, but that didn't prevent Dr. Billig from getting his Navy job.

Moreover, Dr. Billig never won the credentials necessary to do independent open heart surgery, and the adequacy of his eyesight was under serious question. According to the *Washington Post*, Billig failed an eye examination for the Air Force before he applied to the Navy. The deficiencies in his right eye were such as to suggest he could not have the full three-dimensional depth perception which is central to good surgery.

Billig, who was suspended after investigation of the deaths and other complications which followed his cardiovascular surgery at Bethesda, was apparently approved and promoted at Bethesda because he had good friends in the Navy medical command. Three top Navy medical officers have been reassigned and are awaiting courts martial or other possible disciplinary action against them because of their alleged roles in the Billig affair. One of them was commander of Bethesda Naval Hospital when Billig was hired, and subsequently became second in command of the Navy medical establishment until the Billig scandal caused his reassignment.

The widespread appreciation of serious problems in our military medical system has caused major reforms to be announced. Just last July, for example, two great changes were introduced. Under the first, all