

The Politics of George Clooney's Help for Haiti Telethon

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I totally agree with Jesse Lemisch's astute comments about George Clooney's extravaganza and its conspicuous avoidance of anything that might be construed as "political." Of course, in the midst of a colossal disaster, this feel-good spectacle of entertainment icons is *inherently* political, rife with intended and unintended consequences. First of all, it is hard to separate celebrity magnanimity from self-promotion. Haiti's tragedy has given Bill Clinton an opportunity to burnish his fading image, for "W" to emerge from seclusion, and for Obama to back away from his promise not to forsake "the people of Haiti."

As for Clooney's troubadours, it provides better publicity than money can buy. Most of us on this website are old enough to remember Jerry Lewis's "kids" and his annual telethon to raise money for muscular dystrophy research, an antecedent to Oprah's "Angels." Against their intentions, Clooney's telethon is being used to depoliticize Haiti's crisis by making the rescue a matter of individual charity, rather than the responsibility of nation states that alone have the power and resources to make a difference. The proof is in the pudding: The Help for Haiti telethon raised a whopping 57 million dollars!

Of course, Obama has promised to commit 100 million dollars in aid to Haiti. But as Bill Quigley commented on his ZSpace page (January 16): "\$100 million — Are you kidding me? A Kentucky couple won \$128 million in a Powerball lottery on December 24, 2009. The richest nation in the history of the world is giving powerball money to a neighbor with tens of thousands of deaths already."

To use another yardstick, in October 2009 the United States was spending \$7.3 billion (yes, that's BILLION) a month in Iraq, down from \$12 billion a year earlier. The political function of the telethon, with all the massive publicity that it generated, is to create the impression of vast sums being collected to help Haiti, when it only amounts to a pittance. Its intentions may have been noble, but devoid of larger political message, its very nobility provides the perfect smokescreen for moral and political abdication.

Jesse Lemisch also called out David Brooks for writing that "It is time to put the thorny issue of culture at the center of efforts to tackle global poverty." Brooks struck the same obnoxious theme after Katrina. While bloated bodies were still being dredged out of the levees, he argued that there was "a silver lining" in Katrina, in that it broke up the nefarious pockets of poverty that engender cultural pathology that keep people trapped in poverty. No doubt it is only a matter of time before we will be hearing a Malthusian refrain about Haiti's earthquake as well. An estimated 200,000 have had their lives extinguished, and according to today's news, another 400,000 will be moved to camps outside of Port-au-Prince. Like the new New Orleans, tomorrow's Port-au-Prince will be cleansed of poor people. Let the band play on!

Some years ago there was a report in the *New York Times* about a mayor in a French provincial town who reluctantly accepted the philanthropy of a wealthy donor to build a swimming pool for the town's youth. The mayor, an avowed communist, declared that it would have been much better had the town's governing body, representing all of its citizens, appropriated the money for the pool. But since the funds were not available and the pool was desperately needed, he reluctantly accepted the patronage of the fat cat. A swimming pool is one thing, but what kind of society relies on handouts to

pay for muscular dystrophy research? To provide for orphaned children? To salvage a city that has been reduced to rubble? Answer: the same society where the leading liberal newspaper prints David Brooks's victim-blaming screed on its op-ed pages.