Celebrity Culture and the Rise of Narcissistic Interventionism

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This chapter considers what Philip Drake and Michael Higgins call “the increasingly interwoven nature of celebrity and politics” (87), focusing in particular on the politics of humanitarian intervention. In recent years, celebrity involvement in international political and charity campaigning has attracted much comment and attention. Yet the discussion tends to be superficial and preoccupied with the personal motivations of individuals, often implicitly “ranking” celebrities according to a hierarchy of credibility. For example, socialite Paris Hilton attracted derision when, in 2007, she announced that she intended to visit Rwanda. One journalist predicted that she would “parade around [...] in an insincere way” (Kron); another commented that it would not help Rwanda to be “embraced by the personification of decadence” (Winkler). The actress Angelina Jolie, in contrast, tends to be seen as making a valuable contribution when she visits African countries. “Visits to the worst afflicted areas of Sudan/Darfur by celebrities such as Angelina Jolie [...] have helped keep events there in the headlines—invaluable in terms of sustaining diplomatic interest and, through this, funding desperately needed aid,” argues Philip Jacobson (87). Fêted by Esquire magazine as “the best woman in the world” (Hill), Jolie is widely seen as “absolutely serious, absolutely informed,” in the words of former Secretary of State Colin Powell (qtd. in Winkler). Whether one agrees or disagrees with the placing of particular personalities in the league table of sincerity, such judgements assume the existence of a separate sphere of “real” political action, in relation to which the activities of celebrities may be either disparaged as mere self-promotion or applauded as a sign of genuine commitment.

Discussion of what might be called the “celebritisation” of politics tends to be bound by similar assumptions. Politicians sometimes behave as if they inhabited some minor branch of show-business, such as the saxophone-playing President Bill Clinton, or guitarist Prime Minister Tony Blair; and they occasionally do so in the service of some ostensibly political purpose, as when Bernard Kouchner and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, respectively the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany, recorded a music video to promote European integration (“Steinmeier and Kouchner”). More commonly, politicians appear keen to associate themselves with celebrities. In his early years in office, for example, Blair gathered musicians and other entertainers at Downing Street in an effort to brand the UK as “Cool Britannia.” His successor, Gordon Brown, was eager to be seen to support the “Live 8” charity concert as Chancellor in 2005 and the “Live Earth” concert (organised by former-politician-
turned-celebrity Al Gore) as prime minister in 2007. One way to interpret these phenomena is in terms of the twin trends that critics have identified as leading to a trivialisation of the news agenda: on the one hand, a tendency for politicians to place ever-greater importance on spin and image-management; on the other, a tendency for news editors to prioritise “infotainment” (Franklin Newszak; Packaging Politics). From this perspective, today’s political culture of sound-bites and photo-opportunities both reflects and contributes to a dumbing-down of public life; while the media cut back on such high-cost areas as foreign affairs reporting at the same time as increasing the proportion of time and space given over to celebrity and entertainment news. Other analysts, however, have sought to discover something more positive going on, seeing evidence of a search for new ways to connect with an otherwise disengaged populace. Drake and Higgins, for example, argue that “[t]o dismiss celebrity as a mere symptom of the trivialisation of politics would be to fail to recognise its significance as a means of contemporary political engagement” (100).

There is an element of truth in both these opposing views of celebrity-like behaviour on the part of politicians. For instance, Gordon Brown’s choice, in April 2008, of the talent show American Idol as the venue to announce planned aid spending (Sparrow), or his decision, the same month, to consult pop singer Shakira about education policy in the developing world (Hurst), can be understood both as exercises in news management and as attempts to find an audience for government initiatives. In recent years, political leaders have sought new points of connection with a citizenry that is largely uninterested in or cynical about politics; in the process they have spent inordinate time and energy grooming their media image. The mistake, however, would be to assume that somewhere—behind the cynical packaging and PR, or alternatively, beneath the glitzy but essentially worthy attempts to attract a popular audience—the business of “serious” politics carries on as usual.

This chapter argues that such an assumption is no longer tenable, since it misses what is distinctive about politics today—namely, the hollowing out of political life that has followed the collapse of the long-standing framework of Left and Right. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the sphere of international relations. Focusing particularly on the example of the 1992-95 Bosnian conflict, the chapter firstly examines what is different about contemporary celebrity campaigning around international humanitarian causes, and secondly offers an analysis of post-Cold War Western foreign policy in relation to celebrity culture. It is argued that both the rise of celebrity activism and the celebritisation of politics are symptomatic of a crisis of meaning in contemporary politics and international relations in our post-ideological era.

The Changing Politics of Celebrity Campaigning

The involvement of celebrities in politics and in charitable “good works,” including in the international sphere, is not a new phenomenon, but the character and scope of
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such involvement has not always been the same. Celebrity activism has responded to, and been shaped by, the prevailing political and cultural climate—including in cases where the activism in question has been ostensibly non-partisan and purely charitable. Danny Kaye’s appointment as Unicef’s first “goodwill ambassador” in 1954, for example, chimed with the prevailing discourse about childhood in Cold War America, which contrasted freedom-loving US children with their oppressed counterparts in communist countries. Seemingly apolitical portrayals of childhood, such as in comic-strips like Peanuts, or in journalistic discussions of different child-rearing methods, often carried broader implications about “America’s supremacy in world affairs” (Spigel 36).

In other instances, celebrity campaigning was more explicitly political, more obviously shaped by the contest between Left and Right. Around the time that Ronald Reagan made the transition from movie actor to politician as Republican governor of California from 1967-75, the involvement of figures such as Jane Fonda in the Vietnam era anti-war movement signalled the rise of a counter-cultural politics that was sceptical of traditional values and suspicious of Western interference in the Third World. Notorious as “Hanoi Jane” after her visit to North Vietnam during the war, Fonda also campaigned around environmentalism, feminism and other causes, both indirectly through her film projects and in overt political activity, on her own account and as the partner of Tom Hayden, the former 1960s student leader (see Fonda; Kramer). At first glance, it might seem straightforward to find contemporary equivalents of figures such as Reagan or Fonda—whether it is a matter of using celebrity status to launch a political career (like Arnold Schwarzenegger, California’s governor since 2003), or of using personal fame to bring the spotlight of publicity to international causes (like Angelina Jolie). However, the apparent continuity should not blind us to the very different context of contemporary celebrity campaigning. The key contextual change is that the framework of Right and Left that formerly made sense of celebrity activism, whether it was overtly political or not, no longer exists. For today’s celebrity campaigners, however sincere their motivations, there is no larger framework of meaning to make sense of their actions and enthusiasms.

Since it was always shaped by the broader ideological contest between Left and Right, celebrity activism was also affected by the decline and eventual demise of the Left/Right framework over the course of the 1980s. To some on the Left in particular, celebrity-led initiatives seemed, for a time, to offer a way to revive flagging political engagement. Of particular significance in this respect was Live Aid (and associated spin-offs in sports and comedy) from 1985 onwards. Impressed by the huge popular response to this charity appeal launched by musician Bob Geldof, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques wrote in *Marxism Today* that it might be the model for a new form of politics. Two points in particular stand out as especially interesting for this discussion. The first is that Hall and Jacques saw in the Live Aid phenomenon a counter to the Thatcherite “ideology of selfishness” (251), but one that was expressed as an altruistic charitable impulse rather than as a conventional political response. They noted the family resemblance to previous initiatives such as Rock Against Racism and Red
Wedge (a musicians’ campaign for the Labour Party), but Live Aid was different. It seems likely that a large part of the appeal of the “new politics” they identified was precisely the fact that it presented itself as above or outside the traditional Left/Right political contest. Secondly, it is striking that Hall and Jacques explicitly sought to extend this “new politics” to international relations, hoping that Live Aid could help to define “a different post-imperial role for Britain” (258). The idea that the British state could play a more “moral” role in World affairs was not a new one for the Left, who had previously envisaged such a role coming about through the relinquishment of nuclear weapons or through the imposition of sanctions against apartheid South Africa, for example. The aspiration was not remarkable in itself, but it did signal that, accompanying the elevation of charitable celebrity activism as a means to overcome the diminishing appeal of traditional class politics, there was a broader shift subtly taking place, as former suspicions about the motives and effects of Western intervention in the Third World were put aside.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 brought these trends to a head. Left/Right politics collapsed along with the Berlin Wall, while proclamations of a “New World Order” heralded the beginnings of an “ethical” interventionist turn in Western foreign policy. A central feature of this new interventionism was that it overturned the established principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in a state’s internal affairs, which had been central to international order for the previous half-century under the UN system (Chandler From Kosovo to Kabul). Western states began explicitly questioning these norms in principle and violating them in practice. At the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the victorious powers launched further military action under the banner of humanitarian intervention, setting up safe havens and no-fly zones to protect Kurds and other minorities, and in the process taking part of Iraq’s territory and airspace out of its control. These special zones provided the pretext for repeated Anglo-American bombing of Iraq throughout the 1990s. In 1992, then UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali published An Agenda for Peace, outlining an “increasingly common moral perception” that “[t]he time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty […] has passed” (Boutros-Ghali paras. 15, 17). By the end of the year, Western governments were putting the new idea to dramatic effect in a “peaceful invasion” of Somalia, arguing that since it was a “failed state,” the normal rules of the international system did not apply (Lewis and Mayall 94).

Now, when celebrities turned their attention to the international sphere, they were more likely to be campaigning in favour of Western (military) intervention along ethical lines. The phenomenon described by Brendan O’Neill (“Brad, Angelina”) as “celebrity colonialism” owes its existence to precisely these developments. When Hollywood actors Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt presume to tell the government of Namibia what to do, or when the singer Madonna’s wish to adopt a Malawian child takes precedence over the laws of Malawi, they are enacting the disregard for the sovereignty of weak states which has been demonstrated time and again by Western governments since 1989 (Hume “Why is Madonna”; Rothschild).
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The Bosnian war crystallised this post-Cold War moment as, according to one visiting American writer, Sarajevo became “the coolest city in Europe” (Tanner). Some celebrities became directly involved in charity work (Vanessa Redgrave went on a “fact-finding” mission with Unicef, for example; and Bianca Jagger worked with the Helsinki Human Rights Commission and the Albert Schweitzer Institute in Bosnia), while others engaged in more cultural pursuits. In 1993, for instance, Sarajevo hosted concerts by Joan Baez and a production of Waiting for Godot directed by Susan Sontag. Indeed, the city became so trendy that even style magazine The Face sent a reporter. Those who could not visit in person participated from afar. Fund-raising events were organised by figures such as Emma Thompson and Brian Eno; novelist Salman Rushdie publicly declared himself an “exile” from Sarajevo, even though he had never visited (see Rushdie); and the stage show for U2’s 1993 “Zooropa” tour featured nightly satellite link-ups with the city, allowing lead singer Bono to chat with locals. All this celebrity activity inspired would-be stars to have a go too. Aspiring writers hung out with journalists at Sarajevo’s Holiday Inn, while professional photographers became concerned that they were being put at risk by the hordes of inexperienced amateurs joining them in search of fame and fortune (Edwards). Perhaps the most bizarre illustration of the confusion between war and celebrity circus was the ad hoc European “peace convoy” of jugglers and street performers who tried to drive to Sarajevo before being turned back by the UN (Beaumont). Quite what they would have done had they reached their intended destination defies imagination.

Whether explicitly calling (like Jagger and Sontag) for tougher Western action or simply focusing on the suffering of victims, the campaigning of celebrities tended to reinforce the simplistic narrative about the Bosnian conflict that had inspired their activism in the first place. That narrative, which portrayed the Bosnian Muslims as innocent victims of Serbian aggression, was closely identified with the outlook of the US government (Woodward 7). An examination of UK press coverage from the start of the conflict reveals that other influential news sources, such as the British Foreign Office and the European Union, also understood the war in these terms, and that their perspective was adopted by reporters and media commentators (Hammond 59-61). This scenario cast the West in the role of potential saviour, despite the fact that Western interference helped to cause, and then to prolong, the war. European backing for Slovenian and Croatian secession from Yugoslavia in 1991, and then US-led support for Bosnian independence the following year, meant that the leaders of these republics had little incentive to pursue a negotiated settlement with the federal state. As Susan Woodward observes, “Western intervention […] provided the irreversible turning point in [the] escalation toward […] war” (198). The US also prolonged the war by encouraging the Bosnian Muslims to reject peace agreements, for example in Lisbon in 1992 (a proposed settlement similar to that adopted in 1995) and in Geneva in 1993 (Chandler Western Intervention 24; Woodward 243-4).

Against this backdrop, celebrity campaigning tended to legitimise and encourage further Western interference. Thus, when NATO bombed the Bosnian Serbs in Sept. 1995, musicians and other celebrities came together to release a record, not protesting
the bombing, but highlighting the plight of the victims military action was supposedly designed to help. According to then opposition leader Tony Blair, “At a time when there was a danger of the West turning its back on the war in Bosnia, [the record] helped put it back in the headlines and reactivate public interest.” The potential for mutually reinforcing actions by celebrities and the Western military was further demonstrated in NATO’s Kosovo campaign a few years later. In October 1998, Jagger, Redgrave, and others marched in London to demand that Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic be indicted for war crimes; the following day Blair (by then prime minister) approved plans for British forces to join any future NATO attack (Grice and Wood). Once that attack was underway, publicly supported by Redgrave and Jagger, Milosevic was indeed indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, in May 1999.

Why did aggressive Western policy in the Balkans attract the support of celebrity campaigners? One of the most perceptive analysts of the way that Bosnia became a cause célèbre was Jean Baudrillard. Writing in Libération at the time of the conflict, he ridiculed the “false apostles and voluntary martyrs” who went to the war zone for a spot of “cultural soul-boosting.” Commenting on a December 1993 Strasbourg-Sarajevo television broadcast titled “A Corridor for Free Speech,” and on recent visits to Bosnia by intellectuals such as Sontag, Baudrillard sought to reverse commonsense perceptions of the relationship between the West and Bosnia:

It is us who are weak and who go there to make good for our loss of strength and sense of reality. [...] [We] feel the need to salvage the reality of war in our own eyes [...]. Susan Sontag [...] must know better than them what reality is, since she has chosen them to incarnate it. Or maybe it is simply because reality is what she, and with her all the Western world, is lacking the most. [...] All these ‘corridors,’ opened by us to funnel our foodstuffs and our ‘culture’ are in fact our lifelines along which we suck their moral strength and the energy of their distress. [...] Susan Sontag comes to convince them of the ‘reality’ of their suffering, by making something cultural and something theatrical out of it, so that it can be useful as a referent within the theatre of Western values, including ‘solidarity.’ (“No Reprieve”)

The loss of reality identified by Baudrillard here was essentially an absence of political meaning. In a similar vein, he had argued that the 1991 Gulf War was not real, since it had no wider political significance. Instead, argued Baudrillard, the non-war in the Gulf was best understood as “the absence of politics pursued by other means” a futile attempt to reconstitute a sense of mission through military action (Gulf War 83).

Baudrillard accurately identified the impulse in Western societies faced with a collapse of political meaning to make good their loss by drawing parasitically on the suffering of victims elsewhere. Bosnia was interesting because of what it could be made to mean in the “theatre of Western values.” As this suggests, post-Cold War international celebrity activism can be understood as essentially narcissistic. However sincere or well-intentioned the particular individuals concerned with international “causes” such as Bosnia may be, their involvement is driven by a desire to discover a
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senses of purpose and meaning that is absent at home. Celebrities may, of course, be thought to be particularly prone to narcissism. Yet the contemporary celebrity activist is part of a much wider phenomenon.

Narcissistic Intervention and the Crisis of Meaning

The end of the Cold War left us, as Zaki Laïdi argues, in “a world without meaning” (see Laïdi). It is not simply that, in the absence of the Soviet enemy, the system of institutions through which international relations were organised throughout most of the post-Second World War era has lost its justification. Worse still are the domestic political repercussions, as Western elites struggle to cohere their own societies around a meaningful project and to give them a sense of a future goal. This is captured well by Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis. Usually viewed as a triumphalist celebration of the West’s “victory” in the Cold War, Fukuyama’s discussion is actually rather downbeat, forlornly describing the problems arising from this new situation:

The end of history will be a very sad time [...] the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. (Fukuyama)

In place of an inspiring vision of the future, Fukuyama anticipated only the “prospect of centuries of boredom.”

The Cold War, argues Michael Ignatieff, “made sense of the world for us,” but now we have “lost our narrative” (98). In these circumstances, Western states have looked to the international arena for ways to recapture a sense of purpose and meaning. This is true at all levels of society, from individuals who wear a T-shirt or a wristband in a show of what Patrick West calls “conspicuous compassion” (see West), through to governments who send their armies to fight for “values” rather than for territory or some other strategic goal, intervening for humanitarian reasons in places such as Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti or Kosovo. Today’s caring celebrity activist has emerged as a part of this pattern. The issue is not so much that celebrities or others are narcissistic as individuals, but rather that the West’s relationship with weaker states is itself profoundly shaped by a search for meaning. As Ignatieff acknowledges, Western policy in Bosnia was “often driven by narcissism:”

We intervened not only to save others, but to save ourselves, or rather an image of ourselves as defenders of universal decencies. We wanted to know that the West “meant” something. This imaginary West, this narcissistic image of ourselves, we believed was incarnated in the myth of a multiethnic, multiconfessional Bosnia. [...] Bosnia became the latest bel espoir of a generation that had tried ecology, socialism, and civil rights only to watch all these lose their romantic momentum. (95)
The desire to “save” Bosnia was a desire to restore meaning to Western societies, which had ceased to believe in grand narratives. As Lene Hansen’s analysis of official and media discourse about the war suggests, Bosnia came to be seen as an “ideal Western self,” a romanticised embodiment of the values of the West (172).

The narcissistic imperative to discover “meaning” in other people’s wars led to a distorted perception of those conflicts. Through a selective and one-sided style of journalism that Nik Gowing (25-6) has called the “secret shame” of the international media in Bosnia, the war was portrayed as a simple battle of Good versus Evil. Since events were shoehorned into this preconceived moral framework, inconvenient facts that might throw doubt on the clear-cut delineation of villains and victims tended to be omitted. BBC World Affairs editor John Simpson, for example, recalled:

Once, when I was in Sarajevo, the UN discovered that Muslim troops were holding a couple of dozen Serbs in a section of drainage pipe three feet high. They opened the front of the pipe once a day to throw food into the darkness inside. The journalists, many of them committed to the principle of not standing neutrally between victim and oppressor, showed no interest at all in this story. It was inconvenient and, as far as I know, was not reported. (Simpson)

Such distortions were rarely the result of censorship or official propaganda. Rather, they arose spontaneously as journalists sought to turn the conflicts they reported into a meaningful cause with which to become involved. This school of reporting was described by former BBC correspondent Martin Bell—one of its foremost practitioners—as “the journalism of attachment,” as opposed to the “bystander’s journalism” of old. Rejecting the “dispassionate practices of the past,” Bell argued instead for a journalism which “cares as well as knows” and which—in the formula alluded to by Simpson above—would not “stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor” (Bell 16).

Though ostensibly driven by concern for the suffering of others, critics have pointed out that the attached journalist actually tends to put herself at the centre of the story, wearing her compassion for the victims of war as a badge of her own morally superior status. As Mick Hume has observed, there is a “powerful sense of self-aggrandisement” in the work of these “saintly crusaders” (Hume Whose War? 20). Although supposedly part of the serious world of politics, such reporters also tend to take on a kind of celebrity status. Bell himself, for example, resigned from the BBC, successfully stood for parliament (as an independent, anti-corruption candidate in the 1997 general election), and continues to appear regularly as a media pundit. He is also, since 2001, a Unicef ambassador for humanitarian emergencies.

It should be emphasised that it is not simply the celebrities latching on to humanitarian crises or the journalists reporting on them who are narcissistic. Rather, humanitarian military intervention is itself a narcissistic phenomenon. Traditionally, war could be understood in terms of some tangible purpose—defeating a rival,
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acquiring territory—and propaganda was secondary to achieving that end. Today, presentation is paramount and no military operation is undertaken without considering how it will play in the media. From the dramatic 1992 beach landings in Somalia screened on US prime-time TV; the British emergency evacuation of Bosnian orphan “little Irma” in 1993; the special forces staging covert operations in order to film themselves in Afghanistan in 2001; to the statue-toppling efforts to generate the defining image of the Iraq campaign in 2003, it often seems that military actions are undertaken primarily in order to generate good publicity. Image and spectacle are central to contemporary warfare precisely because, in response to declining political contestation and engagement at home, activism overseas has repeatedly been seized upon by Western governments as a means to demonstrate some semblance of purposeful and meaningful activity. As Baudrillard observed of the 1991 Gulf War, “The media mix has become the prerequisite to any orgasmic event. We need it precisely because the event escapes us, because conviction escapes us” (Gulf War 75). His remarks seem even more pertinent to the 2003 sequel.

It is striking that the post-9/11 “war on terror” interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were both lavishly garnished with humanitarian and human rights justifications in addition to the other, less ethical, arguments for war. War in Afghanistan may have been a matter of self-defence, but it was also supposedly a war for women’s rights. Invading Iraq was initially all about the alleged threat from weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but when this argument wore thin it became a matter of “liberating” the Iraqi people. Evidently the war on terror was also understood as a way to discover some values for the West. Tony Blair, for example, suggested that the struggle for democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq could help the West to overcome its own internal problems. The courage of Afghans and Iraqis, he said, “should give us courage; their determination should lend us strength; their embrace of democratic values […] should reinforce our own confidence in those values” (“Foreign Policy Speech I”). The Iraqis’ struggle for democracy, according to Blair, could give “renewed vigour and confidence” to the West (“Speech III”). The clear intention was to bolster confidence in “our values” by discovering people fighting for them somewhere else.

Conclusion

As in the past, contemporary celebrity activism is both shaped by, and helps to influence, a broader political context: in this case, a new, post-Cold War international landscape in which a presumption of sovereign inequality and of a moral “right to intervene” have displaced former suspicions about the motives and goals of Great Power interference in weaker states. Although the particular policies adopted by governments have frequently been subjected to criticism, the underlying assumption is of Western benevolence. Hence, as O’Neill (“Hollywood Actor’s”) remarks, a celebrity figure such as George Clooney can be simultaneously against military intervention (in
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Iraq) and for it (in Sudan). The overall trend is for celebrity endorsements to lend legitimacy to an interventionist stance.

Significantly, however, the contemporary “political” context is characterised by a lack of political meaning, by the collapse of the big ideas that used to make sense of political activity. In response, leaders have repeatedly turned to the international sphere as offering the opportunity to work up a set of “values.” The “ethical” interventionism of politicians and of “attached” journalists taking up human rights or humanitarian issues is thus not fundamentally different from the efforts of celebrity activists committing their efforts to similar causes. In all cases, these are media-conscious gestures designed to produce a flattering self-image.

The result is that international activism—by both celebrities and political leaders—tends to be only tenuously connected with the crises it is supposedly designed to address. As Alex de Waal observes, the “first international outcry” over the conflict in Sudan’s Darfur region came at a point, in 2004, when the level of violence was falling, but regardless of the changing dynamics of the conflict, the constant refrain was that “things are getting worse” (“Darfur Activism”). In Sept. 2006, for example, Clooney told the UN Security Council, “My job is to come here today and to beg you on behalf of the millions of people who will die—and make no mistake, they will die—for you to take real and effective measures to put an end to this” (qtd. in de Waal “War Games” 9) This drastic assessment did not match what was happening in Darfur at the time. As de Waal points out:

What actually happened was that the Sudan army dispatched a battalion of recent conscripts, stiffened by a few experienced regulars and some militia, into the middle of rebel-held north Darfur. On 11 September, the [militia] vanished and the [rebels] attacked, annihilating the well dug-in but inexperienced army unit. Perhaps 400 soldiers died in less than an hour. (de Waal “War Games” 9)

Undeterred by the complexity of conflicts like Darfur, celebrities have led the charge for tougher Western action. In August 2008, for example, actress Mia Farrow held a meeting with the private security firm Blackwater to explore the possibility of a freelance mission to strengthen the African Union force in Darfur. Despite what ABC News described as the company’s “controversial history and allegations of murdering civilians in Iraq,” Farrow maintained that “Blackwater has a much better idea of what an effective peace-keeping mission would look like than Western governments” (Schecter).

Even in the case of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when celebrities more often campaigned against the war, the essentially narcissistic quality of contemporary politics was still apparent, as the issue of going to war was reduced to a question of personal conscience. The slogan of the anti-war movement—“Not In My Name”—was less a political demand than an abdication of responsibility. War was seen as inevitable: the aim was not so much to stop it as to absolve oneself of blame. Matching the tone of these sentiments, Blair’s response, in July 2004, to the official enquiry into the misuse
of intelligence about Iraqi WMD was to emphasise that he had acted “in good faith” (“Statement on Butler”). Indeed, one of his main arguments in favour of war had been that, faced with the suffering of the Iraqi people, he felt he had to “do the right thing” (“Statement Opening Iraq”).

Andrew Calcutt argues that, in its “preoccupation with the personal, the individual, the tangible,” contemporary celebrity culture represents “the triumph of the concrete over the abstract” (Calcutt n.p.). In what passes for politics in the absence of competing visions and ideologies (the abstraction of a general interest), it is perhaps inevitable that more attention is paid to the personalities and personal lives of individual politicians (the concrete). Although the authenticity and sincerity of celebrities’ commitment to the causes they champion will no doubt continue to be debated, there is no way in which proximity to the sphere of “real” politics can lend authority and substance to celebrity campaigning. Rather, political leaders attempt to appear purposeful and stake a claim to the moral high ground by emulating the conscience-driven celebrity activist. The rise of celebrity is a symptom of the death of politics.
Works Cited


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1 The video is available on *YouTube* at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0KChuPWqiU>.

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