

THE AFRICAN CONNECTION

Who sets celebrities on their human rights crusades? Often, John Prendergast

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Blame Princess Diana and the landmines. Blame Bob Geldof and Ethiopia, or go back further and blame Audrey Hepburn, Unicef's stellar goodwill ambassador (the first was Danny Kaye in 1954). Hepburn was appointed in 1989 and spent her later years visiting stricken communities in Ethiopia, Honduras, Guatemala, Vietnam and Somalia. Her legacy endures to the extent that the conventional wisdom today is that if you are starving, fleeing your home or residing in a warzone, life will be immeasurably improved by a fleeting visit from Planet Celebrity.

In recent years, the man behind many of these headlines is John Prendergast, a self-styled peacemaker and networker on a truly global scale who has worked for the UN, Human Rights Watch and Unicef, and who served as President Clinton's Africa adviser.

It's Prendergast whom Darfur can thank for bringing them George Clooney and to whom Sudan owes the pleasure of the company of Angelina Jolie — and the ensuing blitzkrieg of coverage.

After meeting Jolie at a congressional event where she spoke about her visit to a Congolese refugee camp in Tanzania, Prendergast suggested she would have greater impact by going directly to the Democratic Republic of Congo for a glimpse of the mass atrocities. An online photo diary of their trip was so popular that it crashed the server.

It's hard not to be cynical about whether all the photo-worthy efforts have brought any meaningful change besides making these actors who are earning millions look good. Even Clooney isn't convinced. He has been quoted wondering if the attention he's



brought to Darfur may have been more damaging than helpful: 'You dig a well or build a healthcare facility and they're a target for somebody. A lot more people know about Darfur, but absolutely nothing is different.'

I ask Prendergast what he makes of Clooney's comments. 'I think George would agree that hundreds of thousands of people are alive today in Darfur due to the massive international public response to the genocide,' he argues.

'There isn't one celebrity I've worked with who doesn't have major doubts about what impact they are having,' he adds. 'I am glad when they question the impact, because it shows they are based firmly in the reality that peacemaking isn't the same as changing a streetlight or distributing mosquito nets.' At the moment he is also working with Ryan Gosling on a project based around Sudan.

To those who balk at tearful film stars marauding around Africa in expensive sunglasses, he has a ruthless defence. Stars are powerful forces to be 'deployed' (his word). 'Celebrities, when deployed effectively,' he has said, 'can get tens or hundreds of thousands of new eyes on the issue that otherwise wouldn't be there.'

In fact, Prendergast (JP to his friends) has himself become a bit of a celebrity, a fact that doesn't always wash well. He has spent his adult life journeying around the most lawless regions of Africa, negotiating with international warlords and rebels. He's not without his detractors. He has been accused of 'selective outrage' and of being a poster boy for Africa's larger problems.

'White supremacy is a big part of the African puzzle,' the genocide investigator and journalist Keith Harman Snow has written. 'John is the great white hero in Africa, and Africa is his playground. But it's really about the power of whiteness.'

Prendergast grew up in a Catholic family in Berwyn, Illinois, a comics-obsessed kid. His father was a frozen food salesman and his mother a social worker. He dropped out of Georgetown University and threw himself into mentoring at-risk youths, taking in three children between the ages of seven and nine, and forgoing the usual twentysomething pursuits. The experience was documented in his book *Unlikely Brothers*.

For all the fame, his career in Africa began inauspiciously. At around the time of Live Aid he scraped together enough money to buy a flight to Ethiopia but couldn't get a visa to enter the country, so started work in neighbouring Mali. The dangers of this are not to be underestimated. After he was banned from entering Zimbabwe he used to visit illegally.

He once risked flying out: 'The customs officer immediately identified me and I was taken into a dark room in the back of the airport. Two intelligence officers visited me and demanded all my contacts and information on the people I was working with in Zimbabwe. When I refused, they worked me over a bit, very professionally so there were no visible scars, and then deported me. But I felt that beating for weeks.'

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'They stuck me in a concrete cell in 120-degree heat for three days,' he says of his imprisonment in southern Sudan (describing

a scene straight out of *Lord of War* or *Blood Diamond*.) 'After they let me go, the big rebel leader told me, "You keep mouthing off about us and I'll send you back to that hole." There were moments that I didn't think I'd survive but I have never thought of quitting.

'I was damaged goods for a long time,' he adds. But he rejects the idea that it's the risks that have got him hooked. As he points out, you won't find him bungee-jumping or hang-gliding. 'I've had a number of near misses during my travels that in retrospect seem of greater concern than they did at the time. I guess that is what happens with age,' he reflects.

Prendergast's life has gained some semblance of calm since meeting his wife Sia Sanneh, a law professor at Columbia. He divides his time between his writing and film projects and his day job in Washington, working on his Enough Project, which is dedicated to resolving conflicts. It played a significant role in apprehending Joseph Kony, ending the 20-year reign of terror from his brutal Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. It also helped create the Raise Hope for Congo campaign, highlighting the global trade in 'conflict minerals' used to make mobile phones, laptops and iPods that help fuel the wars in the area.

Having worked closely with Bill Clinton in the 1990s, Prendergast is a strong believer in American influence in Africa.

'In Congo, the US is crucial because the conflict minerals helping to fuel the war there end up in electronics products for which the world's biggest market is the US,' he maintains. 'In the battle

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against Joseph Kony and the LRA, the US has deployed military advisers. The US remains very relevant to Africa's future.'

The sad fact, though, is that the LRA is more decentralised now and has spread across central Africa like a virus. War economies like Congo and Sudan are nice little earners in arms deals and the like for America (not to mention China). The continuing violence, political instability and the lowest economic growth rate worldwide are arguably fuelled by US desire to control Africa's resource-rich regions, delaying any peaceful resolutions indefinitely.

And then there is Prendergast, who takes the more hopeful view. 'More wars have ended during the past few decades than continued,' he says. 'Think about the decades-long campaign that finally led to the end of apartheid in South Africa. Or the decades-long battle against the trade in blood diamonds, which helped lead to peace in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Angola.'

Talking to him, you somehow want to be seduced by his optimism and belief in what his book *The Enough Moment* terms being an 'upstander' can achieve. It might not be perfect, but it surely beats sitting around doing nothing?

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