

ACTION STATIONS

by Mark Steyn

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There's a moment in the new Batman (reviewed elsewhere in these pages) that made my ears prick up almost as much as those on top of the dark knight's cute little Bat-mask. Bruce Wayne has just bumped into his childhood sweetheart Rachel Dawes in the lobby of some Gotham City hotel. Unfortunately, he's sopping wet, having been cavorting in the ornamental fountain with a couple of hot pieces of arm candy. Rachel is a crusading district attorney and Bruce can see she's a bit disappointed to discover her old pal is now Paris Hilton in drag. So he attempts to assure her that deep down he still cares about all the worthy stuff. Rachel swats this aside. It's not what you feel inside that counts, she says. 'It's what you do that defines you.'

Bruce wanes, visibly, under her withering riposte. I wouldn't claim this film has anything as coherent as a philosophy, but they thought enough of that line to reprise it late in the action. 'It's what you do that defines you,' Batman whispers to Rachel before diving off a rooftop to go whump the bad guys. 'Bruce...?' she says, faintly.

A couple of days later I read that Oxfam had paid the best part of a million bucks to Sri Lankan customs officials for the privilege of having 25 four-wheel-drive vehicles allowed into the country to get aid out to remote villages on washed-out roads hit by the Boxing Day tsunami. The Indian-made Mahindras stood idle on the dock in Colombo for a month as Oxfam's representatives were buried under a tsunami of paperwork. Aside from the 'tax', they were charged £2,750 'demurrage' for every day the vehicles sat in port.

This was merely the latest instalment in what's becoming a vast ongoing Tsunami Tshakedown Of The Day retrospective — you can usually find it at the foot of page 37 in your daily paper, if at all. Fourteen Unicef ambulances sent to Indonesia spent two months sitting on the dock of the bay wasting time, as the late Otis Redding so shrewdly anticipated. Eight 20ft containers of Diageo drinking water shipped via the Red Cross arrived at the Indonesian port of Medan in January and are still there, because the Indonesian Red Cross lost the paperwork. Five hundred containers, representing one quarter of all aid sent to Sri Lanka since the tsunami hit on 26 December, are still sitting in port in Colombo, unclaimed or unprocessed. At Medan 1,500 containers of aid are still sitting on the dock.

The tsunami may have been unprecedented, but what followed was business as usual — the sloth and corruption of government, the feebleness of the brand-name NGOs, the compassion-exhibitionism of the transnational jet set. If we lived in a world where 'it's what you do that defines you', we'd be heaping praise on the US and Australian militaries who in the immediate hours after the tsunami struck dispatched their forces to save lives, distribute food, restore water and power and communications.

Instead, a fellow Quebecker of my acquaintance sneered, 'Can you believe those Americans? A humanitarian disaster strikes and they send an aircraft carrier!' Er, well, yes. Because for large-scale humanitarian operations it helps to have a big boat handy. It seemed unlikely to me that even your average European politician would utter anything so fatuous in public, but Clare Short came close. The sight of Washington co-ordinating its disaster relief efforts with Australia, India and Japan outside the approved transnational structures was too much for her. 'This initiative from America to set up four countries claiming to co-ordinate sounds like yet another attempt to undermine the UN,' she told the BBC. 'Only really the UN can do that job. It is the only body that has the moral authority.'

Whether or not it has 'moral' authority, the UN certainly can't do the job. It becomes clearer every week that Western telly viewers threw far more money at tsunami relief than was required and that much of it has been siphoned off by wily customs inspectors and their ilk. If you really wanted to make an effective donation to a humanitarian organisation, you'd send your cheque to the Pentagon or the Royal Australian Navy.

But that would be in a world where we're defined by 'what we do'. Instead, on tsunami aid, what matters is what we feel inside, and when it comes to showing what we feel inside on the outside we can only do it through the proper channels — by sending a donation to the Indonesian Customs Inspectors' Retirement Fund, or by demanding our government double/triple/quadruple/whatever its contribution to the 'relief effort', which means a man in a UN office in New York, who'll hold a press conference announcing they're sending someone to the region to conduct an 'assessment' of the 'situation', just as soon as the USAF emergency team have flown in and restored room service to the five-star hotel. The tsunami farrago would be a scandal but, like Western aid piling up on the docks in Indonesia, right now we've got more UN scandals than we need — Oil-for-Food, Darfur, child prostitution rings at UN peacekeeping missions.

The passionate hostility of Miss Short and co to action — to getting things done — is remarkable, but understandable. Getting things done requires ships and transport planes and the like, and most Western countries lack the will to maintain armed forces capable of long-range projection. So, when disaster strikes, they can mail a cheque and hold a press conference and form a post-modern 'Task Force' which doesn't have any forces and doesn't perform any tasks. In extreme circumstances, they can stage an all-star pop concert. And, because this is all most of the Western world is now capable of, 'taking action' means little more than taking the approved forms of inaction.

For example, I'd be far more amenable to criticism of American policy in Iraq if it weren't being levelled by the same folks — notably Do-Nothin' Doug Hurd — who fiddled transnationally while Yugoslavia burned. Bosnia is, in fact, everything the anti-war crowd predicted Iraq would be: 250,000 people were killed, which is what the more modest doom-mongers estimated would happen in Iraq, and that's 250,000 out of a population a fifth the size of Iraq's. We were told that toppling Saddam would do nothing but create thousands more radical Islamists across the Middle East. In fact, it's Bosnia where, under the nose of its EU viceroy, Wahabist infiltration is recruiting tomorrow's

jihadi. Week after week, we've seen sob stories on the TV news in which some hapless Baathist clerk from the Department of Genital Severing reveals that he's been out of work now for two years, but when was the last time you read a piece on unemployment rates in Paddy Ashdown's Bosnia? It's officially 45 per cent, and it's only the drug-dealing, child sex and white slave trade that boom around every UN mission that's holding it down that low. However Iraq turns out, it's already a hundred times healthier than Bosnia, and its effects are rolling on through Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. But because Bosnia is the quintessential expression of international lack of will, it will always get a better press than Bush's 'war for oil'.

Most Westerners remain committed to wasteful incompetent transnationalism on the grounds that, by golly, it may do nothing for the poor and suffering of this world but it makes me feel good. The G8 summiteers will get a taste of this next month when they fly in to Gleneagles to get berated over Africa by elderly Caucasian pop stars. The whole G8/Africa thing these last few weeks rang a vague bell with me: where had I heard that before?

Oh, yeah, that's right, I went to the 2002 G8 summit in Alberta. And, mainly because the then Canadian prime minister didn't want it to be all about terrorism and war and Iraq and other issues to which his own country was and is entirely irrelevant, he'd decided to make Africa the big centrepiece. A bunch of friendly dictators were flown over for photo-ops with the G8 bigshots, and the papers were full of cooing reports about the Canadian prime minister's breakthrough Africa initiative. Well, the Calgary papers were. The Fleet Street papers were full of cooing reports about the British Prime Minister's breakthrough Africa initiative. But the point is, whoever's initiative it was, plenty of Western leaders were eager to take credit for it. Except for Bush, who, as with the tsunami, was roundly criticised for embarking on his own direct initiative with Africa.

Anyway, the 2002 initiative was called 'NEPAD', pronounced 'kneepad'. And not having heard a thing about it in the three years since a Canadian G8 official triumphantly handed me the press release, I wondered how it was getting on. Well, there's an official report on 'NEPAD's Achievements In The First Three Years', but even on a close reading it's kind of hard figuring out what's actually happening:

'On the development front, the African leaders launched comprehensive studies covering conflict resolution, political, economic and corporate governance, education, health, science ...Official Direct Assistance (ODA) reforms ...debt cancellation ...foreign direct investment....'

Gotcha. They launched 'comprehensive studies' of a lot of things. And why did they do that? 'The primary objective was to develop a comprehensive development framework based on a thorough understanding of the most up-to-date information and trends in each area.'

Terrific. So they launched comprehensive studies to develop a comprehensive development study for holding meetings on developing more comprehensively a framework for studying the development of further meetings. So comprehensively did

they do this that in 2004 the NEPAD secretariat overspent its seven-and-a-half million-dollar budget by more than two million dollars. Still, I'm sure the taxpayers of Finland, who chipped in half a million bucks to NEPAD's 'communications and conferences' bill, 'travelling costs', 'corporate services' and other expenses, enjoyed the delicious frisson of 'doing something for Africa'.

On the evidence of the NEPAD report, Africa's tragedy — or its latest tragedy — is that it's advanced straight to late-period Western-decadence transnationalist bureaucratic blather without the intervening stage of economic dynamism. A few years ago a couple of New Hampshire neighbours of mine decided to treat themselves to a rather exotic honeymoon. 'We went to Africa,' said the wife.

'Oh, really?' I said. 'Which country?'

'Africa,' she said. 'I just told you.'

That's the level at which initiatives for 'Africa' are proposed and supported. There is no 'Africa', at least not in the sense that you can devise programmes, reforms and structures to embrace Libya and Swaziland, Niger and Mauritius, Liberia and Botswana. The biggest thing the West could do for Africa is over here, not over there: end European and American agricultural protectionism. The second biggest thing would be to stop making a multicultural virtue of denuding the continent of its best and brightest: Birmingham now has more Malawian nurses than Malawi. In Africa itself, the one issue which is clearly no respecter of national borders — Aids — is the one on which Western do-gooders are most hampered by their own cultural prejudices and pieties.

But on almost everything else, the way to change Africa is to start small and local. The head guy in NEPAD is Chief Obasanjo, Nigeria's strongman. Instead of being flown in to shake hands with Jacques Chirac and Vladimir Putin at the G8 or swanking about at African Union summits, he ought to stay home and make a few simple changes to Nigerian economic regulation: for a piece of property to change hands in Lagos requires 21 different bureaucratic procedures and takes over nine months. Instead of pretending to fix his continent, Obasanjo should try mending his backyard.

What's good for the African Union goes for the European Union, too. The EU's 'big ideas' — the constitution, the currency — are dangerous delusions that prevent individual member states taking responsibility for their own problems. And, if there are any solutions to Europe's economic sclerosis and deathbed demographics, they'll start — as in Africa — small and local.

Any large gathering of world leaders is a waste of time, especially if there's any kind of permanent secretariat or bureaucracy involved. Mr Bush will be polite at Gleneagles, but it's no coincidence that his closest relationship is with a man he hardly ever meets in person, and never at the big talking-shops — John Howard of Australia, who doesn't get to go to the G8 or Nato or the EU and yet works more effectively with America than

Canada or any of the so-called 'major European allies' like France and Germany. Summits are, so to speak, one huge bluff.

According to my favourite foreign minister these days, Australia's Alexander Downer, 'Iraq was a clear example about how outcomes are more important than blind faith in the principles of non-intervention, sovereignty and multilateralism.... Increasingly multilateralism is a synonym for an ineffective and unfocused policy involving internationalism of the lowest common denominator. Multilateral institutions need to become more results-oriented.'

Which is pretty much the Batman thesis: It's what we do that defines us.

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