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Opinion

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Save the Darfur Puppy



By Nicholas Kristof

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Finally, we're beginning to understand what it would take to galvanize President Bush, other leaders and the American public to respond to the genocide in Sudan: a suffering puppy with big eyes and floppy ears.

That's the implication of a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people — good, conscientious people — aren't moved by genocide or famines. Time and again, we've seen that the human conscience just isn't pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.

In one experiment, psychologists asked ordinary citizens to contribute \$5 to alleviate hunger abroad. In one version, the money would go to a particular girl, Rokia, a 7-year-old in Mali; in another, to 21 million hungry Africans; in a third, to Rokia — but she was presented as a victim of a larger tapestry of global hunger.

Not surprisingly, people were less likely to give to anonymous millions than to Rokia. But they were also less willing to give in the third scenario, in which Rokia's suffering was presented as part of a broader pattern.

Evidence is overwhelming that humans respond to the suffering of individuals rather than groups. Think of the toddler Jessica McClure falling down a well in 1987, or the Lindbergh baby kidnapping in 1932 (which Mencken described as the "the biggest story since the Resurrection").

Even the right animal evokes a similar sympathy. A dog stranded on a ship aroused so much pity that \$48,000 in private money was spent trying to rescue it — and that was before the Coast Guard stepped in. And after I began visiting Darfur in 2004, I was flummoxed by the public's passion to save a red-tailed hawk, Pale Male, that had been evicted from his nest on Fifth Avenue in New York City. A single homeless hawk aroused more indignation than two million homeless Sudanese.

Advocates for the poor often note that 30,000 children die daily of the consequences of poverty — presuming that this number will shock people into action. But the opposite is true: the more victims, the less compassion.

In one experiment, people in one group could donate to a \$300,000 fund for medical treatments that would save the life of one child — or, in another group, the lives of eight children. People donated more than twice as much money to help save one child as to help save eight.

Likewise, remember how people were asked to save Rokia from starvation? A follow-up allowed students to donate to Rokia or to a hungry boy named Moussa. Both Rokia and Moussa attracted donations in the same proportions. Then another group was asked to donate to Rokia and Moussa together. But donors felt less good about supporting two children, and contributions dropped off.



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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

“Our capacity to feel is limited,” Paul Slovic of the University of Oregon writes in a new journal article, “Psychic Numbing and Genocide,” which discusses these experiments. Professor Slovic argues that we cannot depend on the innate morality even of good people. Instead, he believes, we need to develop legal or political mechanisms to force our hands to confront genocide.

So, yes, we should develop early-warning systems for genocide, prepare an African Union, U.N. and NATO rapid-response capability, and polish the “responsibility to protect” as a legal basis to stop atrocities. (The Genocide Intervention Network and the Enough project are working on these things.)

But, frankly, after four years of watching the U.N. Security Council, the International Criminal Court and the Genocide Convention accomplish little in Darfur, I’m skeptical that either human rationality or international law can achieve much unless backed by a public outcry.

One experiment underscored the limits of rationality. People prepared to donate to the needy were first asked either to talk about babies (to prime the emotions) or to perform math calculations (to prime their rational side). Those who did math donated less.

So maybe what we need isn’t better laws but more troubled consciences — pricked, perhaps, by a Darfur puppy with big eyes and floppy ears. Once we find such a soulful dog in peril, we should call ABC News. ABC’s news judgment can be assessed by the 11 minutes of evening news coverage it gave to Darfur’s genocide during all of last year — compared with 23 minutes for the false confession in the JonBenet Ramsey case.

If President Bush and the global public alike are unmoved by the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of fellow humans, maybe our last, best hope is that we can be galvanized by a puppy in distress.

Source: Kristof, Nicholas. “Save the Darfur Puppy.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 10 May 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/05/10/opinion/10kristof.html.

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Three empty rounded rectangular boxes arranged horizontally at the top of the page, intended for students to write their main ideas, key concepts, or important themes.



Colbert and Kristof Interview

Save the Darfur Puppy Reading



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