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America's Moral Struggle: Intervening in Uganda

Until recently, the name Joseph Kony may not have had much value to people here in America. Yet the people of Uganda have come to fear the name and the horrors that have been associated with it. For almost 30 years now, Kony and the members of the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) have been wreaking havoc on northern Uganda and several surrounding countries. Over the span of this conflict, this so-called Christian army has killed over 100,000 civilians and abducted around 30,000 children for use as child soldiers and sex slaves. Many of these children were forced to kill their own families in order to distance them from their past lives. The LRA have mutilated, tortured, and ruined the lives of thousands of people. As a result of the fighting, the government of Uganda ordered around 90% of the country's population into displacement camps where they were further mistreated by the government itself. It has become a cycle of abuse which the people of Uganda cannot escape. There is no question that Kony needs to be stopped; whose place is it to stop him, though? In October of 2011, President Obama decided to send 100 military advisors to aid the Ugandan government in their efforts to find and apprehend Joseph Kony and bring him to justice. Is it our responsibility to stop him because we are more powerful and wealthy? With a war as complicated as this, it is difficult to make the decision about whose place it is to do something. As a world power, is it our responsibility to resolve this or do we step back and hope that someone else will step in and make things better?

I first heard about this conflict in high school because of the extensive campaigning of the Invisible Children Organization, a group of teenagers who saw the conflict firsthand and decided to spread the word to America that something should be done. After seeing their video and hearing their pleas, the issue just slipped away from me. Maybe I was too busy with school or just not in the mindset that I was someone who could actually affect this issue; either way, I forgot about it. A few weeks ago, I got an overly excited text from my girlfriend, who had just watched the Invisible Children's newest video: *Kony 2012*. She had been moved by the video and wanted to set out to help change the world. When I first heard the name Kony again, I made no connection to the videos I had seen in high school, but after watching the video, it all came back to me. Whatever the reason, me being more mature, or (maybe more likely) my girlfriend's rising interest in the matter, I wanted to know more.

In watching the 30-minute video, *Kony 2012*, you are pulled into a drawn-out and complicated conflict. You see images of the children who have been made to suffer, and you hear the statistics of what the LRA has done. It tells the story of Jacob, a Ugandan boy, befriended by the members of Invisible Children. Jacob lives in constant fear of the LRA, traveling miles to a nearby city every night in order to hide from abduction. The members of the Invisible Children call for the world to make Joseph Kony famous. One of the main reasons, according to the Invisible Children, why nothing has been done is that not many people outside of Africa know who he is or what he has done. On the night of April 20, 2012, the Invisible Children have requested that Americans cover the night, and as the smoke clears and people wake from the haze of the day before, they will see posters, fliers, and various advertisements that people have come up with to spread the name, Joseph Kony. The goal of this is to keep this issue from slipping away and being forgotten, as it did with me. If the American people are able

to show a continued interest in stopping Kony, then Obama and the government will be motivated to keep sending aid to Uganda. The members of Invisible Children have seen the suffering firsthand and have made friends with these victims. They've seen the need for aid and heard the cries of the people of Uganda. They fight for the people who cannot vocalize this need.

The Invisible Children Organization may not be all that it is cracked up to be, though. With every public movement there comes a great deal of opposition (not to mention a public mental breakdown involving one member running up and down the street, naked and screaming obscenities). Charlie Brooker, a celebrated British journalist and broadcaster, criticizes the budget of the organization in an episode of the talk show *10 o'clock Live*, saying only a third of their budget is spent in Africa, while most of it goes to their publicity campaign ("Charlie Brooker on Kony 2012"). While videos like Kony 2012 have an obvious goal, some of their others involve dancing and singing that in no way even mentions Uganda. Others involve large groups of teenagers standing together, giving off a weird, cultish vibe. Brooker, at one point, criticizes the video for being outdated because the LRA have moved their operations away from Uganda and now are centralized in surrounding countries. This makes me question how closely he paid attention to the video, because at several points in the video they mention that their operations in Uganda are more reconstructive because the LRA has moved on to countries surrounding Uganda. Much of the other criticism for the Invisible Children comes from the fact that the Kony 2012 video glazes over many important matters of the conflict, such as the LRA's dwindling size, now estimated around 250 members, and the cruel actions of the government itself. Micheal Diebert, a writer for the *Huffington Post*, talks about how the government of Uganda is only in power because they utilized child soldiers as well. Museveni, Uganda's current President, forced over 1.6 million citizens into "protected" villages where they were further

abused by the government that was supposed to be protecting them (Finnstrom). Where was all this in the Kony 2012 video? Diebert, having spent extensive time in the region himself, also says that uninformed aid to the region will only make matters worse, comparing the matter to the Congo in which, “U.S President Bill Clinton professed that he was “helping” in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1990’s and his help ended up with over 6 million people losing their lives.” Our involvement in this situation enabled a brutal massacre by assisting in training and supplying the rebel forces in the Congo. Before we can just rush in and “help,” we need to truly understand the conflict and how it started; otherwise, we may only make matters worse. The situation can be compared to the flaming bag of dog poo on your doorstep: blindly putting it out will only spread the poop all over your porch.

Though maybe that’s not the point of the *Kony 2012* video. They wanted to motivate people to take action and to support their cause. The American people would have lost interest if they had included all of the complicated intricacies of the war. We want one clear enemy, one clear villain to blame for all of this. Kony is that man. It would be too hard to have a publicity campaign against both the government and Kony, so the video simplifies and puts Kony’s actions up for judgment. The Invisible Children have been trying to get the word out for years. When they started, Kony was at his height of power and was running rampant around Uganda. They’re not going to just give up what they have now dedicated their lives to because it’s not as bad as it was at one point. People in Uganda and Africa are still suffering because of this war and could still use aid. Not all of the programs the Invisible Children sponsor are about catching Kony; many of them are about rebuilding the schools, villages, and lives of the people most severely affected by the war. So maybe people are being too critical about this and need to take a

step back and see the good that comes from these programs. It seems, though, that I'm getting too far away from the actual issue of American intervention in Uganda.

As mentioned, in October of 2011, Obama sent 100 military advisors to Uganda to aid with the capture of Joseph Kony. This isn't the first time that we have sent aid to Uganda, though; several years earlier we sent 17 advisors to aid in the search for Kony and this ended with catastrophic results. When Kony learned of the American aid sent to arrest him, known as Operation Lightning Thunder, he initiated several retaliatory attacks, which ended up killing nearly 1,000 people, abducting hundreds of children, and displacing thousands of people from their homes. In an article about this, Beth Tuckey talks about the American government's ridiculous response to this. To start, General William Ward, the man in charge of this operation, apparently knows nothing of the situation, as we learned when he said, "Uganda, Rwanda, and Congo came together to look at a way to deal with the problem of the LRA" (Tuckey). Rwanda? When did they come into the picture? So other than not really knowing what's going on, General Ward also decided to leave the retaliatory attacks out and stated that the operation has been, "positive in so far as disrupting the activity of Kony [and] positive in addressing some of the training and recruiting practices that he and his element have performed" (Tuckey). He can't be this oblivious to what is going on.

If American intervention was this unsuccessful before and actually made matters worse, what is it going to do this time? It doesn't sound like we have changed tactics, only sent more advisors. You hear all the time that we need to learn from our mistakes, but when America won't even admit they made a mistake, how are they supposed to learn from it? They're just going to repeat the same mistake over and over and perpetually make things worse. I hear a lot that this is the reason we have become so unpopular with the world. We want to stick our noses in

everything no matter whether it concerns us or not. Whether we even make things better or not, we always want to be the hero that saves the smaller, less fortunate countries. They may call for aid, but it seems a lot of the time the situation doesn't improve, and somehow we become the bad guy. Maybe we should take a step back and let things resolve themselves.

Then again, how are we supposed to sit back and watch as people suffer and die? We come from a position of power and influence, so why shouldn't we intervene if we can? Is it immoral to have the power to stop this, yet do nothing? If we saw someone suffering right in front of us, we would do something to stop it and help, yet if it's across the ocean and on another continent, it's a completely different story. Like the proverbial ostrich with its head in the ground, if we can't see it, it doesn't exist. But it does exist. The people are suffering every single day as we sit back in our comfortable houses and go to bed at night not worrying that we will be abducted or attacked in the middle of the night. Sverker Finnstrom, a professor for Uppsala University, spent some time in the camps the Ugandan people were forced into. He was amazed by the outright mistreatment and abuse shown by the government who was supposed to be protecting them. Most of the camps are set up around a military base and, "If a camp came under rebel attack, the army would frequently withdraw and launch grenades from a distance, right into the camp" (Finnstrom 12). The government uses their citizens as cannon fodder. It might almost be safer to remain in their villages and wait for the LRA to come. Finnstrom also talks about a Ugandan boy he calls Peter, who was severely beaten, tortured, and then finally shot by the military for trying to get enough food just to survive. The food supplies for these camps were initially supposed to be for emergency use and therefore, short-term, but now years later the food is scarce, and a lot of the time inedible. The suffering of these people is real. We sit in a position of power, and while the situation is improving and most of the people are no longer forced to be

in these camps, we can still help. The people of Uganda need help and it's obviously not going to come from the government that treats them just as poorly, so this is where we have been called upon to step up and send aid. Even if it is just in the form of military aid to catch Kony, it could still make a difference.

This all makes me wonder, obviously Kony is a horrible man, but is he the one we should be worried about? Maybe it is the government of Uganda who needs to be stopped and be placed on the ICC's (International Criminal Court) wanted list. The government has used the same tactics: using child soldiers, outright violence, and intimidation to gain power and stay there; why should they get a free pass and receive our help? Or maybe we need to pick our battles. We can't stop every evil at the same time; focusing on one at a time makes for a smaller, more realistic goal. Once Kony has been caught and the turmoil in Uganda has been brought to a close, then we can focus on the government. It's hard to say who the bad guy in this situation is.

From the perspective of the American policy-makers (Congressmen, Representatives and even the President himself), it doesn't seem like there is too much motivation for them to aid Uganda. The LRA are terrorists, yes, but don't seem to pose any threat to our national security. Doug Bandow, former special assistant to Ronald Reagan, had this to say about the matter: "Whatever Kony's ambitions, striking the U.S. is not among them." He also goes on to talk about how if Obama is willing to send troops to aid in a conflict whose "casualty toll is a rounding error in conflicts that typically attract outside attention," then what is to stop him from sending aid and wasting American money on any issue that pops up? The conflict has begun to dwindle away in Uganda now that the LRA have moved on to surrounding countries. It no longer seems so urgent to keep sending aid to help them pick up the pieces. Besides, why should we put American lives at risk for a conflict which we have no part in? It's obvious Kony doesn't react

well to American intervention and would have no qualms about killing the advisors we have sent over. Is Africa to become the new Middle East? A constant drain on our military resources? And what are we getting in return, except the rights to some oil? At least the Middle East has that much to offer America over Africa.

Or maybe I'm wrong, maybe Africa does have the exact same thing to repay us for our aid. In recent years, parts of Africa have begun producing and distributing oil, and countries surrounding Uganda, namely the Democratic Republic of Congo, have large amounts oil just waiting to be tapped. While I found no reports of oil in Uganda, there is a large amount of oil in surrounding countries, so what's to say that Uganda doesn't have the same, just waiting to be found? This could be the motivation to risk American lives: the unrestricted rights to oil in this area. In a report in the *Third World Quarterly*, it was said by Micheal Klare, "Africa will become an increasingly important supplier to the world's energy markets in the next decade" (African Oil Rush). What's stopping this from happening sooner? Could it possibly be the constant turmoil brought on by the war in Uganda? The region is very unstable and currently would be a very unsafe investment for oil companies. They're not going to risk the lives of their employees and facilities until things have begun to settle down. If America was to intervene and remove Kony from the picture, then Uganda and the DR of Congo would become much safer, not to mention the grateful governments. I'm sure this sits pretty heavily on the shoulders of American policymakers. The potential for unlimited rights to an almost untapped oil market seems almost too good to be true. Why wouldn't we have a sudden urge to help Africa now?

In all the time that we spend debating the politics of the matter, it seems that the people who are truly affected by the conflict, the people of Uganda, are left out and forgotten. They've become mere statistics in the matter and we base our actions off of numbers. It doesn't matter

that these are real people suffering, just how many and whether it will affect us. It only starts to matter when we have something to gain from the situation. The way we use acronyms such as IDP's (Internally Displaced Persons) makes it easy for us to pass this off as not a big deal, but it really is. These are real people with emotions and individual stories that we need to listen to.

D.L.M., a missionary from Oregon, saw this first-hand. When bringing several Somalian refugee children to join in a large church gathering, it dawned on her that the American children saw the refugees as props. Not as people. As props. And it was partly her fault: she said herself, "I [...] have been guilty of turning the poor into props all the time, be they refugees, homeless, or single mom neighbors." Even in her constant pursuit to help those in need, she turned them into statistics and props to further herself. In talking to the refugees later on, she realizes that the only way that she can truly help these people was to let certain, more unsettling, aspects slide. One girl, who was 14, was planning to get married soon. This seems a ridiculously young age for this but D.L.M. realized that it would be best for the girl if she just respected this idea and chose her battles to fight for the refugees. In respecting certain, uncomfortable aspects of the refugees' lives, she finds herself baking the wedding cake. This seems an odd tangent, but led me to a realization about something that had been bothering me. How could we focus purely on Kony when the government was nearly as bad themselves? This could be the young marriage that D.L.M. grudgingly accepts: it's not what she wants for the girl, but it's not her place to make this girl's decisions. Sometimes, you have to ignore certain things in order to truly do good for the people you're trying to help. Ignore the cruelty of the government, ignore certain unpleasantnesses of the Invisible Children, ignore the selfish motives behind our extended hand of aid. We can only fight so many battles at once. People like Bandow and Finnstrom, who find themselves on opposite ends of the table, could argue with each other about this topic forever and it would get them

nowhere. It comes down to the people in charge to make the ultimate decision about what to do. With the Invisible Children beating down their doors and Bandow breathing down their neck, it leaves the decision no clearer than in the start.

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