

# Foreign Policy Goes Glam

Daniel W. Drezner

WHO WOULD you rather sit next to at your next Council on Foreign Relations roundtable: Henry Kissinger or Angelina Jolie? This is a question that citizens of the white-collared foreign-policy establishment thought they'd never be asked. The massive attention paid to Paris Hilton's prison ordeal, Lindsay Lohan's shame spiral and anything Britney Spears has done, said or exposed has distracted pop-culture mavens from celebrities that were making nobler headlines.

Increasingly, celebrities are taking an active interest in world politics. When media maven Tina Brown attends a Council on Foreign Relations session, you know something fundamental has changed in the relationship between the world of celebrity and world politics. What's even stranger is that these efforts to glamorize foreign policy are actually affecting what governments do and say. The power of soft news has given star entertainers additional leverage to advance their causes. Their ability to raise issues to the top of the global agenda is growing. This does not mean that celebrities can solve the problems that bedevil the world. And not all celebrity activists are equal in their effectiveness. Nevertheless,

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politically-engaged stars cannot be dismissed as merely an amusing curiosity in foreign policy.

Consider the most notable example of a celebrity attempting to move the global agenda: Angelina Jolie. Her image has come a long way since her marriage to Billy Bob Thornton. In February of this year she published an op-ed in *The Washington Post* about the crisis in Darfur, referencing her work as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. During the summer, her press junket to promote *A Mighty Heart* included interviews with *Foreign Policy's* website and a glowing profile in *Newsweek*, modestly titled "Angelina Jolie Wants to Save the World." In that story, former Secretary of State Colin Powell describes Jolie as "absolutely serious, absolutely informed. . . . She studies the issues." *Esquire's* July 2007 cover featured a sultry picture of Jolie—but the attached story suggested something even more provocative: "In post-9/11 America, Angelina Jolie is the best woman in the world *because* she is the most famous woman in the world—because she is not like you or me."

What in the name of Walter Scott's Personality Parade is going on? Why has international relations gone glam? Have stars like Jolie, Madonna, Bono, Sean Penn, Steven Spielberg, George Clooney and Sheryl Crow carved out a new way to become foreign-policy heavy-



weights? Policy *cognoscenti* might laugh off this question as absurd, but the career arc of Al Gore should give them pause. As a conventional politician, Gore made little headway in addressing the problem of global warming beyond negotiating a treaty that the United States never ratified. As a post-White House celebrity, Gore starred in *An Inconvenient Truth*, won an Oscar, promoted this past summer's Live Earth concert and reframed the American debate about global warming. Gore has been far more successful as a celebrity activist than he ever was as vice president. This is the kind of parable that could lead aspiring policy wonks to wonder if the best way to command policy influence is to attend Julliard instead of the Fletcher School.

Joking aside, celebrity involvement in politics and policy is hardly new: Shirley Temple and Jane Fonda became known as much for their politics as their films.

The template for Live Earth was the 1985 Live Aid concert, which in turn echoed the 1974 all-star concert for Bangladesh.

Actors ranging from Ronald Reagan to Fred Thompson have taken the more traditional star route to power: running for political office.

Not everything old is new again, however. There is something different about the recent batch of celebrity activists. Current entertainers have greater incentives to adopt global causes than their precursors. Furthermore, they are more likely to be successful in pushing their policy agenda to the front of the queue. These facts have less to do with the celebrities themselves than with how citizens in the developed world consume information. Whether the rise of the celebrity activist will lead to policy improvements, however, is a more

debatable proposition. Promoting a policy agenda is one thing; implementing it is another thing entirely. Regardless of what *Vanity Fair* or *Vogue* might want you to believe, celebrities really are just like everyone else. Some are competent in their activism, and some are...something else.

### *The Supply of Celebrity Activism*

ONE REASON for the new-found global agendas of celebrities is simply that today's stars have more autonomy than previous generations, and many of them recognize the benefits of being a popular saint. Stars may have always cared about politics, but they have not always been able to act on these impulses. Entertainers likely feared speaking out in the past, but the entertainment industry is not as authoritarian as it once was. The studio systems of yesteryear exerted much greater control over

their movie stars. Mostly, the studios used this leverage to hush up scandals before the press found out about them.

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In the decades since, celebrities have acquired more leverage in Hollywood. In some cases—see Winfrey, Oprah—they have become moguls themselves. This gives them the autonomy to adopt pet causes, policy initiatives and make their own publicity missteps. It also affords them the opportunity to manage their own “brand”, as it were. Just as Nike or Pepsi recognize the benefits of developing a positive brand image, so do George Clooney and Sheryl Crow.

This leads to another, somewhat more selfish reason for celebrities to embrace policy activism: It distinguishes them from their tawdrier brethren. We now live in a world where the path to



fame can be as fast as a 15-second YouTube clip. Paris Hilton became one of the world's most well-known faces on the strength of a famous name and a poorly lit home video. In such a world, marquee celebrities need to take steps to differentiate themselves from the lesser stars of stage and screen—or distance themselves from past scandals.<sup>1</sup> So when Angelina Jolie attends the Davos Economic Forum or sponsors a Millennium Village in Cambodia, she's not only trying to do good, she's trying to create a brand image that lets Americans forget about her role in breaking up Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston.

The final reason more celebrities are interested in making the world a better place is that it is simply easier for anyone to become a policy activist today. An effective policy entrepreneur requires a few simple commodities: expertise, money and the ability to command the media's attention. Celebrities already have the latter two; the Internet has enabled them to catch up on information-gathering. Several celebrities even have "philanthropic advisors" to facilitate their activism. This does not mean that celebrities will become authentic experts on a country or issue. They can, however, acquire enough knowledge to pen an op-ed or sound competent on a talk show. And when they look sexy doing it, all bets are off.

### *The Power of Soft News*

**E**VEN AS star activists aspire to appear on hard-news outlets, they dominate soft-news programs—a different but no less influential media format. Celebrity activism matters more now because Americans get their

information about the world in different ways from a generation ago. Way back in the twentieth century, the available news outlets were well-defined: the major television networks, the weekly news magazines, *The New York Times* and the local newspaper. By relying on the same "general interest intermediaries", the best and the brightest editorial gatekeepers forced

most Americans to consume the same information. Clearly, the gates have been crashed. Cable television, talk radio and weblogs have radically

diversified the sources of news available to ordinary Americans. The market for news and entertainment has shifted from an oligopoly to a more competitive environment.

This shift in the information ecosystem profoundly affects how public opinion on foreign policy is formed. Matthew Baum has argued in *Soft News Goes to War* that a large share of Americans get their information about world politics from "soft-news" outlets like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, *SportsCenter*, *The View*, *People*, *US Weekly*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show*, or Gawker, TMZ and PerezHilton. Although viewers might not watch these shows or read these magazines to learn about the world, any reporting of current events aired on these programs reaches an audience unattainable to *The New York Times* or *Nightline*.

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<sup>1</sup>For a very amusing skit that satirizes this point, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-ia\\_\\_ld\\_rM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-ia__ld_rM).



cess to a wider array of media outlets, which translates into a wider audience of citizens. Superstars can go on *The Today Show* or *The Late Show* to plug their latest movie and their latest global cause. Because of their celebrity cachet, even hard-news programs will cover them—stories about celebrities can goose Nielsen ratings. With a few exceptions, like Barack Obama or John McCain, most politicians cannot make the reverse leap to soft-news outlets. Non-celebrity policy activists are virtually guaranteed to be shut out of these programs.

The growth of soft news gives celebrity activists enormous leverage. The famous and the fabulous are the bread and butter of entertainment programs. Covering celebrity do-gooders provides content that balances out, say, tabloid coverage of Nicole Richie's personal and legal troubles. ESPN can cover both Michael Vick's travails and Dikembe Mutombo's efforts to improve health care in sub-Saharan Africa. MTV will cover Amy Winehouse's on-stage meltdowns, but they will also follow Angelina Jolie in her trips to Africa. They covered Live Earth for both the music *and* the message.

The power of soft news is not limited to television. *Vanity Fair* let Bono guest-edit a special issue about Africa, knowing that cover photos of Madonna and George Clooney would attract readers and buzz. Without intending to, those perusing the pages might form opinions about sending aid to sub-Saharan Africa in the process. Similarly, celebrity blogs can garner higher amounts of traffic. We may only speculate why Internet users flock to Pamela Anderson's website—but we know that while they are there, they can learn about Anderson's stance against animal testing.

Indeed, celebrities actually have an advantage over other policy activists and experts because hard-news outlets have an incentive to cover them too. Celebrities mean greater attention, and hard-news

outlets are not above stunts designed to attract readers or ratings. Consider this question: If *The Washington Post* is deciding between running an op-ed by Angelina Jolie and an op-ed by a lesser-known expert on Sudan, which author do you think they are most likely to choose?

### *Do Celebrity Do-Gooders Do Any Good?*

THERE IS no doubt that celebrities have the ability to raise the profile of issues near and dear to their hearts. Highlighting a problem is not the same thing as solving it, however—and the celebrity track record at affecting policy outcomes could best be characterized as mixed. Star activism has been reasonably successful at forcing powerful states to pledge action to assist the least-developed countries. It has been less successful at getting states to honor these pledges and not successful at all in affecting other global policy problems.

There have been some significant achievements, though. In the 1990s, Princess Diana embraced a ban on the use of land mines. Her death became a rallying point that led to Great Britain's ratification of the 1997 Ottawa Convention to ban the devices.<sup>2</sup> The Jubilee 2000 campaign, which Bono championed, should also count as a success.<sup>3</sup> According to the Center for Global Development, the movement to assist highly indebted poor countries resulted in "the most successful industrial-country movement aimed at combating world poverty for many years,

<sup>2</sup>See Richard Price, "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines", *International Organization* Vol. 52, No. 3 (Summer 1998).

<sup>3</sup>See Joshua Busby, "Bono Made Jesse Helms Cry: Jubilee 2000, Debt Relief, and Moral Action in International Politics", *International Studies Quarterly*, No. 51 (June 2007).



perhaps in all recorded history.” Celebrity activism also helped fuel the pledge at the 2005 Gleneagles G-8 summit to double aid to developing countries. Bob Geldof, who organized Live Aid a generation ago, arranged the Live 8 concerts to coincide with the summit. Bono, George Clooney, Claudia Schiffer and Nelson Mandela all appeared on stage.

To be clear, celebrities were not the only reason that the Ottawa Convention was signed or the G-7 launched the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative. In each of these cases, celebrities were buttressing organized, grassroots campaigns to change the status quo. At a minimum, however, star activists raised the media profile, spurring politicians to act sooner than they otherwise might have.

But there have been failures, too. While Bono provided an invaluable assist in promoting debt relief, he has not been as successful in his (Product) Red campaign. The idea was for consumers to do good through consumption—by buying iconic products colored red, a portion of the price would go to the UN Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The campaign was launched in January 2006 to great fanfare at Davos. According to *Advertising Age*, however, it has been a bust: After an estimated \$100 million in marketing expenditures, the campaign netted only \$18 million. (Product) Red has challenged the validity of these numbers, but the story invited media critiques of the campaign’s strategy, denting its momentum and cachet.

Celebrity campaigns are also not always considered a greater good. Development expert William Easterly has argued that the celebrity focus on Africa’s problems has been misguided. By focusing exclusively on the diseases of sub-Saharan Africa, celebrities have unwittingly tarnished an entire continent: “[Africans are] not helpless wards waiting for actors and rock stars to rescue them.” Many African

officials and activists share this sentiment, even heckling Bono at a development conference.

Though celebrities have a mixed record in promoting development aid to Africa, the record on other issues is even worse. The Live Earth concerts generated mixed reviews because of their disorganization. Promoters had to cancel the Istanbul venue because of a lack of local sponsorship, and the other concerts were less than sellouts. More significantly, some celebrity activists questioned whether the extravaganza even had a clear purpose. Bob Geldof told an interviewer, “Live Earth doesn’t have a final goal. . . . So it’s just an enormous pop concert or the umpteenth time that, say, Madonna or Coldplay get up on stage.” Roger Daltrey of The Who concurred: “The last thing the planet needs is a rock concert.”

Steven Spielberg came up for criticism in a *Wall Street Journal* article co-authored by actress Mia Farrow. The article warned that Spielberg, as an “artistic advisor” to the 2008 Summer Olympics in China, would become “the Leni Riefenstahl of the Beijing Games” if he did not speak out. The chastised producer later sent a letter to Chinese Premier Hu Jintao because he felt compelled to “add my voice to those who ask that China change its policy towards Sudan.” Regardless of the reasons, Beijing has begun to pressure Sudan’s government into cooperating with the United Nations on Darfur.

Richard Gere has devoted decades to the cause of Tibetan independence to little avail. Yet with one onstage kiss of Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty, he did manage to get himself burned in effigy across India—the reverse celebrity problem. On the whole, celebrities have made little headway in bringing peace to the world’s trouble spots.

Even if celebrities are judicious and focused in promoting their causes, there are diminishing marginal returns to activ-



ism. A celebrity who repeatedly harps on a particular cause risks generating compassion fatigue with the general public. As Bono recently told CNN, "Look, I'm Bono and I'm sick of Bono. And I fully understand. . . I look forward to a time when I'm not such a pest and a self-righteous rock-star. Who needs one?" Clearly, there is a fine line to walk between sustained focus and righteous indignation.

### *Hindered Hollywood*

IT IS TRUE that star activism can influence the global policy agenda. But as we've seen, when it comes to concrete achievements, celebrities have a spotty track record. They face a number of constraints on their ability to affect policy. Most obviously, celebrities might not be the most grounded community of individuals. While some celebrities have mastered the activist game, others seem out of their depth. Hip-hop singer and Live Earth performer Akon admitted to reporters that he didn't know what it meant to be "green" until the day of the concert. Sean Penn's recent fact-finding trip to visit Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez served little purpose beyond a story in *The New York Times* that gently mocked both men. Then there's Peter Gabriel's idea for "The Elders", a group which includes Nobel Laureates Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu that tries to "use their unique collective skills to catalyze peaceful resolutions to long-standing conflicts"—something that seems more at home in a *Matrix* sequel than in the here and now. For every Bono or Angelina Jolie, there are other celebrities who are less well-versed in their *cause du jour*. The problem for the savvy stars is that when other entertainers act foolishly, it becomes easier to summarily dismiss all

celebrity activism.

Another problem is that some celebrity causes are more controversial than others—and controversy can still threaten a star's bankability. Tom Cruise's sofa pitch for Scientology (and against psychiatry) likely played a role in Paramount's 2006 decision to sever its business relationship with him. When the Dixie Chicks blasted George W. Bush on stage at a 2004 London concert, radio stations pulled their chart-topping single from playlists, affecting the record's sales.

None of these episodes ended a career, but they did sting. These cautionary tales reveal a clear constraint on celebrity activism: Most stars will be reluctant to risk their professional careers to take a controversial political stance. When Michael Jordan was asked

to endorse a Democratic senatorial candidate during his playing career, he demurred with a famous reply: "Republicans buy sneakers

too." There are certainly those who present exceptions to this rule, such as Robert Redford, Michael Moore and Susan Sarandon—but they are not the rule.

A deeper problem celebrities face is that the implicit theory of politics that guides their activism does not necessarily apply to all facets of international relations. The goal of most social activism is to bring greater attention to a problem. The assumption is that once people become aware of the problem, there will be a groundswell of support for direct action. This is not how politics necessarily works, particularly in the global realm. Any solution to a problem like global warming, for example, involves significant costs. As people become more aware of the policy problem, it is far from guaranteed that a consensus will emerge about the best way to solve it. It is therefore not surprising that celebs have had their greatest successes in touting humanitar-

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ian causes and almost no effect on ending militarized conflicts.

**T**HIS INCREASE in influence comes with a warning, however: With great power comes the great potential for blowback. A September CBS/*New York Times* poll revealed that 49 percent of Americans think celebrities should stay out of politics. Since 2003, the polling data suggests increasing public hostility towards celebrity activism.

Both elites and ordinary citizens have their reasons to resent star power. Celebrity activism rubs many policymakers and pundits the wrong way. To some, star power upsets their sense of fair play. Christopher Caldwell complained recently, “Philanthropy is a route through which celebrity can be laundered into political power.” He makes an interesting point. Why should the leads of *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* be listened to on weightier affairs of state? Who appointed Bono the global secretary of development? Does Pamela Anderson

merit attention for her causes ahead of learned policy experts? To other aspirants of the foreign-policy community, the offense is more personal. Power is a zero-sum commodity, and if celebrities are rising in influence, that means others are falling. This will not sit well with those who feel pushed aside, especially if they have toiled for years in graduate school and low-paying policy jobs.

Among “ordinary” citizens, celebrities are all too aware that the ingredients for a fall from grace are interwoven with the sources of star power. At its core, star activism hints that the famous are somehow better than you or me. Some Americans view celebrities who pontificate on politics and policy as taking advantage of a bully pulpit that they did not earn. There’s a fine line between principled activism and righteous indignation, and the celebrity who crosses that line risks incurring the wrath of the common man or woman. Americans are addicted to celebrities because we like to see them on top—but we also enjoy their fall. □