



Wealth Makes Health

By James Glassman

Early last December, I traveled to Kenya and Uganda with a delegation of health experts to look at efforts to fight AIDS in Africa. What I saw was both depressing and inspirational: overwhelming numbers of the dying and orphaned, but impressive attempts to save them by drug companies, faith-based charities, and U.S. government agencies.

When I returned home, however, I realized that I had missed a big part of the story.

President George W. Bush has committed \$15 billion over the next five years to combat HIV and AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean, and well-meaning people are searching, through trial and error, to find the best programs to get the job done. But even if AIDS were eradicated tomorrow, Africa would still suffer terribly from disease, environmental degradation, and natural disasters.

Why do nearly half of all Africans contract malaria every year and 2 million get tuberculosis—diseases practically non-existent in the developed world? It's not the climate. Malaria and TB were horrors in the United States a few decades ago. Why these disparities?

In a word, poverty. And poverty, as we learned in the twentieth century, does not stem from a lack of natural resources (look at Singapore) or a surfeit of bad weather (look at Minnesota). No, poverty grows from bad political and economic systems, and Africa has those in abundance.

And not just Africa. On December 22,

2003, an earthquake registering 6.5 on the Richter scale struck near San Luis Obispo, between Los Angeles and San Francisco. While there was extensive damage to property, only three people were killed.

Four days later, an earthquake of similar magnitude, 6.6 on the scale, hit near the historic city of Bam in Iran. The deaths are still being counted, and about 30,000 have already been confirmed.

Again, the disparity was no accident. Two larger, more urban quakes in California—Loma Prieta in 1989, which devastated parts of San Francisco (6.9 magnitude), and Northridge in 1994, which caused about \$30 billion in damage to suburbs northwest of Los Angeles (6.7 magnitude)—killed a total of 120 people. Meanwhile, an earthquake in a far more remote region of Iran in 1997, registering just 5.5 on the Richter scale, killed 1,000.

The correlation between poverty and casualties from natural disasters is intense and glaringly obvious. Scan the database of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (www.cred.be), maintained by the University of Louvain in Belgium, and you'll find that—in terms of loss of life in the past century—nine of the ten worst floods, eight of the ten worst wind storms, and eight of the ten worst earthquakes occurred in poor countries. In 2002, half of the 30 deadliest natural disasters occurred in Africa and nine in South Asia (India, Iran, etc.). None took place in North America or Europe.

It's not that developed nations are immune to the forces of nature. To the contrary, in 2002 CRED listed 17 natural disasters in the United States—wind

storms, earthquakes, floods, and droughts. That was twice as many as in any other country. But in most of those disasters no one was killed, and deaths overall totaled only a few dozen.

According to the Red Cross, in the last ten years “on average 13 times more people die per reported disaster in [poor] countries than in [wealthy] countries.”

Very simply, wealth makes health. Richer countries have the resources to build stronger buildings, to maintain better emergency communications, to rescue the trapped, and to prevent the injured or sick from becoming the dead. Certainly, poorer countries benefit from the wealth of richer countries (through, for example, drugs developed by pharmaceutical firms), but they require their own prosperity.

The same formula applies to the environment. In his book, *The Real Environmental Crisis*, Jack Hollander, professor emeritus of energy and resources at the University of California at Berkeley, shows the link between poverty and environmental degradation. It's obvious to anyone who sees charcoal being burned as fuel in Uganda or dried dung in rural China.

The question is how to improve the economies of poorer nations, and the answer is to end government corruption, advance democracy, and promote free-market principles. Ultimately, those measures will save more lives than noble emergency efforts to battle particular diseases and disasters.



Taliban Days

By Josh Larsen

Some movies exist to bear witness—to document an event or way of life that otherwise might be overlooked. Since the United States toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan, plenty of news reports have shed light on what the Afghan people suffered under the regime's rule. Yet no journalism can match the poetic power of *Osama*, the first feature film to be made in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. It's the difference between second-hand news and first-person experience.

Written and directed by Siddiq Barmak, an Afghan filmmaker who fled the country when the Taliban took over, *Osama* follows a widow and her teenage daughter as they struggle to survive in Taliban-run Kabul. Since she has no male escorts to accompany her in public, the woman is forced to scurry in the shadows. Desperate to earn enough to eat, she convinces her daughter to pretend to be a boy so she can get work. And so the girl becomes Osama.

Barmak has cited mainly Asian filmmakers as influences—the Russian great Andrei Tarkovsky and Iranian contemporaries Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami among them—but *Osama* also clearly owes much to the neorealist tradition of post-World War II Italy. Like the films of Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini, Barmak's picture shuns artifice and rubs your nose in reality. The locations have a dusty verisimilitude; the nonprofessional actors have faces lined with true experience. Indeed, Marina Golbarhari, the girl who plays

Osama, was found by Barmak on the street.

This isn't to say that *Osama* has the dryness often associated with documentaries. Barmak exhibits a keen eye for the lyrical, loaded image, as when a crowd of women in their blue burkas march down a Kabul street demanding the right to work. They're scattered by water hoses, a brutal scene Osama and her mother watch from a doorway. Later, as Osama's grandmother cuts off the girl's hair, she tells her the story of a boy who walked under a rainbow and became a girl. Barmak briefly cuts back to the protest scene, capturing a rainbow beneath the terrified women's feet.

Osama is rife with such imagery—in a pitiable gesture of hope, Osama plants her cut pigtail in a flowerpot—so that the movie often feels less like a feature film than an impressionistic depiction of the mindset women adopted under the Taliban. "I wish God hadn't created women," the mother says at one point, and Osama makes us understand how someone—the mother of a daughter, no less—could express such despair.

The abuses against women catalogued in *Osama* are so grievous, watching the movie feels like viewing a society that existed ages ago, if not in some sort of parallel, fantastic universe. Aside from the strictures women were placed under, they also had to live with the constant threat of physical and sexual violence. Religious zealots, the Taliban nonetheless found wiggle room when it came to sex.



Marina Golbarhari stars as a young girl posing as a boy under Taliban rule in *Osama*.

One character we meet is a teacher at Osama's school who keeps a harem of women—sex slaves, in essence—locked up in his house.

The school scenes, in which Osama strives to hide the fact that she's the single girl among hundreds of boys, are chilling in their portrayal of the brainwashing of a generation. Drilled in religious fanaticism and weapons training, these kids are groomed for an adulthood of violence and hatred—burgeoning pod people of a lethal kind.

At least now the spell has been broken. Whatever difficulties Afghanistan currently faces, you would be foolish to claim this had not been a society in need of liberation. *Osama* is many things: a riveting drama, a righteous feminist statement, a sparkling example of the value of foreign films, and, at heart, a call for the United States to stay the course. If Afghanistan were to return to the dark ages depicted here, we'd not only lose a talented filmmaker in Barmak, but also doom thousands of girls like Osama to death, or worse.

