

## Exterminate the Brutes

*Hotel Rwanda* is a must-see for President Bush and his administration. It might make them rethink their oft-repeated assurance that democracy is an unqualified good to be encouraged among all peoples everywhere.

From the day Belgium yielded her colonial rule over Rwanda in 1962 and the African nation was declared an independent democracy, murderous factionalism became commonplace. The tiny country's principal tribal peoples, the Hutu and the Tutsi, had lived together more or less amicably since the 15th century. Once democracy was declared, however, they were at each other's throats time and again. In 1994, the unrest exploded into mass murder of proportions bound to impress even the most hardened witnesses to the 20th-century's various human slaughterhouses. The bloodletting began when the Rwandan president, a Hutu, and his Burundian counterpart, also Hutu, died in a plane crash of undetermined cause. The Hutu generals instantly charged the Tutsi with assassination. Then, in a campaign too well orchestrated to be spontaneous, they unleashed a genocidal furor, calling upon all their tribe members to do their duty and exterminate the Tutsi. They called the operation "clearing the bush."

While the rest of the world looked on, Hutu militias—actually, packs of street thugs assisted by ordinary citizens—killed somewhere between 500,000 and 800,000 Tutsi within a period of three months. France had thoughtfully supplied the Hutu with guns, grenades, mortars, and—the weapon of choice—97-cent Chinese machetes. During the carnage, hacked bodies littered the streets, attracting hungry dogs. This gave the otherwise impotent U.N. troops on the ground their one opportunity to take action. Having been specifically forbidden to move against the Hutu murderers by Kofi Annan, they felt free to shoot the dogs they found devouring human flesh. But even this meager act of mercy provoked controversy. An English woman, apparently stepping from the pages of one of Evelyn Waugh's African novels, complained bitterly of the soldiers' inhumane action.

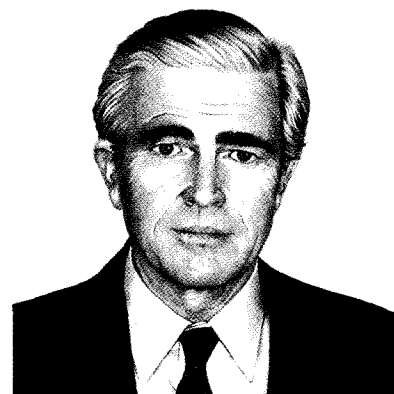
In *Hotel Rwanda*, director Terry George

locates the cause of this madness in European racism, which he also indicts for the West's failure to intervene. He is partially correct, but the whole truth is much more complex. In 1994, the Hutu tribe made up 85 percent of the population; the Tutsi, 14 percent; and a Pygmy tribe, the remaining one percent. In Hutu eyes, the Tutsi were their traditional oppressors and had to be eradicated. At least, this is what the ordinary Hutu citizen was being told by radio Hutu Power, whose announcers urged them to "crush the cock-a-roaches" in their midst.

How did these Africans become so rabidly racist? By way of explanation, George includes a scene in which an American reporter asks why the Hutu hate the Tutsi. He is told that, from the time they first entered the country's affairs in 1915, the Belgians had favored the Tutsi, giving them administrative positions in government and business almost to the entire exclusion of the Hutu. Why? Compared with the Hutu, the Tutsi tend to look more European. They are taller and have thinner noses and lighter skin. Nineteenth-century European explorers theorized that they had descended from superior racial stock, perhaps emigrating from Ethiopia. This favoritism left the Hutu deeply aggrieved. As analyses go, this seems plausible—until you learn that it is less than half the story.

By most reliable accounts, the Tutsi arrived in Rwanda some time in the 14th or 15th century, long before the advent of European colonialism. As nomadic herdsman and disciplined warriors, the Tutsi were able to subjugate the indigenous Hutu, who were small farmers living peacefully on the lush Rwandan hills. Once settled, the Tutsi developed a loosely administered kingdom that resembled European feudalism: They were the lords; the Hutu, their vassals and serfs. The arrangement proved beneficial to both parties. The Hutu farming culture allowed the Tutsi to give up their nomadic life and settle in the fertile country to raise their cattle. In return, the Hutu gained protection from other invaders and access to Tutsi cattle.

This explains the Belgians' favoritism. The Tutsi appeared to be natural lead-



### *Hotel Rwanda*

*Produced and distributed  
by United Artists  
Directed by Terry George  
Screenplay by Keir Pearson  
and Terry George*

ers not just because they had more European-looking features than the Hutu but because they had long ago established themselves as Rwanda's ruling class. The Belgians merely collaborated with the already existing hierarchical division of the people to run the country. This policy did not lead to the genocide of 1994. No, that was fomented by the introduction of European-style democracy. However it may abrade today's sensitivities, the evidence suggests that it was European notions about human rights that finally ignited the tribal hatred.

Having privileged the Tutsi since the beginning of the century, the Belgians changed course in the 1950's when the United Nations began to exert pressure to liberate colonies around the world. The Tutsi liked what they heard and argued that it was time for the Belgians to relinquish power. The Belgians countered by transferring governance to the Hutu, installing their handpicked Hutu president. In order to ensure that this exchange of power went smoothly, the Belgians tried to instill the Hutu with the self-esteem necessary to rule effectively. Whereas before, the Hutu had accepted their secondary place in Rwandan society, they were now told there was no difference between them and the Tutsi and never had been. The unforeseen consequence of this policy was to foster a retroactive resentment in many Hutu. In earlier times, Tutsi superiority was accepted as normal. Now, it was portrayed as an inexcusable breach of democratic prin-

inciples. The fuse was lit.

This development was especially ironic since the differences between Hutu and Tutsi had been blurred through the centuries. From the time of their settlement in Rwanda, the Tutsi had lived among the Hutu, and the tribes frequently intermarried. While the random play of genetics produces purer types of each group now and again, dividing the population along tribal lines had long been a guessing game. This changed, however, when the new government demanded that all citizens carry ethnic-identity cards. These ID cards, not physical traits, sealed the fate of many a Tutsi during the massacres. George has chosen to leave out these complications. Whether this is to simplify his story or to stoke a political agenda, I cannot say. He is an Irishman who has made two films about the insane Protestant-Catholic troubles in his country, so it seems safe to conclude that he saw a parallel in the suffering in Rwanda.

He seems to have designed his film to shame the West into taking a more interventionist role in the conflicts of other nations. This is a noble intention, but we know where such intentions can lead. Think Somalia in 1992.

To tell his story, George has focused on the experiences of a real Rwandan family during the massacres. Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle), a Hutu, was the manager of the Belgian-owned luxury Hotel Des Milles Collines in Kigali, living with his Tutsi wife and three children in moderate affluence nearby. No one would have taken Rusesabagina for a hero before the violent outbreak, but, in the event, he proved to have the mettle to save his family and nearly 1,300 other lives, both Tutsi and Hutu, by standing up to rabid Hutu militants and the official military that were acting as their obliging accomplices. He did so with the only weapons he had: his hospitality training and his native wit.

Rusesabagina, an ordinary man with reserves of extraordinary decency, had learned the ways of the world in his job. In the years preceding the Hutu attack and the civil war that followed, he had become a fixer well schooled in fending off any possible turbulence that might ruffle his upscale clientele. He knew just how to flatter and to bribe local officials. Like the best mollifiers, he also became a subtle psychologist.

Early in the film, we see Rusesabagina explaining to his assistant why a mon-

etary bribe is useless with a wealthy man. "If I give him money, what does it mean? He already has money. But if I give him a Cohiba Cuban cigar, that is style." He knows how to exploit the vanity of "great" men, and he does so in his own style. Wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and apricot tie, he is every inch the Europeanized African. The bullying Rwandan generals who barge into his establishment for free meals and drinks may not respect him, but they genuinely like him, for he makes them feel just as important as they imagine themselves to be. The Belgians also admire Rusesabagina's efficiency and good humor. He is unfailingly deferential, willing to please one and all. He knows what is good for business.

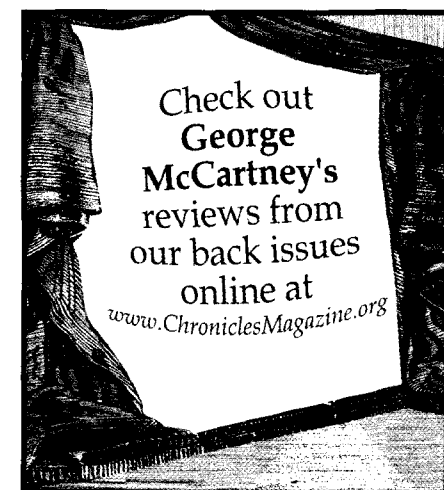
It was this seemingly sycophantic competence that Rusesabagina skillfully used to handle drunken, power-mad soldiers when they came to his hotel time and again, searching for Tutsi to murder. When an irate Rwandan colonel bursts into his bedroom with three rifle-toting soldiers one morning and presses an automatic into his cheek, he instinctively knows he must not quail. He rises slowly from the bed he shares with his wife, careful to adopt a conciliatory yet firm tone. He addresses the man reasonably as though they were having a polite conversation. When the colonel demands the guest list be produced instantly, Rusesabagina calmly points out that he has not showered yet. "Please, sir, I need thirty minutes. Take your men down to the courtyard, and I will send them some beer." Not so incredibly, the armed men do as they are bidden. Rusesabagina somehow infuses his professional solicitude with an air of command so the soldiers do not sense how they are being manipulated. Then, once he has them guzzling beer, he uses his 30 minutes to call the hotel's chief executive in Brussels, who contacts the Rwandan army's high command. Within the half-hour, the dogs are called off. This is just one of several interventions Rusesabagina was able to manage with a truly admirable aplomb. Again and again, he faces men with guns, ready to kill, and gets them to back off, using nothing more lethal than his wits.

Some of the film's best scenes are those in which Rusesabagina and his wife, Tatiana (Sophie Okonedo), are alone discussing their options. The actors show us how their unswerving commitment to each other and their children gives them the strength they need to meet the

surrounding terror with courage and resourcefulness. Rusesabagina holds nothing back from Tatiana as he plots to outwit the killers who keep making inroads onto the hotel grounds. While others panic, he maintains his emotional balance, knowing that it is all he has to save himself and his family and the refugees he has brought into his hotel.

Rusesabagina only loses his nerve once. When French troops show up to evacuate the hotel guests, they refuse to take any Africans. Rushed onto a waiting bus, the whites look forlornly from the windows at their African friends and acquaintances, not knowing what to do. A white priest and several nuns plead with the French to take Rwandan children from their orphanage, but to no avail. In disgust, Rusesabagina tells the priest that "these men are not here to help us, Father." Cheadle delivers this simple statement of fact with masterful understatement, making it unbearably poignant. Later, he secludes himself in the hotel pantry and, in a rage, pulls off his tie and rips off his shirt, disowning his European trappings. "They told me I was one of them, and I swallowed it," he screams. "I have no history, no memory!" This, George urges, is the position of colonized people of good will around the world. Led to believe that they have entered into a mutually constructive alliance with the First World, they all too frequently find themselves ignored when they become inconvenient.

Despite tendentious recasting of some historical aspects of the Rwandan crisis, *Hotel Rwanda* is an important and profoundly moving film with superb performances by all and an utterly magisterial one from Cheadle. I hope the Great Democratizer will screen it in the White House theater. <c



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## Art, Democracy, Empire

Wise men have always understood the destructive effect affluence and power have on societies, even though the unwise (modern liberals, mostly), by railing against them, have succeeded in acquiring both.

Their effect is especially pervasive and pernicious in respect of empires, as Clyde Wilson has cogently noted. The American empire, at the opening of the 21st century, might be offered as Exhibit A. In the political sphere, corruption is engendered by the magnitude of the stakes contended for; in the economic realm, greed is stimulated by imperial *richesse* unprecedented in the history of the world. Wilson reminds us (in *From Union to Empire*), however, that imperialism is always much more than a political and balance-of-trade phenomenon.

The abandonment of responsibility to remote and abstract power is simultaneous with the decay of will and identity in nonpolitical institutions. . . . We no longer judge by result and results no longer depend upon will and effort. In more and more areas of life success depends upon political manipulation, luck, and advantage. Cunning and bluster, the hallmarks of politics, become more important than accomplishment in more and more areas of life, as these are increasingly politicized.

At the beginning of the 21st century, no area of American life is more politicized than the arts, for the very good reason that artistic success in the fabulously wealthy, and wholly secularized, society of today entails the salary of a business tycoon, the glamour of a film star, and the priestly aura of a demigod. In the arts, as in presidential politics, the world itself seems up for grabs in a winner-take-all contest. And so, in the arts as in politics, political manipulation, cunning, and bluster separate a very few—mostly untalented—winners from the great mass of losers, a good many of whom actually have talent, and few real genius.

In the ancient world, performing artists, while admired for their skill, were

considered by the upper class to be socially inferior creatures, having dedicated their lives to a talent that, however pleasurable to behold, was nevertheless unworthy of a lifetime's devotion. In the medieval world, practitioners of the plastic and building arts were regarded, by themselves as by others, as essentially artisans, or skilled craftsmen. Beginning in the early-modern period, and as late as the middle of the 19th century, the greatest geniuses, those in music particularly, were either employed by the churches (Palestrina, J.S. Bach), artistic institutions (Mozart), or princely courts (Haydn, Beethoven, Richard Wagner). Those painters lucky enough to secure commissions from admirers and patrons made out financially on an on-again-off-again basis; those less lucky were left to their own devices or to starve in a garret. The latter was usually the fate of most authors (men of letters being notoriously against the government and the prevailing establishment), for example, Cervantes; a notable exception is Voltaire, who was royal historiographer to Louis XV and later the pampered pet of Frederick the Great.

Every artist, of course, has always hoped for success: fame, money, the love of beautiful women, earthly immortality. A tiny majority has achieved all of these things, while the rest—sometimes deservedly, sometimes not—have gone begging or been forced to demote their vocation to an avocation. For the minority and the majority alike, assuming they were true and deserving artists, the artistic ideal was a noble thing; the pursuit of it, heroic; its approximation in the form of an actualized work of art, an act of grateful humility rather than a vaunting show of self-glorification. Until the beginning of the last century, and even for some time after that, the test of the genuine artist was his unshakable belief in himself and his talent, his steadfast and unswerving determination to carry on with his life's work through thick or thin—failure, as the world knows it, or success. That, however, was when the word *artist* still signified somebody who *made* something, as opposed to someone who *was* something, suggesting a vocation rather than a social



position; before mass education and mass culture, the mass media, the publicity industry, and the fatal reconceptualization of art—including by many otherwise true and conscientious artists themselves—as the subjective exploration, expression, and celebration of the persona of the artist replaced the classic understanding of art as an objective discipline centered on an act of the practical intellect. So it has been reserved, in the postbourgeois, postmodern era, to bourgeois philistinism to subvert and all but destroy high art. George F. Babbitt had nothing to do with it. Pushy narcissists playing at being artists in their Hollywood-perfect designer “studios” from New York to Los Angeles probably had the most. For the rest, we have the National Endowment for the Arts—in every respect a highly politicized institution—and its prodigious spawn to blame. The problem is a double one, comprising two apparently paradoxical elements. The first is the amateurization of art. The second is its professionalization. Between them, these developments have managed not quite to strangle but certainly to exclude genuine artistic endeavor—or its fruits, anyway—almost entirely from the public view.

In earlier times, the amateur artist was, for the most part, content to be just that. Today, he is better described by the colloquial term *wannabe*. The difference between them is that the amateur is content to practice his art as an avocation, in his spare time and in an essentially private capacity, for his own satisfaction and the delectation of a few friends. The wannabe, by comparison, is ambitious for recognition as a public artist of genius and divine seer, commanding a mass audience and an income commensurate with it. (Nothing less than the shouts accorded Dostoyevsky by the Russian crowds—“Hero! Genius! Saint!”—could ever satisfy him