

## Catastrophes That Count

Flood Tide

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*Disasters are not created equal. Hertzberg cites alarming figures about a variety of tragedies currently taking place around the world that do not receive significant public or policymaking attention in the United States. Yet, when a massive tsunami swelled upon the shores of Eastern Africa and many parts of Asia on December 26, 2004, the charitable response from the United States was overwhelming. Individuals, foundations, and the federal government collectively donated humanitarian relief that contributed to a worldwide response totaling in the billions of dollars. In this selection Hertzberg explores why the tsunami was seen as a matter of greater urgency than other disasters. He urges readers to recognize that our level of concern and response to disasters has little to do with the magnitude of the disaster itself. Instead, it has to do with the capacity for the disaster to be socially constructed as a matter of significant concern; a capacity that stems from factors such as when the disaster takes place, how it occurs, who are its victims, and how visible is the harm.*

**N**early four million men, women, and children have died as a consequence of the Congo civil war. Seventy thousand have perished in the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan. In the year just ended, scores of thousands died in wars and massacres elsewhere in Africa, in Asia, in the archipelagoes of the Pacific, and, of course, in Iraq. Less dramatically, but just as lethally, two million people died of malaria around the world, and another million and a half of diarrhea. Five million children died of hunger. Three million people died of AIDS, mostly in Africa. The suffering of these untimely and terrible deaths—whether inflicted by deliberate violence, the result of human agency, or by avoidable or treatable malady, the result of human neglect—is

multiplied by heartbroken parents and spouses, numbed and abandoned children, and, often, ruined survivors vulnerable to disease and predation and dependent, if they are lucky, on the spotty kindness of strangers.

The giant wave that radiated from western Sumatra on the day after Christmas destroyed the lives of at least a hundred and fifty thousand people and the livelihoods of millions more. A hundred and fifty thousand: fifty times the toll of 9/11, but “only” a few per cent of that of the year’s slower, more diffuse horrors. The routine disasters of war and pestilence do, of course, call forth a measure of relief from public and private agencies (and to note that this relief is almost always inadequate is merely to highlight the dedication of those who deliver it). But the great tsunami has struck a deeper chord of sympathy.

One can understand why. Partly it’s that although the scale of the horror is unimaginable (or so it has been repeatedly described), the horror itself is all too imaginable. A giant wave speaks to a childlike fear that can be apprehended by anyone who has ventured too far out from the beach in a suddenly mounting swell, has felt helpless in the suck of undertow or riptide, has been slammed and spun and choked by a breaker tall enough to block the sky. Partly it’s that the reach of the disaster was so vast, far vaster than any hurricane or monsoon or terrestrial earthquake: three thousand miles from end to end. Partly it’s that people from all over the world, seeking a holiday in the sun, witnessed the catastrophe. People from more than fifty countries lost their lives in it; among the dead and missing, nearly two weeks later, were more than seven thousand foreign tourists. (Nearly two thousand of them were Swedes; if that number holds, then Sweden’s immediate losses, proportionately, will be greater than Thailand’s.) Finally, and perhaps most important, it’s that this is a drama that has victims and heroes—but no villains. No human ones, anyway.

The terrible arbitrariness of the disaster has troubled clergymen of many persuasions. The Archbishop of Canterbury is among those newly struggling with the old question of how a just and loving God could permit, let alone will, such an undeserved horror. (Of course, there are also preachers, thankfully few, who hold that the horror is not only humanly deserved but divinely intended, on account of this or that sin or depredation.) The tsunami, like the city-size asteroid that, on September 29th [2004], missed the earth by only four times the distance of the moon, is a reminder that, one way or another, this is the way the world ends. Man’s laws are proscriptive, nature’s merely descriptive.

Yet it is the very “meaninglessness” of the catastrophe—its lack of human agency, its failure to fit into any scheme of human reward and punishment—that has helped make possible the simple solidarity of the global response. President Reagan, to the exasperation of his aides, used to muse that human beings, faced with some mortal threat from beyond the skies, would put aside their differences in common cause. Something like that, on a very modest scale, appears to be happening as the world clamors to help the survivors of the destroyer from beneath the seas. Tsunamis have no politics.

Even so, there were familiar elements in the responses of the Bush Administration. Two days after the disaster, a White House spokesman, asked why President Bush himself had so far remained silent, explained, “He didn’t want to make a symbolic statement about ‘we feel your pain.’” On the third day, the President finally voiced his condolences in person, and two days later the government’s emergency-aid allotment, initially pegged at fifteen million dollars, was raised to three hundred and fifty million, where it remains. On the eighth day, even as Secretary of State Colin Powell, in Thailand, was saying that enough money was at hand, Bush, now back at the White House, appeared side by side with his father, George H.W. Bush (whom he had never before granted such a public role), and his father’s successor, Bill Clinton (the object of his spokesman’s snideness), to announce that he was appointing them to lead a private fund-raising drive in the United States.

“We’re a very generous, kindhearted nation,” the President said on December 29th. And so we are. But it is unseemly to boast about it at such a moment. It would be unseemly even if it were not the case that Australia, Germany, and Japan have been considerably more generous in absolute terms and perhaps a dozen other countries have been more so in per-capita terms. “We’re showing the compassion of our nation in the swift response,” Bush said on January 3rd. “But the greatest source of America’s generosity is not our government—it’s the good heart of the American people.” That is true, too; but it is also true, or should be, that in a democracy a government’s generosity is an expression of a people’s heart, not something separate from it. There is reason to worry that the Administration regards private relief efforts as a partial replacement for, rather than as a supplement to, the efforts of the United States government; and reason to worry, too, that the funds for tsunami relief will come at the expense of victims of disasters yet to occur. According to the *Times*, the Administration plans to use money from the disaster-and-famine-assistance program of the United States Agency for International Development, whose budget for this year is \$384.9 million, and consulted

with “senior Republican lawmakers” to try “to cover the costs of this disaster without undermining Mr. Bush’s other priorities,” such as “making his tax cuts permanent.”

A few influential Republicans, however, are beginning to say that America should help the victims of the tsunami without beggaring other assistance programs, and if their view prevails then our aid will indeed be, as the Administration insists, an expression of “American values.” But these are American values that, at least for the moment, are also manifestly German values and Japanese values and Norwegian and Swedish and Spanish and British values and Sri Lankan and Indian values—values that are, like the victims of the tsunami, simply human.

### QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the monumental human disasters currently taking place around the world that are not getting nearly as much attention in the United States as did the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami?
2. In what ways was the tsunami more visible than these other disasters?
3. How did the presence of so many foreign tourists among those who died or were injured contribute to the massive attention that the tsunami received?
4. How did the tsunami enable the Bush Administration to gain visibility for the charitable pledge of \$350 million made by the United States? Why is this kind of visibility virtually impossible to achieve when the United States supports relief efforts to stave off the many other monumental human disasters currently taking place around the world?
5. Why is there typically lots of claimsmaking attention given to disasters that produce massive suffering in a short period of time (such as the tsunami or an airplane crash) but much less attention given to disasters that produce the same or more suffering gradually, over a longer period of time (such as disease or malnutrition)?