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Who is Saving Darfur?

The Save Darfur Coalition has become a strong contender for the title "most visible foreign policy campaign" (a category sadly not yet included in the People's Choice Awards.) It has everything a campaign needs to stand out in a crowded marketplace: a morally compelling story; innocent victims; evil villains; celebrity endorsers; and a multi-million dollar budget.

But as Tarek noted on this blog late Friday, a Washington Post article that morning about the Coalition might damn it with loud praise. By simplistically according full credit to the Coalition for President Bush's recent announcement of tighter sanctions against the Sudanese government, the story brushed aside any questions about whether the Coalition was making the smartest possible use of its funds. And it dissed the many other groups working for creative ways to engage the US public. A well-researched article Saturday morning in the NY Times offered a corrective -- along with the news that the Coalition's board had ousted its controversial director, David Rubenstein.

What did the Post miss in its puff piece? For one thing, the tension that emerged as the Coalition secretariat became more like an organization in its own right rather than an honest broker of conflicting agendas among its members. One issue: were the Campaign's calls for a no-fly zone over Darfur at odds with the urgent humanitarian work of some member groups in the Coalition? Would the Save Darfur Coalition make it impossible for Western aid groups to save Darfuris?

A column in yesterday's Outlook section of the Washington Post questioned that very premise: Julie Flint usefully complicates our understanding of heroes and victims, and reminds us that Darfuris are actors in their own "salvation." It's a useful reminder of the extraordinary group of Sudanese women already looking for solutions across political and ethnic boundaries, thanks in part to some smart partnering from the Initiative for Inclusive Security.

The Save Darfur Coalition's internal shake-up is a useful reminder as well of how difficult coalitional work can be. Purnima Chawla and Ravi Singh of the Center for Nonprofit Strategies highlight the challenge of managing foreign policy coalitions in the study we commissioned of six successful advocacy efforts.

You'll find their work and others' reflected in our online tools for foreign policy advocacy. But you'll find no simple answers here or anywhere else to the question: what can we do to help end the tragedy in Darfur? We can promise you help in asking the tough questions that will help you plan and evaluate your work along the way. Remember to thank us when you get that People's Choice Award, OK?

Posted by David Devlin-Foltz on June 4, 2007 12:56 PM | Permalink

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