**Congress and the Eternal Wisdom of Leonardo DiCaprio**

*How Politicians Lost to Someone Who Died in the Titanic...and you won’t believe what happened next!*

**By Yll Agimi**

Around this time a few years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO)—a group presumably staffed by overachieving former hall monitors—declared Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe its Goodwill Ambassador. **[[1]](#footnote-1)** For those unfamiliar, a Goodwill Ambassador is like a celebrity spokesperson, except instead of peddling watches or natural blur powder foundation & power plush concealer (*ask Kylie Jenner*), they’re supposed to represent humanity’s better angels. The announcement was followed by a collective “Wait, what?!”

Within days, the WHO rescinded the title, citing “global outcry,” which is polite PR-speak for, “We screwed up, and Twitter is absolutely roasting us.”**[[2]](#footnote-2)** Somewhere, a panicked intern frantically Googled, **“Mugabe, Mugbee, Africa, Who is**??? Is Mugabe good guy??" only to discover pages of headlines screaming, “No!”—as if Google couldn’t believe the audacity of the question. This was not a “misunderstood antihero” situation like *Walter White*. No, this was Mugabe—a tyrant with a leadership style known to make offers no one can refuse.**[[3]](#footnote-3)**

It boggles the mind they thought this would fly. Did nobody do a quick Google search? Or was the printer too afraid to print pages labeled atrocities, for fear of being an accomplice? Either way, it seems clear the interns are paid in leftover conference tote bags, which might explain the oversight. **[[4]](#footnote-4)**

To their credit, WHO tried to course-correct quickly. But I can’t help picturing Angelina Jolie—actual Goodwill Ambassador and ethereal saint—reading the headlines and whispering, “Amateurs.” If the world’s biggest humanitarian can flawlessly rescue refugees while wearing silk scarves and zero visible sweat, surely WHO could Google “Mugabe” without ending up on the wrong side of a meme war.

In 2016, down memory lane here, the UN suspended Maria Sharapova as its Goodwill Ambassador after she tested positive for a banned substance. **[[5]](#footnote-5)** Yes, 2016—back when we were all just a little younger and probably more optimistic about the trajectory of civilization. Seems like a lifetime ago, right? Or maybe that’s just how time feels when you’re measuring time in scandal cycles. Ask Siri, just to double-check.

But wait—let’s rewind to 2011, a simpler era when people thought planking was the height of comedy. That’s when Aisha al-Gaddafi, daughter of the Muammar Gaddafi (yes, that Gaddafi), also had her Goodwill Ambassador title stripped. **[[6]](#footnote-6)**  Apparently, the UNDP (UN’s development sidekick) had a moment of clarity and thought, “Wait a second, her dad’s résumé is basically just ‘dictator,’ ‘despot,’ and ‘general unpleasantness.’” UNDP realized that being the offspring of a tyrant who pitched Bedouin tents in Manhattan like it was Burning Man didn’t exactly scream “goodwill.” Shocking, I know.

Then there is Natalia Alianovna Romanova, OXFAM’s goodwill ambassador. Outside the MARVEL® universe she’s known as Scarlett Johansson, an expert tactician, martial artist, a secret agent and an avid Sodastream® straw sucker. [[7]](#footnote-7) After finding herself in the middle of the Israel/Palestine/Maale Adumin settlement issue, she was asked to choose between the good causes of Oxfam and the delicious Sodastream® bubbles. Bubbles prevailed, they always do, after all bubbles pay for the mansions, penthouses, or clouds, wherever celebs live these days.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*But what’s all this got to do with the title, you ask? Wondering if someone cropped the rest, or is this one of those “artsy” writing styles, like a New Yorker cartoon with no punchline?*

Apparently, the entire planet—local councils, global agencies, the UN, PETA, and even the Pope[[9]](#footnote-9)—is now recruiting celebrities to fix humanity’s biggest problems before we all get bored and click “Skip Ad.” The thinking seems to be that a dashing George Clooney can convince Grandma Doris to donate faster than it takes her to whip up her morning Nespresso. I mean, the man convinced an internationally renowned human rights lawyer to take his last name. If that’s not persuasive power, I don’t know what is.

And let’s not forget Roger Federer, tennis’ golden child, who can apparently fund an entire school for disadvantaged kids with a single eyebrow wiggle. Sure, he’ll sell a razor or two along the way, but who cares? The man’s a philanthropist and clean-shaven—what more could you want?

Then there’s Leo DiCaprio, whose sexy, eco-conscious chest can mobilize an entire audience to fight climate change faster than they can grab a bucket and bail water out of their basement. It’s hard to argue with the logic when 80% of charitable giving comes from individuals, most of whom are thinking with their hearts—or at least, with their thirst. *[[10]](#footnote-10)*

*What’s wrong with a little skin when I make my monthly donation to Save the Children? JLaw flashes a smile and nudges me in a socially responsible direction, and suddenly I’m pulling out my wallet. After all, she’s politically engaged, rich beyond imagination, and has plenty of time to spare between raking in gazillions and tripping adorably at the Oscars. Honestly, I’d welcome the nudge—or even a poke. It’s JLaw after all. [[11]](#footnote-11)*

*So sure, I’ll take my charity pitches with a side of Clooney’s Casamigos Blanco, thank you very much. Because if the planet’s on fire and the ocean’s in my living room, at least let Leo tell me about it shirtless.*

As for Leo, his sexy chest is just a big heart trying to save the world, one smoldering glance at a time. What’s the harm? If John and Jane Johnson of 123 Midland Ave, USA, are the target demographic, we’re golden. Ms. Johnson still swoons over Titanic, and Mr. Johnson insists that one time Leo killed Agent Smith in The Matrix was peak cinema.

The Johnsons will tune in any time Leo looks, talks, breathes, or does a push-up. The man could recite his grocery list, and they’d still donate.

But while the Johnsons are busy writing checks to save polar bears (because Leo asked nicely), what about refugee crises? Or Yemen? Or gun violence? Oh good, Sarah McLachlan has dibs on animal abuse—thank heavens for tear-jerking commercials. But nuclear proliferation? Affordable education? Police violence? Crickets.

We need Ambassadors—Goodwill ones, not the brand kind—or how else are we supposed to know what to care about?

*Lay off Leo. Seriously. Haven’t you seen him in* The Revenant? *He fought a bear for our entertainment. It was certified fresh.*

Fine. Let’s talk about Jenny McCarthy, a different sort of ambassador. Her cause? Convincing parents to endanger their kids by rejecting vaccinations, armed with zero scientific evidence but a boatload of charisma. Yes, in her world, evidence is measured in ounces in the U.S. and grams in Europe. Probably because “science” sounds less intimidating in metric.

Meanwhile, over at the FDA and CDC, 29,824 employees—sporting a combined 180,000 years of grad school—were begging parents to vaccinate their kids. But unlike McCarthy, they wear clothes to work and lack the critical celebrity skill of holding a press conference in yoga pants. It’s almost like science needs better PR. Or maybe just a shirtless Leo.

*So, it’s the celebrities’ fault, huh? Is that what you’re saying?*

No, of course not. Look. Are you looking? I feel like you’re not looking. Fine, just listen. I like to think that people genuinely want to end human trafficking, help refugees, and stop climate change because they’ve read articles, done research, or—if we’re being honest—clicked on a headline that didn’t end in “...and you won’t believe what happened next!” Maybe they trust institutions to guide them, assuming said institutions haven’t accidentally nominated a dictator’s kid as their goodwill spokesperson. After all, Médecins Sans Frontières*[[12]](#footnote-12)*, the EU[[13]](#footnote-13), and even Obama[[14]](#footnote-14) snagged Nobel Peace Prizes, presumably for doing something noble, though I couldn’t tell you what without Googling.

I remember a time when all it took to rally the masses was a stern letter from the principal, a mayoral proclamation, or a scientist in a lab coat saying, “Hey, do this thing, or bad stuff happens.” But now? Now we need George Clooney sipping Nespresso or Jennifer Lawrence vaguely pointing in a direction to feel inspired. What changed?

Maybe it’s because institutions diluted their credibility by cozying up to celebrities, dictators, and the children of dictators—all of them awkwardly wrapped in sponsorships like Gillette razors or Nespresso pods. (Because nothing screams "humanitarian" like a single-use espresso pod.)

And just as we started trusting these hybrid efforts less, the numbers reflected it. As of 2017, 47% of Americans had little to no confidence in Congress or the President. Which, if you think about it, is a lot of distrust for people we literally hired to run the place.

It’s hard to pinpoint when Americans collectively decided to trust celebrities more than the government, but it was likely around the time a pop star tweeted, "This is my truth," while holding a pumpkin spice latte. These days, we’ll take advice on global warming from a reality TV star who once thought Antarctica was a shoe brand, but if a Senator suggests recycling, we assume it’s a conspiracy to steal our aluminum cans.

Think about it: politicians have PowerPoints and C-SPAN, while celebrities have Instagram filters and scandalous divorces. Who are you going to trust—the guy discussing tax reform in monotone or the actress who just went live to announce her 37-step skincare routine "saved her soul"? Honestly, it’s no contest.

The government asks for your taxes; celebrities ask for your hearts. Sure, one funds infrastructure, but the other gives you memes and questionable diet advice. It’s a trade-off America seems perfectly content with.

So maybe instead of waiting for Leo DiCaprio to strip down to his undershirt and save the polar bears, we could skip a Netflix binge, read a book, and maybe tune in to NPR. Institutions, for their part, could stop giving celebrities jobs they should be handling themselves. How about rebuilding trust and being transparent instead of asking Scarlett Johansson to solve world hunger between Marvel shoots?

Sure, CARE called the crisis in Yemen an “absolute shame on humanity.”[[15]](#footnote-15) But what does Leo think?

Oh, right—it doesn’t matter what Leo thinks.

1. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/21/world/africa/robert-mugabe-goodwill-ambassador-who.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/22/robert-mugabe-removed-as-who-goodwill-ambassador-after-outcry [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://inews.co.uk/news/world/revolutionary-hero-corrupt-gerontocrat-rise-fall-mugabe/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/14/why-the-united-nations-doesnt-pay-its-interns/?utm_term=.56b6548852a8> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/mar/15/united-nations-suspends-maria-sharapova-as-goodwill-ambassador [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/mar/15/united-nations-suspends-maria-sharapova-as-goodwill-ambassador [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CttzT8ZtJm8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/scarlett-johansson-sodastream-oxfam-israeli-settlement [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/george-clooney-among-celebrities-honored-by-pope-francis-29007 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2015/mar/23/the-science-behind-why-people-give-money-to-charity [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In our own research working with a large employer and Marie Curie, we have found that celebrity supporters increase donations to charity, and fast – but that this only appears to work for people who have donated to the charity before. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/who-we-are/history/nobel-peace-prize> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history/2010-today/2012/eu-nobel_en> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/press-release/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/yemen-crisis-absolute-shame-humanity-170723141649352.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)