

Time names super-rich trio as 2005 “Persons of the Year”

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22 December 2005

The past year witnessed a number of horrific human tragedies. As 2005 began, South Asia was reeling from the powerful tsunami that struck December 26, 2004, washing away the lives of hundreds of thousands in a matter of minutes and ravaging an entire region of the globe.

On August 29, Hurricane Katrina hit the US Gulf Coast. Up to a million people were displaced, their lives uprooted and their communities destroyed. The official death toll of 1,323 does not begin to capture the dimensions of the catastrophe. Almost four months later, families are scattered, tens of thousands remain without permanent housing and more than a thousand children are still listed as missing.

Then on October 8, a massive earthquake hit northern Pakistan and Indian-controlled Kashmir, resulting in upwards of 80,000 confirmed casualties and leaving hundreds of thousands of refugees as the frigid winter months approached.

The victims of these tragedies were overwhelmingly poor, the vast majority still suffering to this day due in large part to the lack of preparation and allocation of adequate resources combined with the indifference of government authorities. Millions of ordinary people around the world looked on in horror, responding with an outpouring of sympathy and compassion for those affected. Many volunteered their time or made personal donations to relief agencies.

Taking the year's events into account, one struggles to come to grips with *Time*'s seemingly bizarre naming on Monday of two multibillionaires—Bill and Melinda Gates—and one multimillionaire—U2's Bono—as their 2005 Persons of the Year for their altruistic work. In a year dominated by an endless string of natural disasters, which laid bare in their wake vast social inequalities and misery, the actions of these three massively wealthy individuals have had a negligible impact.

Time magazine's annual selection of its Man, Woman or Persons of the Year is not necessarily based on popularity. Past choices have included Adolf Hitler (1938), Joseph Stalin (1939, 1942), Richard Nixon (1971, 1972) and George

Bush (2004). But the magazine's choice is said to be based on people who have “made a difference” in the course of the year—for better or for worse.

For 2005, *Time* writes that the Gateses and Bono have been selected “for being shrewd about doing good, for rewiring politics and re-engineering justice, for making mercy smarter and hope strategic and then daring the rest of us to follow.” In reality, the primary reason they have been selected is because of their immense personal fortunes. From the viewpoint of the editorial offices of the mass media in America, wealth and power dazzle and impress, and should be duly acknowledged. It matters not that these Persons of the Year travel in an orbit thoroughly disconnected from the lives of the overwhelming majority of the world's population.

For *Time*'s editors, equally important as their wealth is the way these three have gone about their philanthropic missions. Everything they do reinforces the notion that the capitalist free-market system can be manipulated for the charitable good. The super-rich can do good deeds through private charity—or by squeezing out token funds from the governments of the world's richest nations—and at the end of the day, the class divide between the haves and the have-nots remains in place.

Just how much money are we talking about? Bill Gates's fortune is estimated at a staggering \$46.5 billion. To put this into perspective, the Microsoft head's net worth is almost 1 million times the annual salary of a working family earning \$50,000. The Gates couple and their three children live in a \$100 million home. When they travel to far-flung regions of the globe on their charity missions for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, they do so on their private jet, and check in to luxury suites at the most exclusive hotels before making their way to meet with “the people.”

The Gates Foundation has a \$29 billion endowment. This year, the Gateses gave about \$500 million to the Grand Challenges in Global Health, one of the charity initiatives applauded by *Time*. But again, from the standpoint of their vast wealth, this is only about 1 percent of the Gateses' net

worth.

While Bono is a small-fry in comparison, *Time* notes that it's not unusual for the U2 front-man to spend "several thousand dollars at a restaurant for a nice Pinot Noir." He owns a penthouse in Manhattan, a villa in the South of France and another home in Dublin.

His band has made \$1.1 billion through record sales and concert appearances, and is ranked by some as the 10th richest band in history. Aside from his music-related business, Bono is a named partner in a \$2 billion private equity firm.

Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson, also produce the Edun clothing line—selling \$175 jeans and other high-priced garments made from organic materials at stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue. This designer clothing is produced by workers at so-called "fair-trade" factories the couple has set up in Africa. Bono makes a point of noting that this is not charity work, but rather a business concern representing "a different kind of label consciousness."

Perhaps the most insidious side of Bono's philanthropic work, however, is his enthusiasm for hobnobbing with just about any politician who will listen. In 2002, he embarked on a 10-day African tour with the Bush administration's treasury secretary at the time, Paul O'Neill, lending credence to the concept that the US would "open its wallet" to the masses of Africa. (See "Bono and O'Neill's African tour: low farce against a backdrop of human tragedy")

He recently lunched with George W. Bush at the White House. Meeting with the leader of the capitalist nation whose economic policies are responsible for the enslavement and poverty of millions in Africa, Bono heaped praise on the miserly \$15 billion the Bush administration has pledged to combat AIDS in Africa through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), funds linked to the administration's Christian-right agenda. Bono reportedly takes to quoting the Scriptures during such visits.

Bono played a leading role at the Live 8 events last July in Scotland. Along with Bob Geldof and a coalition of non-governmental organizations and church groups constituting the "Make Poverty History" campaign, Bono prostrated himself before Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the other assembled G8 leaders as part of the "Live 8" concert events. (See " 'Live 8'—a political fraud on behalf of imperialism")

At the affair, Bono made the remarkable comment that if "Bush in his second term is as bold in his commitments to Africa as he was in the first term, he indeed deserves a place in history in turning the fate of that continent around." In fact, the \$40 billion pledged by the G8 in debt forgiveness to African nations over 10 years must be offset by a corresponding cut in aid to the poor countries. Those nations

must also pledge to "boost private sector development" and eliminate all "impediments to private investment, both domestic and foreign."

By playing it safe in its selection of Bono and the Gateses, *Time* also sidestepped one of the year's biggest stories: the deepening debacle in Iraq. The grim milestone of 2,000 US soldiers killed in the war and occupation was passed in October. Opposition to the Bush administration's policies—both in Iraq and at home—intensified. One mother, Cindy Sheehan—who lost her son to this war—galvanized this antiwar sentiment. From the viewpoint of people who make a difference, and provoked controversy, she would have made a more apt choice.

If a collective selection were to be made, what about 2,157 US soldiers who have been killed to date in Afghanistan and Iraq; or the Iraqi people, who have been subjugated to colonial oppression, with tens of thousands killed as a result?

As it is, *Time's* selection of Bono and Bill and Melinda Gates is in keeping with the US media's glorification of wealth and the status quo. It is a barometer of what passes today for mass public opinion, but which is foreign to the lives not only of American working people, but of mass of the world's population that is untouched by the charity work of this super-rich trio. The message being propagated by *Time*? Big business is compatible with compassion.

This conformist and opportunist outlook was summed up by Bono in remarks quoted by *Time* in their "Persons of the Year" issue. Standing on the balcony of his Manhattan apartment overlooking Central Park, Bono commented, "You know what my least favorite John Lennon song is? 'Imagine.' At the root of it is some rigorous thinking about the way things could be, but people have stolen the idea and made it an anthem for wishful thinking. I'm against wishful thinking. I hate it."



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