

KONY 2012: Merchandising and Branding Support for US Military Intervention in Central Africa

By [Nile Bowie](#)

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Edward Bernays believed that society could not be trusted to make rational and informed decisions on their own, and that guiding public opinion was essential within a democratic society. Bernays founded the Council on Public Relations and his 1928 book, *Propaganda* cites the methodology used in the application of effective emotional communication. He discovered that such communication is capable of manipulating the unconscious in an effort to produce a desired effect – namely, a capacity to manufacture mass social adherence in support of products, political candidates and social movements. Nearly a century after his heyday, Bernays' methodology is apparent in almost every form of civic and consumer persuasion. The platform of social media is being used in unprecedented new ways, one such example is a new online documentary about the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an extremist rebel group operating in Central Africa.

The documentary is unprecedented, not for its educational attributes but for its capacity to use visual branding, merchandising and highly potent emotional communication to influence the viewer to support US military operations in resource rich Central Africa under the pretext of capturing the LRA's commander, Joseph Kony. The Lord's Resistance Army was originally formed in 1987 in northwestern Uganda by members of the Acholi ethnic group, who were historically exploited as forced laborers by the British colonialists and later relegated by the nation's dominant ethnic groups following independence. Together with the Holy Spirit Movement, the LRA represented the armed wing of a resistance faction aiming to overthrow

the government of current Ugandan President and staunch US military ally, Yoweri Museveni.

The LRA was originally formed to combat ethnic marginalization, but soon became dominated by Joseph Kony, a self-proclaimed spiritual messenger of the (Christian) Holy Spirit. Kony utilized his messianic persona to lead a syncretic spiritual movement based on Acholi tribal beliefs' and extremist Christian dogma. It is claimed that LRA seeks to establish a theocratic state based on the Ten Commandments, however its inner ideological mythology is largely unknown. In an effort to mobilize a large scale armed resistance, the LRA routinely recruited child soldiers and forced them to commit heinous acts such as cannibalism and mutilation on others who resisted to join the rebel group during their extensive twenty-five year campaign.

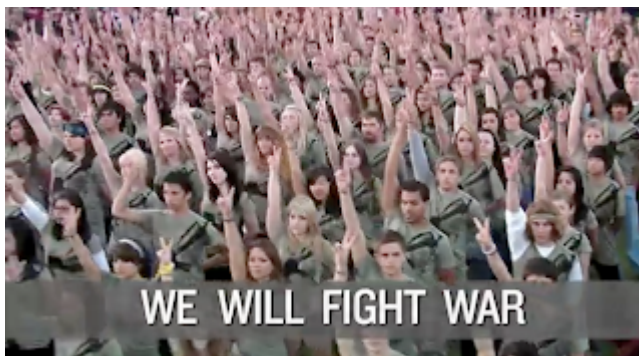
KONY 2012 is directed by Jason Russell and runs just thirty minutes; the video has received [over twenty million views on YouTube and Vimeo and it's national support group on Facebook is said to gain 4,000 members each hour](#). The highly produced feature is narrated from the perspective of Russell and his attempt to explain the Lord's Resistance Army to his infant son, Gavin. The video features footage from Russell's trip to Uganda (prior to 2006, when the LRA was still operating in the region) and introduces the viewer to Jacob, a Ugandan boy who was formally recruited by the LRA as a child soldier. Russell presents various montages of ethnically diverse groups of students raising their fists in the air, sporting KONY t-shirts, and scenes of mass celebration in response to President Obama signing the [S. 1067: Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009](#).

The bill was passed without congressional approval, and allows the US to deploy military forces in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and South Sudan (at the consent of those nations) in pursuit of LRA rebels. The film further advocates the requirement of public support for US military operations in the region through forms of street activism, encouraging viewers to purchase Action Kits (\$30.00) and posters (\$10.00) featuring images of Joseph Kony. Russell then targets specific celebrities and US policy makers and pressures them to endorse the campaign against Kony. Perhaps most absurdly, Russell suggests that without mass public support from the American public, the US would withdraw its military presence from the region.

This is the first large-scale campaign to mobilize social medialites to aggregate public support for what would otherwise be, controversial pro-intervention US foreign policy. The production relies on highly charged and often unrelated emotional triggers, which ultimately rely on the viewers sense of compassion in tandem with a lack of prior information on the subject to produce a desired result – explicitly, the villainous mythification of Kony and the mainstream acceptance of US presence in Africa through a proposed archipelago of AFRICOM military bases in the region.

The production targets an age group between thirteen and twenty-one, and uses a level of academic vocabulary appropriate for a young adult audience with a limited attention span; the narrator at one point even insists the viewer pay attention. The viewer is encouraged to form an emotional connection to Russell, as we witness unrelated footage of his child's birth. The viewer is then subsequently associated with Russell's role as a nurturer to his young son, before shifting to scenes of Russell nurturing the Ugandan child soldier, Jacob. Russell is shown prophetically pledging to stop the LRA to the traumatized and crying young boy. The intimate portrayal of emotion in these scenes work to further incite an reactionary response from the viewer, towards the preordained conclusion suggested in the narrative – a mass mobilization of support for the US military in their efforts to stop Jacob's source of trauma. Bernays' would be beside himself.

KONY 2012 is produced like any other sleek marketing campaign – instead of stimulating elements of self-satisfaction like advertisers would do to promote a product, US military intervention is justified to end an atrocious humanitarian catastrophe. The film also plays on an underlying theme of the White Man's Burden, a notion that persons of European descent inherit a quality of guilt for their ancestors' inclination for slavery and colonialism, requiring an activist response to finally correct the situation by "*saving Africa*." During the Nigerian civil war in 1967, western media successfully used images of starving children for the first time to strengthen public support for military aid to the secessionist Republic of Biafra before rebel forces were defeated. This film attempts to purportedly "*change the conversation of our culture*," however it remains a highly sophisticated refurbishment of pro-military interventionist foreign policy propaganda, dependent on dangerous subliminal messaging.



Furthermore, the film was produced by an organization called Invisible Children, Inc.,

Invisible Children has partnered with two other organizations, Resolve and Digitaria, to create the LRA Crisis Tracker, a digital crisis-mapping platform that broadcasts attacks allegedly committed by the LRA. On its [list of corporate sponsors](#), Resolve lists [Human Rights Watch and the International Rescue Committee](#). [Digitaria's website boasts commercial clients such as](#) CBS, FOX, MTV, ESPN, Adidas, NFL, Qualcomm, NBC, National Geographic, Hasbro and Warner Brothers. While *KONY 2012* attempts to portray itself as an indigenous activist movement bent on bringing justice to African children, its parent organization is affiliated with the upper echelon of the US corporate media and [a network of foundation-funded pro-war civil society groups](#) with a long history of fomenting pro-US regime change under the banner of democratic institution building.

[According to Invisible Children's own LRA Crisis Tracker](#), not a single case of LRA activity has been reported in Uganda since 2006. The website records ninety eight deaths in the past year, with the vast majority taking place in the northeastern Bangadi region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a tri-border expanse sharing territory with the Central African republic and South Sudan. Since December 2009, the eastern Djemah region of CAR has seen occasional LRA activity; the western Tambura region of South Sudan has experienced even less. The LRA has been in operation for over two decades, and [presently remains at an extremely weakened state, with approximately 400 soldiers](#). Due to the extreme instability in northern DRC after decades of rebel insurgencies and Rwandan/Ugandan military incursions into the nation, it remains highly unlikely that cases of violence in the region can be sufficiently investigated before concluding LRA involvement.



The whereabouts of Joseph Kony are completely unknown; [he was last seen in crossing between Sudan and CAR in 2010, according to unverified reports](#). The US military currently has one hundred military officers training and overseeing the Ugandan military in anti-LRA operations. Due to the complete absence of LRA activity in Uganda, it becomes feasible that the US may be planning further operations in the resource rich DRC. [Over six million Congolese nationals have been killed in war since 1996](#), largely with US complicity. The regimes of Paul Kagame in Rwanda and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda have both received millions in military aid from the United States. Since the abhorrent failure of the 1993 US intervention in Somalia, the US has relied on the militaries of Rwanda, Uganda and Ethiopia to carry out US interests in proxy.

Paul Kagame of Rwanda has been given free reign by the US to conduct military operations inside DRC in the on-going ethnic conflict in that region following the 1994 Rwandan genocide. For Ugandan participation in the fight against Somalia's al Shabaab, [Museveni receives \\$45 million dollars in military aid](#). The US has contributed enormous sums to these nations and now is beginning to consolidate its presence in the region under Barack Obama and AFRICOM, the United States African Command. [The LRA has contributed to less than one hundred unverified deaths in the past twelve months](#). Considering that the United States completely ignored events in DRC and Rwanda that collectively resulted in nearly seven million deaths, their participation against the ailing Lord's Resistance Army is completely absurd by comparison.

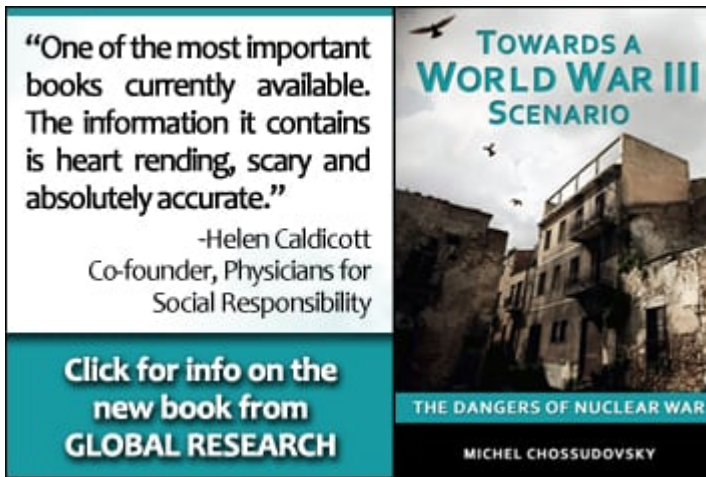
Through AFRICOM, the United States is seeking a foothold in the incredibly resource rich central African block in a further maneuver to aggregate regional hegemony over China. DRC is one of the world's largest regions without an effectively functioning government. It [contains vast deposits of diamonds, cobalt, copper, uranium, magnesium, and tin while producing over \\$1 billion in gold each year](#). It is entirely feasible that the US can considerably increase its presence in DRC under the pretext of capturing Joseph Kony. The US may further mobilize group forces, in addition to the use of predator drones and targeted missile strikes, inevitably killing civilians. In a press conference at the House Armed Services Committee on March 13, 2008, AFRICOM Commander, General William Ward stated that AFRICOM will further its regional presence by *"operating under the principle theatre-goal of combating terrorism"*.

During an AFRICOM Conference held at Fort McNair on February 18, 2008, Vice Admiral [Robert T. Moeller openly declared AFRICOM's guiding principle as protecting "the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market"](#), before citing China's increasing presence in the region as challenging to American interests. The crimes of the Lord's Resistance Army have been documented in the past and they are truly despicable actions. Presently, the operations of the LRA have nearly dissolved and their presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is difficult to verify. While the pro-war filmmakers behind *KONY 2012* naively call for the US military to assert its place in the conflict, an independent fact finding mission would be far more effective in assessing the seriousness of the LRA threat in the present day.



(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>)

Nile Bowie is an independent writer and photojournalist based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; he regularly contributes to [Land Destroyer Report](#) and [Global Research](#) Twitter: [@NileBowie](#)



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