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Leaders and Saviors: A *Hotel Rwanda* Critique

When does a man's decisions become imperative? How does a man step up in the darkest hour to become a leader and a savior? And, how does a man ascend to greatness?

These are the questions asked in *Hotel Rwanda*, a film based on a real events, released in 2004. *Hotel Rwanda* chronicles the struggle of Paul Rusesabagina and Colonel Oliver amidst the genocide in Rwanda. Paul's actions are based on his dedication to his family, the hotel he manages, and his loyalty to the refugees. Oliver's actions are driven by his moral obligation to protect the Rwandan people. Although both men come from completely different backgrounds and cultures, their actions throughout the film demonstrate their selflessness and refusal to give in to pressure.

Their conflict is during the Rwandan genocide. Over a three month period, nearly one million Rwandans were slaughtered. The two major groups in Rwanda were the Hutu and Tutsi. Both tribes lived together for many years. When Belgium and Germany had colonial power in Rwanda, they gave special privileges to the Tutsi tribe. This made the Hutus jealous and bitter. When the Hutu took power after the Europeans ceased their influence in Rwanda, the Hutu took revenge. The Hutu not only killed armed men, but killed women and children too. Mob behavior, compounded with a lack of foreign

intervention and hate provoking media, resulted in a massacre for the Tutsi community, as well as Rwanda itself.

During the film, Paul makes a fundamental change in both his persona and philosophy of life. Initially, Paul is sold on the idea of European sophistication. He believes that if he works hard and remains professional, he will be able to ascend the ranks of the hotel business. Paul holds strong to these beliefs at the initiation of the genocide. He puts all his energy in keeping his four star resort in operation. Even in the face of possible death, Paul retains his professional front, greeting refugees in a business suit, serving alcoholic beverages to the Hutu General Bizimungu, and even sending bills to refugees living in his resort.

The critical scene for Paul was when he and one of his employees went off to retrieve more supplies from the radical George Rutaganda. As well running a supply warehouse, Rutaganda was a leader of the Interahamwe, a militant group of Hutu, who killed many Tutsi. Their trip to the supplier went over well, until they reached their destination. Paul saw Tutsi women locked up in cages, beaten and raped. Paul's experience only gets worse when Rutaganda tells Paul the plans for the mass extermination of all the Tutsi. Paul does not believe what Rutaganda has to say, so he sends Paul back to the hotel on a "Clear road" (*Hotel Rwanda*). Paul soon enough discovers this road is covered in the corpses of Tutsi. Rutaganda clearly made his point.

This was Paul's breaking point. After seeing the road covered with his dead country men, Paul is unable to retain his veil of professionalism. Paul has a break down while getting dressed. Paul comes to the realization that when his life and the life of his family are on the line, professionalism does not hold its weight. Paul understands that

he would never be held to the same regard as a European in his position, thus changing his perspective for the rest of the film. After he understands this fact, he puts less emphasis on his position in the hotel, and places more attention on the lives of his family and the refugees that he is harboring.

Colonel Oliver's circumstances in Rwanda are complex at best. Being a Canadian colonel in the United Nations army has very strict limitations. His assignment is to keep the peace in Rwanda. His men all have weapons but are not allowed to use them, even when provoked.

After the Europeans leave the resort, Oliver makes the decision to stay and keep several of his men to act as a police force. Oliver knows his powers are limited and he does not have enough soldier support to hold back a full attack from the Interahamwe. Despite these facts, Oliver still makes effort to save the refugees.

Oliver is driven by a moral obligation to the people he is sent to protect. His essential decision: should he disobey orders and possibly stand trial in an international court, or obey the orders and deal with his conscience. In *Hotel Rwanda* Oliver disobeys his orders, and saves a thousand refugees.

Three times in the film, the hotel is raided by the Interahamwe extremists. Three times, Paul is able to use his skills of persuasion along with good luck, to save his people. Three times Oliver is able to fight his instinct to follow orders to save the people he is to protect. Their split-second decisions and leadership is what made Paul and Oliver saviors to the thousand Tutsi and moderate Hutu who took shelter in his hotel.

When do a man's decisions become imperative? Those decisions become imperative when he takes responsibility for the lives of others. Several times, Paul could

have took his family and left, but instead stood by the refugees. How does a man in the darkest hour to become a leader and savior? How does a man ascend to greatness? Paul did not want to become a leader or ascend to greatness, but the situation required it of him. Oliver knew that his position would not allow him fit the needs of the genocide, so he broke those barriers to become a savior. Both men rose to the occasion.

Works Cited

Hotel Rwanda. Dir. Terry George. Perf. Don Keadle, Sophie Okonedo, Joaquin Pheonix. MGM. 2004. Film