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Review: New documentary about U.N. only tears down

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NCR Today

"U.N. Me," a film by Ami Horowitz and Matthew Groff, opens this weekend in limited release -- and thank God for that. The film documents many of the gross and more recent failings of the United Nations, but it felt like an assault by an affluent bully (Horowitz) trying to channel Michael Moore. The difference between the two is Horowitz only knows how to criticize, judge and tear down, but offers nothing in terms of understanding or solutions. At least Moore offers some hope.

These sins of the U.N. are known, as are critiques of the ineffectiveness of the U.N. Seeing them all lined up has the power to confirm the anger and frustration of Americans and people in the West. This seems to me to be the purpose of the film.

Nothing positive is said about the U.N.

The Catholic church, through the Permanent Observer from the Holy See, makes known its interest in and support of the work of the U.N. Three popes -- Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI -- have visited U.N. headquarters in New York and addressed the assembly, a way to speak to the governments of the entire world.

It seems to me that the U.N. is important to the church because the U.N. is the only worldwide organization of nations that we have. The website of the Holy See's mission to the United Nations states, "In its activities at the United Nations, the Holy See Mission works to advance freedom of religion and respect for the sanctity of all human life -- from conception to natural death -- and thus all aspects of authentic human development including, for example, marriage and family, the primary role of parents, adequate employment, solidarity with the poor and suffering, ending violence against women and children, poverty eradication, food, basic healthcare and education."

The U.N. is the best hope we have to live in peace, to employ negotiation over war to resolve problems. If it is not good enough, then member nations need to regroup. The U.N.'s website has a page designated to reform that begins with "strengthening accountability."

The film divides the world players into "them" and "us." It seems to want everyone to live according to our U.S./Western standard, and since they are not bright enough and don't have our culture, values or understanding of economics to turn into us, well, what are we to do? Get frustrated! (The film does not say to shut down the U.N., but this is the only reasonable conclusion based on what the film establishes.)

The U.N. can only do what it has powers to do. Yes, the head of the Egyptian U.N. decided not to return to New York and went on a parade to gather laurels rather than attend to the Rwanda tragedy. Remember, President Bill Clinton didn't even know where Rwanda was, and Madeleine Albright in her new book, *Prague Winter*, admits this was a tragic failure on the part of the United States and other nations.

Obviously, the filmmakers did not see 2010's "The Whistleblower" (based on true events recounted in a book of the same title). The company DynCorp that hired the woman who became a whistleblower, Kathryn Bolkovac, is a U.S. corporation, a private military contractor, used by the U.N. The firm did, as the film recounts, hire people from U.N. member countries with no background checks, and most of the bad guys that engaged in the sex trade in post-war Bosnia were from the United States

"U.N. Me" does not hold up for me, and makes no attempt to be objective. Anyone can tear down, but it takes people who are authentically human and who appreciate the gift of community to offer solutions.

If we dismantle the U.N., what then? How many wars will we have to endure, how many deaths, so that a country can be top dog? The filmmakers do not offer an answer.

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First-time filmmaker Horowitz was an investment banker for 12 years before turning to filmmaking in 2006. "U.N. Me" made a limited film festival circuit in 2009 and picked up an award. It's interesting that it has taken another three years to make it to some theaters.

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