**[So Crazy It Just Might Work](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/28/so_crazy_it_just_might_work_robert_young_pelton_hunt_for_joseph_kony" \o "So Crazy It Just Might Work)**

**Swashbuckling journalist Robert Young Pelton is crowdfunding a mission to hunt down Joseph Kony. Is it genius or folly?**

**BY ELIAS GROLL |**

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***Robert Young Pelton thinks he can do what no one else has done: find the fugitive warlord Joseph Kony. And he wants your help in doing it.***

Pelton, a journalist-cum-adventurer, has traveled the world tracking down and interviewing the world's most dangerous men. He was in Grozny hanging out with Chechen rebels while the city was getting pounded by Russian forces. He linked up with Liberian rebels during their assault on Monrovia. And he tracked down and interviewed Francis Ona, the leader of a separatist movement on the island of Bougainville in the South Pacific.

Now he's turning his attention to the most wanted man in Africa. Together with two filmmakers, Pelton is planning an expedition to central Africa, where he will attempt to track down Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), in the jungle wilderness. Where activists and African troops -- aided by U.S. Special Forces -- have failed, Pelton believes he can succeed and find the man responsible for the kidnapping as many as [66,000 children](http://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/some-66000-children-abducted-ugandas-lra-rebels-report) and pressing them into service in his rag-tag army or as sex-slaves.

So is Pelton completely crazy? Or is he, maybe, just crazy enough to pull it off?

Joseph Kony isn't just any African warlord. His brutal insurgency in central Africa and a nasty habit of kidnapping children and forcing them into service in his guerilla force have made him an international pariah. And that, in turn, has made him a celebrity of sorts. The destruction he has left in his wake and the deeply emotional pull of the damage he has inflicted on children and their families have spawned an energetic relief effort and a campaign to capture a man that many view as the head of a personality cult. Last year's viral video campaign, [Kony 2012](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&ved=0CDsQtwIwAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DY4MnpzG5Sqc&ei=BOxqUsnzC4eOkAeXiYGwAw&usg=AFQjCNHyYNt07Pq1SK1afq8_4ClqcjTLRw&sig2=nNNUz8jY8_BuC1DsfQcTTA&bvm=bv.55123115,d.eW0), aimed at raising awareness about the warlord and advocating for his capture only raised that sentiment to a fever pitch.

But a viral Internet campaign has done little to bring authorities closer to apprehending Kony, who is wanted on war crimes charges by the International Criminal Court. It is Pelton's intention to show the legions of do-gooders who have flocked to the cause how it should have been done from the start. "What I'm hoping to be is the lightning rod, in other words the guy that points out that it's actually quite easy to get these people if you don't draw lines around how far you can travel or where you can go," Pelton told Foreign Policy.

As Pelton sees it, previous efforts to find and capture Kony have been hopelessly limited and crippled by the intentions of the groups involved. "All these actors have an agenda and they have limitations to what they are prepared to do, and they after a while start to benefit from the existence of Kony," Pelton says. "It becomes a self-licking lollipop."

The United States has deployed Special Forces troops to the region with the ostensible purpose of helping to capture Kony, and while those troops have in recent weeks [intensified their effort to find the warlord](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kony-2013-us-quietly-intensifies-effort-to-help-african-troops-capture-infamous-warlord/2013/10/28/74db9720-3cb3-11e3-b6a9-da62c264f40e_print.html), he remains conspicuously at large. But their failure, Pelton says, should come as no surprise. The real reason for the presence of U.S. troops, he says, has as much to do with the rise of Islamic extremism in the region as it does Kony. Deploying Special Forces to capture Kony is merely an effective cover story. As for Invisible Children, the group behind Kony 2012, it remains based in Uganda, a country [Kony has long left behind](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/guest_post_joseph_kony_is_not_in_uganda_and_other_complicated_things). Hopelessly limited by geographic boundaries, the group has become limited by its own infrastructure and its simplistic argument that Kony's capture will suddenly solve all Uganda's serious problems, critics say. (Nevermind the fact that the group [has raised millions of dollars](http://www.thenonprofittimes.com/news-articles/results-werent-invisible/) off Kony's back for an [organization with deep ties](http://jezebel.com/5892566/kony-2012-and-invisible-children-are-funded-by-antigay-creationist-groups) to anti-gay, creationist groups and was co-founded by a man whose celebrity took on a life of its own after [he suffered a breakdown](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/kony-2012-filmmaker-naked-meltdown-wasn-article-1.1177514) and paraded naked through the streets of San Diego.)

Pelton's message to these groups is that it's time to put up or shut up -- and by finding Kony he's aiming to point out the essential phoniness of those who have so far failed to locate him. For a similar reason, Pelton is crowdfunding the trip. (You can find his [IndieGogo page here](http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/expedition-kony).) "The reason I'm using crowdfunding is to see whether the world gives a shit. Do you really want to get rid of Kony? Give me five bucks," Pelton says. "So it's almost like a very Shakespearean play, you know. We are going to see who's more evil -- the people who want to get rid of Kony and do nothing about it or Kony himself."

If Pelton sounds deeply cynical, it's because he is. After fleeing a mind-numbing marketing career for the thrills of war reporting, Pelton has been to just about every hot spot imaginable. And his encounters with rebels and terrorist leaders -- the full list of which reads like a virtual who's who of revolutionary fronts, armies, guerillas, and movements of one radical flavor or another -- has taught him that the popular images of these men are usually off the mark and lack nuance. "You think of them as icons of evil and then when you dig into their story there's a very different story behind them," Pelton says. In the case of Kony, he says, while the LRA has committed horrific crimes, it was founded on a set of political grievances that rarely receive any attention.

That instinct -- to go and talk to rebel leaders and terrorists where they live and fight -- has also put Pelton in a strange nexus of careers: both a journalist and an alleged intelligence contractor. In 2008, Pelton teamed up with Eason Jordan, a former CNN executive, [to create](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/03/robert-young-pelton-eason-jordan-isn-praedict) a site called [AfPax Insider](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/03/robert-young-pelton-eason-jordan-isn-praedict), a journalistic entity that sought to help U.S. officials better understand the region. But that outfit became caught up in an off-the-books intelligence operation run by a rogue Pentagon official. "We were providing information so they could better understand the situation in Afghanistan, and it was being used to kill people," Pelton [told](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/15/world/asia/15contractors.html?pagewanted=all) the *New York Times,* which exposed the official, Michael Furlong. Another Pelton initiative, International Safety Networks (ISN), [pitched](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/03/robert-young-pelton-eason-jordan-isn-praedict) potential clients on its ability to "create sustainable solutions for clients who operate in high risk areas." Pelton [told](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/03/robert-young-pelton-eason-jordan-isn-praedict) *Mother Jones* that ISN was an effort to capitalize on his work in war zones, and with "successful programs" in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Colombia, Myanmar, Liberia, and Yemen the outfit carried an unmistakable whiff of a private intelligence agency. "I have a history of being in multiple war zones doing multiple things," he [told](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/03/robert-young-pelton-eason-jordan-isn-praedict) the magazine. "What commercial value is there in that?" To complete his tumultuous relationship with the world of military contracting, Pelton [is currently embroiled](http://www.law360.com/articles/458140/blackwater-founder-claims-extortion-blocking-2m-book-deal) in a legal battle with Erik Prince, the founder of the infamous contractor Blackwater, over the rights to Prince's memoir, which Pelton says he ghostwrote.

The Kony project, then, is something of a return to his roots for Pelton. "If you watch the movie *Apocalypse Now*, what I'm doing is I'm getting on the boat, and the journey is going to be a lot more fascinating than when I meet Mr. Kurtz at the end," says Pelton, who, with his prominent moustache, looks like a man sent by central casting to play an extra on a Francis Ford Coppola riverboat heading upriver. "By the time we meet up with Kony you understand exactly why we found Kony and why for 20 years we couldn't find bin Laden and all these international fugitives." In comparing Kony to bin Laden, Pelton isn't so much comparing the scope of their crimes but the ways in which they evaded capture. Popular imagination -- and the consensus opinion of American intelligence agencies -- held that bin Laden was in all likelihood sequestered somewhere in a cave along the AfPak border, a primitive hiding place that lined up with views of bin Laden himself as a primitive, retrograde man. A similar line of thinking applies to Kony, who, for example, was [described by the *Washington Post*](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-04-29/world/35453646_1_central-african-republic-south-sudan-and-congo-joseph-kony) as using "Stone Age" tactics to evade his pursuers in the jungle. Those pursuers, Pelton thinks, probably wouldn't be surprised to find him swinging from tree to tree in the jungle while subsisting on bananas.

By documenting his journey, Pelton plans to trace the tribal and ethnic politics that Kony has used to evade capture. Like bin Laden, Kony has received shelter from states in the region, a fact that Pelton believes can illuminate the ways that tribal politics could be the key to the warlord's continued survival. "It's not so much just an exercise to find somebody as a publicity stunt or an exercise in what badass bounty hunters we are," Rob Swain, a filmmaker and aid worker who will be one of Pelton's companions on the trip, told Foreign Policy. "It's about what got us here. How come he's still free?"

But the question still remains, how will Pelton and his team actually find the man?

In theory, Kony could be anywhere in an area approximately the size of California. "The first thing you do is you announce to the world that you're looking for Joseph Kony, and that your mandate is zero. I have no law enforcement mandate, I have no military mandate, I only have a moral mandate to find out why people can't find him and where he is," Pelton says. "I can't arrest him; I can't shoot him." Already, the tips have started to pour in, and Pelton says he has a decent idea where Kony is hiding -- and the U.S. Special Forces, by the way, are looking in all the wrong places. As Pelton sees it, finding men like Kony is actually a lot easier than you might think. "The logic that goes into their hiding is usually formed at the local level, meaning that the local smugglers, the local militias know exactly where the planes are flying, where the army is searching," Pelton says. The key is getting inside that circle, and once that happens, the questions start answering themselves. It's almost enough to make you feel sorry for the U.S. Special Forces hunting Kony. They just can't go where Pelton does; if they did, they'd get killed in a heartbeat.

For Pelton, the Kony case reminds him of the time he tracked down Francis Ona, the leader of the Bougainville separatist movement. In his book, [*The Hunter, the Hammer, and Heaven*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1585744166/ossnet-20), Pelton tells the story of when he went to find Ona on the island of Bougainville. During his first attempt, he was rebuffed after locals became convinced that he was in fact a mercenary out to kill Ona. Not eager to wander into the camp of a rebel leader who believed he had orders to kill him, Pelton retreated. But after several years of stalemate, Ona got around to reading the faxes that Pelton had sent him and changed his mind about the journalist. Pelton returned to the island and travelled to Ona's mountain refuge -- the place the word "Heaven" refers to in the title. There he told him of his struggle to achieve independence. Persistence, a healthy dose of empathy, and a bizarrely successful track record of interviewing the world's villains all added up to success for Pelton.

For $450,000, Pelton thinks he can do the same thing with Kony. Do you believe him? [Then give the man some money.](http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/expedition-kony)