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A show of competence and determination inspires the world.

By PEGGY NOONAN

Chile! Viva Chile! If I had your flag, I would wave it today from the roof of my building, and watch my New York neighbors smile, nod and wave as they walked by. What a thing Chile has done. They say on TV, "Chile needed this." But the world needed it. And the world knew it: That's why they watched, a billion of them, as the men came out of the mine.

Why did the world need it? Because the saving of those men gave us something we don't see enough, a brilliant example of human excellence—of cohesion, of united and committed action, of planning and execution, of caring. They used the human brain and spirit to save life. All we get all day every day is scandal. But this inspired.

Viva Chile. They left no man behind. That is what our U.S. Army Rangers say, and our Marines: We leave no man behind. It has a meaning, this military motto, this way of operating. It means you are not alone, you are part of something. Your brothers are with you, here they come. Chile, in leaving no man behind, in insisting that the San José mine was a disaster area but not a tomb, showed itself to be a huge example of that little thing that is at the core of every society: a fully functioning family. A cohering unit that can make its way through the world.

"Viva Chile." That is what they all said, one way or another, as they came out of the capsule, which was nicknamed the Phoenix. They could have nicknamed it the Lazarus, for those risen from the dead. Each one of the miners, in the 10 weeks they spent a half-mile deep in the Atacama Desert, would have known the odds. For two weeks, nobody even knew they were alive.

Then this week there they were, one by one, returning to the surface. They must have thought, "Chile, you did not forget us. Chile, you could have said 'An accident, a tragedy, the men are dead, let the men die.'

But you did not let the men die." What a thing to know about your country.

Viva Chile. So many speak faith but those miners, they had faith. A miner's relative, as the men began to come up: "It is a miracle from God." A miner got out of the capsule and got on his knees in front of the nation, saying prayers you know he promised, at the bottom of the mine, he would say, crossing himself twice, and holding up his arms in gratitude, surrender and awe. A miner, after he walked out of the capsule, described his personal experience: "I met God. I met the devil. >> God won."

So many nations and leaders have grown gifted at talk. Or at least they talk a lot. News talk, politics talk, spin talk, selling talk: There are nations, and we at our worst are sometimes among them, whose biggest export seems to be chatter. But Chile this week moved the world not by talking but by doing, not by mouthing sympathy for the miners, but by saving them. The whole country—the engineers and technicians, the president, the government, the rescue workers, other miners, medics—set itself to doing something hard, specific, physical, demanding of commitment, precision and expertise.

And they did it. Homer Hickman, the coal miner's son turned astronaut who was the subject of the 1999 film "October Sky," said Wednesday on MSNBC that it was "like a NASA mission."

Organized, thought through, "staying on the time line, sequential thinking." "This is pretty marvelous," he said.

"This is Chile's moon landing," said an NBC News reporter.

Technology was used capably, creatively, and as a force for good. It has not everywhere been used so successfully in the recent past, another reason the world needed to see this. Last summer Americans watched professionals and the government seem helpless to stop the Gulf oil spill, a disaster every bit as predictable as a mine cave-in. For months we watched on TV the spewing of the oil into the sea. In Chile, the opposite. They showed live video of the rescue workers down in the shaft, getting the miners into the Phoenix. Our video said: Something is wrong here. Theirs said: Something is working here.

A government of a mature and complex democracy proved itself capable and competent. This was heartening and surprising. Governments are charged with doing certain vital and necessary things, but they are overburdened, distracted, so we no longer expect them to do them well. President Sebastián Piñera, in office five months when the mine caved in, saw the situation for what it was. Thirty three men in a hole in the ground, in a mine that probably shouldn't have been open. A disaster, a nation riveted.

What do you do? You throw yourself at the problem. You direct your government: This is the thing we do now. You say, "We will get the men."

You put your entire persona behind it, you put it all on the line, you gamble that your nation can do it. You trust your nation to do it. You do whatever possible to see your nation does it. And the day the rescues are to begin, you don't show up and wring your hands so people can say "Ah, he knew it might not work, he was not unrealistic, he was telling us not to get our hopes up." No, you stand there smiling with joy because you know it will work, you know your people will come through, you have utmost confidence. And so you go and radiate your joy from the first moment the rescue began and the first man came out straight through to the last man coming out. You stand. You stay.

It was the opposite of the governor of Louisiana during Katrina, projecting helplessness and loserdom, or the president flying over the storm, or the mayor holing up in a motel deciding this might be a good time for a breakdown. This was someone taking responsibility.

The event transcended class differences, social barriers, regional divides.

The entire nation-rich, poor, all colors and ages-was united. Scientists and engineers gave everything to save men who'd lived rough, working-class lives. "Every one of them who came up was treated like the first one," said a reporter on MSNBC.

What does it do to the children of a nation to see that? Everyone from Chile will be proud as they go through the world. "You saved the miners." Chilean children will know, "We are the kind of people who get them out alive. We made up our mind to do it and we did." What a transformative event this is going to be for that nation.

A closing note, another contrast. President Obama this week told the New York Times, speaking of his first two years, that he realized too late "there's no such thing as shovel-ready projects." He's helpless in the face of environmental impact statement law. But every law, even those, can be changed if you have the vision, will, instinct and guts to do it, if you start early, if you're not distracted by other pursuits.

"Shovel ready." Chile just proved, in the profoundest sense, it is exactly that. And in doing so, moved the rough heart of the world.

Viva Chile.