

PURSUING THE
GLOBAL
COMMON GOOD

Principle and Practice in U.S. Foreign Policy

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THE ESSENTIAL HUMANITY OF FOREIGN AID

A Pragmatic Case for the Global Common Good

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Justifications for foreign aid and international development programs in the United States are often wrapped in the realist language of national interest—defined as encompassing political, military, and economic advantages for the United States. Former President Reagan once wrote that “U.S. foreign assistance, including a balanced mix of military and economic assistance, promotes important national interests and helps communicate our values and principles throughout the world.”¹ Echoing this sentiment, former Secretary of State Colin Powell claimed that “a well-administered Agency for International Development is an indispensable tool for advancing America’s interests and values in this world, an indispensable tool for furthering our country’s foreign policy objectives.”² Although both President Reagan and Secretary Powell say that U.S. foreign assistance programs demonstrate our values,³ that argument is clearly secondary (in their speeches and in the programs they both oversaw) to the utility of foreign assistance to our national security.

It is undeniably true that investing in the well-being of people abroad protects our security at home. And since 9/11, we are increasingly aware that weak and failing states unable to provide for the most basic needs of their population can become breeding grounds for extremism and recruiting grounds for terrorist organizations.⁴ Unfortunately, it is a widely held conviction that appealing to this argument is the only way to get Congress to increase the percentage of our nation’s gross national product dedicated to foreign assistance and that appealing to our nation’s enlightened, altruistic interest in helping the world’s poor would be politically futile.⁵

The national self-interest argument appeals to members of Congress who have been deeply skeptical about the value of sending U.S. taxpayer dollars overseas, which helps explain these appeals. Yet the realist school of thought underestimates the central role that generosity and virtue have played in the creation and construction of U.S. foreign assistance. It also underestimates the degree to which increased foreign assistance resonates with American religious and ethical beliefs that we are united as human, and, as such, are obliged to provide for those in need not only in our communities but around the world.

When we invest our treasure to combat human suffering for the simple reason that we believe in the dignity of individuals, regardless of their location or impact on our own standing, we reap a commensurate benefit that includes increased security. Rather than making our nation’s values a secondary argument in support of foreign assistance, we should give moral obligations greater weight. Such a balance is essential to the long-term success of foreign assistance programs. Only by embracing our traditional beliefs in helping others—exemplified most recently by our country’s assistance to Indonesia after its devastating earthquake and tsunami—

will policymakers be able to deploy foreign assistance programs that live up to America's moral responsibilities to combat poverty, fight injustice, and alleviate global suffering, and fulfil America's domestic responsibility to increase U.S. security.

What's more, foreign assistance programs predicated on the global common good will reestablish our nation's lost global moral authority—an objective that is clearly in the common interest of humanity.

The State of the Global Common Good and International Development

Our planet knows unparalleled wealth—and unbelievable suffering. Nearly half the world's population—close to 2.8 billion people—live on less than \$2 a day; 854 million are undernourished; nearly 40 million live with AIDS; and 3.5 billion (54 percent of the world's population) live in countries that are not free or only partly free.⁶

Income inequality is also increasing at an alarming rate. And newer challenges such as global warming will harm the poorest first, even though they are not primarily responsible for causing the pollution that contributes to climate change. Despite international initiatives to confront poverty—including the United Nations' quest to cut global poverty in half and increase economic prosperity, improve education and gender equality, and provide accessible health care for all by 2015—action by the international community has been slow.

In fact, *The Economist* recently concluded that “the U.N.'s drive against poverty remains half crusade and half charade.”⁷ To date, the nominal decline in global poverty is mostly due to rapid economic growth in East and Southeast Asia, India, and Eastern Europe. In West Asia, however, poverty rates more than doubled between 1990 and 2005, while among the nations that once constituted the former Soviet Union (the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States)⁸ and Southeastern Europe,⁹ poverty has not appreciably changed.

Similarly, gender inequality remains staggering. Women do a disproportionate amount of the work worldwide, but are paid far less. And perhaps most disturbingly, most of the half-million women who died during pregnancy or childbirth in 2005 could have been saved with proper care and medicine—as could more than 10 million children who died before age five.¹⁰

In the face of such disheartening statistics, the governments of the developed world—led by the United States—should be providing more generous foreign assistance. However, foreign assistance is decreasing after accounting for inflation. Official aid in real terms dropped by 5.1 percent in 2006 and is expected to drop slightly more in 2007. Furthermore, few countries (with the exception of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) give the 0.7 percent of GNP to foreign aid that the United Nations has been calling for since 1970.¹¹

The United States gave only 0.17 percent of GNP to foreign assistance in 2005, which places us near the bottom among industrialized countries. It is true that in gross terms such a sum places the United States as the highest giver, but think of what could be achieved if the most affluent nation in the world matched other countries in its share of foreign aid.¹²

A History of Values and Foreign Assistance

In the past, the United States has been more generous in its giving, and to great effect. Indeed, the most successful foreign assistance initiatives in our history have been motivated not just by national interest but also by a dedication to the global common good. By contrast, when U.S. foreign policymakers neglected moral considerations by funding undemocratic governments or tolerating corruption because they seemed in our security interests, our long-term national interests have been damaged.

The most successful foreign assistance plan in our country's history is arguably the reconstruction plan developed by President Harry Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall after the devastation and destruction of World War II. Known as the Marshall Plan, it is an exceptional example of how national interest combined with values can advance the global common good.

Between 1948 and 1952, the Marshall Plan provided Europeans with \$13 billion in aid—about \$85 billion in today's dollars. A central rationale for this assistance was grounded in the national interest. Business leaders and state officials (including then-state department official Paul Nitze) worried that the United States could face a serious depression if the virtually bankrupt Europeans did not receive substantial loans to buy American exports.¹³ U.S. officials also wanted the Marshall Plan to strengthen European alliances and contain Soviet communism.

But altruism was also a crucial motivation for the plan. Marshall explained:

Europe's requirements for the next three or four years of foreign food and other essential products—principally from America—are so much greater than her present ability to pay that she must have substantial additional help, or face economic, social, and political deterioration of a very grave character.¹⁴

Despite grave concerns about communism infiltrating Europe, the United States directed its aid toward key industrial countries that could spark Europe's recovery, rather than to those nations with the largest communist parties.¹⁵ This sense of obligation complemented considerations of national interest and formulated a plan that helped Western Europe rebuild and thrive.

Twenty years later, President John F. Kennedy sought to copy Truman's success with his foreign assistance projects, but had mixed results. Building upon the Marshall Plan, he institutionalized U.S. foreign aid with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the establishment of the United States Agency for International Development. In addition, his administration created the Peace Corps, which was Kennedy's most enduring achievement in foreign assistance and a hugely successful program that continues today.

The young president's intention to reorganize and strengthen foreign assistance was clearly a mix of moral obligation and national interest. Regarding moral obligation, Kennedy told Congress in 1961:

There is no escaping our obligations: our moral obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent community of free nations—our economic obligations as the wealthiest people in a world of largely poor people, as a nation no longer dependent upon the loans from abroad that once helped us develop our own economy—and our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom.¹⁶

Later in the speech, Kennedy spoke of the national interest:

To fail to meet those obligations now would be disastrous; and, in the long run, more expensive. Widespread poverty and chaos would lead to a collapse of existing political and social structures which would inevitably invite the advance of totalitarianism into every weak and unstable area. Thus our own security would be endangered and our prosperity imperiled. A program of assistance to the underdeveloped nations must continue because the nation's interest and the cause of political freedom require it.¹⁷

While there is no reason to doubt Kennedy's sincerity, in practice his foreign assistance programs did not always maintain their moral vision, particularly when bolstering friendly governments (regardless of their governance practices) to check Soviet expansionism. Case in point: Kennedy's 1961 Alliance for Progress was on the surface designed to encourage economic development, social justice, and political democracy, but was in practice motivated by U.S. geopolitical concerns that stemmed from the Cuban Revolution of 1959.¹⁸

Furthermore, Kennedy's economic assistance programs did not discriminate between authoritarian and democratic regimes. Propping up anti-communist military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s outweighed moral obligations and support for political democracy—a legacy that still haunts us throughout the region. Even though most Latin American countries are democracies today, anti-Americanism still runs strong due to the foreign aid programs that favored dictatorships over human development.

During the presidency of Jimmy Carter, foreign assistance motivated by national interest considerations and human rights concerns did lead to a great success. Under the Camp David Accords of 1979, an agreement resulted in Egypt recognizing Israel and Israel returning the Sinai Desert to Egypt. U.S. foreign assistance—\$3 billion annually to Israel and \$1.3 billion annually to Egypt—was the glue that made that geo-political deal stick. Such aid packages, when balanced with military and non-military assistance, can play a crucial role in securing agreements like those reached at Camp David.

George W. Bush, perhaps more so than any other president in the modern era, has stressed America's moral obligation to reduce suffering throughout the world. At the Inter-American Development Bank in 2002, the president announced his "New Compact for Development," a plan to increase core development assistance by 50 percent over the next three years. When unveiling his new plan, he said:

The advance of development is a central commitment of American foreign policy. As a nation founded on the dignity and value of every life, America's heart breaks because of the suffering and senseless death we see in our world. We work for prosperity and opportunity because they're right. It's the right thing to do.¹⁹

Throughout his presidency, Bush has continued to prioritize these American values as the basis of U.S. foreign assistance, recognizing the contribution that smart foreign assistance programs make to our security and national interest. As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Steven Radelet argues, the Bush administration's posture on foreign assistance reflects an "acceptance of the fact that poverty and inequality around the world generate hostility and resentment toward the United States and thereby weaken national security."²⁰

This embrace of values in support of foreign assistance reflects the president's open religious beliefs, but also a recognition that evangelical Christians, who are an important part of the president's political base,²¹ strongly support increased foreign assistance because they believe that "to whom much is given, much is required."²²

In fact, the influence of this one constituency on U.S. foreign policy generally and foreign assistance in particular has been a substantial, and perhaps decisive, feature driving increased investments in foreign assistance during the mid 1990s. One of the most dramatic examples of this influence is President Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR, which aims to combat global HIV/AIDS by providing life-saving antiretroviral drugs and care to patients as well as preventing new infections.

The influential constituency of evangelical Christians who believe that morally based foreign assistance is just as important, or perhaps more important, than assistance based only on national interests demonstrates the administration's success in accentuating such values. Yet PEPFAR may also be an example of why foreign aid programs that appeal to particular partisan groups can backfire—at home and abroad.

Common Good Must Be Common

The story of values-based provisions in PEPFAR underscores a cautionary note about the global common good—that the values promoted must indeed be common, or shared. The legislation authorizing PEPFAR contains two controversial provisions that fail to meet this test.

One provision requires that one-third of all money spent on preventing the transmission of HIV be spent on programs that promote only abstinence, which development and health experts consider an ineffective strategy. Another prohibits prevention money from being spent on programs involving sex workers unless funding recipients sign a pledge not to promote the legalization or practice of prostitution. Development and health experts also consider this prohibition counterproductive because it creates a barrier to providing services to sex workers, who are already at a disproportionately high risk of contracting or transmitting HIV in many countries with high rates of HIV infection.

These two provisions may reflect the particular concerns of certain narrow segments of the American Christian community, but they do not reflect more broad-based concerns about addressing the disease and its suffering that prompt the need for assistance in the first place. Such narrow concerns contrast with programs such as the Peace Corps, which are based on a widespread belief in our common humanity, along with appeals to our national self-interest. Programs like the Peace Corps are more durable than PEPFAR and have broader appeal. By calling on the values that unite Americans, such programs embrace our nation's diversity and demonstrate that we value the global community.

There is another sense in which the common good must remain common: Policy makers must design assistance programs to meet shared responsibilities, not enrich a few particular interests. While the Bush administration has ensured dramatic increases in funding for the fight against HIV, it has also overseen the unsupervised, haphazard, and sometimes corrupt expenditure of billions of dollars in foreign assistance through no-bid contracts in Iraq. No-bid contracts were awarded in part because of a perceived need to move quickly to stabilize the immediate situation in Iraq—and in part to reward political allies at home. But focusing on such short-term benefits instead of broader, more long-term goals ends up being neither strategically smart nor ethically right.

Besides the billions of dollars wasted in failed development projects, such projects lead to the perception at home and abroad that taxpayer dollars have been funneled to dubious foreign aid programs. Foreign assistance programs in Iraq undoubtedly would have had a more beneficial influence on the image of our country abroad if not for charges of corruption, cronyism, and calculated short-term political considerations.

Foreign assistance programs that stress shared values allow policymakers to muster the political will necessary for long-term success. Any U.S. foreign assistance program designed to counter perceived threats abroad or appease one particular interest group at home has insufficient staying power. Threats are so dynamic and political calculations so short-lived that it is extremely difficult to sustain public support over the course of many decades—the kind of sustained time horizon that is necessary to see enduring effects from foreign assistance programs—without having to compete with new threats.

Balancing National Interest with the Common Good

Of course, balancing considerations of national interest equally with promotion of the global common good is easier said than done. It would be difficult for any American administration to cut off relations with a regime that provides valuable counterterrorism intelligence, even if it is a despicable and undemocratic regime. Two recent case studies—one negative and one positive—underscore this point.

U.S. foreign assistance to Colombia clearly demonstrates the negative consequences of not balancing the national interest with the values of the global common good. In 1998, former Colombian president Andres Pastrana worked with the Clinton administration to develop Plan Colombia, a foreign assistance program designed to combat drug production and trafficking and promote economic and social development, while simultaneously increasing the Colombian government's control of parts of the country that had been ignored for decades.

Support for the plan continued through the Bush administration. As Roger F. Noriega, former assistant secretary for western hemisphere affairs, explained to the House International Relations Committee, “U.S. policy toward Colombia supports the Colombian government’s efforts to defend and strengthen its democratic institutions, promote respect for human rights and the rule of law, intensify counter-narcotics efforts, foster socio-economic development, and address immediate humanitarian needs.”²³

In reality, however, our focus in Colombia has been much narrower. The majority of American foreign assistance is funneled directly into counter-narcotics programs. As of September 2006, 75 to 80 percent of U.S. aid has gone to the Colombian security forces.²⁴ This assistance has produced limited positive results, such as some abatement of armed conflict, the enhancement of nationwide security, and the capture of more drug shipments and traffickers.

Nevertheless, many experts have also concluded that focusing our investments on military institutions alone—as has been the case through the past two administrations—has been insufficient to lessen Colombia’s socioeconomic and political problems.²⁵ Colombia’s ambassador to the United States, Carolina Barco, has been lobbying Washington on exactly this point. She has said that “not only military action but also social and economic investment” are needed to ensure security gains.²⁶ “Rebuilding Colombia’s economy goes hand-in-hand with providing security. Guerrilla organizations and drug traffickers have flourished in those very regions of the country where poverty and underdevelopment exist,” she explains. “To successfully defeat drugs, we must address poverty.”²⁷

This message corresponds with Bush’s rhetoric on the connection between poverty and security. But the administration’s emphasis on drug eradication and interdiction, as well as the training of Colombian military forces to combat drugs and terrorism, has negated the connection in Colombia. As a result, our aid program (along with others based primarily on security considerations) seems misplaced and limited to the people who are supposed to benefit from it. Meanwhile, the relative failure of the United States to stem the illegal import of illicit drugs from Colombia only increases domestic skepticism about U.S. foreign assistance.

In contrast, the U.S. humanitarian relief provided to countries struck by the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami highlights the positive effects of foreign and humanitarian assistance when they are guided by principles of the global common good. Although the Bush administration was inexplicably silent in the first days after the tsunami struck, shortly thereafter the president made it clear that our nation’s desire to help the victims stemmed from an understanding of their suffering and an American tradition of philanthropy:

From our own experiences, we know that nothing can take away the grief of those affected by tragedy. We also know that Americans have a history of rising to meet great humanitarian challenges and of providing hope to suffering peoples. As men and women across the devastated region begin to rebuild, we offer our sustained compassion and our generosity, and our assurance that America will be there to help.²⁸

Former President Clinton, who along with former President Bush helped raise private funds for tsunami relief, also championed “the idea that we have a moral obligation to build these areas back better than they were before the crisis began.”²⁹

Indeed, the United States was the first to arrive on the scene and led the humanitarian effort in South and Southeast Asia. Just days after the tsunami, aircraft and ships from the Defense Department were transporting wounded victims and providing supplies, food, and fresh water.³⁰ USAID quickly helped fund cleanup and reconstruction projects and provided food and water. Working with a \$656 million tsunami recovery and reconstruction fund, USAID remains in the region today and continues to help rebuild schools and hospitals and hold workshops and drills on disaster preparedness.³¹

“The United States contributes to the global common good when helping others, and our nation’s image abroad is enhanced in the process. By building foreign assistance programs that stress shared values, policymakers can muster the political will necessary for long-term success.”

These efforts led not only to more rapid recovery in the region, but also to an improved image of America abroad. Indonesians were especially grateful, according to a Pew Global Attitudes Project poll. In fact, 79 percent of Indonesians had a more favorable opinion of America because of its relief efforts after the tsunami. The overall percentage of Indonesians with a favorable opinion of the United States increased from 15 percent in 2003 to 38 percent in 2005,³² even as U.S. military action in Iraq continued to draw widespread negative press coverage across the Islamic world.

Of course, it would be naïve to think that national interest did not play a part in the tsunami relief plan. American leaders were certainly aware that massive assistance and humanitarian operations would demonstrate what the United States could do and what other countries could not do. Officials were also aware that relief efforts would provide positive images of American soldiers aiding the needy, in contrast to negative images of the war in Iraq.³³

But as Secretary Powell explained, “We are not doing this because we are seeking political advantage... We are doing this because these are human beings in desperate need, and the United States has always been a generous, compassionate country.”³⁴

Recommendations

U.S. foreign assistance programs need to operate so that they reflect not only our nation’s security interests, but our ethical values as well. Here are three macro-reforms that are vital to ensuring this change.

First, the United States must meet the 0.7 percent of GNP target for foreign assistance. Since 1970, our government has been promising the United Nations it would meet this target. But we have never come close.

Second, the United States should re-establish a free-standing foreign assistance agency with cabinet-level rank in order to send the world a clear message that foreign assistance is an important national priority. A similar structure, the Department for International Development, has worked to great effect for our ally, Great Britain.

Third, the United States should reduce its reliance on the Department of Defense as the distributor of so much of its foreign assistance. Under former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the Pentagon came to play a central role in the distribution of U.S. foreign assistance. The problem is that the Pentagon's increased role is more often a function of necessity rather than design because of the relative weakness and incapacity of other U.S. federal agencies, such as USAID and the State Department.

Embracing these three sets of recommendations will help ensure that U.S. foreign aid programs explicitly embrace our ethical values *and* our national interest. This will build long-term support for such programs at home and abroad.

By contrast, foreign assistance based primarily on national interest often falls victim to competing short-term political and security considerations that threaten the effectiveness, size, and breadth of the funding. In short, doing well for our country by doing well for the world in our foreign aid programs is the smart, effective, and decent thing to do.

Endnotes

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2. Remarks by Secretary of State Colin Powell at the swearing-in ceremony of USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios, May 22, 2001.
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25. Mark Schneider of the International Crisis Group explains that foreign assistance primarily focused on military and police aid is a too "narrow reading of security" because "whenever you throw the FARC out of an area, what you want to have is a coherent rural development plan so people see immediate benefits." As quoted in: Marcela Sanchez, "Security Gains not Sufficient for Success in Colombia," *Washington Post*, November 3, 2006.
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“Many often deride the influence of values and religious beliefs in the making of U.S. foreign policy as irrelevant or not in the ‘national interest.’ This couldn’t be further from the truth. *Pursuing the Global Common Good* tells us why.”

Madeleine K. Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State
and author of *The Mighty and the Almighty*

“American foreign policy has been at its best when it linked our national interest to an engagement with the global common good. Our religious traditions are at their best when they challenge us to find realistic ways of engaging the world that are true to our moral commitments and our values. At a moment when we badly need creative thinking, *Pursuing the Global Common Good* is exciting because it suggests steps that are, at once, right, practical and visionary. By suggesting that there can be such a thing as a ‘common good’ in world affairs, this book will help open the debate we need.”

E. J. Dionne Jr., syndicated columnist, Senior Fellow
in the Governance Studies Program at the Brookings
Institution and author of the forthcoming book, *Souled
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“Our deepest beliefs and religious traditions tell us to respect all humanity and seek justice and peace on earth. Why, then, would we separate our highest principles from the activities of our representative government? By demonstrating how moral vision can have a concrete impact on policy, *Pursuing the Global Common Good* makes a convincing case for a U.S. foreign policy that lives up to our highest ideals.”

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action
Center for Reform Judaism

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