

Altruism and Realpolitik: A History of the U.S. Agency for International Development*

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The Enduring Struggle: The History of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's Uneasy Transformation of the World. By JOHN NORRIS. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021. 308 pp. \$40.00 (hardcover).

Does international development work and how? Is it worth it and why? These are the perennial development questions John Norris addresses in his book, *The Enduring Struggle: The History of the U.S. Agency for International Development and America's Uneasy Transformation of the World*, a thorough account of the agency from its birth in 1961 to the end of 2020. Readers who wrestle with these questions in their daily work will appreciate Norris' powerful examples drawn from meticulous primary and secondary research. Its twelve chapters are chronologically organized by presidential administration and further subdivided by geography, sector, key event, or a thorny issue. Norris draws from interviews (some are personal communications with the author and others from USG archives), substantive news articles (especially the *New York Times*, *Time*, and the *Washington Post*), government documents, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) publications to tell his story. Norris seeks to locate politicians on a scale between two strategic views of foreign aid—one altruistic and the other *realpolitik*—did each president and his administration fall and why, and

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what effect did their personal view have on USAID programming and budget. Norris argues the two strategic views of foreign assistance are: (1) to expand the number of free-market democracies which in turn would make the United States more secure and prosperous; and (2) to use foreign aid to gain short-term leverage and influence in countries willing to oppose communism and terrorism regardless of their actual commitments to democracy and free-markets. Each administration's interpretation of foreign assistance and subsequent USAID policies and actions are detailed as related to these larger themes.

Norris makes a compelling argument why a history of USAID in its political context is important: "No other area of presidential decision-making in the modern era has affected more people, more profoundly, and with so little fanfare than the foreign aid program" (p. 1). Some of the results, such as the eradication of smallpox or prevention of famines, have been valiant. Others have been tragic—propping up despots or dispensing millions of dollars in projects doomed to fail. And throughout, the ways and means by which foreign aid was distributed reflected the mood of the American people over the past 60 years, mirroring who the electorate sent to the White House each presidential election.

Norris writes that President John F. Kennedy's (1961–1963) vision to create a dedicated U.S. foreign assistance agency was shaped by the Marshall Plan, the Cold War, and the influence of the 1958 novel *The Ugly American*. The collective lesson Kennedy learned was clear: development programs would only succeed if the people who administered them rejected paternalism and became steeped in local cultures, languages, and politics. This thinking led to Kennedy's insistence on creating a field-driven agency that carried out its activities through country missions. Around the same time, MIT economists Walt Rostow and Max Millikan argued that "the battle for the developing world would be fought on economic rather than military grounds," and if Washington was to prevent the spread of communism in the developing world, then it should immediately launch "a long-term program for sustained economic growth in the free world" (p. 10). According to Rostow, "the aim of foreign aid should be to help countries rapidly achieve an industrial take-off that would allow these economies to become self-sustaining." Most foreign aid programs had previously focused on technical issues, namely agriculture, but the newly established USAID in 1961 shifted to overall country strategies with an emphasis on development economics that reflected Kennedy's worldview.

Perhaps even more importantly, considering the tragic consequences in the first decades of USAID's history, Norris emphasizes Kennedy's view that foreign aid should not be conditioned based on support for U.S. policies and must be divorced from military aid as commingling the two made neither economic nor strategic sense. Kennedy argued, "If we undertake this effort in the wrong spirit, or for the wrong reasons, or in the wrong way, then any and all financial measures will be in vain" (p. 12). According to Norris in the following chapters, history has proved Kennedy right. Subsequent administrations used foreign aid as a carrot or stick to force countries to adopt specific U.S. policies. In each chapter, Norris focuses on the worldviews of each incoming president and often their own personal likes and dislikes of individuals running USAID. This makes for titillating reading at times, drawing the reader into White House scandals and Machiavellian plots with aptly placed quotes from Norris' rich sources.

When India faced a famine in the mid-1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) refused to send emergency food relief until Delhi fully adopted U.S.-recommended agricultural and economic reform. Johnson explained to one USAID official, "You sup at our table. You mind your manners" (p. 64). In short, Johnson weaponized food to advance a policy agenda, in this case it was India's wholesale embrace of the Green Revolution. In 1967, with Johnson "finally satisfied with India's progress . . . more than 600 U.S. ships, the largest maritime flotilla since D-Day, carried forty million tons of grain" to India to stem the famine (p. 68). Along with the grain came integrated farm technology: new strains of wheat and rice, fertilizers and pesticides, and hydraulic schemes and other agricultural technologies, machines, and tools. For Johnson, the Green Revolution in India was validation of his "short-tether policy" and foreign assistance based on "self-help" (p. 69). To LBJ, self-help meant the ceaseless purchase of Western farm inputs and the immediate, wholesale abandonment of traditional agriculture.

President Richard Nixon concurred. He carried Johnson's conditional view on humanitarian aid even further, insisting aid was essential to achieving U.S. foreign policy goals. Norris writes that Nixon was influenced by his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, who saw aid "as first and foremost a transactional tool" and "primarily a means to secure immediate diplomatic aims, influence great power relations, and pressure or reward developing countries" (p. 82). The 1971 East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) crisis provides one of the starkest examples of how a president's personal dislikes, as well as Cold War politics, could dominate aid policy. Nixon harbored an intense dislike of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and viewed India as too friendly with the

Soviet Union. While India was distributing foreign assistance to the 10 million refugees who flooded its borders as West Pakistan waged a genocide and other atrocities on the Bengalis of East Bangladesh, Nixon and Kissinger continued to pour foreign aid—along with military assistance—into West Pakistan. Nixon and Kissinger’s *realpolitik* needed West Pakistan; at the time, Kissinger was making forays into China from West Pakistan to set the stage for Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972. On the backs of a genocide and other atrocities—witnessed by dozens of USAID officers in Norris’ account—that ultimately cost the lives of perhaps 1 million people, “President Nixon became the first US President to visit the People’s Republic of China in February 1972. His trip was widely hailed as a diplomatic triumph” (p. 92).

Nixon also tried to dismantle USAID and turn U.S. development programs over to the World Bank. To save the agency, Jim Grant of USAID proposed making poverty eradication, rather than economic reform, the agency’s headline goal. In what Norris dubs the “Devil’s Bargain,” Congress passed legislation in 1972 “widely known as New Directions [that] fundamentally reshaped USAID and America’s approach to the world in ways that still reverberate to this day” (p. 102). Public polling revealed a lack of interest in macroeconomics; rather, people cared about “educating kids, feeding the hungry, and sheltering the poor” (p. 102). Congress agreed, and the new legislation divided USAID into sectors, evolved into “a public health behemoth,” focused more on agriculture, especially the rural poor, and Norris notes that “perhaps the biggest winners were those that AID increasingly relied on to carry out its work: contractors, NGOs, universities, and others” (p. 103). The process made USAID significantly more bureaucratic as it turned its focus to helping the poorest meet their basic needs rather than structural economic reform.

Norris argues that Nixon’s immediate successors showed considerable intellectual consistency. For President Jimmy Carter, foreign assistance acted as a policy carrot in the wake of the 1978 Camp David Accords: the USAID Mission in Egypt was now obligated to spend \$1 billion. For President Ronald Regan, foreign assistance was an essential element of projecting America’s influence. Reagan “significantly expanded aid budgets and shifted their priorities toward security aims” (p. 119). USAID’s budget jumped from \$7 billion in 1980 to \$12 billion in 1985, in line with Reagan’s priority of fighting the Cold War. In each new administration, depending on each president’s personal beliefs and political priorities, USAID launched entire new bureaus, offices, and initiatives. Under Carter, there was an emphasis on forestry and the

environment. Under Reagan, USAID Administrator Peter McPherson stood up the Bureau of Private Enterprise, signaling a fundamental shift from the New Directions reorganization. Norris argues that many USAID staff saw the emphasis on private sector growth as “a welcome course correction” (p. 120).

The decision to provide humanitarian assistance in conflict zones dominated the Clinton administration throughout the 1990s. Confronted with complex emergencies in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Haiti, Norris depicts President Bill Clinton as conflicted over decisions to keep humanitarian workers and peacekeeping forces safe by staying out of conflict zones, or risk the consequences of not taking preventative action. An initial hesitancy in 1994 to act in Rwanda led to the massacre of more than a half a million people in a few months, followed by a “gargantuan relief effort by AID” that stemmed the spiraling death toll (p. 60). Increasingly, USAID found itself navigating warring parties on the ground as it tried to deliver assistance in conflict zones. As a result, Norris details the renewed emphasis on conflict prevention at the agency under Administrator Brian Atwood, who established the Office of Transitions Initiatives. That model, focused on restoring media and promoting reconciliation efforts among others, was quickly adopted by other donor agencies to address post-Cold War conflicts.

Perhaps the harshest lesson *not* learned over the past 60 years comes in Norris’ assessment of the post 9/11 era, re-emphasizing Kennedy’s warning that foreign aid should not be conditioned based on support for U.S. policies and must be divorced from military aid—as commingling the two made neither economic nor strategic sense. As LBJ increasingly saw “the development war as equal in importance to the military war” to defeat the Viet Cong, he launched a fully integrated civilian-military pacification effort in Vietnam’s countryside (p. 79). The heavily funded Vietnam Bureau became the largest USAID mission, with 2,300 USAID personnel in Vietnam in 1968. By 1975, more than 40 USAID and State Department personnel had lost their lives in a failed war. History repeated itself 40-plus years later throughout the George W. Bush and Barak Obama administrations, with the hope that integrated civilian-military teams bringing development programs to Afghanistan and Iraq would “win over the countryside” from terrorist militias. (p. 204). Norris sums up this failed strategic view with insight from James Kunder of USAID: “The hard lesson from both Afghanistan and Iraq was that development programs are not a good substitute for an effective diplomatic and military strategy” (p. 204).

At the same time, throughout the book Norris gives equal treatment to the spectacular successes where a president's strong personal conviction and strategic vision of foreign assistance made foreign assistance—undertaken with Kennedy's right "spirit" for the right "reasons"—overall a worthwhile endeavor. One example was George W. Bush's altruistic reasoning behind the formation of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in 2003. Bush was right when he said, "this is one of those moments when we can actually change the lives of millions of people, a whole continent" (p. 196). Flaws notwithstanding, PEPFAR's accomplishments are monumental. Although USAID and the CDC carry out much of PEPFAR's program management on the ground, the head of PEPFAR is an ambassador (the global AIDS coordinator) and reports directly to the Secretary of State. Beginning in the early 1990s, Norris observes that congressional oversight, earmarks, budget cuts, staff reduction, and expanding regulation "bogged down the agency in ways both large and small." Peter Borg of the State Department remarked that USAID had changed from "an organization which planned and implemented projects to an organization that solicited bids from outside organizations and oversaw contractors who implemented the projects" (p. 185). Worse, the overall process for each project "took several years." In a gut-punching statement on the impact of the layers and layers of bureaucracy burdening USAID, Norris observes that "the idea that it was easier to work outside AID rather than inside it had gained considerable purchase" (p. 200).

Norris' final chapters focus on the key accomplishments of USAID Administrators Raj Shah, Gayle Smith, and Mark Green within the constraints of Beltway politics, including the notable passage under President Obama in 2016 of the Electrify Africa Act (USAID's Power Africa) and the Global Food Security Act (USAID's Feed the Future), and the Paris Agreement in 2015. Under the Trump administration, where Norris sums up President Donald Trump's limited understanding of the developing world as "largely a place of pestilence and deprivation," or "shitholes" in Trump's own finite vocabulary, Norris credits USAID Mark Green and Congress' bipartisan support for maintaining USAID's budget to prevent further damage that "could have been far worse" (p. 237). At the same time, the focus of USAID's development efforts overall has shifted from bilateral assistance under direct USAID guidance or U.S. presidents, to partnerships with the private sector and local organizations to achieve USAID development outcomes. Hamstrung by congressional earmarks, requirement after requirement, bureaucracy, entropy, and an outsourcing of development

expertise from internal USAID staff to contractors that has “crowded out substance,” Norris asks his readers if there is still a role for USAID going forward (p. 245).

Norris’ greatest achievement in this well-written, carefully researched, and provocative history of USAID is the opportunity to ask larger questions about the role and the purpose of U.S. foreign assistance within its broader historical context over the past 60 years. What lessons has the past 60 years offered us—what works and what does not? Clearly, Norris is on the side of Kennedy’s strategic view of creating more democratic societies made up of free markets and free people. This kind of institution-building clearly achieves a spectacular return on U.S. investment, yet it is a long-term endeavor and Norris cites numerous examples of when and where international development and humanitarian assistance has paid off, and where it has not—and why. Most often, foreign assistance requires a champion from the White House. Whether USAID will undergo the radical transformation necessary to regain its autonomy and relevance to meet future challenges remains an open question.