

There's a story in each shard of the shattered USAID. At USAID, Trump's commissars leave a trail of suffering in their wake. Column by David Ignatius, *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2025

Representatives of humanitarian organizations that are saving lives around the world were summoned on Feb. 13 to a "[listening session](#)" at the State Department with [Peter Marocco](#), the Trump administration political official who took control of USAID this month and, to many of its supporters, appears bent on destroying it.

Marocco began the meeting by asking the several hundred people packing the Loy Henderson Auditorium to rise and say the Pledge of Allegiance, according to several people who were there. That doesn't happen often at a Washington gathering. Then he described the political criteria that will now shape the distribution of foreign aid so that it will "deliver results for the American people." For many in the audience well versed in the Trump administration's "America First" codespeak, that sounded like a death sentence.

The next day, in [a virtual meeting](#) with more than 1,000 participants, Marocco said the U.S. Agency for International Development "has lost the confidence of the president, and we need to fix it," according to one person who recorded the session. When farmers, veterans and business leaders protested, Marocco parried their criticisms.

Marocco's job is what might be described in Russia or China as a commissar. His task is to impose the political ideology of the ruling party on an organization that, until Jan. 20, had imagined that it was outside politics. Not under President Donald Trump. USAID, which has long needed friendly reform, is now being treated as an enemy.

In [a Feb. 10 affidavit](#) responding to employee protests, Marocco described the freeze he has imposed on USAID. It was done, he said, to "gain control of an organization that included some employees who had refused to comply with lawful directives by the president and the secretary" of state. [A Jan. 24 directive](#) announcing the freeze had told employees that henceforth, there would be "one voice of American foreign policy."

Marocco is part of a network of Trump loyalists sent to agencies across the government to distill that "one voice." This network is one reason Trump has pounced so quickly and decisively at reorienting the executive branch so it serves the priorities of the White House, rather than longer-term bipartisan interests that endure from administration to administration.

The "spoils system" is the name historians use to describe this winner-take-all scheme by the party in power. It was dominant in America in the 19th century, but it led to such abuse and corruption that it was swept away in the civil service reforms championed by President Theodore Roosevelt. He believed that the purposes of government were larger and nobler than the political agenda of a political leader and his party. Over time, the civil service bureaucracy grew fat and sometimes lazy, but it needed reform, not a death sentence.

Marocco's spending freeze has severely damaged USAID, according to the dozen sources I contacted — and many leaders of nongovernmental organizations told me it will probably never recover. The freeze in spending meant that many contractors weren't paid for work done in December. They've had to dismiss staff, send away their patients and let food rot in storage.

The courts are now weighing the legality of the freeze orders, and it's hard to predict just what will emerge when Marocco reaches his April deadline for relaunching the agency. Marocco has said the agency is making at least 21 payments totaling \$250 million for work that was contracted before Inauguration Day. But for many organizations, [it will come too late](#). The administration has promised waivers for humanitarian work, but those, too, have been slow.

Here's the wreckage as of Feb. 14, as compiled by the [U.S. Global Leadership Coalition](#).

At least 11,500 Americans and 54,575 foreigners have lost their jobs. Nearly \$1 billion in payments for work already done has been frozen. Nearly \$500 million in food is sitting in ports, ships and warehouses. In Syria, a country struggling to recover from chaos, food and other support for nearly 900,000 people has been suspended. In West Africa, 3.4 million people in 11 countries have lost drug treatment for deadly tropical diseases. At least 328,000 HIV-positive people in 25 countries aren't getting lifesaving drugs.

U.S. security will suffer, not just needy foreigners, according to the coalition's research. Foreign military financing for key regional partners such as Jordan and Taiwan has been frozen. Unpaid guards temporarily walked off their jobs securing the al-Hol and Roj camps in Syria that hold 10,000 Islamic State fighters and 40,000 families. A USAID counterterrorism program that had been training forces in Indonesia, Iraq, Libya, Malaysia, Somalia and Yemen has also been halted.

What does it feel like for humanitarian workers to suddenly discover that the USAID commissar has cut the lifeline? Taylor Williamson, a public health veteran who since 2005 has worked in Tanzania, Congo, Rwanda, Ghana and Madagascar, described the impact: "In the space of a week, the entire infrastructure of foreign aid has vaporized. No drugs for people living with HIV are being delivered, no malaria drugs, no nets, no vaccines, no training for midwives. Nothing."

Many aid workers have been reluctant to speak out for fear of reprisal. An exception has been the Catholic relief organizations that serve needy people around the world. [The Jesuit Refugee Service](#), for example, said on Feb. 12 that more than 100,000 refugees in Chad, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, South Africa, South Sudan and Uganda will be harmed by the USAID halt.

[Caritas Internationalis](#), which coordinates Catholic relief services, was even blunter. Alistair Dutton, the group's secretary general, said in a Feb. 10 statement from Rome: "Stopping USAID abruptly will kill millions of people and condemn hundreds of millions more to lives of dehumanizing poverty. This is an inhumane affront to people's God-given human dignity, that will cause immense suffering."

Why do these religious leaders speak out when so many in Congress have been silent? Perhaps it's because they fear the judgment of a higher power than Trump and his commissars.

Watching Trump and his allies' assault on USAID, I am reminded of F. Scott Fitzgerald's unforgettable description in "The Great Gatsby" of Tom and Daisy Buchanan. "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

But that isn't quite right. This wasn't carelessness. It was intentional. Trump's team meant to cause this pain.