

Growing Up U.S.A.I.D. By [Jon Lee Anderson](#), *New Yorker*, February 25, 2025

As a child in postings around the world, the author witnessed the agency's complex relationship with American empire—and with autocrats everywhere.

Even by the standards of the new Administration, the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development has been unusually vitriolic. [Donald Trump](#), seeming offended by the mere idea of foreign aid, proclaimed without evidence that U.S.A.I.D. was a “scam” that fraudulently appropriated hundreds of millions of dollars. [Elon Musk](#) said that it was “not an apple with a worm in it” but “just a ball of worms.” Describing the agency as “a criminal organization,” he declared that it was “time for it to die.” I grew up in a U.S.A.I.D. family. In the nineteen-sixties, as Trump was nurturing the bone spurs that exempted him from military service, my father was an officer in a program known as Food for Peace.

My family arrived in Taiwan in 1962, a year after John F. Kennedy founded U.S.A.I.D. At the time, the island was still an agrarian place, where farmers tended rice paddies and raised water buffalos, but the possibility of war was manifest in the landscape. The beaches were dotted with Japanese pillboxes built during the Second World War—the remnants of an occupation only two decades in the past. A new adversary, Mao Zedong's China, loomed just across the Taiwan Strait.

The threat of invasion was checked by a large American military installation. Thousands of U.S. soldiers were stationed in Taiwan, and G.I.s came in from Vietnam for R. and R.; the Seventh Fleet periodically floated through the strait to demonstrate muscle. As a boy of eight, I stood next to my parents at the Taipei airport to meet Vice-President Hubert Humphrey. Steve McQueen came to shoot a movie, and, one day, driving to the beach, we saw him blast past us behind the wheel of a car.

Taiwan was clearly an outpost of American empire, but the U.S. presence was benevolent in certain ways. My father distributed food and provided seeds to farmers who wanted to plant grain. When typhoons and flooding struck the island, he organized relief. One of the efforts he was proudest of was a lunch program in the public schools—providing a free daily meal to children whose families might otherwise have kept them home.

After five years in Taiwan, we moved to a new posting, ultimately living in eight countries. Virtually everywhere we settled, we were surrounded by sacks of grain stamped with the U.S.A.I.D. insignia: clasped hands and the Stars and Stripes. My siblings and I grew up believing that, whatever else our country was doing in the world, our society was willing to share its success.

This was naïvely idealistic, but it did not seem unrealistic to hope that the United States was working to perfect itself; the civil-rights and antiwar movements were visible proof of a robust civil society. The same year that U.S.A.I.D. was created, the Kennedy Administration also launched the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, a plan to boost investment in

Latin America's development. On a trip to promote these initiatives, Kennedy visited Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Colombia. We were living in Bogotá at the time, and my parents dressed me up to go wave at his motorcade.

Kennedy was candid that these programs were intended to help the U.S. compete with the Soviet Union and its global campaign to spread communism. In Bogotá, he alluded to the threat of new revolutions sponsored by Fidel Castro's Cuba, saying, "We deny the right of any state to impose its will upon any other." He acknowledged that the results of the country's postwar aid programs were imperfect. "It is a fact that many of the nations we are helping are not much nearer sustained economic growth," he allowed, in another speech at the time. But he offered a reason for their continuation that resonated with the country's best view of itself. "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 . . . and our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom."

As my family moved around the world, it was clear that perceptions of the United States were far more complicated than that, and not just because of the bloody debacle in Vietnam and the racist outrages back home. In my twenties, when I told people that my father had worked for U.S.A.I.D., the inevitable knowing response was "You mean the C.I.A."

The proximity between the two agencies was hard to deny. In the sixties, America often disbursed aid as "credits" to foreign governments, which in turn supplied the equivalent amount of local currency to the U.S. Embassy. The funds were apportioned by the "country intelligence team"—which invariably included the C.I.A. station chief. The C.I.A. also partnered with the Office of Public Safety, an American program that trained police forces in Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. In 1973, after reports emerged that its graduates had engaged in terror and torture, Congress disbanded it. A Senate Foreign Relations Committee report lamented that the program's notoriety had helped "stigmatize the total U.S. foreign aid effort."

In many cases, the closer U.S.A.I.D. got to hard power, the worse things went. During the war on terror, the agency was drafted into national-security efforts around the world. In 2007, its director visited Baghdad to assist with a program there; as his convoy passed through the city, security contractors hired by the private military firm Blackwater opened fire on approaching cars, killing seventeen Iraqi civilians. A few years later, an office of U.S.A.I.D. got involved in a secret program to build a "[Cuban Twitter](#)"—a messaging service intended to spark pro-democracy uprisings in Havana. When the news broke, the agency's director, Rajiv Shah, lamely insisted that the program was not covert, but merely "discreet."

In the past few years, under the stewardship of Samantha Power, U.S.A.I.D. seemed to regain its focus. Much of its budget went to programs that combatted such diseases as malaria, tuberculosis, and H.I.V./AIDS; other aid went to civilians caught in natural

disasters and war zones. In Central America, the agency supported programs that helped impoverished young men find practical alternatives to joining gangs. U.S.A.I.D., Power recently argued, was once again “a cost-effective example of what once distinguished the United States from our adversaries.”

Perhaps the best advertisement for U.S.A.I.D. is that autocrats tend to hate it. In 2012, Vladimir Putin expelled the agency from Russia, purportedly for inciting pro-democratic unrest; Evo Morales, the left-wing president of Bolivia, ejected it the next year. When Trump announced recently that the program would be killed, there were celebratory announcements from petty despots around the world—in Belarus, Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador. Hungary’s Viktor Orbán chortled on Facebook that Trump was upending the world order by ending support of U.S.A.I.D., “gender ideology,” “funding for the globalist Soros,” “illegal migration,” and “the Russia-Ukraine war.” Orbán added that he intended to hunt down recipients of U.S.A.I.D. funding in Hungary. “Now is the moment when these international networks have to be taken down,” he said. “It is necessary to make their existence legally impossible.”

Others went further. Robert Fico, the pro-Moscow Prime Minister of Slovakia, wrote to Musk asking for help identifying “non-governmental organizations, the media and individual journalists” in his country. Several governments have since announced their intention to investigate U.S.A.I.D.’s “criminal conspiracy.” Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Duma, the Russian legislative body, said, “If they’ve declared U.S.A.I.D. an enemy organization, then let them provide the names. Congress will send us the list and we’ll hand it over to the F.S.B.”

The new Administration seems to take it for granted that citizens find it ridiculous to help needy people abroad; in the Trumpist view, strong countries don’t give to weaker ones, they take from them. Reading out a list of U.S.A.I.D. beneficiaries, Trump scornfully noted a twenty-five-million-dollar grant to “promote biodiversity, conservation and promote licit livelihoods by developing socially responsible behavior in the country of Colombia.” He added disparagingly, “That’s nice . . . for something that nobody ever heard of.” On social media, Musk has presented U.S.A.I.D. as both nefarious and frivolous, responsible for everything from the activities of trans people in Serbia to a secret bioweapons lab in Wuhan that created the *COVID-19* virus.

Musk’s millions of followers on X might be surprised by the effects of shutting the agency down. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, U.S.A.I.D. employees facing violent mobs had to pay to evacuate themselves and their families. Throughout Latin America, media outlets that provided reliable reporting on oppressive governments face collapse. I spoke with a Cuban reporter whose independent news site depends on a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy, funded by U.S.A.I.D. He told me that the site would probably shut down, adding that the Cuban government, which had already accused him and his colleagues of being Yankee stooges, can now accuse them of links to what the sitting U.S. President calls “a criminal organization.”

This week, a reporter in Central America explained that government officers had stepped up accusations that his organization was involved in money laundering and other crimes. “We expect a raid anytime,” he said. To make matters worse, X and Facebook had changed their algorithms to deemphasize liberal topics: “Anything to do with D.E.I.—women, L.G.B.T., democracy—is no longer being given visibility.” Since Trump became President, he estimated, his site’s social-media reach had dropped by about forty per cent. It had decided to close its main office and was struggling to keep its staff on the payroll. In the meantime, a U.S.A.I.D. fund for emergency security had been eliminated—a pressing concern in a nation that has a dismal record of attacks on journalists.

For many, the disbanding of U.S.A.I.D. is a reminder that the U.S. can no longer be relied on as an ally. In Haiti, the order froze some three hundred and thirty million dollars in aid, including funds to help the police fight criminal gangs that have overrun the capital. The halt was announced on the same day that a gang attack killed more than sixty civilians. Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a waiver for forty-one million dollars, citing an exemption for “life-saving humanitarian assistance”—but the tenuousness of U.S. support has a cost. One Haitian American security contractor said recently, “We were told to go home, then brought back a few days later. We don’t know for how long. Whatever happens, this is really going to hurt the Haitian police.”

The loss of soft power was quickly visible around the hemisphere. I was in Colombia recently as Trump engaged in a bullying dispute with President Gustavo Petro over the deportation of Colombian citizens. An influential friend there exclaimed, “If this is how an ally treats us, we can always turn to China.” The same day, Zhu Jingyang, the Chinese Ambassador to Colombia, released a flurry of posts celebrating a new age of comity between the two countries. “We are experiencing the best moment in our diplomatic relations,” he wrote.

The pattern holds throughout the region. According to the Honduran investigative site Contracorriente, China is rushing to take advantage of America’s absence. The outlet [found](#) that, in the past two decades, U.S.A.I.D. supplied Honduras with nearly two billion dollars in financial aid, much of it aimed at curbing illegal immigration to the U.S. In recent months, Chinese companies have announced plans to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in Honduras. Jennifer Ávila, the founder of Contracorriente, said, “China is trying to take advantage of everything U.S.A.I.D. is leaving behind, right down to the language it uses to describe its investments—as ‘aid for development and social infrastructure.’ ”

John Feeley, a former senior U.S. diplomat, suggested that Trump had an ulterior motive in taking down U.S.A.I.D.: “If you can get away with doing *this* to a government agency—which, it has to be said, most Americans had never heard of before—it makes going after other institutions, like the Justice Department and the State Department, that much easier.”

Recently, the left-wing author Ignacio Ramonet, who is close to the Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, took a moment during his weekly podcast to ponder the significance of Trump's dismantling of U.S.A.I.D. "It's just incredible," he exclaimed. "Is he destroying the U.S. empire from within?"