

**Growing Up U.S.A.I.D.** By Jon Lee Anderson, *The New Yorker*, 25 Feb 2025

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."

[https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/growing-up-usaid?\\_sp=1ced7209-0f79-4114-864d-df3556b37bef.1741985660233](https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/growing-up-usaid?_sp=1ced7209-0f79-4114-864d-df3556b37bef.1741985660233)