

Cutting the State Department and USAID will put every American at risk. By William H. McRaven, *The Washington Post*, 15 July 2025

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America needs more than tanks and aircraft carriers.

The Defense Department is our hard power; the carriers, the jets, the bombers, the tanks, the infantry, the use of direct action and kinetic power are there to deter, defend and defeat our adversaries. The State Department is always depicted as soft power — as if to imply that the work it does is somehow less demanding, less effective and less critical than that done by those of us in uniform.

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In my experience, those who served in USAID, the Foreign Service and the diplomatic corps were anything but soft. These public servants were in every conflict zone, every theater of war. Wherever there was a natural disaster, young Americans from State and USAID were there. They are as courageous, as heroic and as patriotic as any soldier I ever served with. As important, the work they do is vital — absolutely vital — to our national security. Calvin Coolidge once said, that “No nation ever had an army large enough to guarantee it against attack in time of peace or insure it victory in time of war.” And yet, we continue to grow our military, frequently at the expense of the other elements of national power that are essential to our success.

This is no time to weaken *any* element of America’s power. The dismissal of highly trained diplomats at the State Department and the dismantling of USAID will jeopardize national security and make the military’s job much more difficult. Our national security has never depended on military strength alone; rather, it relies on collaboration with a strong Foreign Service and diplomatic corps. I’ve stood shoulder to shoulder with these dedicated public servants in some of the world’s most dangerous places, and I have seen firsthand how they advance our national interests.

In 2001, when the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf [kidnapped Martin and Gracia Burnham](#), two American missionaries in the Philippines, it was Ambassador Frank Ricciardone who coordinated with then-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s government in an attempt to rescue the Burnhams.

In 2003, a U.S. surveillance [plane went down in Colombia](#), and the surviving crew members were captured by the FARC insurgent group. It was the U.S. ambassador to Colombia, Anne Patterson, and her team who immediately began to work with the White House to secure

the crew's release. She was followed in Colombia by Ambassador Bill Wood and then Bill Brownfield.

In 2008, Brownfield helped orchestrate [a successful rescue](#) of the American hostages.

From 2006 to 2008, I spent time in Africa pursuing Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). None of this work could have been done without the support of U.S. ambassadors in Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Algeria and Nigeria.

In Iraq, it was the phenomenal work of Ambassadors John Negroponte, Zal Khalilzad, Ryan Crocker, Chris Hill and Jim Jeffrey that allowed both the Special Operations forces and the conventional units to do their jobs despite the constant political turmoil on the ground. In Afghanistan, it was the same. Without the likes of Ambassadors Khalilzad, Wood, Crocker, Ron Neumann and Karl Eikenberry, it would have been impossible for our Special Operations forces to keep our troops safe and pursue the Taliban and al-Qaeda. And yes, Crocker and Khalilzad served in both war zones.

In 2005, after Pakistan was devastated by an earthquake in Kashmir that killed more than 73,000 people. Ambassador Crocker immediately requested support from USAID and the Navy. For the next year USAID was on the ground supporting relief efforts. Beyond just the humanitarian nature of this undertaking, the goodwill it generated with the Pakistani government gave our military and interagency forces greater latitude to work against terrorist targets in the country.

In 2009, it was the U.S. ambassador to Yemen, Steve Seche, who negotiated with a mercurial President Ali Abdullah Saleh to allow U.S. counterterrorism operations in Yemen that eventually resulted in the elimination of two of al-Qaeda's biggest threats in the region.

During our Special Operations pursuit of the terrorist group al-Shabab in East Africa, it was Ambassador Don Yamamoto, who served as our point man. Yamamoto, a Japanese American who was ambassador in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia, had more talent, courage, determination and grit than any 10 people I served with.

In Pakistan, after the Osama bin Laden raid, it was Ambassador Cameron Munter who kept the Pakistanis from shutting down the Ground Lines of Communications, the main logistics route supporting our soldiers in Afghanistan.

Later, while I was the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, I worked closely with USAID Director Rajiv Shah to develop plans to reduce poverty and disease in sub-Saharan Africa. I knew that extremist organizations such as Boko Haram and AQIM recruited from the disenfranchised. I believed American aid would help reduce that threat.

Every right-minded person I know agrees that the State Department needs to establish clear priorities, reduce waste and have an organizational structure that supports our national goals. However, because the State Department budget is less than half a percent of federal spending and USAID is less than one percent, I would offer that these expenditures of American dollars are well worth the investment.

Eliminating USAID and the Voice of America and underfunding the State Department will put every American, both at home and abroad, at risk. George C. Marshall, who as Army chief of staff led American forces during World War II and later served as the 50th secretary of state, once said: "Diplomacy is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength, of a confident nation ready to lead with wisdom, not just weapons."

If we want the world to see us as strong, confident and having the wisdom to lead on the global stage, then this administration, and this Congress, must find a way to reinvigorate and reinvest in the State Department and USAID. Our national security depends on it.