

## **From UAA's Regional Chapter in Florida: An Afternoon of Collegiality and Inspiration**

On March 13, 2026, James Kunder, former Acting Deputy Administrator of USAID and Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East, delivered a talk to a packed meeting room of the Foreign Service Alumni Association of Florida. Former Foreign Service Officers from State, USAID and the other foreign affairs agencies. The group had assembled at the Marsh Creek Country Club in St Augustine, Florida for one of its five annual luncheons that take place at various locations across the state. The audience included retired Ambassadors, senior and mid-career officers, many who left the service years ago as well as several younger USAID and State officers who were RIF'd over the past year and returned to their homes in Florida.

Jim Kunder traveled from the DC area with his travel expenses covered by UAA, to deliver a candid, unscripted assessment of the state of U.S. foreign assistance, the dismantling of USAID, and the political dynamics shaping development, diplomacy, and defense. His talk blended historical perspective, policy analysis, and personal experience, while repeatedly inviting tough questions from the audience.

At its core, the keynote speech argued that:

- **Foreign aid is undergoing its most dramatic restructuring in decades**, driven by political ideology, weakened institutions, and a Congress that has largely abdicated oversight.
- **USAID has been effectively hollowed out**, with most staff eliminated or transferred, and its programs absorbed into the State Department under a new “F family” structure.
- **The future of U.S. foreign assistance hinges almost entirely on upcoming elections**, not on technocratic debates.
- **Despite the turmoil, some form of U.S. foreign aid will persist**, largely for national security reasons and global competition with China and Russia.
- **Major questions remain** about accountability, capacity, and whether new government to government “compacts” will succeed or simply provide a rationale to exit longterm aid commitments.

Jim opened his talk with his signature philosophy of public speaking including:

- Sharing his “three rules” for a good speech: stand up, speak up, shut up.
- Emphasizing he wants real dialogue and tough questions.

- Warns he is “very opinionated” and uninspirable.

He then offered several contextual factors shaping today’s foreign aid debate:

- Americans have forgotten the postWWII logic for international engagement.
- Massive loss of federal expertise: **387,000 federal employees gone**.
- Key decisions are now made without interagency process or NSC deliberation.
- A 29yearold former Hill staffer now oversees major State Department softpower bureaus.

Jim then decried Congress’s absence, namely

- Congress has not held **a single minute of hearings** on foreign assistance since the restructuring began.
- Failure to enforce its own appropriations laws.
- Accepting unprecedented executive overreach.

Jim then clarified what exactly happened to USAID just over a year ago.

- USAID still exists *on paper* but is reduced to a tiny staff closing out old grants.
- **700 technical staff** now manage what **10,500** once did.
- Local staff (FSNs), once the backbone of oversight, reduced by **~94%**.
- Transfers justified through a narrow legal loophole never intended for this purpose.

He went on to recap recent changes made in the State Department’s New “F Family.”

- PRM, DRL, global health, and food programs reorganized or weakened.
- Food for Peace is likely moving to USDA, shifting from development to commodity export.
- New governmenttogoovernment health compacts (e.g., Kenya, Nigeria) raise concerns about oversight and longterm sustainability.

Jim then reiterated the recent budget battles that ensued.

- Administration proposed a **42% cut** to foreign aid and elimination of major accounts.
- Congress surprisingly rejected these cuts and restored traditional earmarks (democracy, education, water, gender, environment).

Then, Jim laid out his predictions for the future.

- The fate of foreign aid depends almost entirely on the upcoming elections.
- If current political leadership retains Congress, expect:
  - A smaller, narrower aid program
  - More alignment with shortterm political goals
  - More governmenttogovernment compacts
- Regardless of politics, some aid will continue due to greatpower competition.

During our audience Q&A he focused on issues raised about public perception & communications.

- Americans often see foreign aid as “pork,” making public support fragile.
- Kunder argues the sector must explain its value far better.

Jim warned of the looming oversight concerns with new compacts

- Experts warn of major risks:
  - Weak accountability
  - Lack of transparency
  - Focus on curative care instead of systemic issues (water, sanitation, literacy)

Jim summarized who is lobbying for foreign aid.

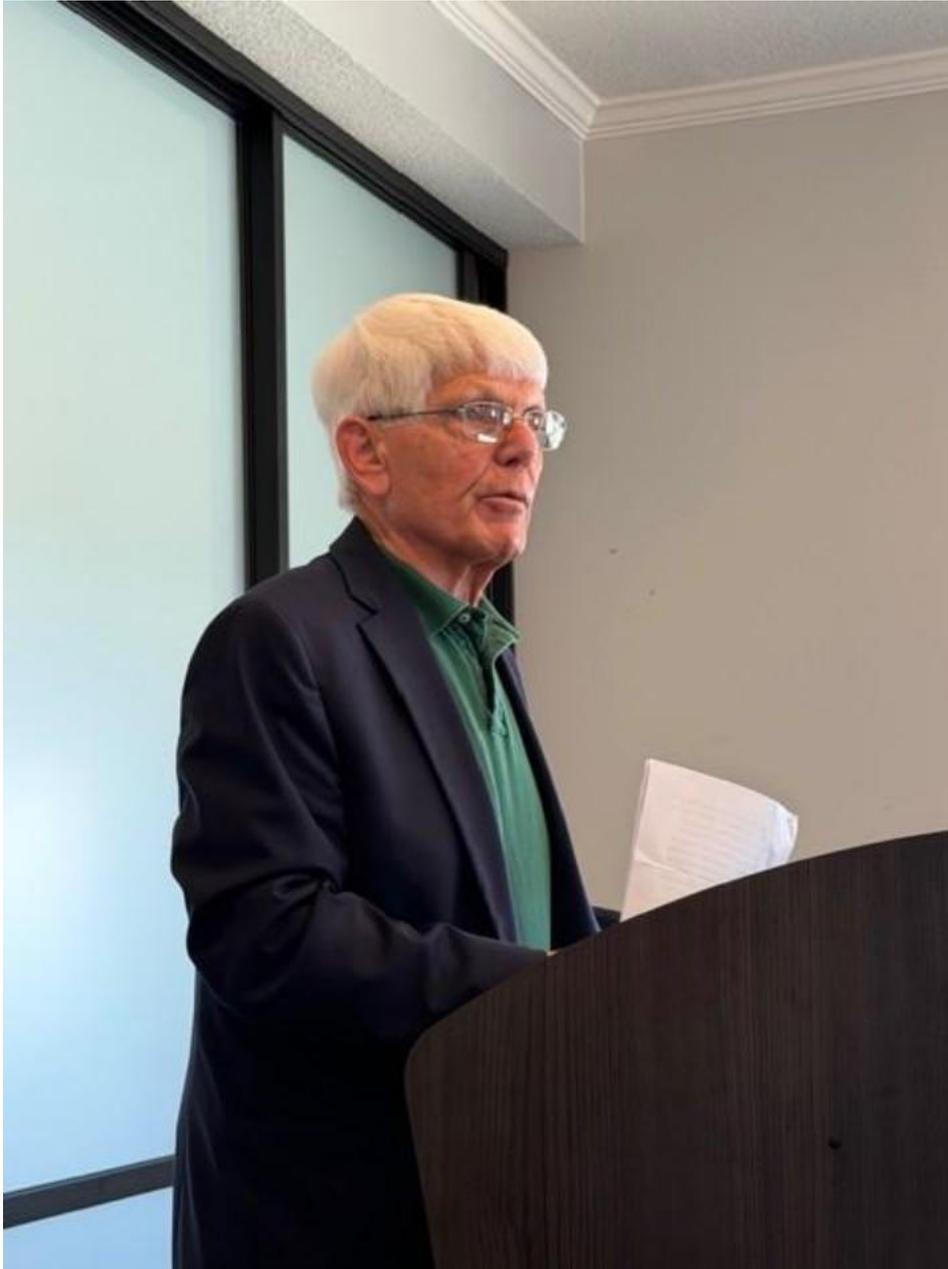
- U.S. Global Leadership Coalition is the most effective, partly due to retired military voices.
- “Aid on the Hill” (exUSAID staff) is active but underfunded.
- Alumni groups may become more engaged.

In his final takeaway, Jim Kunder paints a picture of a foreign assistance system in upheaval—legally intact but operationally gutted, politically vulnerable, and strategically adrift. Yet he also sees space for renewal, driven by national security realities and the persistent need for U.S. engagement abroad. Jim graciously agreed to participate in the side meeting of USAID alumni both in person and virtual who routinely meet after the FSAA luncheons to talk more about global development and US foreign assistance challenges.

To view and listen to Kunder's talk click on the hyperlink below:

Here is the link for Jim Kunder's keynote: <https://youtu.be/24WMIQXdL6Q>

Images from March 13, 2026, St Augustine, Florida



**Jim Kunder speaking at the FSAA/UAA luncheon in St. Augustine, Florida. March 13, 2026.**



**Jim Kunder with USAID alumni at the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, St Augustine, FL March 14, 2026**



**FSAA/UAA Luncheon, Marsh Creek Country Club, St Augustine, FL March 13, 2026**