

PRESERVING AMERICAN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR FOREIGN AID

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Executive Summary

Strong signs are emerging that forces in the U.S. Congress are gearing up to make deep cuts in foreign aid spending. Although the American public is supportive of aid and was largely comfortable with the major increases in aid that have occurred during the last 10 years, it also has a number of reservations and misperceptions that create vulnerabilities to attacks on aid. This policy brief looks at the strategies that have been used to attack aid, especially in the 1990s, the last time a major attack was mounted. It then spells out a communications approach for countering these attacks, including confirming the image of the public as supporting aid, reframing the core question about giving aid, countering mispercep-

tions, differentiating aid from other costs of America's role in the world, and addressing concerns about aid effectiveness. It notes that strategies for promoting aid that have been effective with Congress, such as emphasizing the benefits to the U.S. national interest, may be useful as secondary rationales but can backfire with the public for whom aid is primarily an altruistic endeavor.

What Is the Issue?

A central question facing the U.S. aid and development community is whether, with increasing pressures on all forms of spending in the current fiscal environment, the levels of U.S. spending on development and humanitarian aid can be sustained.

Key voices in Congress are calling for deep cuts in aid spending, and the budget recently passed in the House of Representatives calls for deep cuts in international affairs spending, which would include aid. Although the battle over such cuts has not yet been joined, it is likely that a full-throated debate over aid is in the offing.

It should be emphasized that political opposition to aid spending does not arise from the American public. As a general principle, Americans are supportive of giving foreign aid, although support has slipped in the current economic environment. For example, a 2010 poll of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found 74 percent of respondents favoring “food and medical assistance to people in needy countries” and 62 percent favoring “aid that helps needy countries develop their economies.” When Americans are asked what percentage of the federal budget should go to aid, the median response in numerous polls is 10 percent—a jaw-dropping figure relative to the reality of 1 percent.

Furthermore, the substantial increases in aid over the last decade have all occurred with no public opposition. During the George W. Bush administration, the partisan divide on aid largely disappeared and aid levels rose at a remarkable rate. Even putting aside aid to Iraq and Afghanistan, overall aid doubled. President Obama called for further major aid increases during his 2008 presidential campaign, and levels have continued to modestly trend upward since he has been in office. As long as policy leaders are acting together, the public is comfortable with substantial levels of aid spending.

At the same time, Americans do have reservations and misperceptions about various aspects of the U.S.

aid program and do harbor some doubts about the logic of giving aid. Thus Americans can be responsive to certain arguments critical of aid when they are put forward in a systematic and determined fashion. Efforts to attack aid spending will likely focus on these vulnerabilities.

The effectiveness of these attacks will, to a substantial extent, be a function of how much policymakers perceive the public as responding to them. Policy discourse, especially in Congress, develops in the context of arguments made to the public. Poll results can play a significant role in this process, but narratives can emerge based purely on hunches or what the media portrays. When congressional leaders make arguments and believe they are striking a chord with the public, this is reinforcing and emboldening. When their opponents perceive this, they may be more likely to accommodate. Members of Congress only occasionally take their arguments to the larger public, but there is constant jockeying to create a sense of who would prevail if these arguments were to be taken to the public. The outcome of this interchange ultimately influences legislative behavior.

What Needs to Happen—and Why?

Given the likelihood of a real debate over future levels of aid, leaders wishing to sustain support for aid need to understand which arguments against aid resonate in the public and, more important, how to counter these effects. To this end, I first analyze the last major attack on aid, which occurred in the mid-1990s, looking at the arguments that were used against aid and reviewing polls that show how some of these arguments did effectively resonate with the public. These efforts initially succeeded in bringing about 20 percent cuts to aid spending. They are also likely to play a role in future attacks on aid. Second,

I explore polling data that point to the communications strategies for countering these attacks. Some of these strategies were employed during the Bill Clinton administration and succeeded in parrying many of the attacks; by Clinton's second term, aid budgets had nearly recovered to their earlier levels. A well-crafted communications strategy could be effective in this current environment as well.

The Attack on Aid

The emerging attack on aid is likely to follow lines similar to those employed in the mid-1990s, led by then-senator Jesse Helms and others. At that time, there was only a minimal amount of polling on aid, which primarily asked about the level of aid spending. Majorities of those polled consistently favored reducing the amount of foreign aid. Interviews with members of Congress and the media during this period reveal a widespread assumption on both sides of the aisle that the public simply did not like foreign aid out of an isolationist impulse and a simple desire to spend the money at home instead.

The attack on aid drew on these assumptions and more. It consisted of four key elements: to frame the issue of aid in terms of a simple exercise of setting priorities; to draw on an underlying narrative of hegemonic overstretch; to feed misconceptions about the amount of aid; and to question the effectiveness of aid, including the charge that the majority of aid dollars ended up in the pockets of corrupt leaders.

Framing the issue in terms of *setting priorities* simply posed the question of whether it is more important to take care of people abroad or people at home. Within this framework, majorities in polls would even agree with statements that the U.S. should not give any foreign aid until certain problems, such as poverty,

are first solved at home. There is a cognitively simple logic in this thinking that many poll respondents are looking for opportunities to express their support for addressing problems at home. This is likely to be especially effective in the context of the current economic downturn and the pressures to cut the U.S. budget deficit. Just as they did during the Clinton administration, critics of aid today will surely juxtapose foreign aid spending with projected spending cuts for vulnerable populations at home.

Opponents of aid would also draw on the narrative of *hegemonic overstretch*. By explicitly, or more often implicitly, citing American contributions to world order—including intervening in the world wars, the Marshall Plan, protecting the world from Communism and opening U.S. markets to foreign goods—opponents would draw on the sense that the U.S. has done more than its share and should focus on problems at home. Numerous polls show that this theme resonated with the public in the 1990s and is also likely to resonate in the current environment as Americans grow increasingly weary of the U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Closely connected to this sense of overstretch were highly *exaggerated assumptions* about how much the U.S. was doing for the world in general and specifically with regard to aid—assumptions that aid opponents fed. In some cases, this was done explicitly, such as Jesse Helms' statement that the U.S. had spent more than \$2 trillion on aid. More often, it was done implicitly—for example, frequent discussions of aid and references to it as a meaningful potential source of deficit reduction contributed to the impression that the amount involved was quite large.

Polls reveal that Americans had grossly exaggerated estimations of the amount of aid actually given by the

United States. Asked to estimate what percentage of the federal budget went to aid, the median estimate was a staggering 20 percent, according to polls by the Program on Policy Attitudes (PIPA) and subsequently by the *Washington Post*, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and other organizations. Some have questioned whether respondents were simply conflating aid with money spent on defense in support of security commitments. However, even when subsequent PIPA polls made clear a differentiation of aid and defense, estimations were the same. It is likely that the exaggerated estimates of aid were fed by the larger narrative of overstretch, which includes defense spending. This misperception is likely. In fact, a recent PIPA poll finds that the median estimate has crept upward to 25 percent.

Yet another arrow in the quiver of attacks on aid was the charge that *aid is simply ineffective*. This was curiously potent, given that little evidence was usually offered other than the fact that there are still many poor people in the world. In one poll, the median estimate was that only 10 percent of the money spent on aid ultimately helped the people who need it. One possible explanation for this perception is the greatly exaggerated assumption about the amount of aid. If the amount of money assumed was indeed being spent, the results actually achieved would have fallen far short of reasonable expectations.

Finally, another charge, also related to aid ineffectiveness, is that most aid ends up in the pockets of corrupt autocrats with poor human rights records. Polls show that Americans do assume that this is the case. They also largely reject the idea that aid should be spent to secure strategic ends; rather, most Americans think that aid should serve altruistic purposes.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Research on public attitudes and the history of the efforts to counter the attacks on aid during the Clinton administration provide meaningful direction for possible responses to attacks on aid in the current environment. Seven recommendations for next steps can be offered.

Confirm the Image of the Public as Supporting Aid—Do Not Implicitly Confirm the Opposite

First, in looking at what not to do, it should be noted that even among aid proponents, there is a strong predilection to accept key premises underlying the attacks on aid. Paramount is an image of the U.S. public as fundamentally isolationist and lacking real concern for people abroad. This has roots in the historical memory of isolationist attitudes in the 1930s and also an elite tendency to assume that the general public lacks the intellectual and moral capabilities to grasp the global context within which foreign aid is important.

This image of the isolationist public can be confirmed in subtle ways. Proponents of foreign aid often approach the public as if it must be persuaded to support aid, to assume that moral motivations are weak and that the public can only be convinced based on effects relevant to self-interest. Research shows that people generally have a tendency to underestimate how much others are willing to act in ways that are altruistic or that address long-term concerns.

When public figures act in ways that confirm this image of the general public as isolationist and opposed to aid, this strengthens the image, gives it currency and leads policymakers and even the public to act in ways that are consistent with the image.

Proponents of aid need to confirm at every opportunity the fact that, though Americans may have reservations about some aspects of the U.S. aid program, an overwhelming majority of Americans are generous and do favor giving foreign aid. One should also recognize that when doing so, one may be fighting against some psychological headwinds blowing in the other direction.

Counter the Priority Frame with a Distributional Frame

Second, as previously discussed, framing the issues in terms of priorities leads to the logical conclusion that the U.S. should not spend any money on aid until problems at home are first solved. This framework is rather easily countered by shifting the issue to a distributional framework and by simply asking what proportion of spending should be devoted to foreign aid. Only a very small number of Americans think that nothing should be spent on aid, and given nearly any distributional framework, Americans tend to assign more to aid than is currently the case. When asked what proportion of the federal budget should go to foreign aid, the median response is invariably 10 percent. PIPA has tried numerous frameworks—how much of the money spent on alleviating poverty should focus on the poor at home and the poor abroad, or how much of the money spent on dealing with international affairs should be devoted to defense and how much to aid—and these invariably lead respondents to prescribe amounts of aid in excess of the actual amount.

A key question to ask in the current environment is how Americans will deal with aid spending given the current pressure for budget cuts. The Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland recently conducted a budget exercise survey that

presented a representative sample of Americans with the discretionary budget divided into 31 line items and then allowed them to make changes while getting constant feedback for the effects of their choices on the deficit. Even in this context, economic aid did relatively well. For all 31 line items, the average cut was 11 percent. For all forms of economic aid combined, the average cut was 8 percent. But there was substantial variation for the four different types of aid. Humanitarian assistance was actually increased by 18 percent; global health was nicked by 2 percent; development assistance was cut by 14 percent; and the Economic Support Fund, which was described as aid to countries of strategic concern to the U.S., was cut by 23 percent. All altruistic aid programs combined were cut by 3 percent. (It should also be noted that, in dollar terms, the numbers presented were based on projections for 2015. Thus, the average actual amount budgeted, after cuts, was \$37.8 billion—substantially more than current levels.)

Counter Exaggerated Assumptions

Third, in the 1990s, the Clinton administration embarked on a major public relations effort focused on countering the American public's overestimation of U.S. spending on foreign aid by emphasizing that the amount was just 1 percent of the U.S. budget. A campaign was developed called "Just 1%" to drive home the message that the amount of aid the White House was seeking was quite small. Cabinet members even wore the "Just 1%" buttons in public. In polls, only very small numbers of Americans thought that 1 percent was too much.

However, changing this perception has been quite difficult, and public perceptions of foreign aid spending have not aligned with actual funding levels. Still, when the correct information is presented, it does

have some impact. Polls that first tell respondents how much of the U.S. budget is devoted to foreign aid and then ask respondents whether they want to increase or decrease the aid spending have found that substantially fewer respondents favored cuts than those who were not first given the information. In polls that first tell respondents how much of the U.S. budget is allocated to foreign aid, support for cuts invariably drops to a minority position. However, support for increases rarely becomes a majority position—many respondents simply do not believe the figures they are told.

It should be noted that because of a broad sense of being overstretched, it is generally not a good idea to frame the U.S. as underperforming in the realm of foreign aid, for example, by highlighting that the U.S. gives a relatively small percentage of its gross national income as aid relative to other developed countries. Americans often bridle at the idea that they are doing little compared with other countries.

Differentiate Foreign Aid from Other Costs of the United States' Role

Fourth, one of the reasons that people are resistant to changing their belief that the amount of aid is so high is that this is linked to a broader and deeply felt narrative: that the United States is doing more than its fair share in maintaining world order. For some decades now, Americans have felt overstretched by the United States' hegemonic role—this is an ongoing point of tension between the American public and the policy elite.

In this context, Americans are looking for opportunities to trim back commitments, especially these days with budgetary pressures. Aid is the most ready and

unambiguous symbol of this sense of perceived overcommitment. And thus it is a natural target for those feelings.

However, when placed in a context with other costs related to the U.S. role, other items are cut more than foreign aid in terms of dollars and the percentage cut. In the budget exercise survey discussed above, when Americans were presented with the discretionary budget, by far the biggest cut was to defense, which was cut by \$109 billion (18 percent), followed by intelligence, which was cut by \$13 billion (15 percent), and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were also cut by \$13 billion (23 percent). As mentioned, nonmilitary aid was cut by 8 percent, and altruistic aid was cut by just 3 percent.

Emphasize Multilateral Frameworks like the MDGs

Fifth, because Americans have a general sense that the U.S. is doing more than its share in world affairs, they are drawn to multilateral frameworks, within which countries contribute proportionally and other countries as well as the U.S. do their “fair share.” This is so potent that it is one of the very few contexts within which a majority of Americans will approve of an increase in taxes to be devoted to aid.

The Millennium Development Goals appear to be such an effective framework. In a 2008 *WorldPublicOpinion.org* poll, Americans were told about the MDG of cutting hunger and severe poverty in half by 2015. They were also presented with the annual per capita increase in aid spending that would be necessary for meeting this goal (based on World Bank estimates), adjusted for national income, which was \$56 a year for Americans. Asked if they

would support this increase, provided that the other developed countries also did their part, 75 percent of respondents said they would.

Address Concerns about Effectiveness

Sixth, perhaps the most difficult challenge is to counter the perception that aid is ineffective. As mentioned, on average, Americans assume that due to corruption and inefficiency, only 10 percent of aid money helps those who need it. Contributing to this perception are many of the normal features of democracy. Investigative reporters highlight stories of corruption and inefficiency far more than successes. Books that offer critiques of current aid practices garner attention through sweeping indictments of the entire aid enterprise.

Proponents of aid need to more effectively seek ways to disseminate stories of success. A lingering image of aid is of the U.S. simply delivering checks to corrupt autocrats in poor countries. Stories that highlight the effective provision of services and recipients' increasing self-sufficiency can help counter this effect. Although some audiences are responsive to numerical summaries of such successes, for others it is essential to provide a poignant story of an individual whose life has changed, complete with imagery of their faces and, whenever possible, their words. Aid is a story of the heart more than the mind.

Channeling aid through nongovernmental organizations is also helpful. Aid NGOs have a positive image, and Americans have said in polls that they believe that aid effectiveness increases substantially when it is passed through NGOs.

Finally, it should always be remembered that most Americans form their assumptions about public

policy matters not through direct experience but primarily by taking cues from people they trust. Should proponents of aid seek to mitigate the corrosive effect of low confidence in the effectiveness of foreign aid, they should seek to systematically mobilize trusted public figures to address this question. One approach could be to establish a high-level commission, similar to the commission established in the wake of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Such a commission would no doubt reveal certain problems, but it would also likely contain what is now a hemorrhage of confidence, which could be easily worsened by a systematic effort to undermine support for aid.

Stay Connected to Compassion toward People

And seventh, in recent years efforts to sell aid to Congress have emphasized its advancement of U.S. national interests. Aid has been depicted as a smart way of enhancing U.S. power especially by improving U.S. relations with other nation-states. Aid has also been portrayed as a means of promoting economic development, which will ultimately help the U.S. by providing markets and generating jobs. Although these arguments may well be effective in relation to members of Congress—they do see their role as serving U.S. national interests—they need to be approached carefully with the public. When presented as a secondary argument, they can be persuasive and provide an auxiliary source of support for aid.

However, if presented as a primary rationale, arguments that appeal to national interest can backfire. Aid programs that are designed to enhance U.S. strategic interests are some of the least popular. In the above-mentioned budget survey, funding for the Economic Support Fund—which was described as “economic development aid to countries of strategic concern to the U.S. such as Afghanistan, Pakistan,

and Egypt”—was cut 23 percent. Military aid to countries “of strategic interest” was also cut 18 percent. However, funding for “humanitarian assistance” was *increased* 18 percent.

The whole notion of giving aid to other *nations* as opposed to needy people does not entirely square well with Americans. It elicits the unsettling feeling that we are bribing nations to be our friends. Americans also tend to assume that the benefits are likely to go to elites in these other countries, many of whom are corrupt and illegitimate, because, after all, they are the ones that have the power to further U.S. interests.

Framing aid as supporting economic growth in other countries is also by itself not entirely persuasive. Here, too, elites—in the U.S. as well as in donor countries—may be perceived as primary beneficiaries. Trickle-down effects will not be automatically assumed.

Americans can understand that promoting economic growth, rather than just trying to ameliorate the symptoms of poverty, may be a smart way to reduce poverty. In focus groups Americans love to tell the story of how teaching a man to fish is better than giving him a fish. But it is essential for this process to not become so abstract that the goal becomes the economic growth of developing nations. The foundation of American public support for aid is the compassionate concern, not for nations but for people. A communication strategy that loses this link does so at its peril.

In summary, the American public has demonstrated that it supports aid to people in developing countries in principle, and that it in practice, during the last decade, it has accommodated a doubling of aid. There are signs that some in Congress may employ argu-

ments against aid, which could play on the doubts about aid and get some traction. However, proponents of aid should not fall prey to the belief that this reveals a fundamental opposition, leading to efforts to persuade Americans to support aid while reifying the image that they do not. For each effort to derail American support for aid, there are responses that can effectively reconnect Americans to their deeper compassion and generosity.

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