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Bovard's Battering

Send Chainsaws to ID

by James Bovard

The Bush administration is earnestly seeking to reform scores of federal programs after the scandal-ridden Clinton years. But sometimes there is no substitute for a good chain saw massacre.

Such is the case with foreign aid. The US is now giving \$15 billion a year in foreign aid-economic and military-around the world. An addiction that first surfaced in the years after World War II has perpetuated itself despite practically no evidence of success.

A good example of the failure of foreign aid popped up in the Washington Post last week. The Clinton administration acted like a great savior for its relief efforts to former East Bloc nations. The Post revealed that an Agency for International Development (AID) project to teach Poles about the wonders of local democracy was a three-star farce:

"On the wall of the Warsaw headquarters of the Polish local government project is a sign... that wryly sums up the experience of the last three years. The 'Six Phases of a Successful Program' are listed as: 1) Enthusiasm; 2) Disillusionment; 3) Panic; 4) Search for the guilty; 5) Punishment of the innocent; 6) Praise and honors for non-participants."

The project seemed far more concerned with enriching American consultants than in benefiting Poles. One Polish consultant told the Post that "dozens of Americans arriving with their wives, dogs, cats and children, caus[ed] many more problems than they were able to solve." Each U.S. consultant sent to Poland cost AID around \$200,000 annually to comfortably maintain. An audit of the project concluded that "Polish counterparts were able to see that the quality was low and resented, justifiably, that [the foreign] experts were being paid large salaries and were producing little."

Former cabinet minister Jerzy Regulski derided the AID project for taking a "colonialist approach," observing: "The attitude of the foreign experts was, 'We have money, we are wise, we know what to do.' But the American experts had never lived under communism. Much of their technical information was not usable in a different political setting" The AID project actually undermined effective, successful Polish organizations, the Post reported, because it came in and lured away their talent with higher salaries _ to work for an organization that did little more than shuffle paper and send progress reports to Washington.

Elsewhere, U.S. aid can bring out the worst in recipient nations. To see an example of how U.S. and other foreign aid fueled the fires of corruption and crony capitalism in Russia, see Janine Wedel's excellent book *Collision and Collusion* (1998). The Justice Department is suing Harvard University and several individuals for \$120 million for defrauding an AID program in Russia.

Foreign aid is money from government, to governments, for governments. Unfortunately, Sen. Jesse Helms, who has fought staunchly against AID abuses over the decades, is now pushing a plan to privatize U.S. foreign aid by giving block grants to nongovernmental groups such as the Catholic Relief Services to do good deeds in the Third World.

But a far better privatization would be for politicians to cease seizing Americans paychecks in order to provide "walking around money" for the Secretary of State - as foreign aid has traditionally been known. The U.S. government has a five trillion dollar debt - it has no right to play spendthrift in order to subsidize the therapy of guilt-stricken affluent liberals.

The Bush administration's handling of foreign aid will be an acid test of whether "compassionate conservatism" is more than mush. The best foreign aid program is American citizens deciding which foreigners (or foreign governments) are worthy to receive their contributions - such as earthquake victims in India or El Salvador. This would be a far better check to waste, fraud, and abuse than anything that AID will ever come up with.

James Bovard, a former World Bank consultant, is the author of "Feeling Your Pain": The Explosion & Abuse of Government Power in the Clinton-Gore Years (St. Martin's Press).