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What Have We Lost?

As I begin, I would like to thank, Jennifer Leopold, who worked as a USAID contractor for 22 years. Jen was an invaluable resource to me for months as I dug deeper into this subject. And she just happens to be the daughter of our dear departed friend and the former executive director of the Quest Club, Mick McCollum.

When I began my research for this paper, I quickly realized that this project was going to prove more difficult than I had anticipated. The USAID online library holding tens of thousands of reports to Congress including contractor reports, assessments, evaluations, the history, the impact – all paid by you and I as American taxpayers and required by law to be public information - is no long available. All USAID public sites were taken down within days of one of the President Trump's first executive order.

Why was USAID CONCEIVED AND FOUNDED

The United States Agency for International Development or USAID was created in 1961 by President Kennedy through Executive Order 10973. It was born at a time when the US government was looking to counter Soviet influence by promoting democracy and economic growth around the world. Congress and President Kennedy viewed foreign humanitarian aid as soft diplomacy - reinforcing the belief that the security of the American people was linked to the economic progress and stability of other nations.

More importantly, it was also believed that “Development” when paired with smart foreign “Diplomacy,” would reduce the need to mobilize the third tool of American foreign policy – which was DEFENSE. Defense is a much more expensive option - financially and with consideration to the loss of human life.

Over the years, USAID grew to have a presence in over 100 low and middle-income countries around the world. By awarding grants and contracts to a broad network of not-for-profit, faith-based, and private sector organizations, both American and country-based, USAID was able to respond to a wide range of challenges. USAID’s primary role was to provide immediate humanitarian relief where needed - famine, civil unrest or natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. The Agency also worked to help strengthen the capacity of institutions in partner countries so that eventually these countries would no longer need US assistance. These “Development” projects focused on strengthening democracy and governance, addressing weaknesses in the health system to improve access and quality of care, and developing opportunities for local private sector and not for profit entities to step up to the plate. In fact, this was the focus of USAID projects for the last ten years, as it worked to transition all initiatives to local entities.

As the world’s largest global donor, USAID represented US interests in some of the largest global multi-lateral organization such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations, The Global Fund for AIDS, Malaria and TB and the Global Alliance for Vaccines.

In 1998, USAID was formalized as an independent agency by an act of Congress through the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act.

From 1961 until 2025, for sixty-four years, USAID's foreign assistance programs fed the starving and provided medical care to some of the world's most vulnerable populations. Over the first two decades of this century, estimates of lives saved every year by USAID range from 4.1 to 4.7 million lives.

Over these decades, both Republican and Democratic leaders have supported USAID and have viewed USAID as an essential tool for US foreign diplomacy and a necessary counter to the influence of authoritarian countries.

In January 2025, immediately after his inauguration, Trump signed an executive order that initiated a 90-day pause for all foreign assistance. The stated goal was to ensure that all foreign aid aligned with "American values" and that all programs deemed "woke," DEI, or wasteful were eliminated.

By March, 2025, 83% of all USAID contracts were cancelled.

By July 1, 2025, the Trump administration had dismantled the agency's operations and reduced its staff from over 10,000 to 75.

The government took months to pay for invoices, even for work that had been completed prior to January 2025. And since most of the operations personnel had been laid off, few were left to process outstanding transactions and to help coordinate the transition home for overseas staff and their families.

International relationships that had taken over six decades to establish - were literally decimated in a matter of weeks. All contracts were cancelled - without compensation. Experienced career professionals lost their jobs. Contractors were furloughed without pay. Offices

closed. Leases were broken. Supplies were left to rot at border controls and in warehouses. Small local organizations were left unpaid for services already planned and approved. Support staff were put on immediate administrative leave. USAID employees stationed overseas were ordered to return home, pulling their kids from schools and unceremoniously leaving their adopted communities behind.

USAID officials never conducted “exit” interviews.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service “USAID cannot be abolished, moved or consolidated without authorization from Congress.” At this time, USAID technically remains a legal entity - because only an act of Congress can officially abolish an agency established by statute.

USAID’S impact on our World

In the most remote corners of the world, people have little opportunity to learn about the United States. They may have a KFC in the capital city and they most likely have seen an American movie. But otherwise, what they know about the United States are the humanitarian relief packages, donated medicines, schools and health centers all marked with USAID’s tagline “a gift from the American people.” This logo was emblazoned on the all crates, equipment and resources that USAID distributed worldwide.

Conversely, most American’s never had the opportunity to see USAID activities for themselves. It’s not likely that any one of us will vacation or go on a mission trip in Sudan or Somalia. Most Americans had very little understanding of USAID and how it played a role in US foreign

policy. One good example is that most Americans did not realize that less than 1% (or more accurately 7/10 of 1%) or \$40 billion was spent for all foreign aid compared to 15% being spent for our defense budget.

Please allow me to delineate the work that USAID did on behalf of the American people.

For over six decades, USAID provided food, medicine, shelter and access to clean water in some of the bleakest parts of the world.

USAID also combated child sexual trafficking as well as resettling refugees and supplying shelter to displaced people across the globe. Its programs treated displaced Gazans and offered security and shelter to Haitians fleeing gang violence. It had been responsible for building field hospitals in war ravaged Syria and removing land mines in Cambodia, funding vaccination programs in Nigeria and access to food, water electric and basic health care for millions of people in eastern Congo.

It was estimated that more than 3 million lives were saved every year through USAID's immunization program alone.

Humanitarian Relief

Much of USAID's budget was devoted to addressing humanitarian and health crises abroad. Through its vast global network, USAID was quickly able to respond to natural disasters, providing critical communication and technology support, management and coordination as well as the supply of emergency water, food and supplies. Because the outcome of anticipating and preventing diseases overseas meant preventing these emergencies from reaching our own shores. Americans were safer when infectious threats were effectively diagnosed and managed on foreign lands.

Allow me to address a few of the areas of health where USAID has led the way on global health.

Malaria

Malaria kills more than 500,000 people a year – about $\frac{3}{4}$ are children under age 5.

Through USAID, President George W Bush launched the President's Malaria Initiative or PMI. Since its inception in 2006, PMI reduced the malaria mortality rate by 50 percent in the 30 countries it served.

HIV/AIDS

In the early 1990s, HIV/AIDS was killing millions of people around the world, including infants born to infected mothers. A whole generation of children was growing up without parents.

The President's Emergency plan for AIDS relief (PEPFAR) launched in 2003 by the Bush Administration was put into law with broad bipartisan support and saved more than 25 million lives. Once infected, a person is always infected but with a continued course of antiretrovirals, the virus can be kept at bay, reducing transmission and allowing an HIV+ person to live a full and productive life. More than 20 million people – 500,000 of them children - were receiving HIV treatment through the program before these services were shuttered.

With the abrupt closing of USAID in South Africa, doctors were forced to end an HIV prevention trial leaving their female patients with experimental implants inside their bodies without any ongoing medical oversight.

EBOLA

During the 2014 West Africa outbreak during which more than 11,000 people died, USAID oversaw the training of local health care workers, the building of Ebola treatment centers and passenger screening at the borders and at airports.

Just days into Trump's second term, Uganda reported another Ebola outbreak. This time, though, the foreign aid freeze meant that USAID was unable to supply the usual resources for transporting lab specimens or implementing screening.

It was just too late. DOGE had already eliminated the budget line item and had actively dismantled the infrastructure the country relied on to detect and confront deadly pathogens.

The State Department had canceled crucial contact tracing and surveillance efforts.

The World Health Organization (WHO), stepped up without America's leadership, cooperation or expertise. Since that time Trump has signed an executive order to withdraw America from WHO. WHO is now the only international organization that can identify and respond to emerging threats.

Going forward the US will have to wait on WHO guidance for that crucial health decision and download the recipe for next year's flu shot.

Both California and Illinois have now joined WHO's global Outbreak Alert and Response Network independent of our federal government in an effort to protect their state's residents.

As America keeps abdicating its leadership it will be forced to rely on an organization - WHO - whose funding America has slashed and whose collaboration it has severed.

On a side note, about 750 CDC staff were also let go in 2025 cuts- including many who were stationed on outbreak front lines across the globe. CDC communications such as the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report – which health providers relied on to track health threats were abruptly paused for the first time in over 60 years. Whether the issue is the dismantling of USAID, defunding WHO or hobbling the CDC the end result is the same. America is walking away from global health leadership – thus making America and the entire world less safe.

Until recently countries had compelling reasons to report outbreaks -even if such information came with travel bans or stigmatizing restrictions. Those sticks were often worth the carrots – namely USAID and CDC expertise and funding. Now with no carrots to offer why would any country submit to the stick. Future outbreaks may be reported too late or not at all – leaving America oblivious to emerging health crises. We ALL remember the Coronavirus.

FOOD

Globally nearly half of all deaths among children under 5 are attributed to malnutrition. When children reach the most severe stage of malnutrition, those old enough to have teeth can lose them. Black hair

turns orange as cells stop synthesizing pigment. Their bodies shrivel and some lose the capacity to feel hunger at all.

In 2025, DOGE cancelled USAID contracts with two American companies which provided lifesaving peanut paste to about 3 million children. It's a pouch – basically an oversized ketchup packet – of peanut butter fortified with powdered milk, sugar, vitamins and minerals that is easier for shrunken stomachs to digest than a full meal. The packets do not need to be refrigerated making them useful in hunger prone settings like refugee camps and war zones.

The World Food Program which distributed the paste and the two American companies who produced the paste received an email on April 4, 2025 that said plans for 10 countries to receive the emergency paste would not move forward. The American companies had been contracted to produce and deliver one million boxes of therapeutic food. That inventory is now sitting in American warehouses where it will likely expire with no distribution or transportation structure in place.

Health experts report that these ready to use therapeutic foods are the singular public health achievement of the last several decades – perhaps even more consequential than antibiotics or vaccines.

SCHOOL

In numerous countries, USAID worked with local organizations to support community schools. Specifically In Afghanistan, schools for girls were closed. And under the Taliban's rules, these girls would not be able to continue their formal education.

FIRESALE

In normal times, when a USAID project concluded, its leftover usable goods were methodically inventoried, then distributed to other projects or local partners who could put them to good use. This time, quite obviously, was different. Federal and humanitarian workers scrambled to run a mass closeout before their own termination or their project's bankruptcy with little guidance or leadership at USAID or the State Department. The result was that millions of dollars of equipment that the United States had already purchased was auctioned off at an extreme loss, given away or simply abandoned.

In Nigeria a small team orchestrated the handoff of at least 140 vehicles and 1,350 pieces of furniture and IT equipment. Former USAID workers believe the items went to local health ministries but there is seemingly no record of where USAID's assets had gone. USAID staff stated that much of the direction they received regarding the transition was informal in nature often with no follow up to document the decisions taken.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) also operated a network of health clinics in Afghanistan and when that funding was terminated several were forced to close. The organization gathered the leftover supplies, tables, stethoscopes, gloves and lifesaving medicines to restock its surviving clinics. Legally those items were the property of the US government which had not greenlighted this redistribution. But in the absence of US guidance IRC used the resources that would most likely have been left for scrap or expired.

Because of the cancellation of USAID, iPads, defibrillators, water towers, printers, iPads, chairs, generators, textbooks, agricultural equipment, motorbikes, mobile health clinics and more - once the property of the

US government and all American taxpayers - were simply auctioned off for pennies or abandoned. USAID staff expressed concern that because of the rush and lack of staffing some computers were not properly scrubbed of information.

MEDIA

USAID had also supported a wide range of independent media and literacy programs in a number of authoritarian countries including Hungary and Russia in an effort to foster gratitude between the people living in authoritarian regimes and the United States.

It was another supreme example of soft power: working through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.

In 2023, according to Reporters without Borders, USAID funded training and other support for 6,200 journalists and aided 707 nonstate media outlets encouraging the free flow of information.

A week after USAID was closed last year, the Russian government officials revealed that they had established a worldwide development agency modeled on the one that the Trump Administration had just dismantled.

The Russian government began promoting the Russian language and culture in Ukraine and abroad. They financed study trips to Russia and began to host international conferences with journalists, activists and scholars.

Currently, Russia is running 96 centers across 45 countries that promote Russian language and culture through exhibitions, lectures, and academic partnerships.

Moscow now has the opportunity to present itself as a protector to the many nations the US once supported but has since abandoned. That's an opportunity Russia is not going to waste. The age of Russian soft power has arrived.

And with USAID's demise, authoritarian leaders from around the world are now celebrating the destruction of perhaps one of the most important and influential humanitarian organizations in the world.

WHY WAS USAID SENT TO THE WOOD CHIPPER

PROJECT 2025

Project 2025, the conservative playbook drafted by the Heritage Foundation included an entire chapter on how to overhaul USAID. The Project's authors urged the President to "scale back USAID's global footprint, deradicalize its programs and throttle its funding."

But Project 2025 did not outline the complete elimination of USAID and foreign aid. It did not call for the freezing all foreign aid, shuttering the USAID headquarters and releasing over 10,000 USAID employees and contractors here and abroad.

After the Trump inauguration, the DOGE team embedded itself within USAID gaining sweeping access to the agency's payment system while thousands of USAID employees (both here and abroad) were placed on administrative leave.

Musk, the DOGE Director, boasted about feeding USAID into the wood chipper. He called USAID "evil" and "criminal." According to Musk, USAID was "a viper's nest of radical left Marxists who hate America." He added, "it isn't an apple with a worm in it but rather a ball of worms." "Time for USAID to die."

USAID, like most government entities, was not perfect. It was overly reliant on contractors, often bureaucratic and prone to paying consultants with money that could be used elsewhere.

But USAID operations were legally scrutinized and subject to frequent audits as required by law. Over the years, funding for USAID was given directly to American contractors and local non-profits - rather than to foreign governments. If the USAID-funded entity did not meet that mark, that entity was shut down.

As an example, in 2011, the Academy for Educational Development (AED) a major US based non-profit contractor was suspended following allegations of false claims, misconduct and poor internal controls in Afghanistan and Pakistan. AED settled with USAID for over \$5 million and immediately dissolved as a company

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DISCUSS THE DEMISE OF USAID AND WHAT WE HAVE LOST

WHAT CAN I DO

Supporters for USAID argued that shuttering the agency exposed Americans to a greater risk of outbreaks such as Ebola and bird flu, stifled future markets for domestic producers and cedes the great power competition to China and to Russia. These arguments are accurate and important but they have overtaken a more fundamental and more persuasive reason for the US to invest in foreign aid: Foreign assistance has always been essential to America's identity

What Remains of foreign aid now

The Republicans, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio, whom USAID once counted upon have now gone silent. Few faith leaders are decrying the slashing of foreign aid.

Records now indicate that about 75 employees currently manage the few remaining contracts and are helping to transfer the remaining USAID functions to the State Department

Some good news? On December 29, 2025, the US and the UN signed an agreement for \$2 billion in humanitarian aid administered through the United Nations. This funding will help but cannot replace the scale and breadth of aid and services that were cut.

In legal news, several former USAID employees sued Elon Musk for unlawfully dismantling the agency. A judge denied the government's request to block depositions from Elon Musk and other former USAID officials. Too late to restore the work of USAID but perhaps there will be some accountability as to why USAID had to die.

In Summary – my thoughts?

I have a lot of questions – few answers

Through PROJECT 2025 the Trump Administration was intent on cutting foreign aid. But there was never any discussion on how important foreign alliances were or any attempt to streamline or make USAID work more efficiently.

And there were never any plans on how to efficiently dismantle USAID. Not even an excel spread sheet! Why was there no planned strategy on how to close down an international humanitarian agency that had existed (and changed the world) for 64 years.

THE 2025 BUDGET for USAID was \$40 billion (remember 7/10s of 1% of the annual federal budget). Compare all the good (not perfect) that was done with those dollars. Compare all the tens of millions of dollars of loss that will never be recouped when America pulled out of over 100 countries with little notice or preparation.

DOES AMERICA FIRST MEAN AMERICA ALONE. Millions of people around the world were being served in substantial ways. We were able to soften hearts outside of our country because we were serving others whether it was through shelter, immunizations, health care, food, media, providing conflict assistance or any of the other services USAID offered. And we were able to anticipate health and other trends based on what American workers were viewing on the ground. Why does America's current leadership believe that it is better that America be isolated from our neighbors and allies.

Who will fill THE GAP?

Authoritarian countries will take leadership as far as messaging and propaganda. But human rights will be ignored. Lives will be lost. The humanitarian work simply will not be done. No country will be able to fill this role as well as the United States did. Systems will not be built. Civil and democratic societies will be hushed.

ARE WE AS AMERICANS really willing to give up our role as global leaders? Are we OKAY with that? Is that who we are?

Are we as a country (and a world) now safer, healthier and more economically settled than we were a year ago?

Thank you.

