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## Taking America's Side

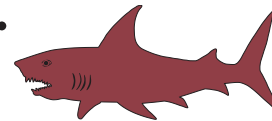
Meet a charity that bolsters the U.S. military and its allies

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# Mini-Mouse vs. Megalodon



By Karl Zinsmeister

► **T**his issue of *Philanthropy* magazine is an extended look at little versus big, at aid versus arm-twisting, at inspiration versus intimidation. It asks whether lots of helpful little mice can fend off huge scary sharks. And it does all this within an unusual philanthropic niche—charities that support foreign-policy and national-defense goals.

Begin by examining the photograph on the opposite page. I shot it a couple months ago in the heart of the Caucasus—a strategic crossroads ringed by Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and other hot-button nations. As this picture was taken, there were separatist boundary lines, gun trucks, propaganda broadcasters, foreign-funded madrassahs, ethnic extremists, and armed forces of all stripes looming over the horizon.

What you are looking at is one of the hundreds of work camps organized and paid for by China through its so-called “Belt and Road Initiative”—a vast play for influence across the low-income world. In scores of frail countries, the Chinese are laying down rail lines, bridges, highways, and docks. They are building telecom networks, shipping hubs, and ports. They are creating facial-recognition networks and other police infrastructure. They are snatching up manufacturing plants, pipelines, and refineries. In the first 11 months of 2019, Chinese entities signed 6,055 contracts in 61 countries for Belt and Road projects costing \$128 billion.

During a half-day drive across the tiny but strategic country of Georgia I peered down into half a dozen camps like the one pictured here, where Chinese laborers, engineers, and equipment were digging, blasting, and pouring concrete. I asked my traveling companions if we

could pull into one of the facilities and grab a few moments to look around and take photos until we got kicked out. The man at the wheel, a former Special Forces soldier, was instantly game, and steered our SUV off the highway and down a gravel road to one of the Chinese camps.

I jumped out and strode quickly down a tidy row of spartan offices marked “Payroll,” “Engineering,” “Contracts,” and such. I reached a sign marking the “Commissary,” and then a series of large buildings labeled “Dorm 1, 2, 3, 4” and so forth. This is a major operation. Hortatory placards in Chinese and broken English urge that “Proper behavior lead a better future,” and trumpet “The Belt and Road: Building Prosperity Together.”

Very soon, large unsmiling Chinese men appeared and told us we could not take photos and must leave immediately. The Special Warfare and PsyOps backgrounds of my two ex-military colleagues immediately kicked in. They explained in a mix of languages and pantomime that we needed to get off the highway because the human bladder has a mind of its own. That all these big signs covered with red kanji got us hoping we might find a good Chinese buffet down this gravel road. That it sure did feel nice to stretch our legs and breathe the mountain air. A burly Chinese officer took a picture of our license plate as we pulled away.

► **T**wo weeks later in Serbia I saw more Belt and Road projects: A bridge across the Danube in Belgrade. The new A2 motorway. Tunnels. Rail lines. Huge tire and steel plants taken over by Chinese state-owned firms. All

representing large investments of labor, expenditure, and effort.

And in the Balkans, China’s interventions are unfolding cheek-by-jowl with major manipulations by the Russians. Russia runs extensive propaganda, intelligence, and military operations in the region. Russians have captured control of the major energy companies in Serbia. In the southern part of that country they recently built a large secure facility labeled in one-foot letters, “Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center.” Experts, however, say that the windowless gray building next to an airport is a lightly disguised intelligence and military base. When I try to visit, a soldier tells me I cannot enter or take pictures.

In Iraq, where I also traveled on this trip, the Chinese very recently clinched a 20-year oil-for-infrastructure deal that will send more than 100,000 barrels of petroleum to China every day. Beijing gets the simultaneous right to build factories, railways, and other facilities in Iraq that will be overseen by Chinese managers and use Chinese materials and operating systems, making them a seamless extension of China’s domestic operations. All of this financed by loans from the Chinese government. Meanwhile, the state-owned Russian oil company Rosneft, operating as a tool of the Kremlin, has provided the Kurdistan government with \$4 billion over the last couple years to gain effective control over the large oil and gas resources in Iraq’s north.

And it’s not just countries I visited like Georgia, Serbia, and Iraq. Across the globe, Russians are newly assertive in their foreign policy, and hundreds of thousands of Chinese are toiling in Belt and Road work camps. The





Chinese are building thousands of miles of road and rail, 42 seaports, and plan to spend \$900 billion in 70 countries over the foreseeable future—drawing many strategic, resource-rich, contested countries into their orbit.

► Does the U.S. government need its own mega programs to mirror these aggressive Chinese and Russian moves? A new Marshall Plan for the information era? An infrastructure blitz for huddled masses all around the world?

Or maybe we need our version of the Chinese military mobilization that has dredged fresh islands in the South China Sea and then armed them? Is their system of high-tech personal monitoring and dissent-suppression the way of the future? Must we organize a counterpart to the disinformation and commando operations the Russians have used to seize territory in Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, and elsewhere?

Lord save us! Those strong-arm tactics are not American methods. And the notion that Washington

might employ big industrial policies to curry favor with poor citizens abroad just makes us giggle. Our bureaucratic agencies can't run a reliable health service for Native Americans or veterans, oversee efficient train or postal operations, or keep homeless encampments from blocking commuter traffic.

Building edifice complexes across the developing world is not something our federal government could pull off. The Chinese send thousands of workers to remote regions for multi-year stints, where they sleep in dormitory bunk beds and live on cafeteria food. Our nation lacks the social regimentation to accomplish that. At American levels of wages, worker protection, capital expense, and environmental care, the costs for us

to complete similar projects would be many multiples of what the Chinese are spending. We can't beat them at that game.

So are we powerless to respond? Have we been checkmated by today's savvy, if sometimes brutal, exercises in power politics by the Chinese and Russian regimes? Must we just sit on our hands and watch contested parts of the globe turn sullen toward us and indebted to our opponents?

In a word: No.

► First of all, most of the Chinese investments will have less ultimate value to the recipient nations than might appear. Belt and Road contracts stipulate that most work be carried out by Chinese workers, that

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Mega projects sometimes create mega problems.  
Human-to-human contact  
can be a good counter measure.

machinery must be bought from Chinese firms, that capital goods will be imported from China tax exempt. All of the trucks and machines in the adjoining photo were brought in from the People's Republic. Same with materials. With little local sourcing, this kind of construction doesn't offer much economic boost to the recipient nation.

To make these transactions easy for host countries, the Chinese offer massive loans. But of course loans must eventually be paid back. Experts accuse the Chinese of hiding the fact that a large fraction of the public-works projects they sponsor will never return their investment, requiring either permanent subsidies or forfeiture.

When the Sri Lankan government recently found it couldn't meet the payments on a new port, it had to give China a 99-year lease on the facility plus 15,000 acres of surrounding land in exchange for debt forgiveness. Indian and U.S. intelligence have long warned the Chinese want a naval base there. A highway the Chinese are now building in Montenegro (despite E.U. warnings it was uneconomic) has sent debt soaring so high in that small nation that a freeze on wages, an end to family supports, and a tax increase have been necessary. Even so the road is likely to end up as an incomplete highway leading nowhere.

Many countries—Pakistan, Mongolia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Djibouti, the Maldives, Laos, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and others—are similarly drowning under their Belt and Road obligations to China. The Center for Global Development estimates that 31 countries already have debt problems linked to B&R work. “China never cares how and if a country is able to pay its loans,” says European Union

Commissioner Johannes Hahn. There is simply “pressure that things are transferred into their ownership” if a beneficiary can't repay.

Even as China expands its Belt and Road initiative, some countries are beginning to object. Big construction efforts in Pakistan, Malaysia, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Myanmar, and other places have been put on hold. Critics are expressing concern about “debt-trap diplomacy,” an attempt to create “tribute states” that kowtow to Beijing, and a “new colonialism.”

B&R projects often bring environmental damage. As the treatment of the mountain river in my photo hints, little care is taken on that front, and there are complaints of deteriorated land, water, and air quality. There are also objections to safety and job conditions from those working in Chinese-managed facilities.

So the sharkish megalodon strategies of China and Russia aren't invincible. They have weaknesses, can be overbearing, and have inflamed some recipient nations. Mega projects sometimes create mega problems. This creates openings for U.S. countermeasures, if we will act.

► **T**he first step is to recognize that America's global competitors are making formidable power plays in ways that endanger peace, prosperity, and freedom. The Chinese and Russians are pressing us with greater economic power, more dangerous technology, and at least as much determination and mental cunning as the Soviet Union managed during its long struggle for world ascendancy.

A gauntlet has been thrown down for Americans. Hard military actions and savvy economic measures will be required to navigate it. We'll also need efforts to win hearts and minds, using the soft strengths of our nation: the good faith of our people, and the allure of our liberty-based culture. This latter work is often done best outside of government.

It's far from inevitable that megalodon will gobble us up. But we can't just sit still while it circles. We need to defend ourselves. And the creativity and independence of America's privately funded civil society can be very helpful in this.

The feature article you will read starting on page 19 is an embedded travelogue that sketches some of the ways donor-funded operations can contribute to today's stiff foreign challenges. The tale will carry you through war-wracked countries so you can observe the work of an innovative charity called Spirit of America that is tightly focused on national security. If you think of defense and foreign policy as the ultimate government monopoly, this reporting may change your perspective.

The story suggests one of the best ways we can win friends and influence enemies around the world is through decentralized human-to-human philanthropy—taking advantage of grassroots American inventiveness and the capacity of our values to inspire others. This narrative documents a practical working model, not a theory. It suggests that the classic mechanisms of U.S. charitable action are a realistic way of building international trust and cooperation.

While our sprawling, multi-viewpoint, individual-centered free society will never be good at ten-year plans and big-hammer, heavy-power, central-investment strategies, we don't need to be. We have our own secret weapons. Very different ones from what the Chinese and Russians wield. Our secret weapons can be seen in the photos just to the right.

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Overseas power plays are endangering peace and freedom. America needs to draw on the generosity and good faith of our people, and the allure of our liberty-based culture, in responding.





Thousands of small, personal, transparent, humane transactions, offering others a hand in heartfelt ways—these are our strength. Such interventions often require only modest amounts of money, channeled quickly to the right person in the heart of a community in need. We can provide that kind of grassroots aid in myriad places, to people of every sort. More than a million charities do that kind of work across our country every day, changing lives without central orchestration, without coercion, without squashing individual or cultural dignity. U.S. philanthropy can work the same magic in conflict zones overseas.

Of course, small-scale, rapid-response aid works only if it is executed with careful discernment, genuine kindness, prudent judgment, and respect for local conditions. But American charitable groups have been learning how to do this well for more than three centuries. We are now expert at translating individual aid and encouragement into effective social change, and are able to do this internationally as well as domestically.

And by the way, philanthropic action can be especially effective against threats that are more limited than our competitions with Russia and China. Both in our long feature article and in Ashley May's story on page 38, we touch on ways that donor-funded efforts are reducing dangers from terror attacks, and "irregular" warfare.

Deft micro-actions can make the difference between hatred and trust,

suspicion and reassurance, war and peace. America already makes many friends around the globe this way; it has the potential to do much more. Donors and social entrepreneurs merely need to recognize that they can play a role in national security just as they do in every other sector of society.

Readers of *Philanthropy* magazine and our *Almanac of American Philanthropy* know that small charitable acts don't necessarily mean small results. We've illustrated over and over how localized deeds of civil society can accumulate, as small streams join into mighty rivers, to create major transformation. There is nothing automatic about this, though. We need to work at it, to reach out to freedom-loving allies in other countries, to take national-security philanthropy seriously.

Of course a huge volume of American charitable activity already takes place in foreign lands. In fact, we give a lot more to struggling people abroad every year acting as individuals, through philanthropic mechanisms, than we do as a national government. But the activities described in this issue's two feature stories are different from what our purely humanitarian charities do overseas.

Hardly any of today's charitable gifts made to foreigners by Americans are oriented toward explicit security and diplomatic goals. We give aid simply to battle disease, shelter disaster victims,

feed the hungry, provide pure water, etc. Those are marvelous causes where we can be proud of our leadership. These gifts have no expedient aim, they just come out of religious feeling, gratitude for our economic good fortune, and desires to reduce human suffering.

But there is nothing illegitimate about also providing charity in support of U.S. military and diplomatic goals: More freedom and individual self-determination. More prosperity. Rule of law. Reduced bullying and domination of weak persons, minority groups, or states. And stability across regions so that everyday people can live unthreatened, build families, and pursue their dreams without the intrusion of ideological clashes or calamitous violence.

Will the prevailing international norm 20 years from now be a USA-inflected system of liberty? Or will shadowy mixes of surveillance, manipulation, and subordination of individual rights to state power predominate across the globe? How safe will it be for U.S. travelers to walk foreign streets? Will our companies be welcomed? Will the world be friendly to American values?

The answers to those questions will have something to do with whether we make more room in our philanthropic universe for groups that support U.S. servicemembers and diplomats—through person-to-person generosity and small-scale community action—as they battle tumult over the next generation. **P**

# National Security Philanthropy



By Karl Zinsmeister

**Take an overseas tour with a one-of-a-kind nonprofit that uses charitable micro efforts to blunt foreign threats**



**REPUBLIC  
OF GEORGIA  
THIS WAY**

**T**he ancient nation of Georgia huddles right where Europe, Asia, and the Middle East grind together in rocky snowclad peaks. For millennia, the mountainous terrain protected its people, allowing a venerable culture to grow up. Georgia has its own alphabet (one of only a dozen or so in use). The local literature dates to the fourth century

and continues to be cherished by many residents. The region's haunting multi-voice singing is the oldest polyphonic music in Christendom (and alive and well—I only had to stand next to an open window in Tbilisi to take in a glorious rehearsal). The world's most antique strains of wine grapes are cultivated here, then vinted in unusual ways. Christianity arrived in Georgia way back in the first century. And for the 10 percent of the population that is Muslim you will find here a mosque where adherents of Islam's Sunni and Shia branches pray side by side—something almost unheard of anywhere else.

The last century, however, has brought conflict to Georgia. That makes it an excellent place for the 501c3 charity known

as Spirit of America to go to work. Spirit is a unique nonprofit that works closely with U.S. military forces and diplomats to help them be successful. If you think defense and national security are fields with little room for charity work, the reporting that follows may surprise you.

## **A Russia problem**

When I first visited Georgia in 1982 it was a territory of the Soviet Union. In fact, Joseph Stalin grew up here. During my November 2019 inspection tour I stopped by the museum commemorating the dictator's birthplace. Back in the days of the USSR it was built as a shrine. Today it feels like a mausoleum, mostly ignored since Georgia joyfully became a free nation again in 1991.



In the capital city of Tbilisi there is now an alternative attraction—the national Museum of the Soviet Occupation. It uses photos, artifacts, and statistics to document the damage and death that flowed from Russia's over-running of Georgia in 1921. The exhibits climax in a set of blood-red letters: "Total victims 880,000." That out of a national population of 4 million.

Today, Georgia still has a serious Russia problem. That's the reason Spirit of America operates in the country. It's what I am here to observe.

After Georgia withdrew from the USSR, a long build-up of tension finally flashed into hot war in 2008. Over 80,000 Russian troops poured into two Georgian provinces, and Russian warplanes and artillery bombarded other cities, including the capital. Simultaneous with their physical invasion the Russians launched cyberattacks and an information war—their first use of a tactic they have since honed.

The Georgian security forces were quickly routed, with 184 killed and another 1,200 wounded, plus hundreds of civilian casualties. The Russians never left the two invaded provinces, which are now administered by Russian civilians backed by Russian forces garrisoned at permanent bases. Their residents use Russian passports and Russian currency. Local proxies destroyed Georgian villages and carried out ethnic cleansing, reducing total population in the two occupied sectors by about half.

In the rest of Georgia, meanwhile, citizens became even more adamantly pro-Western, pro-NATO, and pro-American. More than 6,000 Georgian soldiers participated in the Coalition effort in Iraq. Some were killed there and a few hundred came home injured.

The first Spirit of America project I visit in Georgia is a factory set up to build wheelchairs. Spirit discovered that electric mobility devices were needed for a national backlog of 160 disabled veterans (some from the Russo-Georgian war, some from Iraq). So the charity offered to help.

We enter a ramshackle industrial building filled with drill presses, metal saws, posters of pinup girls in



Nick Israel (center) and Chris Van Johnson of Spirit of America talk to **wheelchair factory manager Giorgi Dzeladze** and one of his disabled workers. This social enterprise—supported by the U.S. embassy and military and assisted by Spirit of America—was set up by Georgia's main charity for handicapped citizens, which was created by Dzeladze's father after a broken neck left him paralyzed.

wheelchairs, and a large computer-controlled laser cutter labeled, "Provided by USAID." A grant from our Agency for International Development allowed a local nonprofit serving disabled people to establish this workshop. The aim was to create personal transport machines adapted to the rough streetscapes and modest incomes of Georgia. We inspect the operation's all-terrain designs—including a battery-powered wheelchair that costs about half as much as a U.S. model, and is much lighter to lug in and out of vehicles and apartments.

Last year the plant was having trouble convincing the Georgian government to buy its products. Bureaucrats were pecking away at the long list of injured veterans by purchasing used electric wheelchairs made abroad. So Spirit of America made a quick grant of \$4,500 to purchase the first three models of the new local product. These prototypes were donated to disabled Georgians and used every day, proving the design.

With this small investment delivered just when the company needed support, Spirit was thus able to help the firm pass through a debt crisis and toward prosperity. Today it manufactures more than 200 wheelchairs per month, and is about to move to a larger factory to accommodate its growth. It is making sales inside and outside of the country, and includes several disabled men among its employees.

"Our next goal, working with the U.S. embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation, is to help Georgia's agency for veterans smooth out some cumbersome bureaucratic procedures so they can provide these efficient, locally made machines to the remaining wounded veterans who need one," says Nick Israel, who is managing this project for Spirit of America. "We're thanking Georgians for their military assistance during the War on Terror, supporting a local social enterprise, and standing beside them as they cope with a difficult Russian neighbor."

During hours of car time as we traverse Georgia I come to know Nick Israel as a bright-eyed man in a high-and-tight haircut whose lips perpetually curl in a ready smile, hinting at the ease with which he turns new acquaintances into fast friends. Judging by his intense curiosity, he was almost certainly the kind of child who drove adults crazy with perpetual "why?" and "how come?" queries. This sense of wonder, however, has turned him into something extremely valuable to a philanthropy that aims to understand and influence overlooked societies: He is a walking, talking encyclopedia of obscure ethnic, political, and cultural knowledge.

*Karl Zinsmeister is editor in chief of Philanthropy magazine and creator of The Almanac of American Philanthropy.*





At the boundary with **Abkhazia, a province of Georgia occupied by Russian troops**, Pakhulani's schoolmaster, far right, talks with Spirit of America staff and security personnel, with European Union monitors in the background, and the Caucasus looming above.

As hinted by his cornfield-flat accent and guileless warmth, Israel grew up in our Midwest, the son of a lawyer and an art teacher. After studying Russian and Eastern European history at the University of Michigan he took his honors degree into the Army. During his eight-year career in the full-time military (he is still a reservist) he served first as an armor officer, then, after completing Russian language courses and special-warfare training, moved into psychological operations within the Special Forces.

PsyOps specialists are known as the Army's nerdy "Goths." In almost any gathering of subject-matter experts, Nick's long marination in Zionism, Baltic history, Slav demography, obscure political parties of the Caucasus, various religious splinter groups, and other European and Middle Eastern arcana would qualify him as a wizard. He reads voraciously, and is the kind of autodidact who can get lost for hours plowing through chronicles of Estonian culture or Balkan language. And his spaniel-puppy exuberance has allowed him to build a vast collection of friends and useful contacts.

### Airwave diplomacy

Now Nick is leading us across Georgia toward the Black Sea and Abkhazia—one of the two provinces occupied by Russian military forces. This contested region is a natural focus of U.S. military and diplomatic interest. Our first stop is a private broadcaster that shares entertainment, news, and community feeling across the armed boundary line that now separates the rest of Georgia from what only Russia, Syria, Nauru, Venezuela, and Nicaragua have recognized as the Republic of Abkhazia.

Radio Atinati—loosely translated as “a ray of light in the dark”—was established by an idealistic couple who also run nonprofit schools in the Georgian city of Zugdidi (which was temporarily occupied by Russian troops during the Russo-Georgian War). Its aim is to support the free exchange of information and maintain relationships across the boundary with Abkhazia. Today a station staff of 18 journalists and program hosts beam music, chat, and news across the region in a variety of languages. The operation is supported

by a mix of grants from Americans and Europeans, plus advertising.

Though it avoids overtly anti-Russian messaging, the station's commitment to openness and freedom has periodically gotten its transmitters bombed and its signal jammed. Recently a pro-Russian station in Abkhazia commenced programming on the exact same FM frequency. But Radio Atinati now has 100,000 Internet listeners who need only a computer connection to tune in. (You can listen yourself at [radioatinati.ge](http://radioatinati.ge).)

This useful resource, in this strategic region, is supported by Spirit of America not with money but with expertise. Several years ago, the Gerson Lehrman Group became one of Spirit's supporters. A network of thousands of technical experts organized by Mark Gerson and Thomas Lehrman, GLG makes its money by brokering the advice of scientists, academics, and businesspeople to investors in need of industry knowledge. Thanks to the generosity of the GLG founders (Mark Gerson's personal philanthropy was profiled in the Spring 2018 issue of this magazine), some of its experts are also made available to Spirit of America and other charitable groups on a pro bono basis.

Spirit arranged for a GLG expert on the operation of prisons, for instance, to guide U.S. military advisers in Bangladesh who were eager to help tamp down Islamic radicalization in that nation's lockups. Another GLG expert who was an experienced Bechtel Corporation executive assisted Spirit in Panama, where locals needed assistance in fending off predatory contract provisions in infrastructure projects offered by the Chinese.

Tom Schurr, formerly a top executive at U.S. market leader Clear Channel Radio, was first recruited through GLG to help Spirit set up ArmyFM. That is a radio broadcaster created in Ukraine to balance a barrage of Russian propaganda and improve morale among soldiers battling Russia's invasion of the eastern part of their country. With Schurr's expertise and more than \$100,000 donated by Spirit to buy the first transmitter and other equipment,



ArmyFM quickly grew into a multi-station network popular with its audience, and then a TV broadcaster, both now well supported by Ukrainian officials.

In October 2019, Spirit brought Schurr to Georgia. He spent time studying Radio Atinati's operations, then recommended ways to strengthen them. In particular he encouraged a heavier emphasis on advertising to provide the station with a more stable economic base. Having now donated his expertise in three intensive consulting trips, Schurr is impressed with Spirit's sharp, dedicated program directors and the group's ability to get things done. "My father was an Annapolis grad and career military," he says, "and I admire Spirit's competence and quiet dedication to helping our nation and its friends."

### Walnuts and life change

At our next stop we watch Radio Atinati journalists in action. We drive to a little rural school in the village of Pakhulani. Located at the western edge of Georgia, hard up against one of the few remaining road crossings into Abkhazia, this is a sensitive area closely monitored by European Union observers and American diplomatic and military personnel.

The Abkhazian and Russian guards allow a small flow of goods to cross into the separatist province. Few people, however, get through. A Georgian man tells me it has been 20 years since he has seen his relatives who live just three houses over the boundary line. Some very insistent parents on the Abkhazian side, however, manage to get their children across the checkpoint to attend school in Pakhulani.

At one point 50 youngsters would cross daily in order to be educated in Georgian language and history, and avoid the Russian indoctrination of Abkhaz schools. After increased interference from security personnel, that number is down to about a dozen today. Every morning though, a determined knot of youngsters crosses the barriers, sometimes in mountain fog, rain, or snow, then trudges past the European Union monitors and on to the Georgian school located about a third of a mile from the boundary. At night they return.



Principal Vakhtang Gogokhia is interviewed on his school playground by a Radio Atinati reporter about what **Spirit of America's gift of 250 walnut trees** will mean to his school and the local economy.

The Georgian schoolmaster, Vakhtang Gogokhia, has been an educator for 40 years. He fled the Abkhaz side himself a couple decades ago, so he has a heart for the migrant children. He doggedly reports detainments at the border, complains that parents of the littlest children should be allowed to escort their youngsters, and otherwise makes himself persona non grata with the Russians and their separatist allies.

In June, Gogokhia made a proposal to the U.S. military team that does civil work in this area. This agricultural region needs economic stimulus, and he proposed planting an orchard of walnuts (popular in Georgian cuisine) as a way to train his students in horticulture while encouraging a new local cash crop. The military team called in Spirit of America. After consulting agricultural experts, Spirit agreed to purchase enough walnut trees to plant a grove in the field immediately behind the school. Only weeks after the schoolmaster initially raised his idea I watched the first tree go into the ground as students clustered around. That speed and flexibility is a key to Spirit's ability to excite partners.

Further proof of the nonprofit's nimbleness came two days before the public ceremony with local officials and media that had been scheduled to commemorate the gift. The arborist supplying the saplings called to say he had miscalculated how densely the

trees should be planted, and instead of fitting the 250 specimens that were ordered, the school plot could fit only 170. If this were a government grant, noted the U.S. embassy personnel collaborating with Spirit in this project, changing the purchase size and amending the accompanying paperwork would have been a months-long bureaucratic nightmare, leaving a trail of cracked nuts all the way from Tbilisi to Washington, D.C.

But because this was a private charitable transaction, the Spirit managers were able to make an on-the-spot adjustment. They told the vendor to just bring all the trees originally contracted for. He would be paid in full, and the 80 leftover plants, each standing about three feet tall in its plastic pot, would be sent home with the children, one per family. That way the horticulture lessons imparted at school would be repeated in local backyards, and cemented even more deeply. A procurement problem was thus turned into an educational opportunity, and parents were delighted.

At the planting ceremony, area leaders turn out to celebrate. As schoolmaster Gogokhia is interviewed by a Radio Atinati reporter for later broadcast and web-video posting, the leader of the U.S. Special Forces team working with Spirit on this project points to the educator standing in front of the camera and says, "That's the



reason we do this kind of work. We get to assist local people in voluntary efforts to improve their lives, while other residents of the region observe directly or through their media. That's a valuable way of building friendship."

I ask Nick Israel later about the influence of small projects like this. "Our only agenda is to help our friends obtain what they value and need, so that their communities will succeed, by their own lights," says Nick Israel. "And we achieve that a lot."

"I can say for certain that the projects I've been involved in with Spirit over the last couple years have had life-changing effects. Sometimes country-changing effects. I can't think of another group or agency where I could have accomplished these things."

Once the shovels are put away after the tree planting, Spirit employees and the U.S. military team are invited to the second floor of the school for a traditional *supra* feast of khachapuri, Mingrelian cheese, minced cauliflower, fruit, grape gelatin, local wine, and homemade hazelnut liqueur. Nick Israel offers a toast. "The American Revolution was unusual in being founded on individual liberty. We sometimes say, 'Every man is a king.' Georgians have a very similar saying. And our shared commitment to personal freedom is one of the links between our ways of life. *Gaumarjos!*"

### Wrestling against Islamists

While pressure from Russia and poverty are the two main forces that Spirit of America has tried to counteract in Georgia, there is also a small Islamist threat here. The Pankisi Gorge is a remote valley that threads through the northeast mountains bordering Chechnya, the Russian region that has produced many Islamic extremists. The 10,000 people who live in villages strung

along the gorge floor are of the same ethnic group as the Chechens.

When the second Chechen war broke out in 1999, up to 8,000 Chechen refugees flooded into the Pankisi Gorge. After a later military loss, nearly a thousand Chechen, Arab, and Turk fighters joined them, licking their wounds and training in the secluded region. Some reports say Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the ISIS founder who subsequently killed thousands in Iraq and elsewhere, sheltered for a time in Pankisi.

It's certain that a red-bearded gorge native named Tarkhan Batirashvili, who had been radicalized while battling Russians as a member of the Georgian military, joined the foreign fighters. Adopting the *nom de guerre* Abu Omar al Chechani he turned into the most dangerous military leader of ISIS at its peak. About 20 other Georgians from the Pankisi Gorge also became jihadists after being exposed to Salafist propagandizing in local mosques set up by Saudi and Pakistani funders.

Today, all 20 of those Georgian jihadists are believed to be dead—along with al Chechani, who was killed in a U.S. air strike in Iraq in 2016. But U.S. military teams and diplomats are keen to head off further radicalization of Muslims in the Pankisi region. In addition to encouraging the Georgian government to maintain order in the gorge, and end its economic and cultural isolation, U.S. embassy staff have suggested initiatives to provide healthier alternatives to young men growing up there.

As part of this, Spirit was asked if it could give a quick boost to a wrestling team that was being formed. Georgia's traditional wrestling, called *chidaoba*, dates back to medieval times, and continues to be highly popular. Dozens of Olympians have come out of Georgia, so the sport is a good way to capture the attention of

young males. A national champion named Jemal Gigauri was recruited to coach a new team based at a community center in the Pankisi valley.

But the facility lacked an adequate heating system for practices. So Spirit quickly installed a gas furnace in 2018, and the team was in business. U.S. Army Special Operators are in contact with the coach, and at their suggestion Spirit supplied the club with wrestling uniforms in the spring of 2019.

"The hard part of my job," summarizes Nick Israel, "is convincing people that I'm for real! American charitability is a completely foreign concept in much of the world. People are shocked when they hear how many things Americans do with donated money and time. And they're very surprised when we offer to help them in the same way."

Even fellow Americans are sometimes surprised as Spirit arrives on the scene. One three-star Marine general briefing his team on how SoA could help their military operations opened his remarks bluntly: "You guys are going to think, 'This is too good to be true.' 'There has to be a catch.' 'What's in it for them?'" But I'm here to say—put that aside. This group exists solely to help you succeed. You should use them."

Nick once had to do some explaining after offering a Slovakian military officer Spirit's help in acquiring video equipment so his unit could make training films for disaster-response units. The officer visited Spirit's website to research the nonprofit, then shot back: "I saw your projects in Somalia and other places. But we aren't Africans. We don't accept charity." Nick spelled out that there is no notion of moral superiority when Americans make charitable gifts, that our citizens just understand the limitations of government and are very comfortable using private gifts to get around bureaucracy, obstacles, delays.

"Whenever we take part in a project, we make sure our partners understand that we get no government funding. That Spirit is supported voluntarily by everyday people. That our gifts come from Americans who want to help our friends overseas make a better life."



There is a tradition in the U.S. of  
businesspeople supporting our military.  
But Spirit of America lets everyday folks  
become involved in defending the nation.  
It's a new category of philanthropy.





## FOUNDING SPIRIT OF AMERICA

**T**all and rangy, Jim Hake is a high-energy, back-slapping entrepreneur with an indelible boyishness he will carry to the grave. During our trip he revels in his recent discovery, via a commercial DNA test, that he is in the 98th percentile of humans for the fraction of Neanderthal heredity in his genome. He laughs easily and often, slings nicknames, and teases his staff mercilessly.

Beneath the joshing exterior, though, Hake is devoted to the work of Spirit of America. The 9/11 attacks jolted him. He realized that as a successful businessman he had benefited in many ways from America's freedoms, and that a violent global argument was now taking place between "voices of intimidation and voices of inspiration." If "inspiration" was going to triumph, America would need to draw on her clever voluntary sector. "I realized we need to use all aspects of our nation's power, not just our fighting forces."

So in 2003 he set up a privately funded 501c3 to support U.S. servicemembers in ways that would make them, and the local partners they collaborate with, safer and more successful. In an unprecedented charitable alliance, Spirit of America began offering resources to meet needs suggested by deployed troops and diplomats. "When our troops or embassy personnel identify a local need they can't address quickly, we provide flexible, citizen-funded assistance. We help them build trust and goodwill, prevent conflict, and strengthen America's security. In the world's roughest corners, people experience the best of who Americans are, and what we stand for.

There is a tradition in the U.S. of businesspeople supporting our military in various ways. But Spirit lets everyday folks become involved in defending the nation. It's a new category of philanthropy.

"We're not the Peace Corps; they are an agency of government. We are an independent organization that is 100 percent donor funded. Plus we carry out our work in cooperation with our defense forces, in zones of dangerous conflict. The reason U.S. military special operators are in those places is because something worrisome is going on."

Spirit of America is not "neutral." Other international charities, and all U.N. humanitarian organizations, vehemently proclaim that they are impartial observers of strife and simply distribute their aid to relieve the suffering of innocents without favoring any political, economic, or military objectives. Spirit is different. "Everything we do is to support the success and safety of U.S. troops and diplomats and their local partners," explains Hake.

"There's no politics. We don't take positions on policy. But when America's men and women are sent abroad, we reinforce their work, as a charitable force multiplier. The first thing we do when we arrive in a new region is listen to the U.S. military and State Department members working there. We ask them what they are trying to accomplish, and how we can help. We don't set our own agenda. We invest, from the bottom up, in the initiative and humanity of Americans who are serving on the front lines.

"In every undertaking I've been part of, the best results come from supporting the initiative of the people who are closest to the problem. American soldiers and marines and sailors tend to be very entrepreneurial. So we listen to them. And try to help them do what they judge best.

"Our goal is that whenever our nation sends our people abroad, the American people will be by their sides. For our national defense and foreign policies to succeed, we need to apply not just our military might but all of America's capabilities—our broad wealth and generosity, our can-do spirit, our goodwill toward others.

"It's impossible for our government to do everything. The hidden strength that built our country is citizen service—ordinary Americans doing their part. We carry this out internationally in very practical ways, in the same way that domestic philanthropy accomplishes vital work in the U.S.

"Spirit adds only small increments of resources to a problem. But they are aimed and timed extremely precisely. We are flexible, and we are cost-efficient. And sometimes small increments of help at the right place and moment make the difference between success and failure."

### Startup mentality

Hake freely confesses that he didn't know a single member of the military, and had zero knowledge of defense operations or the inner workings of our government, when he created Spirit after the 9/11 attacks. Yet he has made many shrewd decisions in shaping his organization to bolster our nation's security. With the savvy instincts of a successful entrepreneur, he learned fast, made wise gut assessments of





**Spirit founder Jim Hake** shares lessons of successful and unsuccessful business start-ups with Kurds hoping to create their own organizations.

problems, hired great staff, recruited a glittering board of advisers, and built a sustainable operation.

“I was ignorant,” admits Hake. “But in some ways that helped me. I had an open mind, and knew I had to invent new systems. No one had drummed into me that what I was trying to do was ‘impossible.’ I learned without preconceptions.”

In classic start-up fashion, Hake launched the effort out of his California home, as something simple and small. In the beginning it was just a mechanism for fulfilling soldiers’ wish lists: He’d zero in on the most practical ideas, advertise them on his website and collect the donations needed to fund them, then ship the resources to a war zone. Medical packages for allied security forces, school supplies for Iraqi families, money to allow Special Forces to stage a dinner uniting tribal leaders, sewing machines that helped Afghan women make a living, soccer balls and winter clothing for children in strategic areas, motorbikes and GPS units for local police. All fulfilled in a matter of weeks, from start to finish.

After a few years of that formula, Hake realized that Spirit’s resources needed to be targeted to vital regions

with more sophistication and follow-up. To build on its successes the group needed employees who could observe in the field, deepen connections with local leaders, confer with military and embassy officials, and make judgment calls. Spirit was evolving from a merely reactive crowdfunding website into an organization with institutional memory, a rich web of grassroots allies, and more sophisticated insight into the best ways to further American values in dangerous places.

Field directors could build up sources capable of sharing valuable information. They would nurture people and groups in a position to solve problems. Spirit’s ability to have long-term positive effects would ratchet up to a much higher level.

Placing employees in spots like Kurdistan, Kandahar, Niger, Colombia, Baghdad, Mindanao, and other contested areas is not easy, though. The first decision Hake made about his field directors was to recruit them from the ranks that Spirit already leaned on to execute its programs—smart, tough, regional specialists from the U.S. Special Forces, Marines, and Civil Affairs units of the Army. Men

and women just out of those services would know how to comport themselves in combat zones. They would bring valuable language and culture skills, and experience at navigating military bureaucracies. They would have instant credibility with otherwise highly reticent SEALs, Marine commandos, Green Beret and Delta Force operators, and military attachés working in sensitive spots all around the planet—individuals who would never open up to traditional charity workers.

So in 2009, more than half a decade after founding Spirit of America as a remote filler of shopping lists created by deployed troops, Jim Hake made it his full-time work to run the organization. He began to hunt down the unusual former military operators he would need to take his group to the next level. And he turned it into a full-fledged, charitable enabler of the men and women who defend our nation.

### **That would take an act of Congress**

Soon, Spirit’s innocent, idealistic founder collided with a stubbornly intractable opponent: the Department of Defense bureaucracy. For the first seven years Hake had run his charitable startup in line with the Uber model: Nobody has ever done anything like this before, so let’s just make things happen, show people our product is valuable, and we’ll worry about the legal framework later. Because commanders on the ground were so glad to have Spirit’s help, the group was able to thrive in practice even though no official rules existed to define its charitable collaborations with security forces.

Starting in 2010, though, as Spirit proposed to embed personnel with U.S. forces in Afghanistan, DoD lawyers began to splutter. Not only did they object to Spirit employees mixing with troops at operating bases, and traveling and working under military umbrellas, they informed Hake that they viewed the fundamental work of the charity as illegal collaboration with a non-Federal entity. Attorneys at CentCom argued that if a soldier or marine sent Spirit an



e-mail suggesting that, say, providing shoes to Afghan children might improve local cooperation with U.S. forces, that constituted an “improper solicitation of gifts” in violation of government ethics regulations.

“These legal interpretations of 2010 would have ended Spirit’s operations, and forbidden our model of involving American citizens in national defense,” notes Hake. So he convinced a high-powered attorney named John Bellinger, well versed in government ethics rules and experienced at the National Security Council and Department of State, to advocate for Spirit on a pro bono basis.

Hake also garnered support from military officers frustrated by legal barriers that hinder private and charitable collaborations. In a 2012 study by the Defense Business Board, 71 percent of commanders reported they had encountered significant obstacles to civilian-military partnerships. Many of them complained that “a strong aversion to risk results in most attorneys finding it easier to say no,” instead of allowing new initiatives.

Under pressure from field officers, top DoD lawyers eventually acquiesced and brought Spirit’s operations out of the shadows. In November 2010, CentCom issued a new regulation that allowed Spirit of America, and potentially other charities, to regularize operations within the Central Command region—provided they met specific conditions. Within weeks, Spirit had two Army veterans working in Afghanistan’s Helmand province.

With the existential crisis deferred, James Mattis, Ray Odierno, James Amos, William McRaven, and other top officers requested that Defense Secretary Leon Panetta broaden the CentCom guidance and apply it to all regions and branches of U.S. military operation. Despite this tiptop support it took many more years to align the government rules and bureaucracy.

Eventually Hake ran into the old argument-ending stumper: full legalization of Spirit of America would require an act of Congress. Many noble causes sleep



Marine general (later Secretary of Defense) James Mattis, Army general Joe Dunford, and a few other top military officers were early and energetic supporters of what Spirit of America brought to combat zones. Here **Jim Hake meets with Mattis at CentCom headquarters** in 2010.

beneath that gravestone. But with his characteristic guilelessness, energy, and refusal to take no for an answer, Hake began visiting Members of Congress, and enlisted further help from flag officers and diplomats who appreciated Spirit’s work. (The advisory board of Spirit of America is a veritable Who’s Who in the world of national defense, currently including generals like James Jones, Stanley McChrystal, Ben Hodges, and H. R. McMaster, several retired ambassadors, former Secretary of State George Shultz, and former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson.)

Hake and his allies sought a formal memorandum of understanding from the Defense Department blessing Spirit, and special language in the annual Defense Authorization Act passed by Congress. A very tall bill. There were the predictable objections and turf battles, but Spirit’s advocates kept talking and visiting, and late in 2018 this improbable effort finally succeeded both at the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. Spirit and the USO are now the only charities officially approved to work in direct concert with our military, though the new language allows

for other nonprofits that might join them in the future.

By early 2020, Spirit of America had 22 people on staff—up from eight employees less than a decade earlier. The group has carried out 1,276 projects in 77 different countries, thanks to millions of separate gifts coming from 16,100 individuals. The current annual budget of about \$6 million is supplied entirely by donors.

General Stanley McChrystal, former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, says that Spirit “brings all the nation’s strength together and focuses it at the point of need.” The ex-Special Ops chieftain refers to the group as a “philanthropic rapid-response team.” Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis likewise characterizes SoA as “agile. It is responsive.” Retired general Ben Hodges explains that during his commands in Iraq and Afghanistan, “they provided me and my soldiers a unique capability to increase influence and strengthen relationships with our partners and allies.” The bottom line on Spirit of America for Mattis: “It has been worth its weight in gold.”

**Hake started Spirit of America following a kind of Uber model: Nobody has ever done anything like this before, so let’s make things happen, and we’ll worry about the legal framework later.**





**Z**ack Bazzi is a friendly, bubbly bear of a man. A stocky Lebanese-American with a neatly trimmed beard just beginning to send up gray flares, he speaks useful Arabic, and brings Middle Eastern volubility and warmth to his job where relationships are so important. In his capacious mental rolodex, Bazzi collects fixers, merchandise buyers, foreign and American soldiers, Middle Eastern politicians, and various diplomats, then mixes and matches the pieces to form networks capable of solving an array of problems.

During four years with the 101st Airborne, he deployed to Bosnia and Kosovo. He later served two tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as an Army reservist. Today he oversees Spirit of America's work in the U.S. military's Central Command region—covering Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and other countries.

For a picture of the kind of work Bazzi does on a regular basis, start with an urgent WhatsApp message he received in January of 2019 from the leader of a small U.S. military team operating in Syria and Iraq. At that moment the last Syrian stronghold of the Islamic

State terrorists was crumbling, and the climactic fights displaced large numbers of residents. Many ISIS fighters and their collaborators (women especially) were using the opportunity to hide within the refugee flow.

Separating the war criminals from innocent civilians was a slow process. Syrian Democratic Forces (the mostly Kurdish-American allies in Syria equipped, trained, and backed by U.S. Special Forces) were working with local sheikhs to visually identify the individuals who had tyrannized the region. Meantime, pent-up refugees were facing thirst and starvation.

The Special Forces officer who contacted Bazzi said U.S. emergency assistance funds were in the wrong accounts, and it would take weeks to reprogram them to save these Syrians. Tens of thousands of people were in danger. Could Spirit provide emergency help?

Bazzi and others at Spirit sprang into action, and by that very night, vendors who Spirit has relationships with in Erbil, Iraq, were packing boxes with lentils, rice, and water, then delivering them to a U.S. base outside the city. A quarter of these aid boxes were put on Chinook helicopters and flown to Syria for immediate distribution. The rest were trucked to Syria in military convoys.

Just 96 hours after Bazzi's phone buzzed, Syrian refugees were eating and drinking again. And as soon as they realized they were safe and being protected, the displaced civilians began to point out to SDF and U.S. forces the Islamic State fighters in their midst. In the first day alone, 45 ISIS partisans were taken into custody.

Spirit's instant action saved lives. It created vital civilian trust that allowed our Special Forces teams to identify dangerous fugitives. And it put pressure on USAID and other agencies to provide necessary follow-up assistance after the emergency response.

The simple food bought in local markets for this intervention cost Spirit only \$32,000. No government agency, though, had the capacity to deliver such aid in the time it was needed. "Our entire budget is a rounding error compared to government agencies, or big humanitarian charities like Oxfam," notes Bazzi. "We succeed not by volume but by speed. By precision of action. By our reliability as a partner."

### Generating goodwill

Now Bazzi is guiding us to another scene where he and Spirit have had success at speed dating.

We are right up against the border where Iraq, Syria, and Turkey touch, arriving here just days after President Trump withdrew U.S. forces from northern Syria. As soldiers from Turkey invade to fill the power vacuum and cleanse Syria's north of Kurds (for whom they have long enmity), a new horde of refugees surges toward Iraq. The central Iraqi security forces won't let them enter, but in Iraq's north the Kurdistan regional government offers protection to those who are fleeing. In the two weeks prior to our arrival about 10,000 displaced people have crossed the border where we are now standing, most of them after paying \$200 per person to smugglers who lead them through the wadis under cover of night.



They arrive possessing only what they are wearing and carrying in their hands.

This is the middle of a bare, brown, dimpled desert. All the land stretching downhill from us is Syria, from which black smoke rises at a spot off on the horizon. Every morning, Kurdish military trucks collect border crossers out in the sands and bring them to the transit facility we are now inspecting.

Asayish, the Kurdish intelligence and policing service, is in charge here. New arrivals are checked to make sure they're not armed or wearing suicide vests, their identities are established, they are fed, and then bused to the nearby Bardarash refugee camp operated by the United Nations. Problem is, the power run up to the transit point from the closest village at Sahela goes off regularly, putting an end to the security checks, the cooking, the lights that illuminate the facility.

Two weeks before we arrived, a refugee specialist at the U.S. consulate in Erbil, knowing about Spirit of America's rapid-response capabilities, had contacted Bazzi. She reported that the collection facility was overwhelmed and needed reliable power—both to carry out a humanitarian mission and to prevent ISIS supporters from sneaking into Iraq. Bazzi quickly connected with the local Asayish commander, met him in person on October 26, and agreed that Spirit would supply a 40-kilowatt electric generator and \$7,500 worth of fuel to keep it humming. Bazzi immediately hit the Kurdish bazaars, where almost anything can be purchased, and on October 28 the large generator was delivered to the transit point, along with all the necessary cabling and connection boxes plus an electrician Spirit had hired to do the installation on the spot.

Now we are inspecting the generator and the camp operations it is allowing. Needless to say, the security-service officers are impressed and grateful for the lightning response. "We only have space here for 2,000 people, who we can keep for only 24 to 48 hours. We have a process we must get the immigrants through. But almost every day we lose power here for two to four hours, and this was causing problems before we got the generator," says Asayish Colonel Nawroz Majid.



**A Kurdish mother feeds her twin daughters** at the Sahela transit station, after being smuggled from Syria into Iraq the night before (top). While Asayish Colonel Nawroz Majid witnesses (bottom), **Zack Bazzi, with beard, pays fuel merchant Ziad** for 1,745 liters of diesel fuel to power the transit station generator.

Spirit's program directors have experience in poor countries and know to be careful they don't encourage corruption. Bazzi provided half of the \$7,500 fuel allotment up front. Now he wants to establish a process for drawing on the remainder in a transparent way.

He asks Colonel Majid to call in the owner of the nearby fueling station, so he can pay him directly for the next refill. Very soon, Mr. Ziad, owner of Artin Oil, pulls up in an SUV and strides into the office where the colonel and Bazzi are talking while aides serve sweet tea and fruit. Bazzi counts out \$800 in cash, and gets a stamped receipt saying that 1,745 liters of diesel fuel are now owed

to the transit station. By conducting this three-way transaction in public with all the principals and several other witnesses present there is a precedent for open, accountable, and honest transactions in the future.

"We have corruption here that needs to be guarded against," acknowledges Ismail Mohamed Ahmed when I talk to him the same day this fuel transaction takes place. He heads the board overseeing more than 20 camps in this region, which house a third of all the refugees in Iraq. "But our corruption problem in Kurdistan is very different from the rest of Iraq. Here the police are trusted. Growth is strong. Whereas in Baghdad, or in Basra in the





Another day ends for **14,000 refugees sheltered in a Kurdistan camp** (top). Syrian Kurds in flight from Turkey's invasion, having entered Iraq the day before, flood into the Bardarash refugee camp carrying all their remaining worldly possessions (bottom).

south, the services and infrastructure are barely changed since the days of Saddam—a terrible mess!”

### Where people go when all else fails

Ahmed is right: Kurdistan is dramatically more functional than the rest of Iraq. Having spent many months down in the Shiite and Sunni provinces, I'm staggered by the contrast in the north. Up here the streets are swept, the power in cities is reliable, the water is clean. People are employed, new buildings are popping up everywhere, and the agricultural fields are large and well-tilled by tractors.

The Duhok governate that we are visiting is a magnet for war victims. Half a million Iraqis who fled Islamic State terror starting in 2014 now live here, along with about a hundred thousand refugees from Syria. More than a third

of the province population is made up of displaced persons. If you have the severe misfortune to have your life wrenched by military or foreign-policy failure, this is a less bad place to end up than what most victims endure.

Because of Kurdistan's growing economy and tradition of toleration, once the new arrivals make an initial recovery there is a big flow from the temporary camps into nearby cities. A majority of the displaced people here are already integrated into Kurdish neighborhoods, while a quarter million remain in tent settlements. Even those who continue in the camps often go out and work every day in the Kurdish economy. Nearly all of the waiters in the restaurant where I talked to Ismail Ahmed, for instance, were Syrian refugees. The Yazidis (who are 90 percent of the displaced Iraqis still

in camps, due to their inability to return to the rural regions where they were terrorized by ISIS) often labor during the day in agricultural jobs.

Now we arrive in the Bardarash refugee encampment. This is where the border-crossers scooped up at the Sahela transit point are bused after being checked into the country. It is the main site sheltering Syrians who fled the recent Turkish incursion into northern Syria, and as we visit it holds 14,000 men, women, and children. On that day, a few hundred new arrivals came in, more than a hundred residents permanently relocated themselves to housing in Erbil, and 180 people returned to Syria.

These Syrians are mostly Kurds, with a sprinkling of Christians and Yazidis. U.N. agencies plus Western charities like Save the Children provide basic needs in this rough-and-ready setting. As we stroll lanes separating the tents, the entire camp is being fumigated by a truck spewing thick choking clouds that appear to be diesel and paraffin smoke, presumably laced with some insecticide. Fleas and mosquitoes can transmit dangerous diseases if they take root.

The Spirit personnel talk to residents of the camp and get their stories. “If you've seen one refugee camp, you've seen them all,” says Zack Bazzi quietly. “A lot of sadness. Not my favorite places. Everything we do on a daily basis is aimed at preventing the kinds of conflict and collapse that drive desperate families into places like this.”

### Donors against the explosive remnants of war

Joshua Brandon is wiry, with a jaw covered by grizzled stubble that blends seamlessly into short-cropped hair that can't decide whether to settle on blond or gray. He's laconic and soft-spoken, rasping out the words of his rich vocabulary between tight lips, and laughing in a kind of slow, grunting, triple chuckle. He has a history B.A. from the Citadel (“West Point for bad kids,” as he describes it), and a master's in International Affairs, but wide reading on his own produces most of the allusions



from classic literature or ancient history that you'll hear about any time he opens his mouth.

Brandon had an intense Army career with the 101st Airborne and a Stryker brigade, collecting a Silver Star and two Bronze Stars with Valor in Iraq. He was a U.S. Special Ops adviser to an Iraqi army battalion in the midst of the 2006 ethnic war in Iraq, where he used information warfare to try to defend civilians from opposing death squads.

Then came what he calls his "hippie" phase where he snowboarded and mountain-biked, sweat-lodged and meditated, and led charitable mountaineering trips for vets. There can't be a lot of American men who have trained simultaneously at yoga and mixed-martial-arts fighting, but he is one. While trying to figure out what to do next he climbed the Dolomite Mountains of Italy, wandered the American West, and assisted anti-poachers on the plains of Namibia.

It was his time in Namibia that made Brandon realize he wanted to get back into work overseas. Spirit's mix of life-enhancement and terror-suppression were a good match for him. His infantryman's sympathy for little guys who do the hard work made it easy for him to earn the trust of foreign soldiers. And the leadership skills he picked up in the Army let him talk easily with SEAL teams, diplomats, generals, and foreign officials.

Brandon works in the same CentCom region as Zack Bazzi, and takes particular responsibility for Spirit projects in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the rest of central Asia. He has a serious girlfriend who is Uzbek. He also works in Iraqi Kurdistan.

One of Brandon's latest projects for Spirit is now on display for me. Thanks to some generous American philanthropy that took place before Spirit got involved, Kurdish security forces have built up a valuable K9 corps for detecting explosives. During their fight to expel the Islamic State, 60 percent of the casualties suffered by Kurdistan's Peshmerga military force were inflicted by landmines or buried explosive devices. Many



The highly trained explosive-sniffing Belgian Malinois named Max works a plot, **seeking dangerous landmines** that even metal detectors can't find.

houses and buildings have still not been reoccupied because they were booby-trapped by ISIS terrorists. During the Saddam era there was also promiscuous mining around military facilities, and during the Iran-Iraq War the border was littered with landmines.

Explosives placed in everyday settings have killed thousands in Iraq. And nobody knows where dangerous devices still lurk today. There are 3,202 areas in Kurdistan that are confirmed or suspected of being hazardous. A regular stream of farmers, schoolchildren, and security forces get blown up every year. When families moved back into the ancient city of Nineveh after ISIS was driven out, 27 people were killed by booby traps in houses. Dogs are the best way of locating these vestigial threats.

In addition, dogs are vital to identifying suicide bombers before they drive their vehicles into populated areas. "For K9 security units, accurately clearing a vehicle as having no explosive danger is easy and quick," one military dog handler

told me. "Yet without dogs that is one of the hardest security tasks imaginable."

To manage their serious problem with so-called "explosive remnants of war," Kurdish armed forces asked for help from the Marshall Legacy Institute—a U.S. nonprofit whose mission is to alleviate suffering in war-torn countries, with a particular emphasis on protecting populations from mines and similar dangers. In 2016, MLI agreed to establish a corps of explosive-detecting dogs and handlers in Kurdistan.

Training dogs to unerringly sniff out weapons (including plastic mines that no metal detector can spot) is a painstaking task with life-and-death consequences that leave no margin for error—so each fully certified Belgian Malinois or German Shepherd costs \$25,000. It was donors like the Perot family, Edelmann family, Hilda and Preston Davis Foundation, schoolchildren in Woodland, Texas, General Dynamics Corporation, and the West Point Class

**"Our entire budget is a rounding error compared to government agencies. We succeed not by volume but by speed. By precision of action. By our reliability."**





**Sergeant Karzan Khalid**, who spearheaded creation of a Kurdish K9 explosives-detecting unit after his grandfather was blown up by a landmine, talks through issues with Joshua Brandon (l) and Zack Bazzi (r) in the office of the Peshmerga unit commander.

of 1970 who put up the funds necessary to create a K9 unit of 18 dogs and skilled handlers within the Kurdish combat-engineering regiment.

### Man's best friend

This morning we watch the dogs work. On a plowed field outside the concrete walls and concertina wire of their home base, they sniff the chocolate soil for explosive residues, earning treats from their handlers when they “indicate” successfully. Then we watch the suspect-capture skills of the same animals. A soldier wrapped in heavy protective padding hides out of sight down the field. When he steps into view, rapid voice commands from a handler send one large canine at a time racing toward the suspect. With a final burst of speed and then a leap, each dog knocks the human to the ground and holds him there with bites on a limb. Coming just two weeks after ISIS terrorist Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was incapacitated by the exact same kind of military dog in nearby Syria, leading to his death, this is a gripping demonstration.

The Peshmerga K9 unit is led by Sergeant Karzan Khalid, who was trained in the U.S. His own grandfather was blown up by a mine in northern Iraq, so he is devoted to this work. In the days before we arrived, the dogs and their handlers had been cleaning up a Saddam-era military base where an itinerant sheep

recently detonated an explosion. They have also been clearing lots of houses in areas where civilians are now trickling back after the rampages of the Islamic State. “We don’t care who the houses belong to—we just want to save lives and make the cities safe,” says Khalid.

“Our dogs and handlers are the first ones to open doors and enter buildings, knowing that ISIS liked to leave behind buried explosives with hair triggers. We recently opened new passages for cars west of Kirkuk. Our dogs are the first feet to tread in places not stepped into since the Iran-Iraq war,” he explains.

Spirit of America got involved with this lifesaving, security-enhancing K9 corps after a snafu between the U.S. military, the Kurds, and the Marshall Legacy Institute created a six-month break in the contract covering the dogs’ care. No food or veterinary medicine was going to be available, which would have caused the dogs to be pulled. So Spirit leapt into the gap and covered maintenance of the animals until the Kurds could figure out how to pick up responsibilities that had previously been paid for by the U.S. A classic SoA niche.

Once Josh Brandon was on the scene, he noticed another problem. The dog handlers didn’t have basic protective equipment for their own bodies, or modern mine detectors to use in confirming and extracting devices flagged by their animals.

So Spirit bought seven light protective suits and four carbon-rod detectors. Around the world, Spirit of America has purchased more than 160 mine detectors and donated them to local partner forces being trained by U.S. military advisers.

During our visit Brandon starts arranging for a trainer to come to the base and instruct the soldiers on usage of the new mine detectors. His partner Karzan offers ideas for the next ways to improve this unit. The two men discuss whether Spirit might acquire a top-level bomb suit to protect handlers dealing with a particularly tricky explosives removal. “Those are expensive, but let’s work on that, along with our military friends in the U.S. consulate,” suggests Josh.

Khalid also points out they lack a proper van to carry the dogs to jobs. The trucks they use now offer the animals no protection from the brutal heat and rough roads of the area, sometimes endangering them. “Maybe you could raise that. You have better channels with the U.S. military than we do. And you may even be better than us at getting our own Ministry of Peshmerga to consider requests like this! Your good relationship could be a big help,” suggests the Kurdish sergeant, sparking a wide grin from Josh Brandon.

### Those who face death

The long-suffering Kurds have an old saying: The mountains are our only friends.

Over the last generation, a more accurate statement would be that their sheltering mountains and their sheltering allies in the U.S. military are their only friends. First American Air Force and Navy pilots, then the U.S. Army and Marines, and most recently our SEAL teams, Delta Force, and Ranger battalions have been partners in war with the Kurds. Americans and Kurds often fight shoulder to shoulder these days, and when a Kurd is hurt in battle, our Special Forces medevac him to the same hospital an American casualty goes to.

This is not just friendliness; it reflects American respect. In a part of the world where the commitment and courage of local allies often disappoint U.S. troops, the Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers stand and fight. The most basic translation of Peshmerga is “those who face death.”



Many Americans who have gone into battle with them will attest that Peshmerga do not quail. Their bravery and willingness to sacrifice to protect their beleaguered people have also made the Peshmerga beloved among their own citizens.

This is, however, the Middle East. As with everything here, there are problems with corruption, nepotism, and partisanship. Power grows out of the barrel of a gun in this region, and the Peshmerga force is actually divided into separate brigades and areas of operation that reflect the two main political parties in Kurdistan.

“In the Middle East, if you don’t have your own loyal soldiers and loyal officers, your own private army, you are nothing,” hisses Major Abu (as I will call him for security reasons), an impressive 32-year-old, many-times-wounded officer who commands a Peshmerga brigade of about 1,000 men. His fighters are part of Kurdistan’s so-called 70 Unit—one of two large divisions that essentially combine the functions of commando force and Praetorian Guard. The 70s are affiliated with the PUK party. “The current vice-president of Kurdistan” (a PUK kingpin) “is the only guy I take orders from,” Abu tells me. The equivalent 80 Unit aligns with the KDP party.

Navigating these political fault lines requires quick understanding, diplomatic savvy, and occasional holding of the nose among Americans who work with the Pesh, including Spirit staff. And then there is the financing, or lack thereof. A wealthy businessman friend of Major Abu paid for all of the materials to create the tidy, secure base, training ground, and firing range where this unit is located. Abu organized volunteer labor to do the building.

Most of the soldiers live off in the city of Kirkuk and serve here on a one-week-on-one-week-off basis, sharing the limited beds, weapons, and gear in alternating shifts. The average grunt is paid roughly \$400 per month. “Basically, you could say most of them are volunteers. By the time they pay for cabs or gas to get here, uniforms, and so forth, half of their stipend is gone,” Major Abu notes.

The Iraqi central government is supposed to share military equipment and



**Shoulder patches tell the story.** Peshmerga stand and fight—often with Americans next to them.

funding with the Kurds, but almost no support makes its way north. So most of the Peshmerga arms are things they have captured in battle. In the courtyard of this base I count 15 U.S. armored humvees plus some other heavier and lighter tactical vehicles. All of these had been given to the Iraqi Army, but then abandoned when ISIS forces attacked. The Peshmerga captured them back and now husband them carefully. The small well-organized arsenal is likewise full of recycled weapons.

Major Abu has a U.S. green card and previously lived in Los Angeles for several years before moving back to Iraq to help with the war against ISIS. He returns to the U.S. annually to visit relatives in Nashville’s Little Kurdistan and other locations across the country. He hustles and gets things done more like an American than a typical Iraqi.

He and his Unit 70 troops share this base with a small contingent of U.S. Special Forces operatives from SEAL Team 7. There is strong sympathy between the two groups, and not long ago the SEALs reached out to Zack Bazzi to ask if Spirit could offer some non-lethal assistance that would make a commando platoon of their Pesh comrades more effective. Spirit soon provided the 25-man unit with five GPS units, 15 compasses, seven pairs of binoculars, 10 tool units, 15 rucksacks,

25 rain jackets, 25 individual first-aid kits, and \$500 worth of supplies for medical training.

Aside from lacking an air wing (which the U.S. provides), the weakest links in the Peshmerga are absence of a medical corps and a communications backbone. During the ISIS offensive that started in 2014, one village was repeatedly raided by Islamic State fighters to confiscate (or burn) harvests, so U.S. Marines distributed cheap cell phones to farmers, allowing them to send alerts on nights their antagonists showed up. Shortly after, Peshmerga commandos received a call, raced to the scene, and killed all the ISIS raiders.

Throughout the ISIS fight, Pesh commanders were hindered by their lack of reliable radios. Sometimes they could communicate only by firing warning shots into the air in crude patterns. “The few Chinese radios we have are junk, and stop working after a couple months. This is the biggest logistical problem we face,” says Major Abu. His latest appeal to Spirit is for some good handheld military radios. Both the Peshmerga and the SEALs show great interest in continuing to work with Spirit.

Our conversations and tour finally lead us to a lavish lunch put on by the Kurdish officers for their Spirit of America and SEAL brothers. The Americans munch





**A platoon of elite Peshmerga commandos** ring three Spirit of America staff to talk about future collaborations.

on pieces of chicken shredded and placed on their plates by hand by the Major as his sign of hospitality. Everyone in the room seems comfortable.

“Relationships like these are invaluable in carrying out the work of U.S. Special Operators, and the work that Spirit does to bolster them,” says Josh Brandon. “That’s one advantage of a veteran-led group like ours. We can instantly bro-bond with the military teams from both countries, who control access to the contested areas. That way, a small project like our package of tactical gear can be leveraged into bigger, higher-level collaborations.”

### **Subsidizing professionalism**

Our next stop is indeed higher level. For years now, the U.S. government has pushed our Kurdish allies to shift their Peshmerga units from sectarian control into a unified command structure and loyalty under the Ministry of Peshmerga. As much as possible, U.S. aid is channeled through the ministry, which has allowed the Kurdish government to slowly gather more control of the partisan brigades. When this happens, each unit is given a balanced rotation of officers carefully drawn from each of two dominant political parties.

Spirit has participated in several projects aimed at helping the U.S.

military professionalize and unify the Peshmerga forces. One was a major effort to modernize the personnel system that administers and pays soldiers. The existing structure uses hand-written records, carried by couriers, requiring multi-hour trips in cars, with much room for error and misallocation of pay. Officials in the U.S. consulate in Erbil identified this as a priority and asked Spirit to provide servers, laptops, and software to the Peshmerga’s H.R. section.

A second Spirit project provided funding for language classes, instructor training, laptops, and projectors to establish new courses for training Peshmerga officers in English. The goal is to get classes of leaders sufficiently up to speed in English so that they can participate in military professional classes in the U.S., which will both raise the competence of the Peshmerga and improve interoperability of their forces with U.S. fighters. Other graduates of Spirit’s language course will become responsible for teaching English to larger numbers of Peshmerga officers.

“I was explaining this language initiative to a U.S. general in Baghdad who has authority over hundreds of millions of dollars, and he got super excited about it,” says Army Captain Connor Love, a military attaché Spirit works with in the Erbil consulate. “He offered to put resources into it. I told him,

‘Sir, Spirit and I don’t want your money. That would just slow things down.’”

With support from Spirit of America and an educational charity in Erbil, two initial classes of 12 Peshmerga soldiers each began their training the month before I arrived. Spirit is now considering offering similar language training to the Asayish security and intelligence service. The U.S. consulate would like to see this happen, and Zack Bazzi is negotiating with Asayish commanders over what a sustainable English-instruction program for them might look like.

To coordinate this H.R. and language assistance, Spirit of America became friendly with Brigadier General Hazhar Omer Ismail within the Ministry of Peshmerga. An impressive officer who speaks excellent English himself, the general completed his own training in national-security policy at the University of Delaware earlier in the year, and attended the U.S. Army War College before that. In the long run, Ismail would like to have within the Peshmerga a language-instruction wing like America’s Defense Language Institute, to make it easier for his officers to coordinate with and learn from foreign allies.

General Ismail, who is close to Kurdish president Nechirvan Barzani, has been charged with the delicate work of gradually merging the various Peshmerga factions into one cohesive body. He co-authored a well-regarded long-term reform plan that aims to unite, professionalize, and equip Kurdistan’s fighters, eliminate corruption and nepotism, pull them under unified government control, and convince the central Iraqi government to supply the resources promised to the Kurdish military under the national constitution but rarely delivered. “I had a good meeting with President Barzani yesterday,” he tells us. “He is a strong supporter of the Peshmerga reform plan.”

Ismail says he also met recently with top officers of the Iraqi military in Baghdad. “My counterparts in the Ministry of Defense were complaining of Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. Many Iraqi people are tired of this.



Anything which forces Iran to pay attention to their own problems and leave us alone would be good.” Ismail continues to lobby his colleagues in Baghdad to share resources and re-establish joint operating mechanisms that used to exist before southern Iraqis and Kurds clashed during the fight to push out the Islamic State.

“Corruption in Kurdistan is a serious problem,” notes the general, “but it’s one hundred times worse in the south. With terrible effects. Basra, for instance, is the third biggest city in Iraq, producing much valuable oil. Yet thousands of its residents are having their health harmed by dirty drinking water,” due to misgovernance.

In addition to Iraqi fractures, and problems from Iran, Ismail points out that ISIS remains a threat. Though it no longer commands territory and issues currency and marriage certificates as it used to, Islamic State fighters still lurk in rural and mountainous areas of Iraq. Local leaders continue to be harassed and killed. In one attack last year a half-dozen people gathering truffles in the desert, a favorite Iraqi tradition, were murdered by ISIS thugs. Many thousands of displaced people are still afraid to return to their previous homes.

“More than 1,800 Peshmerga fighters were martyred defeating ISIS. Over 10,000 were wounded. They were right on our doorstep, and threatened to overrun even Kurdistan’s capital of Erbil. The danger is not gone.”

### Free enterprising in a brutal world

Prosperity is, of course, an essential precursor of peace. With this in mind, U.S. diplomats aim to encourage business and free enterprise in Kurdistan. Not long ago, Zack Bazzi was asked whether Spirit of America would be willing to support a program that brings together Iraqi and American businesspeople in an Investor Exchange. Spirit agreed to pay \$15,000 to make the program feasible.

The grant went through an American nonprofit based in Kurdistan called Five One Labs. Founded by a Stanford business school graduate, Five



Jim Hake shakes hands with **aspiring Kurdish entrepreneurs** after delivering his lecture at a U.S.-style business incubator and shared workspace run by an American 501c3, and supported by Spirit of America.

One offers, in addition to the U.S.-Iraq Investor Exchange, webinars, panels, and seminars for businesspeople, an intensive three-month bootcamp for training young entrepreneurs, and a shared workspace where would-be owners can generate business plans, get advice, and test their ideas.

The Lab has a slick glass-walled, high-ceilinged facility in Suleimaniya. Popularly known as “Suli,” this is a university town considered the most Westernized city in Iraq. You can get a good espresso here and imagine as you drink it that you’re sitting in a java house in Dallas.

As Five One Labs collaborated with Spirit on the Investor Exchange, it invited Jim Hake to address some of its entrepreneurs-in-training during his next visit to Iraq. So now we are strolling through the open tables, breakout rooms, and shared kitchen of the airy Lab offices. Hake climbs up on a stool and begins to describe to a gathering of about 25 business aspirants what it takes to succeed with a startup, drawing directly on his own prominent successes and a few failures.

“When I was ten, I had a little stand at the beach where I sold seashells,” he starts, noting that business is a kind of instinct for many of its practitioners.

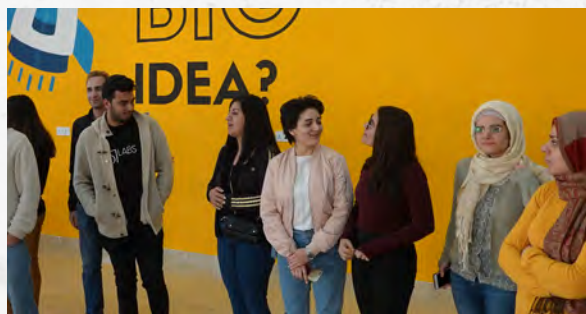
He goes on to describe his first company in Silicon Valley, which was

eventually acquired by IBM. Not long after, he got his first glimpse at the brand-new Mosaic web browser—which popularized use of the World Wide Web. He explains that he instantly understood it would make the Internet the backbone of future business, inspiring him to create one of the first Internet media companies.

Then Hake tells his audience some stories that are more painful. With his failed company Big Buttons he arrived too early at the concept of freestanding apps. This leads to a discussion of stumbling blocks, and classic mistakes that many entrepreneurs make. Big societal events (like the dot-com implosion in his case) can sweep aside dreams, Hake explains, if you don’t have a strategy for responding and surviving.

“I love creating things. And I imagine all of you do too. That’s great, and I want to encourage you. But you need to be crystal clear about what you are creating, what it is useful for, and why you think you can succeed where others haven’t. Because competition in the real world is brutally unforgiving. Clarity about what you’re doing, and honesty with yourself and others about the advantages you can exploit, and the weaknesses you need to patch, are absolutely crucial. Otherwise you will fail. And I can tell you—let me tell you—failing hurts.”





## SPIRIT OF AMERICA FILLS NICHES

There is a structural factor that helps make the field work carried out by Spirit of America valuable: simple continuity. Almost all Special Operations teams deployed by the U.S. rotate home on six-month cycles. That means new faces are constantly arriving and needing introductions to the local movers and shakers, their issues, and their culture. Often it's the local Spirit representative who links a fresh SEAL lieutenant or Marine commando team to the relevant players in their hotspot.

And Spirit tries to help new arrivals score points right away. "A new U.S. military friend shows up, shakes hands, has coffee, then departs, leaving nothing behind. And six months later he's gone from the country altogether. Locals sometimes get engagement fatigue," one Spirit operative tells me. "We aim to help fresh Special Ops teams have an instant success, some small 'give' they can deliver at their very first meeting. That can get things moving in the right direction."

Each Spirit program director is authorized to approve on-the-spot projects of up to a few thousand dollars. Larger projects can often be approved after just a quick consultation with the D.C. headquarters. This allows Spirit to be a sparkplug.

"Here in the Middle East, to be taken seriously you need to be able to show you can actually make something happen, on a timely basis," explains Connor Love, the U.S. military adviser in the Kurdistan consulate. "I can tell our Peshmerga friends that \$10 million

of military equipment is coming. And they'll say, 'Sure,' but not really believe it until they see it, because it could be a good while before it arrives. So when Spirit produces an operating English-language lab within a matter of months, it grabs people's attention. The speed with which they complete things helps us produce a different psychology, a closer heed from our allies. That makes all of our other work easier."

"Even a little bit of assistance at the right time can change momentum," Hake points out. "It was just at the peak of the battle against ISIS for Kirkuk that we delivered a small package of GPS units, tourniquets, and other medical supplies, and this gave a boost to Peshmerga units under real stress."

Though their terms aren't as short as the Special Forces teams, U.S. diplomats and military attachés also rotate out of country regularly, and sometimes rely on the regional Spirit manager to provide institutional memory and relationship continuity. "Government action takes forever. I'm overseeing projects today that were proposed five years ago. By the time the ideas I'm pushing now come to fruit, I'll be long gone," notes Captain Love. "But when I rotate out, Zack will be part of the glue that keeps my projects going."

"In addition to their speed, the other huge benefit that Spirit brings to our joint work is their ability to fill gaps," Love reports. "For instance, when we were rolling out our big effort to professionalize the payroll and H.R. functions at Peshmerga headquarters, we suddenly

realized there was no wifi in the offices where millions of dollars of computer gear was about to arrive. We hadn't anticipated that, and our contracts don't allow us to retroactively order and pay for that kind of work. This would have brought problems and delays. So we just relied on Spirit to quickly provide wifi gear."

In another case, a military office supplied a medical clinic with sophisticated radiology software. But after it was installed, doctors found their computer monitors were too fuzzy to take advantage of the new images. So Spirit quickly stepped in and provided high-resolution monitors.

"Our philanthropic and government roles complement each other beautifully," asserts Hake. "This kind of work would be hard to get done without the full force of the military and federal agencies behind it. But the government ecosystem has weak spots that need to be filled in. That's our role."

The military and USAID offices in our embassies have budgets for local projects. But there are twisty contract requirements, metrics demands, and other attached strings that bog projects down. For instance, the funds appropriated to our Defense Department for supposedly time-sensitive Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster Assistance, and Civic Aid projects have 18-24 month turnaround times that make them too slow for urgent priorities.

Another Spirit niche is grant size. Most SoA gifts are micro-grants. Lots are just \$500-\$7,000. Five-figure expenditures are common. Only occasionally does Spirit do projects costing \$100,000 or more. Government agencies and private NGOs rarely partake in small offerings of that sort; they just don't have the flexibility at





headquarters, and the boots in the field, to execute multiple small ventures.

One clever Spirit protocol requires some institutional humility. Rather than trying to be “innovators” imposing ideas from outside, the group often prefers to be complementary. It aims, in most cases, to come into a project after the community has already taken some action. Then Spirit will fill in missing pieces to keep momentum going. Like the wifi install and the medical monitors mentioned above, the gap-funding for the Peshmerga K9s, and the heating system installed at the community center to make the Pankisi Gorge wrestling team a reality.

“Too often, aid teams parachute into some place and give something that no one locally was really asking for,” Nick Israel tells me. “Like the community center for Roma families that someone in the State Department decided should be built in Serbia before I arrived. There was no local buy-in, it never got used much, and quickly became a disaster. The air conditioner was stolen, the windows taken out, the wires stripped. It now looks like something in a Syrian war zone. Because it was imposed rather than generated locally.”

### Winning hearts and minds

Spirit of America operates in these distinctive ways all across the globe, in a riot of different settings. In Niger, where jihadists have killed local military and U.S. servicemembers, Spirit bolstered economic stability among the poor tribes that Islamists recruit from by launching a vaccination effort to improve the health of cattle herds—which provide all subsistence in the area. Spirit brought in veterinarians, supplied dirt bikes so they could reach isolated places, and created 27 scholarships to allow local youths to attend vet school.

In Central America, Spirit is reducing recruitment of vulnerable youth into narco-trafficking gangs. Working with the U.S. Marines and Army, it has equipped an auto-mechanic course that leads to legitimate job opportunities, supplied uniforms for sports teams that keep kids out of gangs, and delivered medical supplies to local military forces doing dangerous drug interdiction in the countryside.



Nick Israel (wearing Spirit cap and blue coat) toasted liberty and friendship at a supra feast offered by Georgians to their American guests.

Vietnam, a nation vexed by China’s power grabs, is an emerging interest for Spirit. While I travelled with Spirit staff, plans were unfolding to distribute medical supplies, share records that could help local officials identify remains of their missing soldiers, and provide educational materials that the wife of the U.S. Secretary of Defense could present to Vietnamese schoolchildren.

In many of these cases, it is local hearts and minds that are being appealed to. “The future of war is winning people, not territory,” suggests John Phelan, a financier who donates to Spirit, in explaining why he thinks the group serves our national interest.

Much of what SoA does can be viewed as trust-building. That is often a precondition for improving security today. And it is something that everyday citizens can help with.

These ideas are now part of the official defense strategies promulgated by the Pentagon. “Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and

small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives,” states the grand strategy document covering U.S. military operations today. Special Operations teams working out of U.S. embassies are ideal for executing such work, the report proposes.

That is exactly the hub that Spirit of America spins most of its operations around. One recently retired Special Forces soldier I interviewed estimated that nearly 100 percent of her colleagues knew what Spirit could bring to civil-affairs work in contested countries, and valued its help. “The operators have learned who we are,” agrees a Spirit field director. “We now have a reputation that makes it much easier to get involved at the core of tough problems.” Indeed, briefings on what Spirit of America can bring to the fight have become part of the normal Tampa training of Special Ops soldiers.

### Citizen support for national goals

Even as new mechanisms allow Americans to directly support our

Spirit aims to come into a project after the community has already taken some action. Too often, aid teams parachute into some place and give something no one was asking for.



security forces, and military officials embrace private collaborations, there are simultaneous sparks of resistance to civilian involvement in national defense. Over the last year or two, some employees at tech companies in particular have objected to any collaboration with the Pentagon. In December 2019, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos answered these critics.

“If big tech is going to turn their backs on the Department of Defense, this country is in trouble,” said Bezos. “Do you want a strong national defense or don’t you? I think you do. So we have to support that.... This country is important.... We are the good guys. I really do believe that.”

Certainly this is the view of Spirit of America’s philanthropic supporters. In 2019 the charity had 803 individual contributors. This included many small donors, and 12 people who gave at least \$100,000. Major funders have included investor and charter-school innovator Bob Oster, Ross Perot, Jr., Palantir cofounder Joe Lonsdale, medical-device entrepreneur Fred Khosravi, private-equity investor Philip Hammaraskjold, the Paul Singer Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation, and others.

Home Depot co-founder Bernie Marcus has been a stalwart backer, and recently offered \$4.5 million so Spirit of America can do more in support of “the 1 percent of Americans who volunteer to serve our great country through the U.S. military.” Marcus says he funds the group because it helps servicemembers navigate “the world’s most complex problems,” which “bureaucracies can’t solve on their own. Spirit of America brings entrepreneurial values, speed, and flexibility to bear against the enemies of the United States.”

While now well proven, the SoA formula is arguably taking place on much too small a scale today, given the colossal security pressures that exist across the globe. Ideally there would exist a dozen Spirit-like entities offering philanthropic amplification of security-related duties like police work, border control, first-response, medical aid, courts and detention systems, disaster aid, culture training for troops, and so forth.



(From top to bottom) **Spirit donors**  
Bernie Marcus, Joe Lonsdale, Paul Singer,  
and Bob Oster.

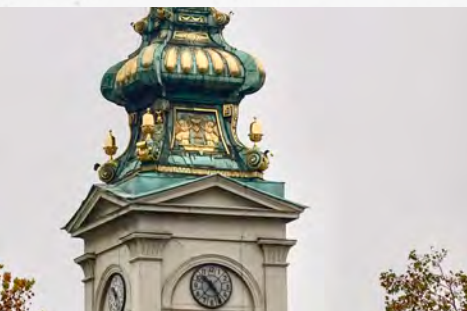
And Spirit itself, despite steady growth, is far from the size it could be. It has the organizational vision and staff competence to execute on a much larger scale. The organization currently runs on a shoestring, and I estimate it could grow to several times its current scope without bloat, waste, or creation of dependency among recipients. Even without a substantial personnel increase, Spirit could funnel perhaps ten times as much through its existing pipelines as it does now—annually distributing something like \$30 million of careful aid instead of \$3 million. All that is wanting is donor support as more givers become aware of this unusual philanthropic niche.

Jim Hake’s medium-term goal is to roughly double staff and triple spending. One model he cites is the CDC Foundation, the private charity that supports the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Much as Spirit supports frontliners in our departments of Defense and State, the CDC Foundation offers private resources to medical threat controllers to make them more effective. Over the past two decades the CDC Foundation has raised more than \$800 million from donors, and backed about a thousand separate interventions to secure Americans from illness. Bernie Marcus has been vital to the success of the CDC Foundation, just as he has been a linchpin of Spirit of America.

The one thing Jim Hake is certain of is that he doesn’t want his group to take any government money. “It would kill the Spirit of America model if we started accepting government money. Right now we can call in anyone. We can try crazy things. We can move at the speed of light. Because we don’t belong to anyone. Being a contractor of USAID or the Department of Defense would choke the life out of us. It would be our end.”

Spirit’s key allies and admirers, even within government, share Hake’s understanding that the group is able to do much more as a private actor than it could accomplish if it became just another adjunct of the public sector. “As Americans, we have never accepted that government has all the answers,” notes James Mattis. Even in areas like national defense.





America's problem in Serbia is visible in one glance at the heart of the capital. Hard amidst Belgrade's top government ministries, high courts, fancy restaurants, and British Embassy loom two large, grimly bombed-out buildings. For more than 20 years they have stood amidst the surrounding parks and historic structures, prominently proclaiming their downbeat message. The Serbian government has even put a memorable title on this "protected monument of culture": *Poklon Gradana Amerike Gradanima Srbije 1999 ... Gift of American Citizens to Serbian Citizens 1999*.

To stop government bloodshed against provinces that were breaking away from the former Yugoslavia, NATO in 1999 commenced a bombing campaign against the Serbian military and state. After three months of precision attacks, mostly led by American pilots, President Milosevic

withdrew his forces from Kosovo and the raids stopped. About 1,000 Serbian troops and 500 civilians were killed during the campaign.

Today's Belgrade ruin was the Ministry of Defense back in 1999. Not being attacked until the fortieth day of the NATO intervention, it was unoccupied when the missiles struck. The hulk has been used by the government, though, to symbolize "the suffering of Serbia," with the U.S. cast as the main villain.

Negative perceptions of the U.S. remain pronounced in segments of the Serbian population, particularly in areas where the NATO jets and helicopters did their work. At a fuel stop as we drove across the country, two American Army officers accompanying us in uniform crossed paths with a Serb as they entered the gas station. "Lutajuci kriminalci!" (wandering criminals) he interjected before walking away.

The U.S. military has tried hard to make friends in Serbia during the two decades since the air strikes. The defense attaché from the U.S. embassy reports that one Serbian army company taking part in international peacekeeping operations is being equipped by the U.S. as a gesture of

friendship. Serbs are now regularly invited to have a role in NATO training exercises.

But frosty relations at the top of politics frequently interfere with the healing process. The current president was propaganda minister under Milosevic, the media are state-controlled, and the government finds it convenient to nurse continuing resentment against America. When the U.S. embassy recently published a photo of a Serb and an American at joint military instruction in Germany they were chastised "You can't show that!" and force-to-force cooperation was cut off for a period.

One clever way of getting around this has been to use state National Guardsmen rather than regular Army as U.S. representatives in mil-to-mil relations. Ohio National Guard troops, who don't spark resentment among Serbian leaders as other U.S. military do, have had a continual presence in Serbia since 2006. Their soldiers drill with Serbs. Combat medics on both sides exchange information. Guardsmen have trained Serbia's Border Police. Female Guardsmen instruct their counterparts in self-defense. The military chaplains on both sides collaborate. Serb officers have repeatedly been invited to U.S. classes by the Ohio Guard. And Guardsmen participate in humanitarian, social, sports, and charitable projects across Serbia.

If civilians "turn their backs  
on the Department of Defense,  
this country is in trouble," said Jeff Bezos.  
"Do you want a strong national defense  
or don't you? I think you do."

**Green Beret with a head for green**  
Another clever way of getting beyond the official antipathy has been to reach





The bombed-out shell of its Ministry of Defense right in the heart of Belgrade has been preserved by the Serbian government **as a tool to keep resentment alive** against the U.S. for its opposition during the Balkan wars.

out to Serbs through U.S. civil society instead of government—specifically through Spirit of America. The charity has recently invested more than \$50,000 in small projects across the country, laying groundwork for a gradual person-to-person thaw in relations. Spirit’s main focus has been the south of the country, where Russia (protector of Yugoslavia during its warring phase, and vetoer of any international efforts distasteful to the old regime) has concentrated its own efforts to influence Serbian opinion and governance.

“We’re looking for a high volume of small-scale projects where we can work with local partners, produce clear benefits for residents, mix U.S. and Serbian armed forces, leverage work already being done by the U.S. government, and gain media attention,” summarizes Ryan Frost, Spirit’s director of field operations. Wiry, bearded, with a shaved head and sharp handsome features lit by gray-blue eyes, Frost was one of Spirit’s first program directors. He

set up the group’s operations in Latin America—a place he knew well after serving in Honduras and Guyana as a U.S. Special Forces soldier, blowing up airstrips used by drug traffickers, training Honduran troops, and working with the CIA to tamp down the narcotics trade.

“Ever since I saw *Clear and Present Danger*, the Tom Clancy movie with Harrison Ford, I wanted to be a Green Beret!” he says with a smile. He started college in Colorado but it left him flat. “At my first go, college did nothing for me. I wanted hard challenges. I wanted to learn by doing things. I just wasn’t interested in classwork, so I dropped out and enlisted in the Army.”

He worked his way up the military food chain, including time in Iraq where he got the opportunity to earn his Special Forces Green Beret. “I realized at one point that the things we remember and relish most in life are not the times we were comfortable and easy and having fun. What we really end up cherishing are the times that were tough, that forced us to struggle

and overcome, even painfully.” With seven years of hard-won achievement under his belt, Frost returned to college and earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology that tempted him to try a career as a therapist.

Interesting duty in the Special Forces reserve, however, eventually led him to Spirit. Once he had the Latin American shop operating, Frost then spent three years at Goldman Sachs. He loved finance, but as he began to feel the itch for a family life the office hours at Goldman pushed him away. Still attracted to the patriotic ideals and colleagues at Spirit, he returned in 2018 to run all field ops.

### Finding friends for America

Now Ryan and I are talking to a woman who loves kickboxing, business, and organizing huge mass demonstrations. While she probably weighs 100 pounds with her boxing gloves on, pony-tailed Nadica Stosic is a firecracker. In some very American ways she is blunt, brimming with energy, friendly, funny, and uninterested in ideology. She is also streaked with an unmistakable fierceness.

When still a teenager, she was part of the opposition to Slobodan Milosevic. She personally organized some of the largest rallies staged in her country against his policies. With support from the U.S. embassy she established a nonprofit to push for integration of Serbia into the West, and an end to its reliance on Russia.

Yet when Milosevic stepped down, and Serbia and NATO exchanged ambassadors, Stosic left politics completely. “For me, it was all defensive. I didn’t want to live in a rogue nation, constantly battling, where normal life was impossible. As soon as I could see a path for Serbia to become peaceful and integrated with other decent countries, I shifted my energies into business.” Now she is an administrator and H.R. specialist at a busy corporation, though she still keeps an eye on public life just as a good citizen.

A few years ago the U.S. embassy came to Spirit of America to let it

**A clever way of getting beyond the antipathy of the Serbian government has been to reach out to Serbs through U.S. civil society.**



know an influential community leader in Vranje, a city in the far south of Serbia near Kosovo, was asking for help to renovate a dilapidated kickboxing gym that had become a center of community activity and pride. Numerous local kickboxers had risen to the national team, and the gym unified a cross-section of young people, including some Roma boys who might otherwise have had trouble integrating. The community leader—who was Stosic—reported that the two kickboxing clubs using the gym taught good character and required solid school effort from any youngster who wanted to train. “This is a poor border area, just the kind of region where resentments turn to hatred if you don’t have constructive institutions for young people,” she argued. Spirit agreed to help her.

Spirit supplied all of the building materials needed to transform the decrepit facility, an old garage tacked onto the back of a city firehouse. Then it organized a mix of volunteer laborers to carry out the renovation: Spirit staff, Ohio National Guard, a bunch of young athletes, other U.S. soldiers, Serbian soldiers, and U.S. embassy personnel. It took two weeks of hard toil to replace the windows, walls, and roof, then finish the interior. Spirit also donated several thousand dollars of athletic gear.

As I visit the gym now, one year later, Stosic and Jim Hake ask a group of kickboxers what they thought when a bunch of Americans first showed up and said they were going to fix the moldy training center in their little city. “Candid Camera! We thought it was a spoof,” answers one in Serbian. The boxers were surprised by the helpfulness, energy, and passion of the U.S. soldiers who spearheaded the physical work. These men and women were very different from what their parents had led them to expect of Americans.

One day toward the end of the project Spirit set up a little social-media operation in the cramped changing room of the gym. Each local



Nadica Stosic is an influential **community leader in southern Serbia who worked with Spirit of America** to get a kickboxing gym renovated. Here she is flanked by two products of the gym who became members of the Serbian national team.

kickboxer posed for a picture with a U.S. soldier and a Serbian soldier on either side, and walked away with both printed and digital copies of the shot. The young people posted these to their Facebook pages and other sites, and a large number of shares and likes accumulated. It was a nice advertisement for cross-national cooperation through volunteer work.

“Spirit of America is very different from other groups I know,” observes Nadica Stosic. “It doesn’t have bureaucracy, but works directly with real people, all around the country. This is the right way to show someone you care for them.”

In collaboration with the U.S. embassy and a Serbian ad agency, Spirit has recently commissioned some public polling and group testing. They want to map out Serbian perceptions of America, of local problems, and of how the two societies might better collaborate. Identifying cultural obstacles and turning them into opportunities is an important part of Spirit’s operation.

As a dozen or more young boxers swarm around us, talking about their training, showing off their tattoos, and reminiscing about when the Americans descended and started swinging sledgehammers, Jim Hake tests an

idea. “What if we had a contest asking residents of this area for proposals on how to spend a charitable donation of a few thousand dollars? Maybe set up a Facebook page and let people vote for their favorite project?”

A good concept, the young men seem to think. Then Hake asks, “If you personally had a couple thousand dollars given to you by everyday Americans for a charitable venture, what would you use it for?” The boxers think, wheels turning as we watch.

“I would protect homeless street dogs,” answers one. “Improve a city park, with exercise equipment,” says another. “Maybe another kickboxing club at a nearby village 12 kilometers away,” suggests a third.

“We always want to test new approaches, and find new partners,” Hake tells me later. “Get our friends thinking about ways that help from U.S. citizens could allow them to improve their own societies. They shouldn’t just focus on what someone might give them.”

The moral effects of this gym renovation are on display throughout our morning visit. That same afternoon we get to observe some of the physical fruits. Several of the Vranje kickboxers will fight in a big competition in the city of Nis, an hour and a half north. We all pile into cars.





Fighters trained at the gym renovated by Spirit won honors at **this year's Balkan kickboxing championship.**

As we enter the “Balkan’s Best Fighters” auditorium, 400 competitors from Serbia, Bulgaria, Moldova, Hungary, Bosnia, Macedonia, and several other countries have already begun to face off. The youngest athletes are battling on mats covering a basketball court. A large roped ring hosts the older and most skilled fighters. Punches and kicks are flying.

At the end of the two-day competition, several of the boxers from little Vranje emerge as victors. Stosic sends us photos of the champions, medals draped around their necks. They look proud. She is beaming.

### Power plays

Next we head to the city of Novi Pazar, right on Serbia’s contested border with Kosovo. This area is rife with smugglers, money launderers, and various stripes of gangsters. It is subject to aggressive Russian influence. And the religious tensions that were at the root of the Balkan wars are bubbling up again here. Saudis, Turks, and other outside funders are pushing more stringent varieties of Islam in the local mosques.

To further complicate matters, this is the part of Europe where the Chinese are trying hardest to expand their influence under the Belt and Road Initiative. During our visit to the Novi Pazar mayor’s office, I notice

a nice penjing planting on his desk, and a lacquered doll of a soldier in traditional Chinese armor. I inquire, and find the mayor was recently hosted on an all-expenses-paid “friendship tour” of China.

Hoping to tamp down this area’s multiple schisms and make friends, the U.S. Agency for International Development has recently invested more than \$6 million in the region. U.S. military teams are also trying to help. While the mayor is explaining to guests from Spirit of America and the U.S. embassy some of the challenges he faces, Major Rob Hamilton reminds him that the American military would like to supply de-mining equipment and training to the Serbian army so the mothballed local military airfield can be made safe and opened to commercial air traffic. That would boost the economy of this isolated region. Yet Serb commanders keep rebuffing the offer, under Russian pressure. “The military is the military,” the mayor shrugs with resignation. “We can’t influence them either.”

Spirit has found two places to be helpful here. It supplied some medical equipment to a local clinic. And it is just now donating, as we visit, \$12,000 of equipment for fighting wildfires—which are a serious problem in this mountainous landscape. The region used to have fire-suppressing aircraft,

but these were sold off by corrupt politicians for private enrichment, so burns now rage on and on. As a grassroots response, Spirit is supplying 50 water-dispensing backpacks and the necessary support gear. There is a ceremony attended by local media as the donation is handed off to city hall.

The Russians have taken a very different approach to influencing strategic southern Serbia. Several years ago they built a large secure facility near the airport in Nis. Prominent signage labels it as the “Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center.” Experts, however, say it’s a lightly disguised intelligence and military base. When I attempt to visit, a soldier tells me I must leave, and may not take photos.

Two weeks before we arrived in this area, while serious blazes were leaping through nearby forests, a Russian firefighting plane was dispatched to the Nis airport, and trumpeted as an emergency response. Yet the plane never flew a mission. It merely sat there, while a hotel and surrounding region burned to the ground a few kilometers away, then quietly flew back to Russia without making the slightest contribution against the crisis. “Who are they kidding, claiming that’s a civil-defense center!” scoffs Nadica. Other locals give the same response.

While skepticism about Russian motives, and concomitant friendliness toward the U.S., are slowing rising among the Serbian public today, leading politicians still strongly favor Russia. Putin’s representatives press them hard to resist Serbian integration into Europe and NATO. And Russia has seized much of Serbia’s energy sector in underhanded ways, and influences other industries.

The state media remain full of pro-Russian narratives, which enables additional manipulation and predatory behavior. Serbs tell pollsters today they believe Russia is the top investor in their country. Actually, Russia is #15. The E.U. is Serbia’s #1 source of finance, and the U.S. is #2.



### Charitable acts at a real humanitarian center

With signs of the big, hard power plays of the Russian bear fresh before us, we next head off to observe an even softer intervention by Spirit of America. The Mara Center is a home that cares for several dozen mentally disabled Serbians. Drawing from a district of 400,000 residents, it provides long-term custodial care and sheltering for seriously handicapped people.

For this visit by Americans, plus local media, a group of residents puts on a sweet dancing and singing demonstration. The center director stands up and says, “The Mara Center is no longer alone. We have a friend. A friend we can invite to celebrate with us. But also one we can rely on when we have a hard time. Thank you to Spirit of America for your humanity and support, which no separation of kilometers can erode.”

“One of the tests of any society,” states Jim Hake, “is how well they take care of the least advantaged. I have had experience in my own family with people touched by disabilities. So I am very happy to see dedicated staff making life better here in Nis for disabled individuals.”

“Spirit of America’s support began when we visited the Serbian-American Friendship Club in this city, and asked how we could deepen links between our countries. They suggested the Mara Center was a worthy community organization.” First Spirit donated some computer equipment, furnishings, and electronics that could be used by residents. Then they gave an EKG machine and some other equipment so clients can get health exams on site instead of enduring difficult transport to a hospital.

To be blunt, there is no national-security value in supporting the Mara Center. This is pure, lovely charity. It reflects a respect for life and an inclination to protect the vulnerable that many Americans cherish for

religious and moral reasons, not utility. That said, Spirit’s assistance here has accrued a bit of unexpected payoff: respect from influential people.

Meeting us at the door of the Mara Center, and sitting with the Spirit staff and accompanying U.S. military officers as residents put on their dance performance, is one Dr. Dragan Milic. Wearing a crisp blue suit and sporting thick gray hair that threatens to explode into wildness at any moment, Milic looks like an eccentric Italian count. When he begins to speak, though, he bubbles with the productive energy one might encounter in any professional or commercial Master of the Universe in the U.S.

Milic is in fact a Serbian with a lot of America in his bloodstream. He spent considerable stretches at Mayo, the Cleveland Clinic, and other stateside institutions completing his medical education. He was noticed there for his innovations in phlebology and other fields, including several new treatments and surgical methods he created.

“When I was young and unknown I started getting invited to speak in prime-time slots at major U.S. medical conferences—2,000 people in the room. I thought to myself, ‘These Americans really are cowboys! They’re taking a big risk by giving me such opportunities, when I have no fame

or backing!’ My papers started to win prizes, and ended up in the top U.S. journals. Then I realized, ‘This is what a meritocracy looks like!’ How can you not fall in love with a place that gives an outsider like me such chances?”

### Medical healing plus culture mending

Today Dr. Milic is the sole physician in Serbia with three licensures: as a cardiac surgeon, as a general surgeon, and as a vascular surgeon. He has published many frequently cited papers in the medical literature. The American Association for Vascular Surgery named him the best surgeon in that craft outside the United States.

And he is the dynamo who has built up the most remarkable medical clinic in the Balkans. His center does a large volume of heart surgeries and organ transplants on the most difficult cases, while rapidly growing into new areas like genetic medicine. He is also vice dean of a nearby medical school that is being lifted to new heights by his whirlwind contributions.

In a country where few professional sectors are anywhere near the cutting edge, the Nis clinic sparkles with modern efficiency. Last year it treated 12,000 patients for heart ailments alone, operating on 1,100 of them (many of those done by Milic himself). And among those 1,100 heart surgeries there were only 15 deaths.



The “humanitarian center” Russia built in southern Serbia a few years ago appears to be anything but. It’s big and located in a strategic location, but visitors are forbidden and nothing visible happens here.





Tribute to U.S. aid on the cardiovascular clinic in Nis, Serbia.

“You cannot have a lower death rate than that among urgent patients,” he notes.

Sharp eyes at the U.S. embassy in Serbia knew a star when they saw one, and some years ago they started helping Dr. Milic build up his remarkable establishment. They provided funds from various defense-cooperation accounts, and negotiated big discounts for him on American medical equipment. U.S. gifts now totaling in the millions furnished his operating theater and bought a heart-lung machine. They provided an intensive-care unit, radiology gear, and equipment to support transplants of kidneys, livers, and hearts. Most recently, an advanced genetics lab was fitted out.

Milic insists with every fiber of his body that, “People must know where all of this comes from!” Remarkably, in a country where anti-Americanism is official government policy, and

an old habit of significant parts of the population, the main entrance to Milic’s clinic is crowned by a massive 400-pound medallion bearing the Great Seal of the United States, with the eagle clutching a quiver of arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other. Large silver letters underneath state in Serbian: “We owe a debt of gratitude to the American people, the American government, and foremost the U.S. Army for donating equipment that will be used to treat patients at this clinic.”

“People warned me, ‘Don’t make fireworks with these American donations,’” explains Milic. “But we put up signs that nobody could miss or ignore. I needed a very big sign because we have a very big problem with propaganda. Dishonest, filthy Russian misinformation.”

He reports, “That sign has been defaced by Russians and hooligans. I know who did it. We have cameras. We took it down and cleaned it.”

“I was advised very sternly not to re-install the sign after we removed it. I was told, ‘You now have a good excuse to make disappear something that has offended powerful people.’ I refused. I told them no matter if it is attacked ten times I will repair it over and over. Next time we have it down for repairs I may gild it before putting it back up!”

“It’s ridiculous to be wedded to the old idea that anyone sympathetic to the U.S. is a traitor! We must rebut that. Many Balkan people want America’s friendship and help. Everybody who leaves my clinic gets a pamphlet telling them exactly who provided the equipment that saved or improved their life. So they can get used to the fact that Americans are actually our best friends.”

Milic understands very well the recent history he is working against. His city of Nis, the third largest in Serbia and a military center, was the most heavily hit part of the country during the 1999 NATO bombing runs. He himself lived through 78 days of attacks, lost friends in the bombardments, and once had the windows of his operating room blown out while he was working in the chest of a patient. But he knows this was collateral damage brought on by his own government’s bloody-mindedness. And he calculates that the number of lives saved by the equipment donated to his clinic has already exceeded all the casualties of the prior war.

His hospital is actually achieving two triumphs simultaneously. It is a top-flight establishment of medical healing. And it is also a revolutionary teaching facility that encourages humanitarian, historical, and cultural mending. Literally dozens of plaques, photos, military insignia, paintings, and storyboards lay out a long tradition of Serbian-American cooperation, and bring to life many forgotten contributions of Americans to Serbian success and happiness.

For instance, the brand-new genetics lab bears large signs



dedicating it to Douglas Dold, an American doctor fresh out of Columbia Medical School who traveled to this part of Serbia to offer humanitarian care when World War I broke out. In addition to doing much lifesaving himself he intervened to stop atrocities. At one point he presented himself to a Bulgarian general and warned, “If there are any bloodbaths in Nis, you will have trouble with me, and the American government, and the American people.” After German saboteurs interfered with the alcohol he used to bathe his hands and arms before doing surgery, Dold went blind. (“So his last sights were of Serbia,” interjects Milic poetically.) Nonetheless the nearly sightless American stayed on, volunteering to help the Red Cross with an anti-lice campaign aimed at stopping diphtheria outbreaks among Serbs. “We must keep these stories alive, to rebut the lies from the east!” exclaims Milic.

A new laboratory at the medical school funded with U.S. support midwived by Dr. Milic will be named for John Frothingham, an American philanthropist who donated a fully equipped field hospital to Serbia during World War I. He later became concerned about Serbian orphans and provided the necessities for 6,000 of them to be cared for. And he legally adopted 260 orphaned Serbs himself, to protect them. Frothingham also fell in love with Serbian folk music, and built a series of tennis courts to help Serbian troops relax—the root of today’s excellence in this sport among Serbs like Novak Djokovic.

Also covering the halls of the clinic are images of contemporary American medical pioneers who are heroes to Milic for advancing his profession—like Houston cardiac surgeon Michael DeBakey, and U.S. Army vascular surgeon Norman Rich. There is even a painting of the day Woodrow Wilson flew the Serbian flag over the White House to honor Serbia’s military bravery. The aim of all this teaching is cross-cultural accommodation.



Dr. Dragan Milic stands in the **new intensive-care unit established with American help** in his clinic, one of the most productive in the Balkans.

### Russia vs. USA

Driving much of his effort is Milic’s dread of Russian influence. “Communism would never have blanketed my country except for the Russians overrunning us,” he states. The raw violence of Russia’s occupation is very real to him. His own grandmother had her spine broken by their soldiers.

“The Russians create mayhem. They are killers, and sophisticated liars. But they are not stupid. They will never allow us to escape their orbit if they can help it. They will never allow Bulgaria to break free. They have destroyed Ukraine. They have nothing positive to offer, but they are powerful. I am a doctor, and I see the way they operate as much like a malignancy in the body.”

“We cannot compete with Russian propaganda and manipulation on our own. Every day there is a blizzard of lies. All resentment, anger, envy—reptilian emotions.”

“All we can do is try patiently and realistically to share a fuller truth. The Americans are our most precious allies in this. The Russians use their

resources to corrupt and pollute. You use yours to help people in need.”

“The only hobby I have outside my work,” Milic tells me, “is the Serbian-American Friendship Club.” He founded the group in 2014 and astonished observers at the U.S. embassy by building it to more than 3,000 participants. Members we met at a local restaurant included a defense attorney, writers, businesspeople, and other independent and influential Serbs. Milic continues as club president; the group’s symbol of intertwined Serbian and U.S. flags adorns the lapel of his suit.

“America is not perfect. But the principles Americans believe in and stand for are perfect,” says Milic. “I love that statement by my friend Ben Hodges” (a retired American general who serves on the advisory board of Spirit of America).

“All societies change and evolve, with ups and downs. The U.S. is the only country I know that evolves into something better after each peril. I am a devoted student of American Civil War history, and it is an inspiration to me to

**Spirit’s assistance here—pure lovely charity—  
has accrued an unexpected payoff:  
respect from influential people.**





Dr. Milic and Jim Hake **speak about friendship between Serbia and America** during a half-hour interview on Serbian television.

see how your country used that horrible event to evolve upward, to become more noble. That is the huge difference between the U.S. and other nations.”

“Sometimes it is difficult for Americans to see what a beautiful society they have. The biggest success. The fairest place. The cradle of philanthropy. True individual freedom. A Constitution that prevents these things from being washed away. And a U.S. military that never, ever, breaks.”

“Americans who take these things for granted should recognize how rare they are. You must conserve and strengthen those institutions. Those of us who hope for a better world look to America when we get discouraged. That’s our best proof that these things are not dreams. The U.S. will always be a beacon and a pillar for people who love freedom.”

For proclaiming his bold views, Dr. Milic has encountered many obstacles and threats. He is often at odds with the administrators of his government-owned hospital. A brother of the hospital director is head of Serbia’s intelligence

service, and a close friend of the country’s pro-Russian president.

When Milic was slated to be in the U.S. for some advanced medical training, the director nearly succeeded in firing him from his post. Only the accident of a delayed flight allowed the doctor to be present as the trap was sprung. So that attack he was able to fend off.

In addition to the grave risks to his career, Milic’s outspokenness has brought threats to his life. He is, however, wildly brave, and charges ahead on sheer nerve and energy. His irreplaceable expertise, his intellect and stamina, and his folk popularity have so far propelled him around many stumbling blocks and thuggish pressures.

“When I walked the streets of the city with him once, perhaps a quarter of the people we passed acknowledged or thanked him for something,” one American colonel explained to me. “His medical work alone has touched thousands of families.” Indeed, at a dinner in a different part of the country, I discovered that the Lieutenant Colonel in the Serbian army who was sitting

across the table from me had had his father’s heart repaired by Dr. Milic.

“Strangely, I find I am accumulating friends in the Serbian army,” Milic tells me. While we were with him the doctor was invited to attend Serbia’s annual military celebration day. It’s doubtful there is much warmth behind that, but this at least suggests some authorities have developed a grudging respect for his influence.

### **The power of the personal**

To conclude the visit of Spirit of America’s field operators to his city, Dragan Milic arranges for the television station to air an extensive discussion between him and Jim Hake, guided by the local anchorwoman. Milic puts on his good-citizen/impresario/translator hat and spearheads an interesting exchange.

“I’m very happy to see a strong relationship growing up here between Americans and Serbs,” says Hake on air. “I of course heard things about Serbs before I arrived. So I was really glad to come here and meet extraordinary Serbs myself.”

“And I’m sure Serbs hear things about America. In Vranje, where our organization helped rebuild a kickboxing gym, I recently learned that many of the young men there had been told bad things about Americans before we showed up. Working shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. soldiers and volunteers, though, gave people a chance to make up their own minds. And many misconceptions on both sides were dispelled.”

Hake has the personal touch that is often so important to the success of charitable work. This is his fifth visit to Serbia, and the third time he has driven down to spend time with Milic. The doctor’s admiration for Spirit’s willingness to support the Mara Center quickly extended into shared friends and overlapping values, and the two men have built a sturdy bond.

Hake’s gift for making pals has come in handy more than once. At one point he was included in a long-sought

**“The Russians use their resources to corrupt.  
You use yours to help people in need.  
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Americans stand for are perfect.”**



meeting between the U.S. military attaché at our Belgrade embassy and Serbia's Commander of the Army, Milosav Simovic. The room was set up with a formal array of military flags and a 12-foot separation between the tables of each side, as is conventional at the generally frosty mil-to-mil meetings between Serbs and Americans. Then the U.S. attaché got sick. Unexpectedly, Hake was handed the floor.

He quickly improvised remarks about the importance of making human connections between their two nations. He explained what Spirit does. That it is funded entirely by voluntary contributions from real Americans. With a goal of building bonds of mutual knowledge and respect.

General Simovic was charmed. The meeting went much longer than anticipated. The confab ended with the general's arm draped around Hake's shoulders—so of course the American did what every modern tech-entrepreneur-turned-philanthropist does: He took a selfie with his new pal. Not long after this it was agreed that Serbian soldiers could help Spirit and the Ohio National Guard with the renovation of the kickboxing gym in Vranje. Meanwhile, the official defense attaché in our American embassy still finds it impossible to get meetings with Simovic.

American ingenuousness and goodwill make friends everywhere. Some of these friendships are conditional. Many are full-blown love affairs.

Philo-Americans like Dragan Milic and Nadica Stosic exist all over the globe, even in the most inflamed, harshly governed, tyrannized countries. They cluster around outposts of U.S. culture and ideas, blooming forth whenever they are watered by our miracles of commerce, our schools, our books and films, our churches and charities. The principles of our founding retain a great power to draw people, especially when they are put into concrete action through personal generosity.

And the citizens attracted to our ideals are often the most impressive, resourceful, brave, and productive in their society. "Many of us have discovered in life that if you really want something done, you should ask the busiest person you can find," Hake observes paradoxically. "The community leaders that Spirit connects with overseas certainly illustrate that."

### But is it enough?

Spirit of America expresses U.S. altruism and partnership through acts that could reasonably be criticized as pinpricks. The Russians and Chinese build multimillion-dollar infrastructure and manipulate national politics. We plant walnut trees, teach English, and fund kickboxers. Do our pinpricks sum to anything consequential? Can they balance the leviathan efforts of our antagonists?

Certainly our nation could use a lot more Spirit of America-like grassroots intervention overseas. There is a large untapped upside for philanthropy that directly undergirds the security of our nation. Yet even as it has had to invent a new form of philanthropic action from scratch, Spirit has already sprayed thousands of its pinpricks across some of the planet's saddest societies. And there are hundreds of other U.S. philanthropies representing our values overseas, even when they aren't explicitly aiming to undergird the security of our nation as Spirit does.

As for the ultimate effectiveness of little actions—mass repetition of small successes is how good philanthropy works. Person to person, town to town, one human case at a time. One must have some faith that such efforts are not wasted, that they cumulate and add up, that they move people. People are rarely motivated by anonymous actions carried out mechanically on a mass level by officials, but they remember sincere and timely responses when they were in need.



A selfie snapped by Jim Hake after he hit it off with Serbian Commander of the Army Milosav Simovic.

Charitable action is a soulful undertaking, a humane rather than scientific process. It's an imprecise, gradual, sometimes-messy task. Yet in the end it often has surprising power. Even modest personal giving can yield thunderbolt results.

In any case, we have little choice but to work in humble human increments. America is not going to sweep across the globe erecting Belts and Roads or Humanitarian Centers wrapped in sneaky provisos and predatory demands. Even if we wanted to, we'd make a botch of that kind of Machiavellian big-state work.

Instead, Americans like to water lots of little local gardens. Within coherent communities. As partners with natural allies and compatriots. In loose concert with as many friends as possible. Repeating this hundreds and thousands of times, in small acts that build, as modest creeks join to become mighty rivers. That's our way.

We live in a world where cruel men have increasing opportunities to reach across long distances and hurt those they disdain. Generous men and women and clever social entrepreneurs need to be equally active in reaching out to strengthen and heal fractured societies. So bringing more of the tools of philanthropy to U.S. national-security problems could be a valuable aid to international peace and stability. **P**