

# Winning Hearts and Minds



## With the *Spirit of America*



Above: LtCol John Lutkenhouse and his Marines passed out Spirit of America-provided school supplies in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2004.

Below: Spirit of America founder Jim Hake visits Afghanistan and Iraq to obtain firsthand knowledge of the communities' needs. In this photo, he is accompanying 1stMarDiv Marines on a visit to Fallujah, Iraq, in June 2004.



By Karen Karl

We see many images from Iraq and Afghanistan on the evening news, but some of the best are images of Marines helping local people and their children improve their lives. What we don't see—not directly anyway—is the “Spirit of America” that helps the

Marines, behind the scenes, as they win the hearts and minds.

This Spirit of America is more than a great feeling; it is one of our country's most innovative nonprofit organizations. For six years Spirit of America has supported the Marines' outreach efforts by providing supplies for them to give to local residents—items the Marines have identi-

fied as most needed and beneficial—everything from tools and textbooks, to sewing machines and irrigation equipment. These grassroots initiatives are an essential part of the counterinsurgency doctrine developed by Generals David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army and James N. Mattis, USMC.

Spirit of America (SoA) helps the Marines build better relations with locals. Better relations that support the success of their mission and make them safer. Or as Marine Staff Sergeant Shawn Delgado puts it: “It is easy to forget that the vast majority of the people are not hostile to us. Spirit of America allows us the tools to be able to approach them on a personal level and to connect with them outside of a hostile encounter.” And, reducing hostility helps save Marines' lives.

Spirit of America was founded by Internet entrepreneur and businessman Jim Hake. “I've benefited greatly from America's freedoms and opportunities,” Hake explained. “After 9/11, I wanted to do something to help.”

Idealists lead many nonprofits. Spirit of America is unusual because, although idealistic, it doesn't dictate how it's going to help. “Jim came along and asked, ‘What do you need?’” said Lieutenant Colonel Alan Burghard, deputy director of I Marine Expeditionary Force's humanitarian assistance coordination center in Hillah (Babylon), Iraq, in 2003. “Nobody asked that question before.”

Today, the men and women in our armed forces tell Spirit of America what they need by simply sending an e-mail. With donor support SoA then procures and ships the requested items. The Spirit of America motto—“You Ask, We Get”—says it all. The organization is highly efficient, supporting troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and Africa with a three-person staff.

Spirit of America's first request came in 2003 from LtCol David Couvillon, then commanding 3d Battalion, 23d Marine Regiment and acting military governor of Wasit province in Iraq. Soccer is *the* game in Iraq. Couvillon decided to “spread the message of American concern, caring and freedom” by giving soccer jerseys to local kids, who often have only a couple of changes of clothes. Spirit of America delivered 500 jerseys, each with a card and

the greeting “A gift of friendship from the people of the United States to the people of Iraq.”

The program was an immediate success—residents turned out in droves, and attitudes changed. Couvillon explained, “It’s a natural human impulse to be appreciative and sympathetic to those who are honestly trying to help you.”

Later that year, days before Christmas, Spirit of America was put to a tougher test. Hake met then-Major General Mattis, whose Camp Pendleton, Calif., Marines were about to deploy to Iraq. The Marines asked for medical and school supplies and Frisbees for the kids.

With help from Instapundit blogger Glenn Reynolds and talk-radio host Hugh Hewitt, Spirit of America raised \$62,000 in 14 days. The new year saw 10,000 school supply kits, 3 tons of medical supplies, and 2 tons of Frisbees imprinted with “Friendship” in Arabic and English being loaded onto containers bound for Iraq.

Gen Mattis’ response was the highest praise: “Spirit of America is just like the U.S. Marine Corps. Both are able to see and seize upon opportunity, both are aggressive organizations, both are mission-oriented.”

Three months later, LtCol John Lutkenhouse, plans officer for economic development for the First Marine Division special staff section for Civil Affairs, made an even more ambitious request: Could Spirit of America deliver television pro-

duction equipment to Anbar province, so local residents could rebuild their own stations and provide an alternative to the biased reporting of Al Jazeera?

This time the assistance came from *The Wall Street Journal’s* Daniel Henninger, who dedicated his “Wonder Land” column to Spirit of America under the nonsensical title “Here’s a Way You Can Help the Cause in Iraq.” Henninger called

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—LtCol David Couvillon

Spirit of America and the Marines “a coalition of the can-do.”

America answered the call. Only 21 days after receiving the Marines’ e-mail request, Spirit of America had \$100,000 worth of TV gear on a cargo plane en route to Iraq. That’s the blink of an eye compared to government procurement cycles. “We know that speed and responsiveness make a huge difference on the front lines,” Michele Redmond, SoA project director, explained. “We promise no bureaucracy, no red tape. The Marines like that.”

The TV equipment was immediately put to good use. One of the first broadcasts

covered another Marines and Spirit of America success story: the opening of sewing centers in Ramadi and Fallujah, stocked with brand-new machines, where local women could earn a living and develop the confidence needed to begin participating in local affairs. This was a program that *gave* heart as it changed minds. “Spirit of America didn’t send secondhand machines,” said Gen Mattis. “This was noticed and changed the image of the U.S. with the Iraqis.”

The sewing centers and new TV stations helped change how the Iraqis saw themselves. Inspired by their new tools of free expression, personnel at the stations took to the streets with camcorders and began conducting “man in the street” interviews, to an enthusiastic response.

During Hake’s visit to Iraq, SSgt Delgado told him that many children had stayed inside that day “because they don’t have anything to wear on their feet and the streets are too hot.” SoA quickly found a company in Baghdad to make children’s shoes and sandals. It was yet another gift that kept on giving. Iraqis got jobs, children received shoes, and citizens of Anbar saw that the Marines could be allies.

As Delgado explained, “Upon our initial entry into that area, the people were real skeptical of our intentions and were very cautious as to how to approach us. When we went back with the shoes and sandals for the kids, the leadership of the village came out and actively engaged us in productive conversations as to how we

**Marines and civilian volunteers pack school kits, medical supplies and Frisbees at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., for delivery to Iraqis by the leathernecks of 1stMarDiv.**



LtCol David Odom took advantage of the Spirit of America support while working with Afghan civilians in Farah province in August.



CWO-3 PHILIPPE CHASSE

**“Spirit of America enabled me to have ‘deeper pockets’ to reach into and facilitate needs and requirements for the local Afghans.”**

—LtCol David Odom

range of assistance—CamelBak canteens, ballistic sunglasses and first-aid kits for Marines to supply to the Afghan National Security Forces they were mentoring, and medical supplies for the general populace. Spirit of America delivered.

“As an infantry battalion commander tasked with conducting distributed counterinsurgency operations across a broad and contested area of operations,” Odom said, “Spirit of America enabled me to have ‘deeper pockets’ to reach into and facilitate needs and requirements for the local Afghans. The ready, willing and available support from SoA has a significant and quick impact on winning the current fight.”

Spirit of America is receiving more requests from Marines in Afghanistan: from 2/3—clothing, blankets, shoes; from 2/8—gear for Afghan police and humanitarian items for villagers; the 2d Light Armored Reconnaissance Bn—help with an irrigation project; and from 1/5—school supplies.

“Our approach is well-suited to Afghanistan,” said Hake. “We get assistance down to the remote village where it is needed the most.”

Lieutenant General Joseph F. Dunford, Commanding General, I Marine Expeditionary Force and Marine Corps Forces Central Command, reinforced the point, saying: “Our challenge in Afghanistan right now is to gain the trust, confidence and support of the Afghan people. Spirit of America is tangible evidence of the good will of the American people. It contributes to a climate of trust and confidence between our Marines and the local people. In the current fight, it’s clear that actions speak louder than words ... SoA is all about action!”

Afghanistan will likely need approaches similar to the Marines and Seabees’ Iraq Construction Apprentice Program (ICAP). Lieutenant John Serre was one of the Navy engineers who led the ICAP project.

With ICAP, Iraqi men, ages 15 to 25, learned their trade by constructing buildings—clinics, schools and other needed facilities. Spirit of America provided hard hats, coveralls, gloves and complete tool sets—the tools were gifts to the men when they graduated—so they could both re-



COURTESY OF SPIRIT OF AMERICA

**Spirit of America has opened two new sewing centers in Ar Ramadi and Habbaniyah, Iraq, providing Iraqi women with employment opportunities to make a new life in a country that has previously discouraged education and employment.**

could provide assistance to them and what they needed to improve their basic quality of life. This small gift to the kids helped in opening up lines of communication with the tribal leadership for positive future operations in the area. Spirit of America was a big part of that success story.”

Winning hearts and minds often requires unconventional solutions. In 2006, Marines told Spirit of America how Iraqi children loved looking at their pictures on the Marines’ digital cameras, as many had never owned a photo of themselves. The result was Operation Snapshot. SoA provided Polaroid cameras and film and Marines gave snapshots as goodwill gifts to local families.

In 2008, MajGen Walter E. Gaskin, the

commander of Multi-National Forces-West, wanted to recognize the Iraqi tribal leaders who had joined forces against insurgents. His idea was to present them with the Marine Mameluke sword as a sign of brotherhood and to establish “a warrior’s bond with the desert leaders.” Spirit of America provided the needed swords. Then-MajGen John R. Allen wrote, “Your role was pivotal to our being able to cement a variety of relationships among the *sheikhs*.”

The Marines and Spirit of America are now bringing the same creativity and can-do determination to the tough terrain of Afghanistan. Late last year, Hake met with LtCol David Odom, commanding 3d Bn, 8th Marines. Odom asked SoA for a broad

build their country and earn a living.

Serre remembered the pride and excitement in the students' faces when they received their coveralls at the start of the program. "These people have nothing ... two or three sets of clothes, the same sandals for years. A new pair of overalls was an amazing gift. The students reacted like kids at Christmas."

But winning hearts and minds is about more than good feelings. It is a key to victory. "In warfare, we always need to seize the high ground," said Gen Mattis. "In today's 'wars among the people,' the operational 'high ground' now lies in the perceptions of the people among whom we are fighting. The way we create the necessary credibility among the people to dissuade them from supporting our enemies is to show the people hope of a better future.

"While the irreconcilables/terrorists who kill the innocent will always need to be stopped by the bullet/bayonet, we need to deny the enemy the ability to swim anonymously among the larger mass of people."

Gen Mattis, now Commander, U.S. Joint Forces Command, Norfolk, Va., added, "Spirit of America provides direct support to our efforts to build the hopes of the people we are trying to protect from the terrorists' grip. Spirit of America's direct support is often as important as a resupply of ammunition as we work to turn the people against the enemy, something the Marines and soldiers did so well in Al Anbar province with Spirit of America help. There, for the first time in this war, turning a significant Mideast population against our common enemies, an effort that grew much more broadly across Iraq."

Spirit of America is supported by individual donations through its Web site, [www.spiritofamerica.net](http://www.spiritofamerica.net), and by phone: (888) 604-6267. Donors select exactly where they want their contributions to go. You can choose, for example, to support any request from Marines in Afghanistan, and 100 percent of your donation will be used for that purpose.

"People like that their donation makes a difference on many levels," said Hake. "It improves perceptions of America. It supports our troops and the success of their mission. It helps people who have suffered under great oppression. It keeps our men and women safer and helps save lives."

He added, "For winning hearts and minds, we are a force multiplier."

*Editor's note: Karen Karl is the daughter of a Navy veteran. She lives with her family in Los Angeles.*



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