

# The Dallas Morning News

OPINION

## Jordan: Soft power still matters

Trump can reduce waste without reducing America's global leadership.



By **Robert Jordan**  
Contributing Columnist

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Contributing columnist and former ambassador Robert Jordan writes that soft power still matters, and our global adversaries are using it to their advantage. (Michael Hogue)



Robert Jordan (Michael Hogue)

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Beginning at the height of the Cold War, the new agency was designed to provide disaster relief, economic development and assistance with democratic governance, under the authority and guidance of the secretary of state. Hungry, desperate populations were prime targets for communist inroads, and America and the West were determined to compete against these forces.

A few years after its establishment, my father joined USAID as an officer stationed in war-torn Saigon. He was a World War II veteran who had served aboard an amphibious ship at the Battle of Normandy and was no stranger to war. His USAID mission was to find ways to clear the Port of Saigon to enable food and other essentials to be delivered to the desperate South Vietnamese people. He worked with military and intelligence colleagues to promote American interests in a dangerous and challenging environment.

After four years in Saigon, including surviving the Tet Offensive, he spent the remainder of his career at USAID headquarters working on aid to Egypt. He exemplified the patriotism and idealism of the Greatest Generation.

## Pointy heads and chainsaws

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Foreign aid historically has been viewed by many of our fellow citizens as wasteful, soft and inconsistent with a muscular foreign policy. Bureaucrats routinely draw fire from political candidates of both the right and left for mindless, hyper-regulatory fixations. Decades ago, Alabama Gov. George Wallace made headlines trolling those he called “pointy-headed” bureaucrats.

During my time as ambassador, I likewise found myself occasionally battling a mind-numbing bureaucratic blob. Unquestionably, we can trim a lot from our national budget, including some USAID funding, even though foreign assistance consumes less than 1% of our national budget.

In its first month, the Trump administration has tackled the issue with a vengeance. Elon Musk recently appeared brandishing a chainsaw, declaring that it was “for bureaucracy.”

Despite the speed, scope and chainsaw approach of the new administration, it remains unclear whether the dismantling of USAID represents a repudiation of all forms of international assistance and cooperation. President Donald Trump left the door slightly ajar when, after blasting USAID officials and saying we have to get the “radical lunatics out,” he went on to say, “and then we’ll make a decision.”

Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that lifesaving assistance would continue, although we have not seen concrete evidence. Rubio’s recent

commentary in *The Wall Street Journal*, titled “[An Americas First Foreign Policy](#),” offers a clue. As he concluded his trip to Central America, his first trip abroad, he noted the opportunity for partnerships in the Western Hemisphere. Rubio emphasized promoting policies to counter China’s foreign assistance programs, which often work to China’s benefit but take advantage of their supposed partners. For example, Rubio suggests that relocating parts of American supply chains to this hemisphere would “clear a path for our neighbors’ economic growth,” allowing them to “more easily resist countries such as China that promise much but deliver little.”

## Soft power rivals

Rubio seems to recognize that competition with China, Russia and other rivals has more than a military dimension. Many members of his own party in Congress likewise understand that an America First doctrine has to include deepening relations with struggling states desperate for assistance, if not from the United States, then from our adversaries.

Hunger and disease offer opportunities for China, Russia, ISIS, al-Qaeda and others to fill the vacuum, just as communism threatened to fill the vacuum when USAID was established in 1961.

In 2017, Trump’s Secretary of Defense at the time, James Mattis, observed that if diplomacy is not properly funded, “I’ll need to buy more ammunition.”

Reimagining our nation’s foreign assistance programs will not occur overnight and may well leave enormous gaps. Remarkably successful programs, such as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), instituted under President George W. Bush, have saved millions of lives and gained widespread admiration for the United States in Africa and beyond. These programs should not be abandoned.

Other programs, privately funded, show promise as models for data-driven, closely monitored efforts that emphasize America’s national interests and

American values. For example, Spirit of America, founded in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, operates in the arena of national security assistance. Spirit of America workers communicate directly with deployed U.S. troops and diplomats, assess what they need, and how they can help. Support is limited to American national security objectives and the partners they assist. Under a unique agreement with the Department of Defense, they work with the military to fill the gaps between what is needed and what government can do. They get non-lethal assistance to the field rapidly. They have operated in Ukraine to provide equipment helping defend against Russian attacks and save lives; in West Africa to assist U.S. Special Forces in local development against violent extremism; and in Iraq to provide tourniquets and GPS devices and bomb detectors to help defeat ISIS and support our troops' safety and success.

As taxpayer-funded foreign assistance inevitably declines, needs like these will still be there. Of course, Americans cannot, and should not, chase down every project that comes along. But the “can-do” spirit that has typified our history compels us to think outside the box, and to not rely upon government to solve every development challenge.

Yet at the same time, we have a national interest in keeping much of the developing world from drifting into the orbits of our adversaries, and there is still an important role for our government to play. Those who want to tear down the entire system are ignoring a fundamental component of the national interest. That's not what America is about.

Time will tell if we deserve to be mentioned even in the same breath as the Greatest Generation. If so, it won't be because of our chainsaws.

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