“Peace Corps Prime”: Reassessing the Role of the Peace Corps in American Foreign Policy

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Although admirable programs, both the Peace Corps and the current United States model for foreign aid are outdated and no longer serve as effective tools for the purposes they seek to fill. If reformed to work on broader, longer term projects in higher impact areas of the world, the Peace Corps could enhance its ability to better the lives of people in nations worldwide while simultaneously working to reduce the negative perceptions of the United States abroad. It could also assume the primary role in the United States’ foreign aid system, a system lacking a unified direction and plagued by issues of dependency. A handful of changes in these two areas could dramatically change the way we conduct foreign policy in the United States.

The Peace Corps is one of the most respected institutions in American culture, but the bottom line is that it has a monumental amount of untapped potential. Due to the unique nature of its current structure and the experience and credentials of its volunteers, I believe that it has all the qualities necessary to serve as the new face of the United States’ foreign aid system. Doing so would ameliorate a variety of problems with our current method of dispersing aid while simultaneously providing a new source of soft power, which the United States lacks considerably. This proposal would call for an expansion of the traditional Peace Corps program as well as the establishment of an elite “Peace Corps Prime” that would be responsible for

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longer, high impact aid projects which would replace some of the more traditional monetary grants.

The most important background information to be aware of is the history of the Peace Corps itself. The original concept was drafted in the senate by Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey who introduced a bill to create the Peace Corps in 1957. It began to gain notoriety when Kennedy gave a speech on the topic at the University of Michigan during the 1960 presidential election. He officially established the organization in 1961 with an executive order. Kennedy’s vision was of a force that would swell to 100,000 people a year who would help combat the negative, “ugly American” stereotype that persists abroad to this day.

Although the Peace Corps never did grow as impressively as Kennedy had envisioned, it is nonetheless an important institution in America today. In its history it has served 139 different countries and sent nearly 200,000 volunteers abroad to make a difference. On average, it sends nearly 8,000 volunteers a year. Its operating budget for the fiscal year 2009 is $330.8 million. To offer some perspectives on that budget, the United States total aid to foreign countries for 2008 was $13.2 billion, the U.S. Department of State’s budget is $35.1 billion and the U.S. Department of Defense’s budget is an impressive $515.4 billion. This means that the Peace Corps budget would comprise 2.5% of foreign aid, 0.94% of the Department of State’s budget and .064% of the Department of Defense’s budget. These numbers should make it clear that, although $330.8 million is not

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a small number, the Peace Corps makes up a relatively small portion of the raw money the United States puts into its foreign policy.

There are several problems with our current system of dispersing foreign aid which are important to consider in understanding this proposal. The first issue with current foreign aid is that it often creates in the recipient country a dependency on our continued assistance. This occurs in two fashions: an entrenchment of those interests which are receiving the money and an integration of the aid as a constant into the recipient nation’s budget. The problems with such dependency cannot be better illustrated than in Somalia. During the cold war the United States viewed Somalia, along with many other places, as an important battleground in the fight against communism. We provided monetary aid to them in an effort to prop up their government and prevent the Soviet Union from gaining strength there. This system worked respectably until the Cold War came to an end and Somalia was no longer of strategic importance to the U.S. We withdrew significant amounts of our aid and essentially left the country to fend for itself. Unfortunately, when we left with our money their government literally did not have the funds to effectively govern the country. The rise of warlords and factional powers, which is familiar to most Americans due to the popularization of “Black Hawk Down,” was at least partially our own doing. Now the country is the embodiment of a failed state; no government to speak of and a hotbed for human rights violations and terrorism. Somalia is an extreme case, and some countries, notably Singapore and other East Asian nations, have successfully used foreign aid as a crutch until they were ready to walk on their own. Unfortunately their successes are the exceptions which prove the rule. Dependency is a major issue in dealing with foreign aid that cannot be ignored.

The other principal issue here is less fundamental and has much more to do with the implementation of aid. A significant amount of aid is worked out through grants by USAID to the United Nations and to a multitude of non-governmental organizations. However, the system in which they operate severely diminishes the effectiveness of their actions. The first problem here is the effects which NGOs have on the recipient nation's government. NGOs typically hire most of the workers for a particular aid project from the nation which they are going to be assisting. This sounds good on paper, but what typically happens is that, because NGOs pay much better, they draw the talent away from the government of the recipient nation. This effectively creates a "brain drain" on the nation's government, hindering its ability to do its job effectively. In extreme cases the NGO can wind up creating a parallel, "shadow" government which competes with the government of the nation it is supposed to be assisting. The second problem is the manner in which funds filter through international institutions, NGOs and governments. The bureaucracy involved typically takes out up to twenty percent of the funds allocated for aid. This problem is compounded by the fact that these agents often sub-contract others to do the job. As an example, the United Nations rarely does a specific task itself, but launders the money to an agency more suited to the specific task at hand. This means that two bureaucratic fees are being taken out instead of one. This is not necessarily the fault of the NGOs or other parties, but rather the product of a lack of guiding force in the system of international aid. There are too many actors and not enough order. It should be evident by now that there are a number of problems with the foreign aid system and our government's policies regarding it.6

Another important bit of background information to understand is the concept of soft power. Soft power is a term originally coined by Joseph Nye Jr. used to describe the ability of some

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entity to get what it wants by means of attraction or cooption of rival forces. It is contrasted with the more prominent concept of hard power which measures a country’s ability to coerce. An example of hard power would be the strength of a nation’s military or its effectiveness in enforcing economic sanctions. Soft power can be the desire for a country’s goods abroad or a respect for its culture. Nye has identified Canada, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries as successful wielders of soft power. Each uses their culture, international image and other soft power tools to generate more influence than their level of hard power would generally allow them.

Soft power in the United States is remarkably underused. The conventional wisdom, fairly accurate in this case, is that the Europeans tend to rely too significantly on their soft power while the United States acts oppositely. Countries far outside the traditional bounds of Europe clamor to become part of the European Union, but most European countries lack strong militaries and rarely enforce credible economic sanctions. In contrast, the United States has, both recently and historically, relied on the full might of our military backed by an extremely potent economy to enforce our will across the globe. Soft power in the United States is frequently misunderstood and underestimated because it is perceived as too intangible, too difficult to quantify, too limited in scope and inapplicable to the current terrorist threats we are facing. These notions are, in the main, inaccurate in their perceptions of soft power. It is not my purpose here to refute these claims, so for those who are

10 Ibid.
interested I would guide you once more to Joseph Nye. The important idea to take away here is that the United States relies, often overwhelmingly, on hard power while neglecting the soft power resources it could be utilizing.

Taking all of these factors into account, the goal of this proposal would be to expand the Peace Corps to serve as a new base of United States soft power and simultaneously ameliorate the problems of a broken foreign aid system. There are two components to this proposal. The first is expanding the basic Peace Corps program. The second is the creation of an elite branch, here on out to be referred to as the Peace Corps Prime, recruited from former volunteers to serve as the face of United States foreign aid efforts. I will lay out the proposal first and then address potential drawbacks and arguments against it.

The first aspect of this proposal that if the Peace Corps Prime is to be populated by returned volunteers, then it is important to make sure the talent pool is as large as possible. Having previously served as a volunteer ensures that candidates possess certain key characteristics. Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, RPCVs, will have spent two years immersed in a foreign culture and will possess a cultural sensitivity that will be critical in social interactions in foreign nations very different from the United States. They will have experience dealing with the idiosyncrasies of foreign bureaucracy as well as NGOs and other international actors. Finally, RPCVs will have two years of experience working in establishing infrastructure in whatever specialty they happen to focus in. The experience of already having served in the Peace Corp makes them uniquely qualified to be the principal enactors of United States foreign aid policy. Therefore, making the Peace Corps Prime successful would require a large pool of potential candidates to recruit from. Therefore part of this proposal would provide resources to double the number of traditional Peace Corps volunteers.
The second and more significant aspect of this proposal calls for the establishment of an elite service known as the Peace Corps Prime. The first aspect to understand about the Peace Corps Prime is that its structure is based on an existing program known as the Peace Corps Response. The Peace Corps keeps a voluntary database of RPCVs and during significant international crises they are given the opportunity to return to the Corps and serve an additional three to six months. Peace Corps Response volunteers have helped organize responses to AIDS epidemics in African countries, combated the devastation of the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 and provided reconstruction assistance in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Peace Corps Response mission statement captures the important similarities between it and the proposed Peace Corps Prime: “Using the language, technical and cross-cultural skills gained through Peace Corps service and other professional experience, Peace Corps Response allows exceptional Volunteers to return to the field.” The Peace Corps Response serves as a model starting point for the emergence of the Peace Corps Prime.

The principal purpose of the Peace Corps Prime would be to serve as an alternative to the fundamentally flawed foreign aid system currently in place. Instead of giving out grants to a tangled mess of NGOs and risking the establishment of a dependency relationship, the Peace Corps Prime can offer the skilled labor and expertise countries need to deal with specific, pointed issues. Potential projects might include establishing and running an effective education system, addressing issues of government transparency and efficiency, managing and assisting in the construction of complex public works projects and helping deal with various socioeconomic and public health issues. With all

decision-making processes consolidated under one agency the process of distributing aid would suffer from significantly less bureaucratic inefficiencies. Instead of several agencies working against and subcontracting to one another, there could be a single, unified organizational network. Furthermore, the Peace Corps Prime would not threaten the legitimacy of the recipient government. They would be serving alongside the existing government in an advisory capacity, not competing to provide the services the recipient government is already having difficulties providing.

The structure of the Peace Corps Prime would also be altered from the basic program in order to better meet their goals. Since the projects they would be working on would operate on much longer timelines, they would also serve longer. A time frame of four to six years is what this proposal calls for. Like the Peace Corps Response, Prime would not be restricted to countries which the regular Peace Corps operates. Bosnia was considered too unstable to send traditional volunteers, but Peace Corps Responders still entered to help in rebuild. The combination of a longer commitment as well as some elements of instability and uncertainty leads to the recommendation that Prime workers be compensated. Secondly, instead of operating as relatively solitary individuals, Peace Corps Prime workers would work in small groups. Because the idea is to work on larger, high impact projects, it behooves the program to provide sufficient human resources to accomplish such tasks. Furthermore, because these workers would be working on solving tough problems the recipient nation is struggling with, the recipient country would benefit from having multiple minds addressing these issues. Having several Prime workers, along with the recipient government, would ensure a maximum number of perspectives are considered in attempting to solve an issue. In addition to

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being coordinated with the recipient government, the Peace Corps Prime would also confer with the representatives from the United States Foreign Service to ensure both the United States and the recipient nation would be benefiting from work being accomplished.

The rest of the world would not be the sole beneficiary of the proposed Peace Corps Prime; the United States would also stand to gain in several ways. In an increasingly globalized world, the more conscious United States citizens are of cultural differences the more successful we will be as a nation in living in such a world. Whether you measure success in terms of trade, military dominance, peaceful relations or an equitable distribution of wealth, knowledge is the single most important tool you can possess. Both the general expansion of the Peace Corps, as well as the Peace Corps Prime, would provide substantial opportunities for our citizens to learn more about the world outside our borders. That being said, the benefits of a greater cultural understanding is easily matched or exceeded by the second upshot of this proposal. The Peace Corps Prime would be the perfect opportunity to make Kennedy’s initial vision of the Peace Corps a reality; it could be the program to eradicate the unpopular image that the United States has cultivated abroad. Nye has very recently argued that right now the United States has a unique opportunity to change the narrative of its foreign policy and can do so “by again investing in global public goods, providing things people and governments of the world want but have not been able to get in the absence of leadership by the strongest country.”¹⁴ The Peace Corps Prime would accomplish exactly that, in a manner that would neither be caught up in bureaucracy nor perceived as a neo-colonial power play. Making it the new face of our dedication to foreign aid would not only result in a more effective aid system, but it would also serve as an

investment in soft power that we could capitalize on in our foreign relations.

There is one critique of this proposal which has stood above the rest in terms of significance: why should the Peace Corps be performing this task and not one of the other numerous government entities that deal with international affairs? Critics of this theory would argue that providing aid, building infrastructure and handling crisis situations might be better suited to the State Department, the Department of Defense, NGOs, international institutions or the foreign governments themselves. I will respond to each of these in turn. I believe the background information I presented on the current issues with our aid system can effectively rule out NGOs and international institutions. They lack a cohesive direction, are inefficient and often lack the will or are prohibited from acting in the situations which are the most desperate. In response to those who would argue that it is not the United States’ job to be providing foreign aid to countries, all I have to say is that my purpose here is not to do battle on the field of isolationism versus interventionism. It is not my reason for writing this. My only statement on the matter is that in an increasingly globalized world where our nation’s fate is intertwined not only with our allies, but also every state that faltering or failing, it would cost us dearly to stick our heads in the sand. As it stands now the United States’ foreign aid budget as a percentage of GDP, even taking into account non-governmental, charitable contributions, is lower than nearly all other developed nations.\(^\text{15}\) I take as a given that at least some level of foreign aid is a necessity, and I am advocating for the Peace Corps as the new face of our foreign aid efforts.

Putting the Department of Defense in charge of these efforts does have some legitimate rational behind it, particularly since the DOD is currently in charge of some of these responsibilities. Reconstruction efforts have become an important factor in nearly

\(^{15}\) Joseph Nye, “The U.S. Can Reclaim ‘Smart Power.’”
all military endeavors at this point, and the DOD nearly always has some part to play. The Department of Defense also has a significantly larger budget which could more easily be shifted around to accommodate the responsibilities our proposal gives to the Peace Corps Prime. That being said however, there are two key issues with having the DOD in charge of this program; the first is practical, the second theoretical. The bottom line is that the vast majority of the military is not trained to properly handle these situations. While the need to conduct counterinsurgency has created a small community that could handle these tasks, a soldier’s first responsibility is prevailing in military conflicts. Their experience is also mostly limited to dealing with reconstruction efforts relating to wartime damages. The responsibilities I have outlined for the Peace Corps Prime go far beyond this. The more esoteric reason is that an organization whose primary purpose is preserving the national security of our nation and is composed of “war-fighters first” is fundamentally the wrong choice to be the leaders in aid and reconstruction. An institution dedicated to war should not be in the forefront of a process dedicated to peace and stability.

Above all the other alternatives, the strongest case can be made for putting the State Department in charge over the Peace Corps. I believe that the Peace Corps would be better suited to taking the lead. The first issue with putting the State Department in charge is that its primary purpose is to shape United State foreign policy and deal with the day to day details of international interactions. They are trained to analyze the broad political and economic situations of the country they are stationed in and perform diplomatic tasks. They are not trained in education,

construction, engineering, forestry or any of the other disciplines which makes Peace Corps volunteers such good aid workers. Furthermore, Foreign Service Officers spend the vast majority of their working hours in United States embassies. Yes, during their down time they have the opportunity to explore the rest of the country\(^\text{19}\) but the immersion is nothing compared to that of Peace Corps volunteers.\(^\text{20}\) Volunteers live right alongside the people they are serving\(^\text{21}\), interacting with them on a daily basis and integrating into their way of life.\(^\text{22}\) While the experience of working as a Foreign Service Officer gives a greater insight into a foreign culture than the almost any other job, it still cannot quite measure up to that of a Peace Corps Volunteer. Finally, as with the Department of Defense, the State Department already has a rather daunting agenda and pressing more on it might not be the best decision. The Peace Corps’ mission is already aligned with the goals of distributing foreign aid, thus making it the perfect candidate for taking the lead on such a task.

The implementation of this program would hardly be as difficult as it might appear at first glance. For starters, funding would effectively be a non-issue. Because the one of the main goals of the Peace Corps Prime would be to serve as the new face of United States foreign aid, with many workers serving in countries that had previously been receiving monetary aid from us, some of the funds could simply be re-directed away from USAID. Although in actual implementation each grant would likely need to be accessed individually, let’s start here with a 5% sequestration of foreign aid across the board. Every country that

\(^{19}\) U.S. Department of State, “Frequently Asked Questions.”
the U.S. aiding would still receive 95% of the money the U.S. government currently giving them but, using the numbers I presented in the background information, this would create a surplus of $66 million dollars. It may not seem like a significant amount, but a run through of the likely expenses shows that $66 million would be plenty. As I mentioned before, due to the longer term nature of Prime in comparison to the basic, two year program as well as the potential for assignment to more dangerous countries, it would be necessary to make the Peace Corps Prime a paid position to attract the talent necessary to effectively aid foreign governments. A baseline salary here would be the starting value for a Foreign Service officer they have a bachelor's degree, $42,576.23 If the program attracts a reasonable and respectable thousand people in its first year of operation the cost for the salary of those workers would be $42.58 million a year. Factoring in insurance and other benefits, this cost would rise to approximately $59.61 million a year.24 This still leaves $6.39 million dollars for expanding recruitment efforts in the basic program as well as costs incurred in the initial establishment of the Peace Corps Prime. If the initial one time start-up costs of the program exceeded the leftover $6.39 million, which would be unlikely, then one time cuts could be made from the departments of State and Defense. If you will recall from the examination of the figures, their budgets are absolutely mammoth in comparison the Peace Corps. While a small cut would be like taking a drop out of the pond to them, it would provide more than enough money for the proposed Peace Corps Prime to get off the ground. Such a shift would be a one time endeavor, because the sequestration of foreign aid would be more than enough to cover the annual costs of the program. Furthermore, if the program grew beyond a thousand workers, as should be hoped and

expected for, the funding could continue to come out of the budget for foreign aid. The ultimate goal here would be to create a new form of aid in the Peace Corps Prime which would teach foreign nations to fish, rather than just throwing fish at them.

The last part of the proposal to discuss is the criteria for Peace Corps Prime operations to begin in a country. The criteria I will outline are broad because United States foreign aid policy as it currently exists is broad, and the goal of this proposal is to present the Peace Corps as a new and improved form of foreign aid. Keeping this in mind, there are three criteria: a willingness of the recipient nation to receive the Prime workers, a reasonable level of security for the workers to operate under and an expectation of a reasonable return on the investment of our resources. The first criterion is relatively easy to understand. In order to avoid being labeled as a neo-imperialist force, the country which the Peace Corps Prime wishes to operate in must agree to host them. This criteria would exclude very few counties, and likely none that would not already be excluded by the second criterion, safety. Although Prime workers would be expected to operate in regions of instability and even unrest, they would not expected to be operating as a military or peacekeeping force. Their safety must be guaranteed. It should be noted though that if they could be reasonably protected by United States or allied military forces independently operating in the region then the country still meets the safety criterion. Finally, any operation must have reasonable expected return on investment.

If the Peace Corps Prime is going to construct, staff and lead several educational facilities but there is no expectation of attracting enough students to make it a worthwhile endeavor, then the project is not going to happen. If there is a plan to establish a large public works project that could easily get destroyed due to vandalism, terrorism or incompetent management, then the plan is not going to happen. The Peace Corps Prime is designed to make a real, significant impact on the lives of people in foreign nations, and their projects must
actually accomplish that goal. Any nation which fits these three criteria would be eligible for Peace Corps Prime teams to be sent in and assist their government. Looking at these criteria, some potential candidates might be Georgia, Rwanda, and the Botswana-Zimbabwe border. Mexico would have made the list, but increasing levels of violence between the government and drug cartels make its candidacy dubious. The green zone in Iraq could also be a potential location, although such an arrangement would be extremely complicated to be sure. Obviously this list is not meant to be exhaustive, only to provide some idea of the locations where Prime teams could operate.

In order to give a more specific concept of how the Peace Corps Prime might function, I will present a more detailed case study looking into a potential comprehensive education reform program in Cambodia. Part of the havoc wrought by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge during the late 1970’s was a decimation of the intellectual and academic communities in the country. One of their goals in bringing about a new, communist regime was to completely restructure the education system. They oppressed, drove out or executed a significant number of Cambodia’s qualified teachers. In addition, they destroyed nearly all the tools used for education and closed or destroyed the institutions where learning took place or which facilitated the process. They never rebuilding any of the infrastructure and attempts, both by the following Vietnamese occupation and new Cambodian government, have faced numerous difficulties. Recognizing the

difficulties which Cambodians are facing, the Peace Corps opened up operations in the country in April of 2007. Currently volunteers are teaching English and providing scattered training for secondary school instructors, but there is room for a much more comprehensive program to take place in the country.28

There are currently a number of issues still plaguing the Cambodian education system. It is difficult to discern which is the most troubling, but certainly a leading contender is the availability of education. Many rural areas of Cambodia still simply do not have schools or teachers, and parents have no way of ensuring or even contending for an education for their children. Furthermore, in urbanized areas, in particular around the capitol Phnom Penh, teachers charge their students a fee for what is supposed to be a free public education.29 This prevents a significant number of poorer families from sending their children to schools. Both issues mean that Cambodia still has access issues in its education system.

This problem is compounded further by issues of supply and labor in education. The wages of teachers in Cambodia are awful, with nearly all required to work a second job to ensure their livelihood. Not only does this discourage the pursuit of careers in education, but it also makes it impossible for teachers to dedicate their full faculties to imparting knowledge to their students. Also an issue is that there is very little in the way of education for teachers or school administrators. Many school directors gain their positions based on a political patronage system rather than on their own merit. Oftentimes their practices hinder, rather than

help, the students in their school learn. Their success or failure is largely determined by their own intuition and whether or not their mentor taught them good practices when they were serving as a vice-director.\(^{30}\)

Finally the higher education system in Cambodia is still suffering from set-backs of the Khmer Rouge period. The destruction of academic talent is still an issue, and instructors for higher education institutions still have a much higher demand than level of supply. Only roughly one percent of the Cambodia population is actually enrolled in a higher education program, and education must compete with other vital functions of the state for those emerging top intellectual talents.\(^{31}\) This is an issue in and of itself, but it exacerbates the problems generated by the fact that more than half the population is under 21 years old.\(^{32}\) This large number of young people is an untapped talent base for rebuilding the countries damaged infrastructure, but could pose a threat to stability if they are all left to compete for the same labor intensive tasks usually acquired by youth with modest education.

Considering all these issues, here is how a Peace Corps Prime program might operate in Cambodia to help ameliorate these issues. The task that is first and foremost would be to coordinate with the Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport towards several ends. The first would be to negotiate with them to put an end to the political appointments of school directors and help establish a uniform criteria and doctrine for school administration. The second purpose would be learn about the current NGO’s operating in the country and assess the effectiveness of their projects. Prime workers would find out which one’s are proving to be successful or providing important resources and ensure a coordination of their efforts. They would

\(^{30}\) Morefield.

\(^{31}\) Visiting Arts.

also suggest methods of improvement or optimization to those which are not efficient and urge the Ministry of Education to expel any organization which might be hindering the development of a solid educational system. Coordinating with the Cambodian government would help ensure these tasks are completed promptly.

Following this upper level coordination, the Prime workers would engage a more specific task. While the problems facing Cambodia’s primary and secondary education systems are certainly significant, the Prime program would focus on higher education for two reasons. The problems facing primary and secondary are to a large extent systemic of issues in higher education. Neither teachers nor administrators are really receiving proper training, and providing that would almost certainly see a benefit to lower level schools. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the traditional Peace Corps is already operating on the primary and secondary level teaching students English. To put Prime workers in would be redundant and wasteful.

In working in higher education, Prime workers would have a couple of specific tasks. First and foremost, they would be assessing the methods of instruction in institutions of higher education and serving as instructors themselves. The assessments they perform would give the Prime Program as well as the Ministry of Education a better idea of what specifically they could improve. Prime workers with high levels of education could serve as educators themselves, helping to fill the void in top tier academia still unfilled after the Khmer Rouge devastation. As a secondary, though complimentary, goal, Prime workers would also work to establish and/or improve on existing vocational and engineering schools. A lot of work still needs to be done in rebuilding the infrastructure of Cambodia and training in these fields will help establish a base of people in the country who know how to solve the problems themselves. This would help eliminate the need to rely on outside sources, hopefully
guaranteeing that in the future Cambodia will no longer need the Peace Corps Prime or any other outside assistance.

Obviously this is only an example and programs in other countries would demonstrate wide variation. However, it should be clear that the Peace Corps has all the qualifications to serve as a new method of distributing United States foreign aid. Doing so would not only help address several issues with the current aid system, but help generate goodwill and dispel the negative stereotypes of the U.S. abroad. Such an investment in soft power would only be to our benefit, and providing the assistance would be to the benefit of developing nations worldwide.
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