



Michael Gerson on transforming foreign assistance with evidence

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By Michael Gerson

Given the essential role of U.S. aid in addressing the crisis in Syria and other conflict zones, it is more important than ever that we come together around a bipartisan vision for foreign assistance. **That is why I am pleased to have joined with former USAID Administrator Raj Shah in writing a new chapter for the second edition of the national best-selling book, *Moneyball for Government*.** Our chapter, titled “Foreign Assistance and the Revolution of Rigor,” provides a bipartisan roadmap for result-oriented foreign assistance.

Despite our differences on a range of ideological issues, our experience working in Republican and Democratic administrations has led us to several shared convictions:

- We believe foreign assistance should be measured in lives changed, not dollars distributed.
- We believe making friends with other countries should be the by-product of a really good aid program rather than the mission itself.
- And we believe evidence and data should drive policy and practice.

These principles may sound obvious; for several decades in the 20th century, they were anything but. Particularly during the Cold War, foreign aid was too often seen through the lens of geopolitics, as a lever to shift alliances and allegiances, instead of primarily as an instrument to improve lives.

This dual mission hobbled foreign assistance for decades. Success was often defined by whether the United States provided assistance, rather than whether that assistance produced meaningful outcomes. Decisions about where to spend money—and on what—were highly politicized and money was wasted.

The lack of measured success—of any real evidence that aid was working—created a backlash that exists to this day. It gave opponents of foreign assistance

the ammunition they needed to criticize its efficacy, question its purpose, undermine its budgets, and marginalize its mission. And it gave people working within the foreign assistance community reasons to be deeply frustrated, as high-impact projects would go unfunded while money was squandered.

Fortunately, there has been a shift in recent years toward more evidence-based foreign assistance efforts. American aid institutions—“bureaucracies” to their critics—have become some of the most data-driven, outcome-oriented segments of the U.S. government. **And within the realm of foreign assistance, political parties are moving closer together, not further apart.** Indeed, our achievements in the past 15 years were made possible by unprecedented alliances between Democrats and Republicans and between faith-based organizations and development advocates.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this kind of consensus began when I was in the White House, advocating alongside others for the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), an evidence-based initiative designed to save the lives of those suffering from HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa.

At the start of the Bush administration, only about 29,000 of an estimated 30 million people with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa were on treatment. **As a result of our efforts, we saw some of the broadest gains in public health ever recorded. By 2015, PEPFAR funding was supporting antiretroviral treatment for nearly 9.5 million people.** It was offering HIV testing and counseling services to 14.7 million pregnant women, providing antiretroviral therapy to over 800,000 women and averting nearly a quarter of a million infant infections. And in 2015 PEPFAR provided care and support for more than 5.5 million orphans and vulnerable children.

Along with efforts by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, and the increasing contributions of partner countries themselves, tremendous progress that has been made. But there is more work to be done to ensure that U.S. foreign assistance continues to focus on results and improving lives. **In our *Moneyball* chapter, Raj and I call for data and evidence to drive U.S. foreign aid and we highlight seven best practices in foreign assistance for policymakers to follow, including:**

1. Building and maintaining a strong political consensus for results-driven outcomes
2. Employing technology and innovation to drive measurable outcomes and save lives
3. Appointing people to lead international development who believe in the power of evidence and data
4. Designing strategies that focus on measurable outcomes
5. Refraining from reverting to old practices that don’t rely on data and evidence for results
6. Protecting spending on results-oriented aid and assistance

7. Developing effective conflict-zone strategies using the best data and evidence available

By grounding our foreign assistance in what works, we can ensure that these efforts continue to serve both the values and interests of America.

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