

Power for good: The Millennium Challenge

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The United States “has too much power for anyone’s good, including its own.” So argues Timothy Garton Ash, who observes that since the demise of the Soviet Union there is no countervailing force on the world scene to check the use of U.S. power. Economically, the U.S.’s “only rival is the European Union. In military power it has no rival. Its military expenditure is greater than that of the next eight largest military powers combined. . . . It would be dangerous even for an archangel to wield so much power” (*New York Times*, April 9).

If the U.S. has too much power for its own good, then we might ask: How can that power be put to work for good? One way is by sharing its wealth with impoverished, underdeveloped countries. Right now only about .10 percent of the GDP goes toward foreign aid, the lowest amount of any of the Western industrialized nations. In contrast, the European Union gives .33 percent. (The U.S. itself gave 1.2 percent during the Marshall Plan era.) Nearly half of current U.S. aid goes toward military assistance and training, especially for Israel and Egypt, and for “security aid” to fight terrorism and drug trafficking, not for poverty relief and sustainable economic development.

Ironically, Americans typically think the foreign-aid budget should be cut. But that’s because they assume we are giving much more than we actually do. Most Americans, when asked how much we should give, suggest figures far in excess of the actual amount. In a poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes, Americans tend to support aid for alleviating hunger and poverty more than aid used as a means of gaining strategic influence.

At the United Nations conference on development aid in March, President Bush agreed to urge Congress to increase American aid to poor countries by 50 percent over the next three years, going from \$10 billion to \$15 billion. He would put this money into a “Millennium Challenge Account” for deserving poor nations. This is a

good start, even though it is not enough of a commitment from the U.S. to meet an already agreed-upon UN goal of cutting in half by the year 2015 the number of people in poverty. The president should be held accountable for this commitment, and Congress should be persuaded to back it, if not to improve on it. And while President Bush is properly prudent to not want to give money to rogue regimes, his own condition of tying aid to the opening of trade markets may just be stacking the deck in favor of American interests rather than those of impoverished people. Besides, giving funds to nongovernment agencies is one way of bypassing corrupt politicians, and it is often a more effective way of delivering assistance.

Government funding is not the only way to aid the needy of the world—though we should lean on our leaders to use tax monies for the well-being of others. Calls for government to spend more ring hollow if people are not willing to increase their personal support for nongovernmental relief and development programs like Church World Service, Bread for the World and comparable denominational agencies. As Nikolai Berdyaev said: When I'm hungry it's a material problem; but when my brother [or sister] is hungry, it's a spiritual problem.