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Foreign Aid – Where Has it Gone?

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February 2025

The first 100 days of any presidential administration are expected to bring many changes as a new executive's policy agenda takes shape. They normally include numerous meetings with legislative branch leaders, particularly those of the president's own party, to identify priorities for upcoming legislation. This is particularly crucial when the president's party has a majority in the House, Senate, or both, as it is anticipated that these priorities will be negotiated and signed into law as quickly as possible.

Typically, the midterm elections held two years after the presidential election will reverse gains made by the president's party, as the electorate tends to prefer preserving a balance of power. In 2008, President Barack Obama led a "blue wave" that accompanied his first electoral landslide win of over 9 million votes more than Republican nominee U.S. Sen. John McCain, and over double the electoral college votes (67.8% to 32.2%)[[i](#)] to also gain control of both houses of Congress. Obama famously called the 2010 "red" legislative branch reversal two years later a "shellacking"[[ii](#)] as shown in the chart.[\[iii\]](#)

Congressional Election Results, 2008 and 2010	
2008	2010
U.S. Senate	U.S. Senate
Democrats: 57	Democrats: 51
Republicans: 41	Republicans: 47
Independents: 2	Independents: 2
U.S. House of Representatives	U.S. House of Representatives
Democrats: 257	Democrats: 193
Republicans: 178	Republicans: 242
Independents: 0	Independents: 0

Reversal of congressional membership after the Democratic Party held executive and legislative majorities, 2008 to 2010

President Donald Trump has re-entered the White House with a comprehensive policy agenda. Instead of meeting first with congressional leaders to negotiate legislation, he characteristically swung into action hours after his inauguration with a dizzying array of sweeping executive orders and directives to executive branch agencies at a pace rarely seen from previous executives.

One of the attributes of democracy over other political systems that I always emphasize to my students is its often glacial pace in enacting legislation. Despite appearances of a “do-nothing” Congress, in the long term this grinding pace is considered a positive attribute as it means there is deliberation that includes negotiations with many perspectives in the final legislative bills, as opposed to autocratic regimes, which rule by executive fiat. This charge has been leveled at most executives by their political opponents, whenever they use this tool of executive order. The value of slow deliberation aside, modern executives have found the use of these orders attractive since World War II. The first chart shows how many executive orders each president issued in his first year in office.[vi]

Use of Executive Orders by Presidents During First Year in Office			
Donald J. Trump		Jimmy Carter	
2025	46	1977	66
2017	55	Gerald R. Ford	
Jospeh R. Biden		1974	29
2021	77	Richard M. Nixon	
Barack H. Obama		1969	52
2009	40	Lyndon B. Johnson	
George W. Bush		1963	7
2001	54	John F. Kennedy	
William J. Clinton		1961	70
1993	57	Dwight D. Eisenhower	
George H. W. Bush		1953	80
1989	31	Harry S. Truman	
Ronald Reagan		1945	139
1981	50	Franklin D. Roosevelt	
		1937	256

Number of executive orders issued in each president's first year since 1937

President Franklin Roosevelt used executive orders the most of all presidents in his first year with 256. Harry Truman is in second place with 139. This is not surprising considering the enormous crises each was managing at the time: the aftereffects of the Great Depression and World War II. Trump has not even begun to reach these numbers, but his orders (46) represent only those recorded in the Federal Register as of Feb. 6, which had recorded the most recent as having been signed on Jan. 31 – his 11th day in office. A more thorough review would show all orders signed in the first month in office but while it is the beginning section of this essay, it is not the primary point. Needless to say, Trump has 11 more months in his first year of office and, as he often states how much he loves “winning,” he may be in competition with Roosevelt.

As this is a space devoted to global affairs, trade and tariff wars aside for now, this essay is devoted to actions related to foreign aid. The relevant executive orders include the following:

Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid – “It is the policy of United States that no further United States foreign assistance shall be disbursed in a manner that is not fully aligned with the foreign policy of the President of the United States.”[v] It orders a “90-day pause in United States foreign development assistance for assessment of programmatic efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy” and “reviews of each foreign assistance program shall be ordered by the responsible department and agency heads under

guidelines provided by the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Director of Office of Management and Budget.”

Withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization – As of Jan. 20, this order retracts the Biden administration’s 2021 revocation of Trump’s July 6, 2020, notification of withdrawal, meaning that the U.S. will no longer have representation in the agency, nor provide it with financial support. The order further states, “The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs shall establish directorates and coordinating mechanisms within the National Security Council apparatus as he deems necessary and appropriate to safeguard public health and fortify biosecurity.” Thus, the National Security Council and not the National Institutes of Health nor the Centers for Disease Control will “safeguard public health.”^[vi]

Memorandum for the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Administrator of the United States for International Development, as of Jan. 24, 2025 - Revokes the Presidential Memorandum of Jan. 28, 2021, for the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (Protecting Women’s Health at Home and Abroad), and reinstates the Presidential Memorandum of Jan. 23, 2017, for the (same federal officials) – The Mexico City Policy.

Directs the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, to the extent allowable by law, to implement a plan to extend the requirements of the reinstated Memorandum to global health assistance furnished by all departments or agencies.^[vii]

The Mexico City Policy, as explained by KFF (formerly the Kaiser Family Foundation), was a policy first announced by President Ronald Reagan’s administration in 1984 amid the AIDS crisis, which was later expanded to apply to:

PEPFAR, maternal and child health, malaria, nutrition, and other U.S. programs, and potentially encompassed \$7.3 billion in fiscal year 2020 alone, to the extent that such funding was ultimately provided to foreign NGOs, directly or indirectly (family planning assistance accounted for approximately \$600 million of that total, or 8.2%). The Trump administration’s original revocation of this policy also moved to further tighten restrictions, reaching other areas of U.S. development assistance beyond global health and other non-U.S. funding streams.^[viii]

To further explain this, PEPFAR is the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief instituted by President George W. Bush in January 2003, which has since

instructed the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy to lead, manage, and oversee the program through which the U.S. government has invested "over \$110 billion in the global HIV/AIDS response, the largest commitment by any nation to address a single disease in history – saving 26 million lives, preventing millions of HIV infections, and accelerating progress toward controlling the global HIV/AIDS pandemic in more than 50 countries."[ix]

Bush announced the PEPFAR initiative during his 2003 State of the Union Address, which indicates how highly he prioritized the effort. At that point, Bush's own key points memorandum from that speech noted that "The HIV/AIDS pandemic has killed at least 20 million of the more than 60 million people it has infected thus far, leaving 14 million orphans worldwide."[x]

On Feb. 24, 2023, Bush gave remarks in the White House Rose Garden commemorating the 20th anniversary of the initiative saying:

I don't really come to Washington often, but I'm here to remind people that American taxpayers' money is making a huge difference, a measurable difference in saving lives: 25 million people. This program needs to be funded. For the skeptics, all I ask is, look at the results. If the results don't impress you, nothing will impress you."[xi]

After the controversies of Bush's "war on terror," PEPFAR has often been hailed by allies and critics alike as his singularly important achievement. Now, tens of millions of people will no longer receive the medication that keeps their disease in remission unless China steps in. China has been expanding its influence in Africa since the Bush administration, so this would be an easy way to gain political approval in that oil- and mineral-rich region and show the population that American promises are empty.

Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations – withdraws all U.S. support from the United Nations organizations related to Palestinian refugee support operating since the removal of Palestinians for Israeli settlement in 1948; withdrawing U.S. participation and support from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as of Feb. 4, 2025.[xii]

To unpack all of this, there are three distinct U.N. organizations included in this order. The first, UNWRA, focuses on support for Palestinian refugees. It has come under fire since the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel when it was revealed through various intensive investigations that some UNRWA personnel were directly involved in the attack and that others had intentionally located UNRWA

facilities and storage bases over known Hamas operating areas in the tunnels under Gaza in order to prevent these areas from Israeli attack during the ensuing war.[xiii]

Therefore, it is perhaps understandable that a U.S. president would no longer want to fund an organization with some members who had, in effect, supported a known terrorist organization. However, the current state of destruction in Gaza and the dire humanitarian need, there as refugees attempt to return to their homes, dictates that something is needed to continue supporting them. It is unclear at this writing what that will be in terms of U.S. support. Also as of this writing, the UNRWA USA National Committee, the agency that manages U.S. UNRWA support, has not updated its website to reflect this revocation of U.S. support during the current ceasefire .[xiv]

UNHCR currently protects 122.6 million people worldwide who are refugees and internally displaced from violence, crime, food insecurity, and disease.[xv] UNESCO protects global cultural heritage artifacts, sites, languages, and foods. It also provides education to children in the world's poorest countries and uses science to support the environment and technological advances.[xvi]

In researching for this article, after reviewing the relevant executive orders on foreign aid, my next source was the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, website; however, my search on Feb. 6 was greeted with this notice:

On Friday, February 7, 2025, at 11:59 pm (EST) all USAID direct hire personnel will be placed on administrative leave globally, with the exception of designated personnel responsible for mission-critical functions, core leadership and specially designated programs. Essential personnel expected to continue working will be informed by Agency leadership by Thursday, February 6, at 3:00pm (EST).[xvii]

A federal judge has reinstated USAID employees who have taken mandatory leave until midnight on Feb. 14 and paused the agency's requirement that personnel return from abroad in 30 days. It is unclear what will happen after that deadline passes.[xviii]

The archived version of the USAID site frozen as of Jan. 2021, at the end of the first Trump administration, states the historical objectives of the agency: "It transforms families, communities, and countries – so they can thrive and prosper. Whether by preventing the next global epidemic, responding to a devastating earthquake, or helping a farmer to access tools for growing her business." [xix] To further quote the goals and purpose of the agency

USAID demonstrates America's good will around the world; increases global stability by addressing the root causes of violence; opens new markets and

generates opportunity for trade; creates innovative solutions for once unsolvable development challenges; saves lives; and advances democracy, governance, and peace. Our efforts are both from and for the American people.

Some may be aware of my work with the U.S. Defense Department through previous articles and a series of lectures given in 2018 when I returned to Erie after three years of working with the U.S. Army Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Since 2008, when I founded my research firm, DC Analytics, all of my federal contractual work has been focused on [stabilization](#).

This is the effort the U.S. government undertakes around the world to prevent conflict, shore up fragile states, and help countries and communities manage post-conflict environments to ensure safety and security, stable governance, economic development, establishment of the rule of law, and support social well-being; all interconnected activities illustrated by the graphic [\[xx\]](#)

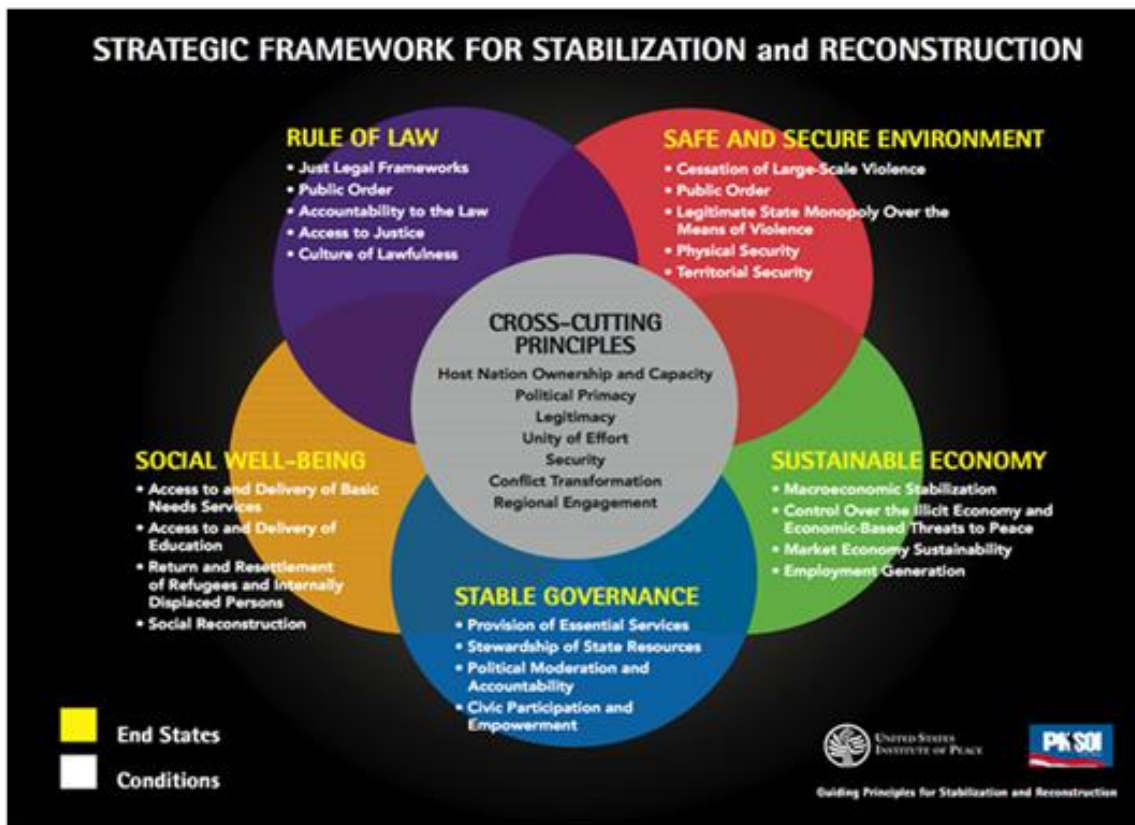


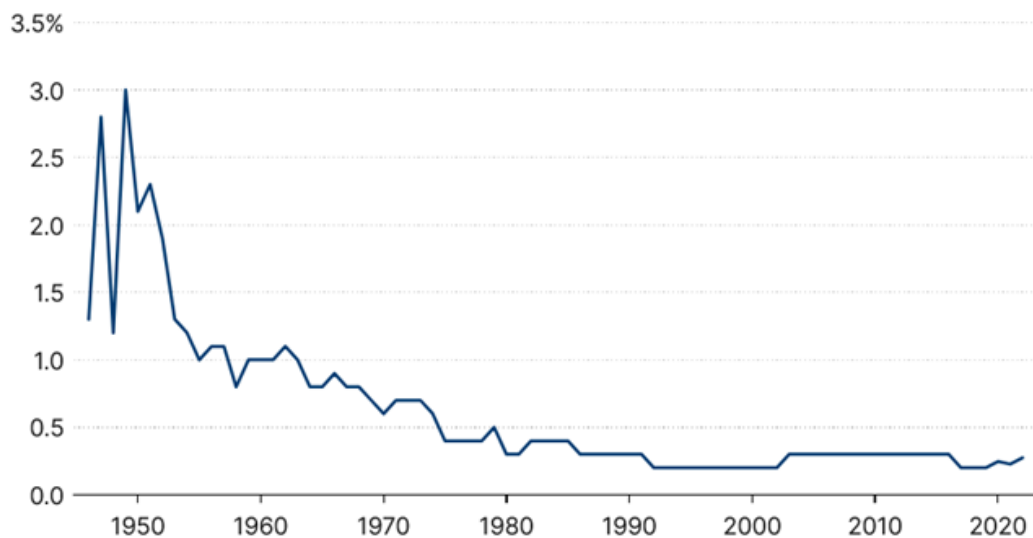
Illustration of strategic interaction of Guiding Principles of Reconstruction and Stabilization

The U.S. Department of State is designated as the lead in stabilization but relies heavily on the U.S. military for logistics, personnel, and transportation because

the State Department's budget is about 10% of the Defense Department's budget. Defense is mandated to support this work in a document signed by the first Trump administration.^[xxi] The State Department and USAID work with civilian and military partners around the world to achieve the aims of stabilization operations. Foreign aid is meant to support other nations and societies in ways described above, but stable nations also support U.S. interests because conflict, like disease and pollution, can easily spill across borders and serve as crime incubators. All of these factors disrupt normal activities of people around the world, including the United States, as well as global trade, which is directly in the interests of U.S. businesses and consumers.

The amount the U.S. spends on foreign aid is so small in proportion to the overall budget that it is common to see State Department officials sporting lapel pins showing a white pie chart with a tiny sliver of red indicating that aid typically constitutes 1% of 1% of the total federal discretionary outlay. The chart below shows the percentage of total Gross Domestic Product (total U.S. annual income) spent on foreign aid since World War II through 2022, when it was only 0.3%.^[xxii] This was under the Biden administration, only up from 0.2% during the first Trump administration when aid was last at its lowest share.

US foreign assistance, % of GDP



Percent of U.S. Gross Domestic Product spent on foreign aid, 1946-2022

A disease-ridden, uneducated, isolated, or violent world further spawns conflict, localized violence, more disease, dangerous disinformation, and terrorism in an unending cycle. While the American people say they do not want to be “the world’s policeman,” would we prefer that China or Russia take on this role?

The rule of law and stable governance also ensure social well-being so people have the services they need including health care, education, infrastructure, utilities, and functioning markets, which maintain stable cities and nations and allay the forces that lead to crime and destabilization. Economic development also supports safety and security in a society, by ensuring people have sufficient economic opportunity so they don't resort to preying on their neighbors.

Those who have claimed that the U.S. doesn't care about the rest of the world can say they were right when they can show that around the world as many as 52 organizations and counting have stopped their humanitarian work. A new website attributed to admittedly disgruntled USAID staff on Feb. 6, 2025, claims that 10,725 American jobs and another 15,000 globally have been lost this week alone estimating that the final figure could be 10 times that many in both categories. While USAID has about 5,000 federal employees, many contractors and partner organizations reliant on federal funding multiply the effect of their work. The same source notes that the confirmed lost jobs include those of Americans in 43 states so far and the process is just beginning.[[xxiii](#)] The site also provides information on how much USAID jobs and programs contribute to the economy in each of the U.S. 50 states. It estimates that in the past fiscal year, USAID contracts and grants to 20 farmers, two universities and one non-profit added \$7.8 million to Pennsylvania's economy alone.[[xxiv](#)]

Billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates said in a recent interview that USAID's stop-work could mean the direct deaths of "literally millions of people" and further asserted that Elon Musk's new Department of Government Efficiency would not close down USAID "if he knew what it did."[[xxv](#)]

For the U.S., aid gives us positive public relations by which people can see us doing tangible good in dangerous areas and for those in need of humanitarian assistance in a world filled with disinformation about America's role in the world spread by adversaries like China, Iran, and Russia. Just as the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II strengthened people's faith in democracy as an antidote to the destructive powers of autocracy in the forms of fascism and rising communism while the Soviet Union expanded its influence, foreign aid has done the same – until now.

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