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GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

IN MEMORIAM: USAID (1948—2025)

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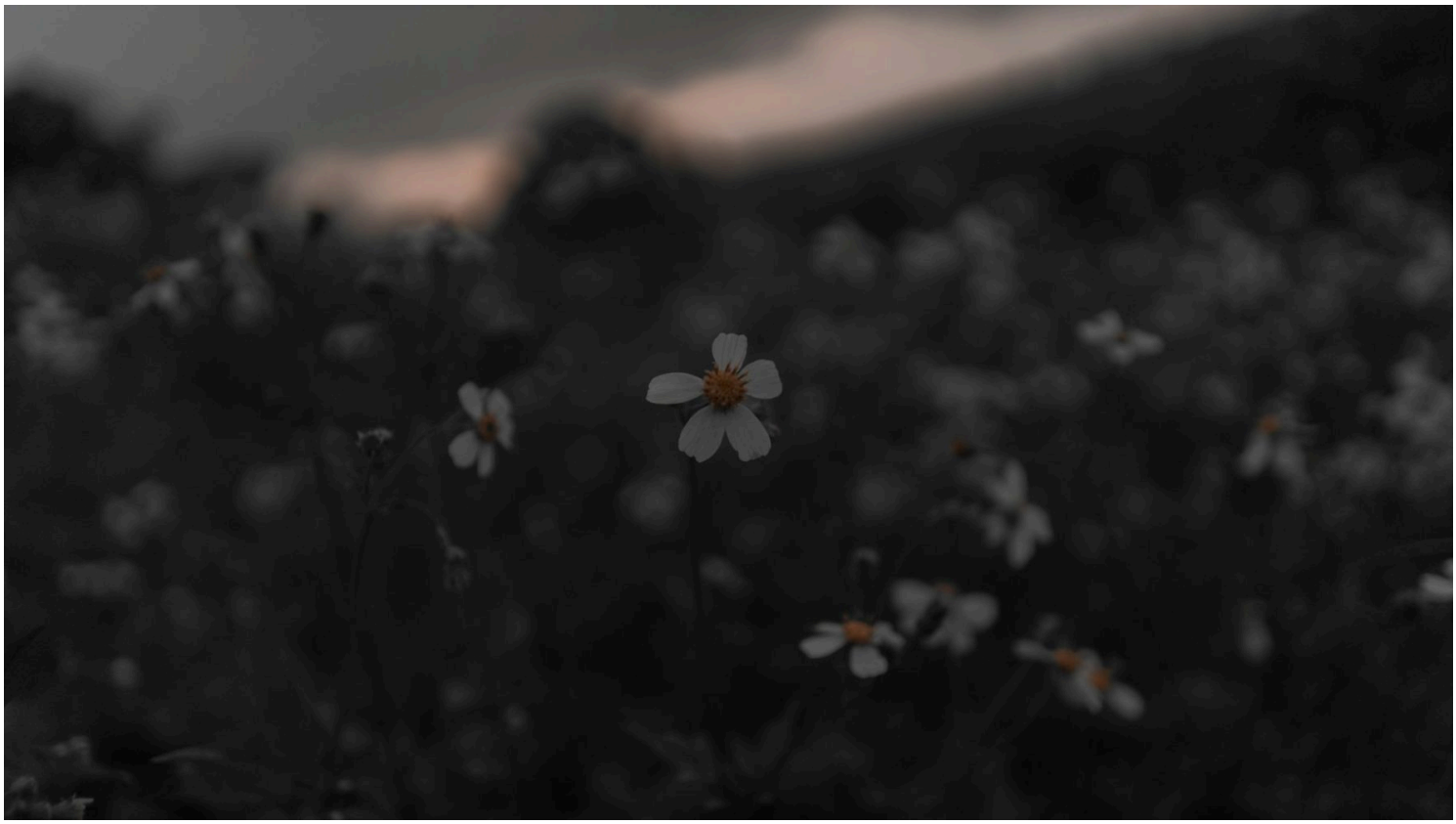

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In remembering USAID—and looking toward what follows to fill the void it leaves—we should remember the agency's legacy and victories, as well as its decline, writes Steven E. Hendrix.

T

he United States Agency for International Development (USAID) passed away quietly in February 2025. There was no official funeral, no cable sent, no presidential tribute. The agency that once symbolized America's global generosity and soft power simply stopped breathing—undone by political bureaucratic suffocation and homicidal strategic confusion.

To trace the roots of USAID is to tell the story of American leadership at its most expansive and optimistic. Though formally created in 1961, the agency's intellectual and operational heritage began earlier—most notably with the Marshall Plan. That postwar reconstruction effort, led by Secretary of State George C. Marshall, poured billions into rebuilding Western Europe, laying the foundation for NATO, the European Union, and a generation of peace and prosperity.

The Marshall Plan was not just an act of generosity—it was a geopolitical strategy backed by infrastructure, know–how, and American pragmatism. And it worked. It established a model: development assistance could be both altruistic and in the national interest.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy consolidated a patchwork of foreign assistance programs into a single entity: USAID. "To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe," Kennedy said, "we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves." That phrase—"help them help themselves"—became USAID's creed.

The agency flourished under bipartisan support during the Cold War, funding health, education, and agriculture programs that won hearts and minds across Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It backed the Green Revolution, helped eradicate smallpox, and laid the foundation for basic governance and public health systems in dozens of countries. In South Korea, Taiwan, and Botswana, aid paved the way for prosperity. In Colombia, Bangladesh, and Ghana, USAID seeded institutions that still carry forward today.

At its best, USAID was a quiet engine of transformation. It worked through partnerships. It trained civil servants. It built roads and schools and budget systems. It responded to famines, floods, and refugee crises. It was the first to arrive and often the last to leave.

And it produced giants. Carol Lancaster, the agency's former Deputy Administrator and later Dean of Georgetown's School of Foreign Service, argued that "development is diplomacy." Andrew Natsios, a Bush–era Administrator, championed aid as strategic statecraft. Gayle Smith, who later directed the ONE Campaign, emphasized USAID's nimbleness in global health. And Rajiv Shah, under President Obama, modernized procurement and championed science and innovation.

But USAID's path was never easy. It suffered chronic underfunding, a rotating door of political appointees, and tension with the State Department. Too often, it was seen as a tool, not a strategy. Reorganizations were frequent. Morale was perennially fragile. Administrators came and went, but the field staff—engineers, health officers, democracy advisors—carried the mission forward.

The decline began subtly. Over time, USAID was slowly absorbed—bureaucratically and conceptually—into broader foreign policy machinery. The push for consolidation with the State Department gathered

steam in the 2010s. Calls to "streamline foreign assistance" masked a deeper reality: development was being subordinated to short–term diplomacy.

Budgets stagnated. Contracting slowed. Talent fled. Field missions shrank. Technical offices were hollowed out. Reform agendas were shelved. USAID's unique voice—rooted in development logic, not political expedience—was gradually lost.

In 2025, the merger was functionally complete. USAID remains, on paper, but its leadership now reports into structures it once influenced. The "Administrator" is a figurehead. Programs are branded State. Field authority is curtailed. Strategy is reactive, not generative.

It is, for all practical purposes, over.

And yet, an obituary demands more than a summary of loss. It must remember and celebrate the living years. USAID brought potable water to millions in rural Africa. It restored educational access to girls in Afghanistan, trained agricultural scientists in Kenya, and stood with civil society in Ukraine long before it was fashionable. It helped build electoral commissions from Indonesia to El Salvador. It delivered ARVs, clean stoves, and microloans. It supported credit unions in West Africa, land reform in Latin America, and energy access in South Asia.

Development is slow. Quiet. Sometimes invisible. But when it works, it reshapes nations.

What follows the death of USAID will not be nothing. Foreign assistance will persist, repackaged into public diplomacy toolkits or crisis response units. Private contractors will fill the void. Multilateral organizations will pick up the slack. The language will shift—toward "stabilization," "resilience," and "partnerships." But the ethos will fade.

Kennedy promised that America would "bear any burden" in the defense of freedom. But development is not a burden. It is an investment. One now left unrealized.

Still, even in death, USAID leaves behind a legacy—of people trained, systems built, crises averted. That legacy lives on in the quiet confidence of officials in Georgia's finance ministry, in the resilience of Haitian cooperatives, in the self–determination of Vietnamese entrepreneurs. Those seeds may grow long after the hand that planted them is gone.

And should the world change again—should a new crisis of conscience or conflict arise—there may once again be a call for America to lead not just with arms or rhetoric, but with engineers, educators, and development officers. When that call comes, the memory of USAID may rise once more.

About Steven E. Hendrix:
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