



An Open Letter on USAID to the Secretary of State

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Speaking Out

BY STEVEN E. HENDRIX

I write to you with the utmost respect for your office and the immense responsibility you bear. History has always judged U.S. leaders not by how they navigate moments of ease but by how they respond to crises—whether they rise to the occasion or shrink from it. As Henry Kissinger once said, “The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.”

Today, America finds itself at a crossroads. The choices we make now will define not only our place in the world but the future of millions who look to us for leadership, stability, and hope. The world is watching, and history will not be kind if we falter. I urge you, with all due respect and urgency, to course-correct on several critical issues—most urgently the dismantling of USAID—before the damage becomes irreversible.

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The Unraveling of USAID and America's Global Influence

If you have ever stood in a refugee camp, watched a child take their first sip of clean water, or seen a mother cradle a bag of grain knowing her children will eat that night, then you understand what is at stake when we dismantle our development efforts.

Tens of thousands of professionals dedicated to international development now find themselves without work, their hard-earned expertise and deep understanding of global challenges discarded. This is not just about jobs—it is about America's ability to see, interpret, and shape the world around us. These professionals were our bridge to communities in crisis, our human face in places where our military cannot and should not go. They were the architects of stability, quietly preventing the conflicts and pandemics that would otherwise reach our shores.

The humanitarian cost of this withdrawal is staggering. Consider Nigeria: Until several months ago, if you were HIV-positive and on antiretrovirals, there was a 100 percent chance your medication came from USAID. Today, that lifeline is gone. The world faces a 20-25 percent chance of another pandemic in the next four years, yet we have dismantled our global health team and withdrawn from the World Health Organization. In Sudan, genocide unfolds before our eyes. In Gaza and Ukraine, devastation continues. And yet, we have gutted one of the core instruments the U.S. government has to respond to these crises.

The consequences will not remain overseas. Halted interventions in faraway countries will lead to the rise of preventable diseases—tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, polio—within our borders. Reducing our capacity to monitor the spread of infectious diseases leaves Americans at risk of contracting avian influenza, mpox, and other deadly diseases that know no borders.

As you know, USAID food aid programs account for less than 1 percent of current U.S. agricultural exports, yet they have historically provided U.S. farmers and manufacturers with a stable \$2 billion market and supported an estimated 15,000-20,000 U.S. jobs. Suspending these programs will lead to layoffs across the U.S. food processing, manufacturing, and transportation sectors.

America will not be safer, stronger, or more prosperous for these decisions—it is becoming weak, isolated, and increasingly irrelevant in the global arena.

Further, the responsibility for managing these abandoned programs now falls on the State Department—an institution already stretched thin, unprepared for the operational demands of development work. USAID contract officers, auditors, and program managers—all essential personnel—have vanished, leaving behind a bureaucratic vacuum. The inefficiency, the waste, and the inevitable failures that are now cropping up will draw the ire of Congress and the public. A scathing Government Accountability Office (GAO) report is almost inevitable. You will bear the brunt of the criticism, but the greater tragedy is the damage to America's global standing.

The Fraying of Alliances and the Rise of Global Disorder

But your problems go beyond the destruction of USAID. For generations, American leadership has been a force for stability. We built NATO, we upheld the rules-based order, we led the fight against climate change, and we stood as a beacon for democracy. That legacy is slipping away, and you face intractable crises on several fronts.

- **Ukraine:** Russia is the aggressor, yet the president appears aligned with Kremlin talking points. Our wavering support is emboldening Putin and eroding NATO's trust in us.
- **Climate Change:** Abandoning the Paris Agreement is not a policy shift—it is a retreat from reality. The climate crisis does not recognize political ideologies, and our abdication of leadership will cost us dearly.
- **Diplomatic Absurdities:** The world does not take seriously the notion of annexing Canada, Greenland, or the Panama Canal, or turning Gaza into a beachfront resort. But they do wonder whether the United States has lost its sense of strategic direction. These missteps push allies away and embolden adversaries.

At this moment, China and Russia are not just watching—they are moving into the void we are leaving behind.

• **The Migration Crisis:** The majority of migrants crossing our southern border are not Mexican, and Mexico does not want them either. We have a shared interest in solving this crisis, yet threats and tariffs have replaced diplomacy and cooperation. We have the chance to work alongside Mexico to build real solutions, but we squander it with bravado and short-sighted ultimatums.

The Soul of State

Beyond policy, beyond global strategy, there is a fundamental truth that cannot be ignored: The State Department is at war with itself. Morale is at an all-time low. Hostility, exclusion, and fear have replaced unity and purpose. This institution, home to the best and brightest in American diplomacy, as you yourself noted on your first day at the department, is fracturing under the weight of internal strife.

You must lead. The culture wars have no place in Foggy Bottom. Competency, commitment, and intelligence must remain the measures by which we value those who serve. Every diplomat, every civil servant, must know they are included and valued—not for their race, gender, or political ideology, but for their contributions to our great nation and to the mission of American diplomacy.

The Call to Leadership

Mr. Secretary, you are at the helm of this great institution at a time of unprecedented challenge. Your legacy will not be written by how well you implement directives from above but by whether you had the courage to stand up when history demanded. As Kissinger might say today, it is time to get the department where it has not been.

It is time to right these wrongs—not for political gain, and not for personal legacy, but for the American people and the ideals we have long championed. The world still looks to us for leadership. We must show them that America is still worthy of that role.

The weight of history is upon you. Your moment is now.



Steven E. Hendrix, a retired Foreign Service officer, is the principal of Hendrix LLC. In 2024 he retired from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Foreign Service, where he served most recently as the USAID coordinator for the State Department's Office of Foreign Assistance and as the State Department's managing director for planning, performance, and systems for the Office of Foreign Assistance. Earlier USAID assignments include senior adviser for South America, deputy mission director in Ghana, program office director in Nigeria, peace negotiations adviser to the president in Colombia, director of national capacity development for Iraq, and others.

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