

I Ran USAID When It Was Last Under Attack. Here's How We Saved It.

Foreign aid isn't charity. It's an investment in America's vital national interests.

By J. Brian Atwood | Contributor March 6, 2025, at 6:29 p.m.



How We Saved USAID Last Time

[More](#)

LUIS TATO|AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A USAID logo is visible amid the scattered remains of boxes and materials at a warehouse in the Democratic Republic of Congo on Feb. 21, 2025.

Last week, I stood outside the Ronald Reagan Building, the now-former headquarters of the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#), as employees carrying their belongings in boxes [were forced to leave](#) their beloved workplace for what may be the last time. We

applauded each one for their service to the nation. Some were in tears as they left jobs that many told me were the most satisfying they ever had.

I was the head of USAID when we first moved into the Reagan Building back in 1994, more than three decades after President John F. Kennedy established the agency by executive order.

Memories flooded back to me last week as I watched what could be the demise of an institution that – perhaps more than any other – represents the American values we hold dear: our shared sense as humanitarians of what the richest democracy can and should do to help the rest of the world.

I'm proud to have led the agency that helped eradicate smallpox, saving lives and saving American taxpayers millions of dollars that the U.S. had been spending every year on inoculations. Our public-private partnership nearly eliminated polio. Our doctors and public health specialists helped stem the global spread of HIV/AIDS.

And I remember our previous battles to keep the agency alive after the end of the Cold War three decades ago, when some in Congress no longer saw the point of foreign aid.



The arguments we made to Congress then were practical. We appealed not just to American generosity and democratic values, but also to our vital and strategic interests in preventing violent conflicts that would inevitably draw in far-costlier U.S. military resources. I testified before Congress numerous times, and we won the fight in 1996 when Republicans and Democrats passed legislation to make USAID a permanent government agency. A bipartisan consensus had emerged that combatting global poverty was well worth the cost of [less than 1% of our national budget](#).

Once again, that mission [faces a fight](#) for its very existence, and once again, we must wage a battle to save it.

Since taking office on Jan. 20, President Donald Trump has shuttered the USAID building; [placed more than 4,000 USAID employees on leave](#); fired an additional 1,600 workers; [caused layoffs](#) of tens of thousands more aid workers and contractors worldwide; refused to disburse payments for [\\$2 billion worth of aid work](#) already done; and slashed more than 90% of foreign assistance-related grants going forward, including lifesaving programs to prevent the spread of Ebola and treat HIV and AIDS. As of this week, USAID's global health workforce has [been cut](#) from 783 to fewer than 70.

On Wednesday, in a 5-4 decision, the [Supreme Court rejected](#) the president's attempt to stop the payout of \$2 billion in promised government spending owed to nonprofit groups and businesses who've completed work around the world over the last year, under contract for USAID. Still, the timeline for payment is unclear, and many of these organizations have already been forced to shut down or will be put out of business.

The president and his cost-cutting czar Elon Musk have done all of this under the guise of cutting "waste" without showing evidence of the misuse of funds. Musk went so far as to accuse USAID and its devoted employees of being a "[criminal organization](#)," while Trump claimed it is infected by "[tremendous fraud](#)." These characterizations are demonstrably false, and they are an insult to the highly professional and nonpartisan career public servants at USAID. Nearly 100 of them have lost their lives in service to their country since USAID was founded in 1961.

The lifesaving work that USAID has done to detect and stop infectious diseases from becoming global pandemics has expanded over the years as viruses multiply. It's hard to fathom how much deadlier the COVID-19 pandemic would have been if we had not had USAID workers on the front lines helping to control its spread.

Without USAID assistance, millions of the world's most vulnerable people will now die from preventable illnesses. Nicholas Enrich, the acting assistant administrator for global health at USAID who was put on leave on March 2, outlined in [a series of memos](#) that he made public this week that the agency projects that Trump's radical cuts will result in as many as 18 million additional cases of malaria and 166,000 additional deaths every year; in hundreds of millions of new polio infections and 200,000 children paralyzed with the disease annually; in 1 million more children untreated annually for severe malnutrition, which is often fatal; and in more than 28,000 new cases of infectious diseases such as Ebola and Marburg every year.

If the United States walks away from our commitments, other donor nations will be unable to close the gap. Our [friends and allies](#) are already under pressure from the new administration to increase defense spending, and they are paying the price of Trump's tariffs and [trade wars](#). The United Kingdom, under pressure from the new administration to boost its defense spending, just [announced it is reducing its foreign aid budget](#). The consequences of cuts in foreign aid will be measured in lives lost and growing global instability.