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Aid, Interrupted: Inside USAID and the Collapse of American Health Diplomacy

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Abstract

The 2025 dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)'s global health programs under the Trump administration marked one of the most abrupt and far-reaching rollbacks of U.S. foreign assistance in modern history. But behind the budget lines and agency memos lie human stories: career officials uprooted overnight, life-saving partnerships abandoned, and a global health infrastructure thrown into disarray. This project explores what happens when decades of American global health diplomacy are dismantled in a matter of weeks. Through interviews with longtime USAID officials and a senior member of Congress, this profile-driven policy analysis traces the real-world impact of the cuts — from HIV clinics in Haiti to pandemic surveillance in Indonesia. It draws on testimonies from officials who built and managed these programs, documenting the rupture as both a strategic failure and a moral reckoning. My findings show that the collapse of USAID's infrastructure has weakened America's credibility on the world stage, emboldened adversaries, and jeopardized vulnerable populations worldwide. With Congress structurally constrained and the public largely disengaged, the capstone urges a rethinking of how we protect development institutions in times of political upheaval — and whether American soft power can ever be rebuilt once trust is lost.

Dedication

For the USAID public servants who built lifelong careers on compassion, equity, and steadfast dedication. Whose professions were upended, but whose work saved lives. For those who lost not just their jobs, but the mission they believed in. And for everyone who still believes diplomacy, dignity, and global solidarity are worth fighting for.

This project is for you.

Methodology & A Note on Anonymity

This project draws on qualitative interviews conducted between March and May 2025 with seven former senior USAID global health officials and one current member of Congress. Participants were selected for their firsthand experience with the dismantling of USAID programs and their leadership roles across a range of technical areas, including infectious disease, health systems, program logistics, and congressional oversight. The group includes both headquarters staff and field-based officials with decades of institutional memory. Interviews were conducted via phone and video calls and ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Participants were identified through professional networks, public records, and expert referrals. In several cases, a snowball sampling method was used — where one interviewee referred the researcher to additional individuals with relevant expertise. Detailed notes were taken during each conversation, and follow-up clarification was conducted when needed.

To protect the privacy of those who participated in this project, several individuals interviewed for this report are identified by pseudonyms. All interviewees spoke in their personal capacity and not on behalf of any current or former institution. Their identities were verified by the author, Tal Yahalom, to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of their perspectives. Anonymity was granted to allow for greater candor on sensitive topics, including internal agency dynamics, political pressures, and the personal and professional costs of the dismantling of USAID programs. Where pseudonyms are used, they are indicated in the text.

Lives Built on Service: Why USAID Officials Chose Global Health Diplomacy

Before the headlines, before the layoffs, before the dismantling, were lives built around a simple idea: that American engagement abroad could save lives, build trust, and strengthen communities. For USAID officials, the often invisible work of global health diplomacy—especially to the American public—was more than a career; it was a calling rooted in lived experiences, deep-seated values, and a belief in America's role as a global partner. USAID diplomats, advisors, and contractors chose this line of work not for politics or prestige, but for a chance to bridge worlds: to expand access to vaccines, prevent the spread of infectious diseases, and leave behind stronger health infrastructure than they found.

One of those officials is Shira Davis (*a pseudonym*), a longtime USAID global health leader with decades of experience across Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. For Davis, the road to global health diplomacy began with childhood dreams of becoming a doctor. But during her studies at the University of Michigan, she discovered public health. The field wasn't just about treating individuals; it was about addressing health at scale – weaving together medicine, social science, culture, and policy into something more impactful and longer lasting. Her connection to this work ran deeper than academics. She grew up hearing stories from her grandmothers in Nepal — stories of maternal health challenges, loss, and resilience that left a lasting imprint on her. As a child, she traveled to Nepal and witnessed the stark disparities in maternal health and access to basic care firsthand, sharpening her view that healthcare is truly about quality systems, equity, and dignity. *"I always had an interest in understanding different cultures,"* she reflected, *"and connecting across cultures and disciplines to make change at a global level."* Her path led through graduate training in health management and policy, and

ultimately into a career in global health that offered a tangible way to listen, to learn, and to build programs that wouldn't merely deliver care, but would transform lives.

Another official I spoke with, John Mensah (a *pseudonym*), spent many years working on the frontlines of U.S. global health efforts. His career at USAID spanned service from West Africa and South Asia to Washington, D.C., supporting initiatives on maternal and child health, infectious disease response, and health system strengthening. He entered the field wanting to make a broader impact — but his path began with medicine. Trained as a physician, he soon realized that while treating one patient at a time mattered, public health offered the chance to save lives at scale. *"I could influence and save more lives by managing interventions like vaccination,"* he reflected, *"than I as a clinician could by treating children one by one for pneumonia."* Beyond the promise of large-scale impact, it was the complexity that hooked him. Mensah found himself fascinated by the nuance public health demanded — the need to understand local context, to diagnose the root causes of a crisis, and to tailor solutions accordingly. *"If there's a cholera outbreak,"* he explained, *"you have to ask: is it the water supply? Is it hygiene practices? Public health lets you investigate, adapt, and solve."* Mensah's first exposure to USAID came through a U.S.-funded project supporting maternal and child health in his home country of Nigeria. It opened his eyes to the reach and generosity of American development efforts. When an opportunity arose to join the USAID mission there, he seized it, launching a career dedicated to advancing clinical outcomes by strengthening the systems that support them.

Others, like Karlan Jankowski, found their calling not in clinics or field offices, but in the logistics systems that quietly held global health together. Jankowski, a seasoned USAID supply chain leader, traced her path to global health through a lifelong commitment to community

service. "*When I was in high school, I was really highly involved in community service clubs*," she explained. That early passion matured into a clear sense of purpose during her Peace Corps service, where she managed a small USAID-funded project — her first direct encounter with the agency that would later define her career. *"It was very clear early on," she recalled, "that [USAID] was the end all be all of international development — the ultimate goal*." After Peace Corps, Jankowski took an entry-level role with a USAID implementing partner and quickly found her passion within the operational backbone of global health: supply chain management. "*I started in a very entry-level position, learned every part of the supply chain and how it shapes global health — and I just loved it."* That exposure reshaped her graduate studies and capstone project, both of which she dedicated to public health logistics. What drew her in was the systems thinking: how forecasting, procurement, and distribution could quietly make or break global health interventions. As a full-time USAID official, Jankowski led multi-billion-dollar pipelines for procuring and distributing HIV medications and related health commodities, managed global commodity distribution, and served in seven different USAID missions abroad and Washington D.C. Her work enabled continuity in HIV care, vaccine rollouts, and epidemic preparedness in some of the world's most vulnerable settings.

Trump 1.0: Early Signs of USAID's Dismantling

The dismantling of USAID didn't begin in 2025. Its foundations were quietly laid during Trump's first administration, which tested the limits of executive power, exploited institutional weaknesses, and eroded the bipartisan support that had long protected U.S. global health

diplomacy. While the first Trump administration ultimately failed to slash USAID's budget[1], these early attempts served as a critical testing ground for the Trump-aligned conservative wing of the Republican Party, establishing a playbook for dismantling the agency[2]. Trump's first term demonstrated how to bypass congressional oversight, sideline institutional resistance, and disrupt established norms of U.S. foreign policy — tactics that would be refined and expanded in 2025.

Efforts to cut foreign aid under the Trump administration were not merely about cost-saving. They reflected a broader ideological project: to recast the role of U.S. global engagement while consolidating decision-making power within the executive branch. In 2017, the White House proposed slashing the State Department and USAID budgets by as much as 37%[3] — a drastic cut intended to offset a $54 billion boost in military spending. According to an internal State Department memo obtained by The Washington Post, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attempted to push back against these cuts[4], arguing for a more strategic, phased approach to right-sizing U.S. diplomacy. "*He is deeply concerned about the timing and size of the reductions,*" the memo read, emphasizing that the United States needed to remain "*active, engaged, and influential throughout the world.*" This memo reflected Secretary Tillerson's concern with the administration's overreaching agenda, which risked gutting some of the very programs that underpin U.S. influence abroad.

[1] Adva Saldinger., "Congress again rejects steep cuts to US foreign assistance in new budget," Devex News, March 22, 2018, https://www.devex.com/news/congress-again-rejects-steep-cuts-to-us-foreign-assistance-in-new-budget-92403
[2] Beau Breslin, "Project 2025: U.S. Agency for International Development," The Fulcrum, July 12, 2024, https://thefulcrum.us/governance-legislation/project-2025-usaid
[3] Nahal Toosi et al., "Source: Trump wants 37 percent budget cut to State, USAID," Politico, February 28, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-budget-cuts-state-department-usaid-235505
[4] Josh Rogin, "Tillerson pushes back on White House's proposed cuts to State Department and USAID," The Washington Post, March 3, 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/03/03/tillerson-pushes-back-on-white-houses-proposed-cuts-to-state-department-and-usaid/

Despite Secretary Tillerson's efforts, the White House remained committed to its vision of a leaner, more militarized approach to foreign policy, viewing diplomacy as a secondary tool to military power. The budget proposal, though never fully enacted, marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities, setting a precedent for sidelining the development community. As Anton Schneider, a longtime senior USAID advisor and now public health lecturer at the University of Maryland, recalled:

> We wanted to see what the administration would do when they were elected. Because the last time — Trump 1.0 — he came in wanting to cut the agency by 35% in 2017, and he failed at that time. I think Congress really pushed back, and most of our funding was either left intact or restored. So we didn't suffer any significant cuts during his first administration.

Indeed, the 2017 budget cuts faced immediate bipartisan resistance in Congress, with powerful Republicans like Senator Lindsey Graham dismissing the proposal as being "*dead on arrival*."[5] Graham, then the chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee for the State Department and foreign operations, warned that slashing the diplomatic budget would be a "*disaster*", one that "*puts our diplomats at risk*." Then Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell added that "*the diplomatic portion of the federal budget is very important*"[6] and often more cost-effective than military solutions.

Yet, for all the chaos of Trump 1.0, there remained institutional guardrails that prevented a full-scale dismantling. Many core global health programs remained intact, reflecting the resilience of bipartisan support for foreign aid. One longtime USAID official reflected on this period:

> The administrator under Trump 1.0 emphasized sustainability and the 'journey to self-reliance,' which basically meant cutting big contracts and reducing funding to countries to encourage self-sufficiency. But even then, I joined in August 2017 — nine months into the administration — and the funding levels were still the same. They were pushing projects, and nobody talked about

[5] Gabrielle Levy, "Lindsey Graham: Trump Budget 'Dead on Arrival' in Congress," U.S. News & World Report, February 28, 2017, https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-02-28/lindsey-graham-trump-budget-dead-on-arrival-in-congress

[6] Nikita Vladimirov, "McConnell criticizes Trump's proposed State Dept cuts," The Hill, March 21, 2017, https://thehill.com/policy/finance/325048-mcconnell-criticizes-trumps-proposed-state-dept-cuts/

> eliminating foreign aid. In fact, figures like Marco Rubio and Lindsey Graham, who were close to Trump, were vocal advocates for foreign aid.

Programs like the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), illustrate this continuity quite well. Despite Trump's broader push to slash foreign aid, PEPFAR received a five-year renewal[7] without controversy. Despite the administration's broader America-first rhetoric, PEPFAR — a cornerstone of U.S. global health leadership — remained fully funded. This reflected the enduring influence of powerful congressional advocates like Senator Lindsey Graham and a deep reservoir of bipartisan support for the program.

Yet, the seeds of a more radical agenda were already being planted. For all the congressional pushback in 2017, the Trump administration succeeded in pushing through significant changes to U.S. foreign aid policy, particularly in areas like reproductive health and multilateral cooperation. An anonymous senior USAID officer who worked overseas during the first Trump administration recalled:

> When the first Trump administration came in, I was overseas. I didn't feel the changes as sharply as my colleagues in Washington. There were cuts to family planning and restrictions on working with public international organizations like the WHO, but overall, it wasn't the same kind of full-scale dismantling we're seeing now. We couldn't attend WHO meetings, for example, but the core public health programs continued.

Many USAID officials entered 2025 with the assumption that the deep cuts proposed in 2017, which had ultimately been blocked by Congress, would not be repeated at the same scale. The agency's leadership, accustomed to weathering political headwinds, assumed that the worst was over. As Karlan Jankowski recognized:

> Everyone in the agency just treats a change in administration the same way, because we don't work for one administration politically. We just follow whatever their mandates are. So we were just thinking, okay, this is a more aggressive mandate for us, but we'll comply, and we'll present everything they need to make sure they have the data and information for the review.

[7] Deborah Birx, "On President Trump Signing PEPFAR Extension Act of 2018," U.S. Department of State, December 12, 2018, https://2017-2021.state.gov/on-president-trump-signing-pepfar-extension-act-of-2018/

But beneath this institutional complacency was a more profound ideological shift. The Trump administration's early moves, including the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy, echoed a more profound skepticism of multilateralism and a growing preference for a narrowly defined, America-first, politically driven approach to foreign policy. The policy, first introduced by the Reagan administration in 1984, prohibits foreign non-governmental organizations that receive U.S. global health assistance from using funds from any source (including non-U.S. funds) to "*perform or actively promote abortion as a method of family planning*."

Under the first Trump administration, the policy was renamed "Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance.[8] In 2025 President Trump significantly expanded the policy[9] far beyond traditional family planning programs, to cover nearly all U.S. bilateral global health assistance. This expanded version of the policy created a chilling effect that strained USAID's relationships with key partners including the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), as well as major NGOs. By tying unrelated health programs to abortion restrictions, the policy effectively sidelined some of the most experienced and capable global health implementers.

Although USAID health officials had navigated similar policies in the past, this version brought new intensity. One senior officer explained:

> Historically, we didn't really get hit that hard the first time. I mean, we had some budget cuts and tightening here and there during the first Trump administration, but nothing like this. I also work in health, and I'm used to them turning the Mexico City Policy on and off — the one that regulates family planning and abortion. Well, not abortion, because as the U.S. government, we never fund that, but family planning and how we talk about women's health. So I'm used to pivoting on that. That's just what we do.

[8] "Trump's 'Mexico City Policy' or 'Global Gag Rule'," Human Rights Watch, February 14, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/trumps-mexico-city-policy-or-global-gag-rule

[9] Alejandra Oconnell-Domenech, "Trump expected to quickly revive 'Mexico City' anti-abortion policy," The Hill, January 19, 2025, https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/5092735-trump-abortion-mexico-city-policy/

For years, USAID officials operated under an unspoken contract: while political winds might shift, the fundamental mission of the agency would endure, protected by institutional guardrails like congressional oversight and established diplomatic norms. This contract relied on a shared understanding that U.S. global health diplomacy, however strained, would remain a core pillar of American soft power. But the early moves of the Trump administration, including the attempted budget cuts and the rapid expansion of the Mexico City Policy, signaled a break from this foundational norm. The erosion of these safeguards in 2017 set the stage for the full-scale dismantling that would follow in 2025.

The Human Toll of a Vanishing Institution

For the thousands of career professionals at USAID, the dismantling of the agency in 2025 was not just a bureaucratic upheaval — it was a profound personal and professional crisis. It shattered careers, uprooted families, and erased decades of institutional memory in a matter of weeks. The chaos reached every corner of the organization, from high-ranking Washington officials to field staff embedded in some of the world's most challenging environments.

> From the moment the administration took power, it felt like psychological warfare. They bombarded the entire staff with threatening, traumatizing communications. Some colleagues disappeared within a day. It felt like a purge. – Shira Davis (a *pseudonym*), a longtime USAID global health leader

Davis, a longtime USAID global health leader, captured the shock and fear that gripped USAID staff in early 2025. She described a "*purge*," evoking a sense of targeted elimination, and a deliberate campaign to erase not just jobs but the people and expertise that sustained USAID's global health mission. It suggests a complete severing of institutional ties and a brutal dismemberment of a community bound by a shared mission of humanitarian service. Another

USAID contractor from Nigeria went on to describe the severe psychological trauma of USAID employees that he feels is being missed in the broader media conversation about the dismantling:

> I think the impact of this is deeply personal for individual USAID employees. While many people focus on the loss of income, I believe the psychological toll is just as significant, if not greater. It's a level of trauma that can't be easily measured, and I worry about the mental state of people who have dedicated their lives to this work and have been treated so harshly. I think the psychological effects of these terminations on the thousands of USAID and USAID contractor staff around the world are profound.

The speed and severity of the cuts left little time for preparation or even comprehension. "*It was absolutely traumatizing, and it happened so quickly that you couldn't really be okay. People with decades of experience and expertise running critical programs lost their jobs overnight,"* Davis recalled. The emotional whiplash facing Davis and her colleagues was severe. The dismantling was a sudden, disorienting blow that left even the most seasoned professionals reeling. For many, their roles at USAID were not just jobs but callings, careers defined by the mission to improve global health outcomes. To have this work erased without warning, without respect for their years of service, struck at the core of their professional identities.

This sense of betrayal extended beyond the individual. It rippled through families, communities, and the countless lives touched by USAID's programs.

> By the second week, they were telling everyone to evacuate their posts. These are people who have sacrificed their lives to serve overseas, often with families, children in school, or loved ones with special needs. I had a colleague on CNN whose wife has a severe, life-threatening pregnancy, and they offered no support, no guidance, no understanding of what comes next. It felt like they were burning everything down without any regard for the human toll — the impact on the millions of people relying on our programs for life-saving care, medicine, and basic services, or the thousands of staff and NGOs on the front lines who dedicated their lives to this work. – Shira Davis (a *pseudonym*), a longtime USAID global health leader

This moment captures the moral failure of the dismantling in stark, human terms. It's one thing to shutter a program on paper but quite another to force families with special needs children or medical crises to leave their posts without warning. It reveals a fundamental

disconnect between the political architects of the rollback and the human realities of the staff they displaced. For the families who suddenly found themselves without support or clear paths forward, the cost wasn't just professional. It was existential. Shira's words cut to the core of this disconnect. The directive to evacuate posts within days, with no regard for personal circumstances, reflects an almost militaristic approach to bureaucratic restructuring. The human infrastructure that sustained these programs was both overlooked and actively undermined. For those who had spent years building these programs, the emotional toll was compounded by a profound sense of abandonment.

"They flooded the zone, moving so quickly that it was immediately obvious they were targeting USAID. The tone of their communications was disrespectful, demeaning, and dismissive of our work, with no regard for our well-being," Davis recalled. The institutional chaos was mirrored in the personal lives of the staff, many of whom found themselves suddenly without income, housing, or any clear path forward. This was not just a bureaucratic failure but a moral one, a complete disregard for the sacrifices of those who had dedicated their lives to humanitarian service. It underscores a deep failure to understand — or even acknowledge — the human realities of the staff they targeted

> Even for someone like me, who was based in D.C., this has been a nightmare. I've been with USAID for nearly 19 years, and this is not the way I wanted to end my career. But for my colleagues in the field, it's so much worse. Many have families, children, or special needs dependents, and they've been forced to evacuate with almost no warning. They're watching the programs they built collapse, unable to support the communities they dedicated their lives to. – Shira Davis (a *pseudonym*), a longtime USAID global health leader

Davis seizes the heartbreak of watching decades of progress unravel in real-time, careers ending stripped of dignity. It also emphasizes the broader, more insidious impact, which is the breakdown of the human connections which have historically formed the backbone of effective development work.

The breakdown extended to the logistical backbone of the agency. *"Within a week, half of the people I worked with were gone, and the rest were hanging on by a thread,"* recalled Karlan. *"One by one, our USAID emails got cut off, then our contractor emails, and then we each got a personal email: 'Here's your termination letter. We hope to have you back, but given the current situation, we cannot keep you. You were an at-will employee. Here's information about unemployment.'"* Another senior health officer described:

> For those of us overseas, it wasn't until late February that we were put on administrative leave, and even then, we had no clear instructions. Colleagues in Washington were getting Reduction in Force (RIF) letters as early as January. By early April, they told us we could come back, but only to face RIF notices. We had no idea what was true and what wasn't.

The same shock and uncertainty reverberated through the frontline NGOs that had come to rely on USAID support. As Anton Schneider put it, "*When you're in combat, a lot of things happen very fast, and it's all very traumatic, so you're not quite sure what just happened. I think it was like that — it was shock and awe. They hit us with shock and awe, and we were stunned. They froze everything.*"

Yet for all the trauma, what stung the most for many was the sense of betrayal. The work they had devoted their lives to was being erased without warning, their expertise shunned, and their sacrifices ignored. It was not just an institutional collapse, but a human one — the destructive unraveling of careers, connections, and commitments that had taken decades to build. These were the people who had America's back in some of the world's toughest environments — who stood up for U.S. interests when it wasn't easy, who embodied the quiet, patient work of diplomacy. And then, in a matter of weeks, their own government had abandoned them.

The Bureaucratic Coup: How USAID Was Gutted in Real-Time

For those inside USAID, the dismantling of the agency in 2025 felt like the opposite of a routine political transition and more like a high-speed, bureaucratic coup, a methodical, ruthless campaign to erase the institution in a matter of days. Officials who had weathered multiple administrations, including Trump's first term, were stunned by the speed and severity of the assault. What many had assumed would be a more aggressive but still negotiable mandate quickly revealed itself as a full-scale purge. This was a deliberate effort to hollow out the agency from the inside.

The unraveling began immediately, ferociously catching even the most prepared staff off guard. A senior USAID official described the first days as a "*domino effect*" of massive, successive cuts that left the agency paralyzed:

> Everything happened in a domino effect — massive, successive cuts that were extremely big and sudden, each on their own, earth shattering. And then they did it all at once, in rapid succession. All the DEI staff were fired the first day. By the third day, we received a stop work order for all of our activities across the globe. By the end of that week, all the contractors were fired. This is within four days. It felt like the first week of the administration lasted a decade.

Far from a disorganized transition, the dismantling unfolded with calculated speed and intent. DEI staff, who had been some of the most vocal advocates for inclusive programming, were the first to go. By the end of the first week, entire teams had been wiped out, their projects frozen, their contracts terminated, and their institutional knowledge erased. One of the first tactical moves was to cut off staff from critical communications. A senior official described how USAID staff suddenly found themselves unable to access even basic systems:

> They just shut everything down. They cut off everyone's access to the system overnight. One day, I discovered I had lost all system access and was put on administrative leave. It took six weeks for me to regain even the most basic access.

This was designed to isolate staff from each other and prevent coordinated resistance. The immediate loss of email and system access cut off critical lines of communication, leaving

staff members effectively stranded, unable to share information, organize responses, or even confirm their own employment status. Another senior advisor, described the chilling moment when the personal termination letters started to arrive:

> Then, that night, we got the emails. It was like a slow-motion collapse. One by one, our USAID emails got cut off, then our contractor emails, and then we each got a personal email: 'Here's your termination letter. We hope to have you back, but given the current situation, we cannot keep you. You were an at-will employee. Here's information about unemployment.'

The effort to silence dissent went beyond technical lockouts. Staff were warned — sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly, that they were being closely watched. The senior advisor recalled a particularly chilling tactic:

> Every email we sent was automatically marked 'Sensitive but Unclassified' (SBU) — a move clearly intended to entrap us. It sent a chilling message: they were out to get us, and we had to be extremely careful with every word.

This tactic wasn't just about security, but it was a form of bureaucratic intimidation designed to muzzle staff and make even routine communications feel dangerous. Compounding the fear and confusion was a staggering level of administrative chaos. The same officials who were ordered to evacuate their posts were simultaneously stripped of the logistical support they needed to comply. A senior official described the scramble to follow impossible orders:

> They kept pushing these extreme evacuation deadlines, like telling staff to leave their posts within two days, often on military jets. It was logistically impossible and wildly expensive, especially after firing entire HR teams and putting everyone on administrative leave. They had no plan for getting people back to the U.S., and even the reduction-in-force notices were riddled with errors — inaccurate personal information and improperly handled by the wrong offices. If you're going to fire us, at least fire us in the right way.

By creating an environment where even basic HR functions collapsed, the administration effectively paralyzed the institution, preventing staff from organizing, resisting, or even understanding the full scale of the attack. Beyond the logistical and professional chaos, there was a profound psychological impact. As one senior health officer put it:

> As for communication, there wasn't any direct guidance. We found out what was happening through the White House website, public media, and rumors in Signal groups. Every day, there was a new decision, and every day, it felt like the ground was shifting beneath us. We would hear, 'Oh, take the fork in the road, you can resign or last three months.' There was no plan. The only plan was the dismantling of USAID.

Together, these voices paint a dark picture of a deliberate, fast-moving campaign to dismantle USAID from within, a bureaucratic coup executed at a stunning speed. This was not just an administrative shakeup or a budget cut. It was an intentional, calculated effort to erase one of the most influential institutions in American foreign policy.

Trust & Credibility: The Erosion of U.S. Soft Power

For decades, USAID has served as one of America's most powerful instruments of soft power, building deep reservoirs of trust through long-term investments in public health, humanitarian aid, and technical assistance. This trust has allowed the United States to influence global health developments, strengthen diplomatic alliances, and reinforce its position as an exceptional global leader. USAID's unique approach which blended technical expertise, long-term partnership, and locally tailored solutions, constructed a model of development assistance that was respected worldwide. Yet, this credibility has been shattered by the rapid, chaotic rollback of USAID programs in 2025.

A former longtime senior USAID health official emphasized the scale of this damage:

> USAID was the main instrument of American soft power, and many of our colleagues did an incredible job building trust around the world. This trust was a key leverage point, allowing the United States to build stronger alliances and demonstrate global leadership, particularly in public health, humanitarian aid, and technical assistance. But that trust has been shattered. The way this was executed — with no regard for the human impact and a tone that is disparaging and dismissive — has destroyed America's credibility, influence, and soft power.

This collapse in credibility has profound implications for U.S. foreign policy. Trust is the cornerstone of effective diplomacy, and USAID's long-term investments were designed to foster precisely this kind of trust. In many countries, USAID programs acted as a stabilizing force,

helping to prevent conflict, support fragile states—particularly those with poor health infrastructure—and build the kind of institutional capacity that reduces dependence on direct U.S. military intervention. It was never just about generosity; it was a long-term strategy to stabilize regions and advance U.S. interests through influence rather than force.

However, the rapid dismantling of USAID programs has destroyed the very relationships that these long-term investments were designed to build. As Karlan, another senior USAID advisor, explained, this isn't just about losing contracts or cutting budgets, it's about losing the long-term leverage that comes from decades of consistent partnership. This loss of leverage has direct policy consequences. In global health, for example, the ability to guide national health policies is not just about funding. It is about being seen as a reliable, technically competent partner. USAID's role in supporting national health ministries, training healthcare workers, and providing technical expertise created a deep reservoir of trust that allowed the U.S. to influence critical health decisions.

One of the clearest illustrations of USAID's strategic value lies not in a budget spreadsheet but in a bilateral trade deal. During his time in South Africa, Paul Mahanna recalled how U.S. health programming played a quiet but decisive role in advancing a broader diplomatic goal: bringing South Africa into the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The South African government under President Zuma had initially resisted joining. But because of deep trust built through years of collaboration in the health sector, USAID was able to serve as a bridge. "*There was significant pushback from the Zuma government…but we had such a really strong relationship with [the Minister of Health] that he convinced the Zuma government to sign on to AGOA,*" Mahanna explained. "*Our ambassador relied heavily on our health programming to get the Minister of Health engaged*." This episode underscores what is often lost in

conversations about "*foreign aid efficiency*": that USAID's influence was never just about technical assistance or funding flows. It was about relationships with local ministries, with communities, with diplomats. Health programs weren't simply humanitarian interventions; they were strategic tools of engagement. When the U.S. led on HIV/AIDS or pandemic preparedness, it opened doors, aligned governments, and built credibility that benefited broader U.S. interests. The collapse of these programs is a geopolitical loss. As Mahanna emphasized, "*It'll be more difficult for our diplomats across the State Department*" now that USAID's health infrastructure and the trust it earned has been dismantled.

"*Everything you do is based on relationships*," Mahanna reflected. "*When money just stops all of a sudden, that is going to affect our relationship not just in health, but really across the U.S. government*." The fallout was immediate. In South Africa — home to the world's largest HIV epidemic and a linchpin of regional health infrastructure — the government now estimates it will need 28 billion rand to fill the gap left by USAID's abrupt pullout[10]. The ripple effects won't stop at national borders: South Africa draws in workers from Mozambique, Malawi, and the DRC, meaning the loss of HIV prevention and treatment services may reverberate across the entire region. This is not just a fiscal crisis — it's a breakdown of the very trust that made 20 years of health gains possible.

This influence reflected the credibility that USAID built through decades of on-the-ground presence. Karlan also pointed to a deeper, more strategic shift. The rollback of USAID is not just an accidental byproduct of political chaos but a deliberate move toward isolationism.

[10] Michelle Gumede, "South Africa plans to spend more on health and defense after the US cuts aid," The Associated Press, March 13, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-trump-aid-freeze-budget-godongwana-199795bdb1aa44aefbc5469e798d7acc

This is a devastating assessment. Karlan isn't just talking about a temporary loss of credibility, she is describing the collapse of a decades-long strategy that relied on patient, consistent engagement to build trust, influence, and leverage. USAID's approach was not just about handing out money. It was about building relationships, earning trust, and becoming a reliable, long-term partner in some extremely challenging environments. That trust wasn't abstract — it was the bedrock of American influence in global health, development, and humanitarian aid. Without this trust, the U.S. has effectively lost its seat at the table. Local governments will no longer take American advice as seriously, and U.S. diplomats will find it far harder to shape policy outcomes, promote democratic norms, or push back against authoritarian influence. The leverage that Karlan described — the ability to walk into a room and be heard, respected, and trusted — is gone, possibly for good. This shift has not gone unnoticed by the broader international community. As Karlan noted, institutions like the World Bank and IMF are already adjusting their strategies, moving on from the United States:

> Look at the recent World Bank and IMF meetings. Everything I've read from those meetings suggests that these institutions are already moving on from the United States. They're trying to figure out what to do without U.S. funding or partnerships. They're looking for new relationships because they no longer see us as a reliable actor.

Karlan's point is critical. The United States, for decades, served as the primary underwriter of global development institutions, providing financial support as well as technical expertise. By withdrawing from these commitments, the U.S. is effectively ceding its leadership role in global development to other actors. This represents a strategic realignment in which the U.S. is no longer seen as the central pillar of the international development system. This loss of credibility is deeply personal for those who have dedicated their careers to U.S. foreign assistance. A senior USAID official in the DRC, captured this sense of betrayal:

> That kind of goodwill means something. When I say I work for USAID anywhere in Africa, it opens doors. People treat you like a dignitary. They see the USAID name as a symbol of generosity, hope, and aspiration. But that's gone now. We've done reputational damage in the past few weeks that will take lifetimes to overcome. We've killed global trust in America.

This erosion of trust is not just about lost funding or shuttered programs. It is about the loss of a fundamental diplomatic currency, the ability to be believed, to be counted on, and to be respected. As a former USAID contractor, put it:

> We have become a seasonal, short-term, unreliable partner. That's not the America I believed in. That's not the America our partners once trusted. If a U.S. government official now goes to a partner country and says, 'We support this program,' the response will be, 'Are you really sure about that?' The damage to our credibility is severe. We have created deep distrust among our allies, and I don't know how we can repair it.

Together, these voices capture one common theme, that the rollback of USAID programs has done lasting damage to America's global credibility. The trust that once underpinned U.S. foreign aid, painstakingly built over decades, has been shattered in a matter of months. This loss of credibility is not just a short-term setback. It represents a fundamental break with the long-standing principles of U.S. foreign policy, one that would take decades — if not longer — to repair. Rebuilding this trust will require more than just restoring funding. It will require a fundamental shift in how the United States approaches its international partnerships, moving away from the transactional, short-term thinking that characterized the Trump 2.0 era. If the U.S. hopes to reclaim its role as a trusted global leader, it will need to rebuild not just its institutions but the relationships, trust, and credibility that made USAID a symbol of American generosity and global leadership in the first place for so many decades.

Who Will Fill the Void?

As the United States retreats from its long-held role as the world's leading provider of development assistance, a critical question emerges: who will fill the void? For decades, USAID's global footprint provided technical expertise, an on-the-ground presence, and a

network of relationships that extended into the most remote corners of the world. With that infrastructure now collapsing, the vacuum is already being filled by geopolitical rivals eager to expand their influence. A senior USAID official in the DRC, observed that China has been quick to step into the gap:

> Within days, China was in there engaging on, like, Ebola response type things. They're stepping in to fill that void. We have left a massive void for China to step right in and fill. The Chinese have a fully different approach to the way they work in other countries. Many argue it barely qualifies as development. There's a lot of infrastructure in Africa that has been developed by the Chinese, but the Chinese own it, or they bring in Chinese workers to do the work — to build the roads, to build the ports, to do whatever.
>
> In Bangladesh, the government struck up a deal with China to build the largest port. The terms of that agreement were such that it was going to be nearly impossible for Bangladesh to pay it all back. And so that means China now controls this port. So there's a lot of stuff that's been to the advantage of China. They're not doing it out of, you know, a sense of betterment for the local population.

China's model, often referred to as "debt-trap diplomacy"[11] is a model that works to create economic dependencies that undermine the sovereignty of partner countries. Unlike USAID's approach, which focuses on capacity building, technical assistance, and local empowerment, China's model, which over the past few years has had an increased footprint in Africa, often relies on loans that come with significant political and economic strings attached. This approach can lead to long-term financial dependency, as the official pointed out in the case of Bangladesh, where a strategically important port is now effectively controlled by China due to predatory loan terms[12].

This shift is not just about infrastructure. China has also been moving aggressively into the global health space. Paul Mahanna, a veteran of USAID's Office of Infectious Disease, noted

[11] Hanna Sunny, "China's Debt Trap in Africa: A Comprehensive Analysis," The Geopolitics, November 23, 2024, https://thegeopolitics.com/chinas-debt-trap-in-africa-a-comprehensive-analysis/
[12] Ruma Paul, "Bangladesh says Xi Jinping would consider lowering interest on Chinese loans, " Reuters, March 28, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-says-xi-jinping-would-consider-lowering-interest-chinese-loans-2025-03-28/

that China's willingness to fill the global health vacuum left by the United States is already becoming apparent:

> China seems already willing and able to fill the gap. They've been interested in doing global health work for a long time, and they've made inroads over the years. China has a very different model than the U.S. government. They do a lot of loans, and many of our partner countries have really overextended themselves financially, given COVID and the broader economic challenges. So, many of them are deeply indebted and will struggle to continue global health programming without U.S. support.

However, not everyone is convinced that China can fully replace the role that USAID has played. As one former senior USAID official pointed out, the gap left by USAID is about more than just dollars and infrastructure:

> A lot of people are talking about how this will increase China's influence, right? That's definitely an issue, but I don't think China is going to make up for the gap. I mean, China does more with infrastructure, but in terms of service delivery, technical assistance, and policy, I don't see it. You'd go to the most rural community in Mozambique, and there would be services, supplies, and health workers — a lot of that was because of USAID. I haven't seen other projects getting to that level, that really on-the-ground, tangible implementation of services and programming. So I think this is a really tragic vacuum.

This observation highlights a critical difference between the U.S. and Chinese approaches to development. USAID's value was not just in the scale of its funding but in its ability to deliver services at the community level, build local capacity, and support sustainable development. These are roles that China's more transactional, infrastructure-heavy model may struggle to replicate. Moreover, China's approach to foreign aid often prioritizes state-to-state relationships, which can create resentment and resistance among local populations. Chinese infrastructure projects largely rely on imported Chinese labor, which can erode local support and undermine long-term stability. In contrast, USAID's approach has historically emphasized local capacity building, community health, and institution strengthening, creating a deeper trust and influence.

The vacuum left by USAID's collapse also creates fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation campaigns by U.S. adversaries. Anton Schneider, a senior USAID advisor,

warned that the absence of a robust American presence in the information space could have serious strategic consequences:

> My fear is that when we pull out of the space, who pulls in? Well, we know the Russians and the Chinese have been great propagators of misinformation and disinformation about not just USAID, but U.S. interventions in general. So now it seems like they have a clear playing field. The goal is open. The way they've been hitting Ukraine and saying, you know, USAID has been funding biological weapons labs or whatever they're saying — there's nobody to fight back. And so I think in the information space, it leaves it really open to our adversaries, whoever those might be.

This is a critical point. The loss of USAID's ground presence not only removes a key source of humanitarian and technical assistance but also silences one of the most credible voices in the fight against misinformation. This leaves an open field for authoritarian powers to shape the narrative unchallenged, further eroding U.S. influence across the globe. This newly created vacuum will not be easily filled. While China is moving quickly to expand its influence, it lacks the technical depth, local partnerships, and institutional knowledge that made USAID a uniquely powerful actor. As one former senior USAID official noted:

> This is a really tragic vacuum. The U.S. had a presence in the most remote communities, providing not just funding but real, tangible support — health workers, supplies, and technical expertise. I haven't seen other projects getting to that level. I don't know who can fill that gap.

Together, these voices paint a picture of a rapidly shifting global landscape, where long-standing U.S. influence is being replaced by a mix of opportunistic state actors and potentially destabilizing misinformation campaigns. This is not just a loss for U.S. soft power but a critical strategic setback with far-reaching consequences for global stability, American influence, and national security.

Trump 2.0 – The Rhetoric vs. The Reality of the Dismantling

The Trump administration framed its dismantling of USAID as a necessary push for "efficiency" and the elimination of "waste, fraud, and abuse." Executive Order 14169, signed

just hours after Trump took office on January 20, 2025, froze all U.S. foreign aid programs for 90 days[13], except for emergency food assistance and military aid to Israel and Egypt. The stated purpose was to conduct a comprehensive review of foreign aid spending to root out inefficiencies and ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars aligned with "American prosperity, safety, and security." In public statements, the administration framed this as a long-overdue cleanup, citing examples like the infamous (and later debunked[14]) $50 million condom shipment to Gaza and millions spent on DEI programs in Serbia, Ireland, and Colombia.

Through my interviews with senior USAID officials, it became apparent that the cuts weren't about efficiency at all. In fact, the dismantling created far more waste and inefficiency than it eliminated, ultimately undermining U.S. influence abroad.

From the beginning, the administration cast USAID as a bloated, unaccountable bureaucracy wasting taxpayer dollars on frivolous or politically controversial projects. In a February 3, 2025, article titled *At USAID, Waste and Abuse Runs Deep,* the White House accused the agency of funding everything from transgender comic books in Peru to "*personalized*" contraceptives in developing countries. DOGE head Elon Musk described USAID as having become *"apparent that what we have here is not an apple with a worm in it, but actually just a ball of worms*"[15] and claimed it was "*time for it to die*."

[13] Tammy Bruce, "Implementing the President's Executive Order on Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," U.S. Department of State, January 26, 2025, https://www.state.gov/implementing-the-presidents-executive-order-on-reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/
[14] Reuters Fact Check, "Fact Check: No evidence US spent $50 million on condoms for Gaza," Reuters, January 29, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/no-evidence-us-spent-50-million-condoms-gaza-2025-01-30/
[15] Jennifer Hansler et al., "Elon Musk said Donald Trump agreed USAID needs to be 'shut down'," CNN News, February 3, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/02/politics/usaid-officials-leave-musk-doge

This narrative quickly took hold in conservative media and among Trump's political allies. At a February 26, 2025, congressional hearing, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene described USAID as a "*slush fund for liberal propaganda*," while Rep. Scott Perry claimed, without evidence, that the agency had funded Boko Haram and other terrorist groups. These claims, however unsubstantiated, created a powerful rhetorical frame for the dismantling. The administration waged a full-scale narrative war, flooding the public sphere with claims that USAID was funding terrorists, promoting "*woke*" ideology, and wasting taxpayer dollars on frivolous projects. This became a strong message for a conservative base primed to distrust government institutions. The administration framed the agency as a rogue, unaccountable bureaucracy, an enemy within that had to be rooted out. It painted career public servants as dangerous radicals and reduced the agency's decades-long record of humanitarian work to a series of cheap political talking points. In the long run, this campaign of disinformation may prove to be one of the most damaging legacies of the second Trump administration.

However, the reality of the cuts looked very different from the rhetoric. Rather than making the agency more efficient, the dismantling triggered a cascade of logistical failures, operational collapses, and financial losses that will likely cost taxpayers far more in the long run. One senior USAID advisor described the chaotic nature of the process:

> You know, they froze everything. They said, 'All of your activities are frozen pending an evaluation, because we think there's a lot of fraud, waste, and abuse.' But if you took them at their word, what they said was that they were freezing all programs, they were going to evaluate those programs, and then in three months, we would see what would remain standing, right? But of course, that didn't happen.

The administration worked to create a domestic political environment where even the most basic humanitarian work can be portrayed as a radical, subversive act. Another USAID

official, reflecting on the sudden wave of layoffs, pointed out the absurdity of trying to evaluate program effectiveness after gutting the very teams responsible for oversight:

> They claim they were reviewing all the projects. Number one, when you want to review a project, you need to first review all of the documents, you need to interact with the people who are running the project. You need to ask specific questions and demand specific answers. In this case, within the first week of this government coming into power, they started laying people off. All of the staff at USAID were not interviewed about the projects they managed. All of the documents that could have been reviewed to get a factual, objective assessment of project performance were not even touched. So when the claim was made that after a thorough review, 83% of the projects would be stopped, I don't think it was a thoroughly done assessment. It was very obvious that this was a predetermined decision.

The administration's approach violated the basic principles of program evaluation, which require detailed assessments and interviews of the people managing the projects, various stakeholder consultations, and data analysis in order to determine effectiveness. By laying off the very staff responsible for conducting these evaluations, the administration essentially guaranteed that any review would be superficial at best and politically motivated at worst.

The cuts also created enormous waste, undermining the very efficiency they claimed to promote. Critical medical supplies, vaccines, and essential infrastructure were left to spoil as contractors were abruptly terminated and local partners abandoned. One senior USAID official, who had been overseeing a major health logistics operation, described the scale of the damage:

> I cannot talk to the people that were working there to know if the warehouse had been looted. I don't know if it still stands. You know, there's a great risk that anything could have happened with the drugs that were already sitting in the port. We support structural infrastructure, things like air conditioning for the warehouse, because it needs to be kept at a medicine-compliant temperature. Without that, the drugs will spoil. You've essentially destroyed all of the medicine in it. And you know, it's not hard to understand, but when you're saying, 'Oh, we're just going to cut 83% of the programs because they support an agenda that we don't believe in,' they're just not doing the work to look into the details of what it is.

This is a textbook example of how abrupt program termination can create enormous financial waste. Critical infrastructure like medical warehouses depends on long-term contracts

for maintenance, supply chain management, and regular quality control. Shutting these programs down midstream creates cascading losses as entire networks collapse. Rebuilding these systems, if it ever happens, will be exponentially more expensive. Local staff will need to be rehired, supply chains rebuilt, and relationships mended, all of which take years and decades, not months.

The rhetorical attacks on USAID also created a level of reputational damage that will be difficult, if not impossible, to repair. One Nigerian USAID official described the fallout from a false claim by a U.S. congressman that USAID was funding Boko Haram:

> In Nigeria, we heard one of the congressmen here say that USAID has been funding terrorism. That statement reverberated across the whole country, and a lot of people believed it. That has caused a calculable and I believe irremediable damage to USAID's reputation, because, you know, bad things travel very fast. Whatever mitigation effort we put in place can never catch up with the very terrible news that had been spread already.

This kind of reputational collapse is not just a public relations problem. It directly undermines any U.S. agency's future ability to operate in fragile states where trust is already in short supply. For USAID staff on the ground, these kinds of statements are potentially dangerous. When local partners and communities hear that the U.S. government is funding extremist groups, it erodes the very relationships that USAID depends on to deliver life-saving aid, promote stability, prevent infectious disease spread, and counter violent extremism.

Far from eliminating waste, the dismantling of USAID was a deliberate, ideologically driven campaign that traded long-term strategic stability for short-term political gain. This wasn't a campaign to root out inefficiency or eliminate waste — it was a calculated effort to gut an institution that clashed with President Trump's narrow, isolationist worldview. Far from a government "cleanup," it was a systematic attempt to discredit, defund, and dismantle one of America's most powerful tools of global influence. This is the paradox of the anti-government

rhetoric that drove the dismantling. It claims to protect taxpayers by cutting "waste" and eliminating "bureaucratic bloat," but it has destroyed precisely the kinds of expertise, capacity, and institutional knowledge that make efficient government possible. The people who staffed these agencies weren't just nameless bureaucrats. They were public health experts, epidemiologists, disaster response specialists, and human rights advocates — people who dedicated their lives to building a safer, healthier, more just world. When institutions are gutted, it's not just programs that disappear — it's the expertise, institutional memory, and human capital that take decades to build and seconds to destroy.

The rhetoric of efficiency and accountability was a convenient cover, but the realities tell a different story. The cuts were executed without review, without planning, and without regard for the catastrophic downstream effects. The administration fired the very staff responsible for ensuring accountability, and slashed funding without even a cursory evaluation of the programs on the chopping block. They shut down critical supply chains, destroyed decades of institutional knowledge, and abandoned local partners to scramble for survival, all while claiming to eliminate waste.

The consequences have been disastrous. Millions of dollars in life-saving medications and food aid are now sitting in uncooled warehouses[16], slowly spoiling without the contracts and infrastructure needed to maintain their viability. Vaccine supply chains have collapsed. Critical programs for HIV/AIDS[17], maternal health, and child nutrition have been gutted midstream, wasting billions in sunk costs and leaving millions without the services they depend on. Local

[16] Aimee Picchi, "Almost $500 million in food is at risk of spoilage after USAID pause, report says," CBS News, February 12, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/usaid-trump-funding-pause-500-million-food-spoilage-risk/
[17] Mariam E Sunny et al., "Eight countries could run out of HIV treatments due to USAID cuts, WHO says," Reuters, March 17, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/eight-countries-could-run-out-hiv-treatments-due-usaid-cuts-who-says-2025-03-17/

health ministries have been abandoned without notice, erasing decades of trust and partnership in a matter of weeks. The very programs that helped stabilize fragile states, prevent conflict, and counter violent extremism have been pulled out without a second thought, creating precisely the kind of chaos that USAID was designed to prevent. This isn't just a bureaucratic blunder. It's a strategic failure that will undermine America for decades to come. The true cost of this reckless assault on USAID will not just be measured in dollars, but in lives, lost influence, and the erosion of American power on the world stage. This was not a war on waste. It was a war on the very idea that America can and should be a force for good in the world.

"Where Have You Been?" USAID Leaders on Congress's Inaction

As the Trump 2.0 administration moved in on USAID, one question loomed large in the minds of many career public servants: Where was Congress? The legislative branch, which is supposed to act as a check on executive power, remained largely idle as an entire agency was gutted without formal authorization or public debate. For those on the front lines, this inaction has been as demoralizing as the cuts themselves. A senior DRC USAID official captured this frustration:

> I mean, I think I'd start with, like, where have you been? Seriously. I have, over my nine years, hosted countless congressional delegations and congressional staff delegations. I've walked Republicans through the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and handed them tissues because they were crying about how powerful the experience was and the amazing work that USAID was doing. I've had that same experience taking people to gay men's health centers in Vietnam. I mean, I took Republicans to a gay men's health center in Vietnam, and it was a powerful experience for them. So, where are these people? These Republicans who have supported us in the past? Where are you?
>
> And then with the Democrats, it's like, there's a handful that are fighting, that have really stepped up, but overall, it feels like people have just let it go. There's no fight for USAID anymore. It should be impossible to shut down an agency without an act of Congress. In lieu of that, they just fired all of us instead, and nobody — it feels like nobody — is fighting for us. Or they moved on to other things.
>
> So what I would say now is, I'm disappointed in you. I think it's too late to fight a lot of these things, and I hate that I'm saying that because I want to fight to the bitter end, but

> I'm disappointed. The tired people should retire. If you're not standing up, what's the point? Why were you elected?

This sense of betrayal isn't just about policy. It's about a fundamental breach of the democratic contract. Congress, as the body that created USAID through an act of legislation, has a responsibility to oversee its operations and ensure its survival. But as another USAID official pointed out, that oversight has been shockingly absent:

> I was actually shocked that Congress would relinquish its oversight ability in this situation. USAID prepares its budget, defends its budget, responds to congressional feedback before it is approved every year. If Congress has reviewed and approved these budgets, why would they allow the executive to just ignore what it has thoroughly reviewed and passed? From my understanding of the U.S. democratic system, Congress holds the purse strings. Why would Congress pretend that it wasn't them that approved this budget? And why would Congress allow any other body to override its approval of funds?
>
> USAID, as an agency, was created by an act of Congress. Any effort to dismantle it should require the approval of Congress. I am disappointed that Congress is allowing this to go on without exercising its oversight powers.

At the core, this is a fundamental challenge to the constitutional balance of power. Allowing the executive branch to unilaterally dismantle an agency without formal congressional approval is a constitutional crisis. Karlan Jankowski echoed this frustration, describing how she and her colleagues have taken their case directly to Congress, often to little effect:

> We specifically go to Congress on a weekly basis, and we'll go into any office that will listen to us. We've been to the Republicans, we've been to the Democrats, we've been to the Senate side and the House side. What we're hearing from Democrats is that it's a real shame what's happening, and we support you guys, and there's not much we can do because we're not in the majority. And what we're hearing from the Republicans is that the majority of them are somewhat sympathetic to our cause, but they're not opposing the administration. They will do everything in their power to make sure that the executive branch gets their job done.
>
> So they're very admittedly ceding their power. We have three branches of government. You all have your own power. In Congress, you all hold the purse strings. You decide on the money, and you make the laws. They are doing something illegal by dismantling USAID. Stand up, and it is your vote to say whether it should be dissolved or whether it shouldn't. But they're like, well, obviously, if the president issued an executive order about it, that's what we're going to vote aligns with, and we're not going to fight back. They don't even care that they have their own power, because our power is just to serve the president.

This passivity is a failure to protect the checks and balances that are supposed to prevent precisely this kind of executive overreach. A third official put it more bluntly:

> It's very disappointing that Congress didn't stop this. This is really disappointing. USAID cannot be destroyed. It's an independent government agency. If it is to cease, it would have to be an act of Congress. And it would have to go through, you know, deliberation and a process versus this. I mean, it's all disappointing that between DOGE and the administration, they have been able to do all of these massive cuts of life-saving work without more from Congress.

For many USAID staff, this is a sense of betrayal, as they are public servants, stewards of American soft power. They have spent years doing the hard work, only to see it being dismantled by an administration that didn't even bother to consult them before pulling the plug. The dismantling of USAID is more than just a policy failure. It's a failure of democratic accountability and a breach of the trust that the American people place in their elected representatives to act as a check on executive power. And it demonstrates that in democracy, silence and inaction is complicity.

The View from the Hill – A Congressman's Perspective on the USAID Dismantling

Back when he was Secretary of Defense under the first Trump administration, James Mattis issued a blunt warning to Congress: *"If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition."*[18] It was a striking admission from one of the military's most respected leaders — that diplomacy and development were not luxuries, but essential pillars of national security. For Congressman Mike Quigley, that remains a touchstone — one he says he often recited back to Republicans who dismissed foreign aid as wasteful. *"It's not charity,"* Quigley told me. *"It's national security."*

[18] Alex Lockie, "Mattis once said if State Department funding gets cut 'then I need to buy more ammunition'," Business Insider, February 27, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/mattis-state-department-funding-need-to-buy-more-ammunition-2017-2

This, for Quigley, is the crux of the argument: that dismantling development infrastructure isn't just morally short-sighted — it leaves the United States more vulnerable, more isolated, and ultimately, less safe. USAID was born by an act of Congress in 1961—founded not just as a tool of foreign assistance, but as an extension of American ideals abroad. For decades, Congress played the role of steward: shaping USAID's mission, funding its programs, and overseeing its global footprint. So when the agency was rapidly dismantled—its staff gutted, its programs halted, its credibility shaken—what did that moment look like from inside the very institution that created it?

Congressman Mike Quigley sits on the House Committee on Appropriations, the body responsible for funding USAID. He's also a senior member of the Intelligence Committee and one of the lawmakers who has publicly decried the collapse of America's development infrastructure as a national security risk. In our conversation, Quigley described a moment defined by opacity, powerlessness, and slow-rolling devastation—a *"Humpty Dumpty on steroids"* scenario, in his words. His reflections offer a window into how Congress grappled with a crisis it was both constitutionally empowered to check and politically unequipped to stop.

At the heart of that crisis was a breakdown in communication. Quigley emphasized the opacity of the Trump 2.0 administration, explaining that Congress was not briefed on the dismantling of USAID. Instead, lawmakers were forced to piece together the scope of the cuts through a patchwork of press reports, NGO warnings, and word-of-mouth from former staff. *"We were never briefed. We found out from the press and from folks on the ground,"* he described. This lack of transparency, he noted, was both unprecedented and strategically harmful. That strategic silence from the executive branch left Congress scrambling not just for

answers, but for tools. Even with clear concern across the aisle, Quigley made it clear that structural limitations defined what lawmakers could realistically do in response.

Quigley underscored how narrow Democratic margins and unified Republican control limited Congress's ability to counteract executive dismantling efforts. He explained that while Congress holds the purse strings, it often lacks the leverage to use them effectively. *"All Congress has is their vote. And our leverage only matters when the margins are close, and Republicans are fractured."* Quigley described foreign aid as just one of many bargaining chips in larger political negotiations—such as tax packages or continuing resolutions—and stressed that unless Democrats can tie aid protections to must-pass legislation, their ability to intervene remains slim.

As Quigley put it bluntly, *"Without the House, Democrats can't do anything."* The same structural imbalance that allowed USAID to be dismantled without oversight, he argued, is also threatening other core institutions: Social Security, the Veterans Administration, and beyond. In negotiations, Democrats in the minority have little leverage unless Republicans are divided. Even when opportunities to act do arise, foreign aid rarely captures the spotlight. Quigley reflected on the media and public attention span in the face of a fast-moving and chaotic administration: *"USAID will get blown off the front pages. There are twenty things going on, all at once. The real question is: which one has the most resonance with the American people?"* In that kind of political climate, he suggested, even monumental changes can pass with little notice—let alone resistance. And yet, Quigley is quick to point out that foreign aid is not just a budget line—it's a national security imperative.

When asked what lessons Congress and future administrations should take from this moment, Quigley spoke to the importance of preserving institutional capacity and rebuilding

public trust. He argued that Democrats' best chance to fight back is through public pressure and narrative power. *"We have our voice and our votes. Educating the public is the most important thing we can do right now."* He warned that in a saturated media environment, the dismantling of USAID risks fading into the background, unless voters come to understand its significance. Quigley sees USAID not just as a humanitarian agency, but as a strategic safeguard, what he called the *"first line of defense."* Funding diplomacy, he argues, is not only cheaper than military intervention, it's smarter. Without agencies like USAID, the United States loses critical tools for pandemic containment, regional stability, and countering adversarial influence. *"Our first line of defense is in other countries — not at U.S. borders."* Without those defenses, he warned, the vulnerabilities compound. *"We'll be less safe—militarily, diplomatically, and from a public health standpoint. The damage won't be immediate, but it will come. It's a slow-motion train wreck."*

Quigley's warning is not just about what's already been lost — but about what's still coming. The collapse of USAID, he argues, is not an isolated event. It's part of a broader unraveling: of institutions, of bipartisan norms, and of America's global credibility. Whether voters recognize the consequences now or not, he says, the effects are already in motion. *"There will be expected and unexpected outcomes*," he told me. *"There will be hardships. There will be deaths."*

Is Rebuilding Possible?

The dismantling of USAID has left behind a trail of shattered programs, broken partnerships, and abandoned infrastructure, raising a critical question: Is rebuilding even possible? For those who lived through this dismantling, the answer is complicated. A longtime USAID health official captured the scale of the challenge:

> I think that rebuilding could be possible, but the damage has been done. The NGOs have closed down, the trust has been shattered, and a lot of people have been fired. I mean, being able to reestablish this seems daunting, given the speed and level of devastation. They just destroyed everything so quickly. Pulling this back together — it's hard to imagine it right now. I mean, I feel like the damage has been done. Is it possible? I don't know. I don't feel positive about it.

This isn't just a question of funding or political will. It's about the physical and human infrastructure that makes global health programs possible. This includes the networks of local staff, the relationships with ministries, the technical expertise, the partnerships with NGOs, and the on-the-ground mechanisms that took decades to build. Without these foundational elements, any attempt to revive USAID will be but a shadow of its former capacity. Paul Mahanna, a veteran of USAID's Office of Infectious Disease, put it bluntly:

> You can burn the whole place down in a matter of months, but to rebuild it will take years. We've had incredible local staff across the globe who have been working for USAID for many years. If those people retire or find other work, it will be almost impossible to replace them. You can't just recreate that expertise overnight.

The scale of this loss is extremely staggering. This is not just a matter of rehiring staff. This would have to be about rebuilding trust, reestablishing relationships, and reconstructing entire systems of service delivery that have been gutted. As Mahanna noted, programs like tuberculosis (TB) control have been years and years in the making, with carefully constructed networks of local staff, supply chains, technical partnerships, and more:

> For TB in particular, we have worked really hard over the years to make it a much more sustainable program. We've been doing these local organization awards, trying to create a local organization network. In 2018, we had a UN high-level meeting on TB to really look at the global perspective on TB and put together targets on how to end TB by 2030. In 2023, we had a second UN high-level meeting to re-energize the global community to end TB by 2030. But once you stop all that programming, you're basically going to revert back to as if there was nothing. Once you stop this mass drug administration, all those people will be affected by TB again.

This captures the tragic irony of the entire dismantling. Programs like TB control, neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), and HIV prevention weren't simply short-term projects, they were multi-decade investments, painstakingly built with the understanding that public health

gains require a sustained long-term commitment. Once those systems disappear, the diseases they were designed to contain don't just pause, they come booming back, erasing years of hard-won progress. Mahanna explained this dynamic in stark terms:

> Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are a perfect example. We started this program in 2006 with $15 million, and over the years, we built it up to cover about 20 priority countries. For every $1 of U.S. government money, we leveraged about $26 in donations from pharmaceutical manufacturers. But once you stop that programming, you're basically going to revert back to as if there was nothing. The diseases come back, the trust is gone, the partnerships are broken, and the entire infrastructure collapses.

This is the fundamental challenge of rebuilding USAID. It's not just about restoring budgets or reopening offices. It's about rebuilding trust, reconstructing shattered networks, and re-establishing relationships with local partners who have been abandoned mid-crisis. It's about convincing the world that the United States is still a reliable, long-term partner, despite the chaos of the past year. And that will take far more than a change in administration. It will take years, if not decades, of patient, sustained effort to undo the damage that has been done — if it can even be undone at all.

Adding to this urgency, Paul Mahanna underscored the rising frequency and severity of global outbreaks, warning that "it takes just 36 hours for someone from Kinshasa to board a plane and be in New York." From Ebola to drug-resistant tuberculosis, the diseases USAID was helping contain abroad can — and likely will — reach American soil. And when they do, the cost of response multiplies exponentially. "Even TB," Mahanna explained, "is fairly inexpensive to treat in developing countries. It's extremely expensive to treat in the U.S." The same is true of neglected tropical diseases — one of USAID's most cost-effective programs. For every $1 in U.S. funding, the agency secured $26 in pharmaceutical donations, fueling mass drug administration campaigns across 20 countries. But once that programming stopped, those donations vanished, and the diseases began to return. Stripping away this infrastructure has left

the United States more exposed and reactive, it has made our global health spending less efficient, and it has made us far less prepared for the next inevitable threat.

Final Note: The Fight Isn't Over

It is not too late to fight. These stories — of collapsed programs, broken partnerships, and abandoned missions, must be told, retold, and remembered. The American people deserve to know what was lost, and why it matters. Rebuilding USAID will take more than time; it will take political will, public reckoning, and a refusal to let this moment pass quietly. Global health diplomacy is not a luxury. It is how we prevent wars without firing weapons. How we save lives without sealing borders. How we lead without dominating. In abandoning that mission, we did more than cede power, we betrayed a promise. But the story does not end here. The work is not over. What remains is a question of civil will, whether we choose to confront what happened, to demand accountability, and to rebuild the institutions we allowed to collapse. This moment is not just a reckoning with the past, but a test of our commitment to the future. The credibility of U.S. global health leadership will not be restored by rhetoric alone. It will require sustained investment, institutional reform, and the public courage to say that this matters not only to those abroad, but to who we are at home.

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