

NO TO THE HUMANITARIAN AID STRATEGY

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 30 2009

Some parts of the American military, perhaps a bit underemployed, propose humanitarian aid missions as a central component in America's national military strategy. Admiral James Stavridis, the new NATO Commander, in his last assignment, Commander US Southern Command, was certainly an advocate of this approach, arguing that sending US Navy hospital ships and military construction crews to Latin America was the way to win "hearts and minds."

I am unsure about whose hearts and minds we need to win in Latin America. After all, one of the problems that the US has is a wave of illegal immigration from Latin America. There are many there who apparently want very much to come north whether we want them or not. Often cited is the good will we gained in our rapid, military lead aid mission to Indonesia following their disastrous Tsunami. I am sure the aid was appreciated, but my bet is by now the Love/Hate for America index is back to normal in Indonesia. There is no evidence that "hearts and minds" are permanently won by providing episodic welfare.

More important, the free care and good work may actually work against us. One of the reasons that the US military can not perform the same missions in the US, even after disasters, is that there are local health care providers and construction companies who will not tolerate the government competition. I hear the same unhappiness exists to the point of demonstrating at the pier occurs in our overseas missions. What looks like humanitarianism to us looks like stealing patients or business to the local dentist or carpenter. Doing the work is different from paying for it. The US paying for a new school to be built in a county is one thing. The US sending military units to do the work is another.

A third problem with using the military to do good is that their entrance into the country is usually through the local military whose work ethic and democratic leanings are often suspect. US officers have told me that the local military is likely to take credit for the school or the medical care that we provide, pushing aside the elected government as a source for assistance because of their direct ties to our military. Worse, they often sit and watch the working being done rather than breaking a sweat by doing some of it themselves. The American troops like the assignment because they like doing good, helping people. The local military is not always tempted by such thoughts.

We have an US foreign aid program to do much of what the military wants to claim as a mission. Civilian government offered charity has its own issues, but at least it does not wear a uniform and totally confuse recipients about its motives. It is soft headed not to want to keep most of our soft power civilian. It is also wasteful of expensive military equipment and personnel to use it to provide free labor in parts of the world where labor is not in short supply.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War*

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