

Understanding US Foreign Policy: It's All About the Pinto Beans!

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, MAR 21 2013

Ok, so I have been away from writing on this blog so I apologise, and the excuses are extensive (and legitimate) but I won't bore you with them. I am currently finalising my paper for the I.S.A. Annual Convention this April and have been trawling the US Agency for International Development's website for details on its programmes on Libya. And believe me, reading these documents for an ounce of information that is applicable to one's research can be tiresome but every now and then you see a gem that must be shared, and so my first blog in a while is a product of this tiring process. *Background context:* The paper examines US democracy promotion post-Bush administration and considers possible lessons from the Afghan and Iraq missions, and then considers whether or not they have been applied to the US engagement in the world during the Obama administration. One of the case studies I use is US involvement in Libya.

The following extract is from a briefing on April 25, 2011 with Mark Bartolini, who is the director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance at USAID, and Reuben Brigety, who is a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. They are discussing the US humanitarian assistance in Libya; remember that the civil war was ongoing at the time. The discussion at the point of this extract concentrates on the shipment of food aid to the port of Alexandria which contained 560 metric tons of vegetable oil and 270 metric tons of pinto beans. This food is important, it most probably saved lives and perhaps this is why I find the interaction comical; something seemingly banal as I exist in my comfortable London life has such a huge importance. I think it is the fact that Mr. Bartolini is thinking on his feet and suggests that they chose pinto beans because of their cultural importance that a wry smile developed. I did a quick, and un-scientific Google search and came up with a lot of commentary on pinto beans being used in USAID programmes in Haiti and other places. Are these beans the culturally neutral beans of the world? Do they 'do no harm'? Or, are they grown in excessive numbers by US farmers?

QUESTION: Okay. And then just the last thing: On the WFP, did – are they ones who say what they need and then you ship them that – you ship that to – you ship that stuff? They say we need 270 metric tons of pinto beans and then –

MR. BARTOLINI: Those numbers are derived from assessments that are being done on the ground.

QUESTION: Right, but I mean in terms of the actual commodity, I mean, 200 just –

QUESTION: Seems like a lot of pinto beans.

QUESTION: It's a lot of beans.

QUESTION: Did they ask for specific things?

QUESTION: Did they ask for pinto beans?

MR. BARTOLINI: We're stockpiling food that we think is culturally appropriate and relevant to any future needs that

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may arise. This is emergency stocks of food, so it would be used in cases when the supply lines – if they do break down.

QUESTION: No, I understand –

MR. BARTOLINI: Yeah.

QUESTION: — but does WFP make a specific request for something or do they just say give us what you got.

MR. BARTOLINI: No, there's a discussion about what's available and what's appropriate.

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.