

## **FINAL REPORT**

**The Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) of the United**

**States Agency for International Development (USAID):**

**A Critical Juncture Analysis, 1964-2003\***

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## I. OFDA: The Road Less Traveled

The origins of what would become the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) can be found in 1964, when the Administrator of the Agency for International Development (AID) appointed the first “Foreign Disaster Relief Coordinator” to improve the management of United States Government (USG) disaster assistance overseas.<sup>1</sup> The trigger events for this innovation were both from 1963: (1) the eruption of the Irazú volcano in Costa Rica visible from the capital city of San José and personally witnessed by then-President Kennedy, who was on a state visit, and (2) more importantly, the devastating Skopje, Yugoslavia earthquake, which killed at least 1,100 people (the official death toll) and destroyed significant parts of the Macedonian capital.

Responding to the Skopje event showed severe internal USG coordination difficulties, and a young Foreign Service Officer in the U.S. embassy in Belgrade, Lawrence Eagleburger (then an Economics Officer but later to become Secretary of State in the George H. W. Bush Administration), sent a highly critical cable to Washington detailing response deficiencies (and how inept they made the USG appear). In a 2003 interview for this paper, he recalled his frustration:

We needed to help, we wanted to help, but there was no one place to call in Washington. You had to call ten places at least. That was impossible from Belgrade, much less from Skopje.

The coordination problem was highlighted in the Skopje disaster with the highly public arrival of a boatload of grain in the port of Rijeka (diverted after much paperwork from the Suez Canal) that turned out to be insect-infested. The entire cargo had to be disposed of as pig feed (one story, probably apocryphal, was that the grain then made the pigs sick). Skopje was not exactly the USG’s finest humanitarian hour.

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<sup>1</sup> AID was later re-titled USAID, but “AID” is still the most common acronym.

Rather more carefully and certainly more bureaucratically, a 1985 AID policy paper (*International Disaster Assistance*, p. 1) offered this explanation:

Following the Skopje, Yugoslavia earthquake ... the U.S. Government determined that a central authority was needed to coordinate disaster assistance offered to foreign governments and peoples. The next year the Foreign Disaster Relief Coordinator's Office was established within AID.

Virtually by definition, therefore, what would become OFDA was—and remains to this day in important ways—an event response or crisis management organization that literally can (and often does) have its operational agenda changed from one day to the next.<sup>2</sup> One result of this “living in the moment” orientation and “911” mentality is that as an organization, OFDA pays relatively little attention to its own history. That is, the OFDA culture focuses on responding to particular events or situations, and the history of the organization thus becomes lost in the flow of events and constantly changing demands and tasks, leaving both its own personnel and outsiders dramatically uninformed about how and why OFDA came to be as it is.

Answering—or at least beginning to answer—the historical how and why of OFDA is the objective of this report. With 40 years of OFDA history, however, structuring the answer is quite challenging. As an organization, OFDA has a complicated history, and the specific questions rapidly become: Which events or decisions were more important, which were less important? Which absolutely have to be included, which can safely be left out? And most importantly, what are the criteria to decide the inclusion/exclusion question?

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<sup>2</sup> One relative newcomer to OFDA said, “It’s like working in a hospital ER around here. You never know what’s going to come through the door.”

Deciding what is important in a short organizational history is as much art as it is science or historiography, and Robert Frost once offered the beginnings of an answer in his famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Viewed on a daily basis, organizations appear to evolve incrementally, but if we step back and use a perspective that spans decades, a few turning points always stand out, points after which everyone agrees that “nothing was ever the same.” In the Frost poem, that is a fork in the road. In academic terms, these watershed events or turning points are called *critical junctures*.<sup>3</sup> It is especially interesting to note that participants at the time are often unaware that they are engaging in decisions or actions with major long-term organizational consequences (*legacies* in critical juncture terminology). Their perspective is usually, “Well you see, we had this problem, and we had to find a solution.” A critical juncture approach counters this view by literally forcing a long-term analysis that identifies key points in an organization’s evolution. It is particularly useful when applied to an organization such as OFDA that was very clearly designed to take within AID, following Frost’s words, the road “less traveled.” It has also turned out to be a road quite difficult at times.

Reviewing the 40 years of OFDA and literally dozens of important changes, I have identified four critical junctures (although some have multiple components) with permanent or at least decades-long legacies, as follows:

1. 1964-1965: The Founding

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<sup>3</sup> One of the more famous studies, *Shaping the Political Arena* by Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), actually uses the Robert Frost poem as a point of departure.

2. 1975-1976: A Congressional Mandate, the Famous “Notwithstanding” Clause, Higher Profile, the United Nations System, and Blame/Credit
3. 1984-1986: “Borrowing Authority,” Regional Teams, and “Into Africa”
4. 1988-1995: Operation Lifeline Sudan, the DART Concept, Institutionalizing “PMP,” Bureaucratization, and “Complex Humanitarian Emergencies”

With a longer perspective, at least three more years, OFDA’s role in the invasion and early occupation of Iraq (2003-2004) may prove to be another critical juncture for the organization, but that will require further study and reflection. At this point, however, it appears more than likely that “Iraq” will be OFDA’s fifth critical juncture.

The final parts of this report are (1) a discussion of the sensitive issue of sustaining a “humanitarian voice” in the making of U.S. foreign and security policy, and (2) a conclusion focusing on OFDA’s mission, its organizational placement, and the fierce loyalty that OFDA personnel have demonstrated over the years.

## **II. The Current Legal Foundation**

Before explaining OFDA’s various historical critical junctures, however, it is useful to specify the legal basis for OFDA’s activities. As is often the case with even the most complicated of operations, the underlying law—the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (Public Law 87-195 or “FAA” and especially section 491) as amended (particularly by the “International Development and Food Assistance Act of 1975,” Public Law 94-161)—is actually quite straightforward on the international disaster issue, as expressed in the United States Code (through August 2002):

### § 2292. General Provisions

- (a) Congressional policy. The Congress, recognizing that prompt United States assistance to alleviate human suffering caused by natural and manmade disasters is an important expression of the humanitarian concern and tradition of the people of the United States, affirms the willingness of

the United States to provide assistance for the relief and rehabilitation of people and countries affected by such disasters.

- (b) General authority. Subject to the limitations in section 492 [22 USCS § 2292a], and notwithstanding any other provision of this or any other Act, the President is authorized to furnish assistance to any foreign country, international organization or private voluntary organization, on such terms and conditions as he may determine, for international disaster relief and rehabilitation, including assistance relating to disaster preparedness, and to the prediction of, and contingency planning for, natural disasters abroad.
- (c) Specific directions. In carrying out the provisions of this section the President shall insure that the assistance provided by the United States shall, to the greatest extent possible, reach those most in need of relief and rehabilitation as a result of natural and manmade disasters (22 USCS § 2292).

The President delegated these foreign disaster-related responsibilities to the Secretary of State, who further delegated them to the AID Administrator, who in turn delegated them down through the AID structure to the “Director, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance” (46 FR 30735, June 10, 1981). That is, OFDA’s principal current authorities derive from that chain of delegation.<sup>4</sup>

### **III. OFDA’s Critical Junctures**

#### **Critical Juncture #1 (1964-1965): The Founding**

It is a human tendency to believe that “nothing important happened until I got here.” In a bureaucracy, the corollary is, “It’s not important unless I wrote it.” A closet humorist in OFDA said in response, “Both true, but here at OFDA it is also, ‘my disaster was the worst.’” That is, as the pioneering generations move on or retire, those who

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<sup>4</sup> The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 as amended (especially by the 1975 International Development and Food Assistance Act) is not the only legislation important for OFDA over the years. One should also review the “Horn of Africa Recovery and Food Security Act of 1992” (Public Law 102-274); the “African Famine Relief and Recovery Act of 1985” (Public Law 99-8); the “Foreign Disaster Assistance Act of 1974” (Public Law 93-333); and various of the annual appropriation acts for “International Disaster Assistance.”

follow tend to believe that important things—and important disasters—really only began to happen “on their watch.”

The folly, of course, is that much of what succeeding generations are able to do—and how they do it—was determined, or at least structured, much earlier, and OFDA is no exception. With 40 years of history, however, memories of the founding, early structuring, and various traumas (disasters overseas and in Washington) are fading quickly. Therefore, we have to spend some time on OFDA’s founding. Virtually by definition it constitutes an organizational critical juncture.

To establish the context, it should be noted that USG foreign economic aid only dates from the 1947 Marshall Plan (military aid is a different issue, with a much longer history). Within the concept of economic aid, at least the spirit underlying USG disaster assistance can be found with the 1954 Mutual Security Act and, in particular, the P.L. 480 (“Food for Peace”) legislation of the same year.

With the passage of the foundational Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, the Kennedy Administration created, by executive order, the Agency for International Development, with foreign assistance authority delegated to the AID Administrator by the Secretary of State. In effect, the creation of AID consolidated a variety of previously separate streams of foreign assistance and, of course, added major new ones. As amended (many times), the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 remains AID’s benchmark legislation. Indeed, the FAA was a critical juncture for United States foreign policy in general.

USG disaster assistance was administered on a completely ad hoc basis from 1954 until the July 26, 1963 Macedonia (Skopje) disaster highlighted the fact that there was no



overall coordination of assistance, much less any real management. Memories have tended to fade over the decades as to just how caustic the criticisms were of USG “coordination problems” in responding to the Skopje disaster.

On September 26, 1963, however, the House Subcommittee on Foreign Agricultural Operations held a hearing on Skopje. Several of the members were in Belgrade at the time of the earthquake and then had visited Skopje after the disaster. The tone of the subsequent hearing was harsh, to put it mildly. The report runs 29 pages, none of it very pleasant for the representatives of the Department of Agriculture (because of its role in the P.L. 480 program), the State Department/AID, and the Department of Defense. In one particular late (p. 24) exchange, however, the redoubtable W.R. Poage of Texas, the chair of the subcommittee, and the equally unrelenting Harold Cooley of North Carolina, the chairman of the full House Committee on Agriculture, took turns grilling Herbert Waters (AID’s Assistant Administrator for Material Resources) on the gap between promised USG assistance to Skopje and what had actually been delivered two months later (and noting that Russian assistance was highly visible):

Mr. Poage. [W]e were going to be the benefactors of the world . . . , and we got out there and we now find that we are not going to do much for anybody. We got in the newspaper when we should have kept our mouth [sic] shut. If we are going to open our mouth [sic] we should follow it up with some real action....

Mr. Cooley. Put up or shut up. That is what it means.<sup>5</sup>

While these were general—but acerbic—comments, earlier questioning had touched on more substantive problems: definitions of disaster relief versus development assistance, ambiguity over who was to coordinate and lead USG disaster assistance, and underlying

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<sup>5</sup> A former staffer who knew the OFDA founders in the 1960s said that, “From what I heard, Columbus got to the New World faster than we got to Yugoslavia.”

legal uncertainties about what the USG could do in an overseas disaster. AID's Herbert Waters was again the target (p. 22):

Mr. Cooley. You all ought to wake up. We are talking about an emergency and a long-term situation.... [T]here are 170,000 human beings homeless. They are working desperately ... to get some housing ... to get through the winter. Here we sit with all the money we have thrown down rat holes ... and say we cannot spend a few dollars to help this emergency.

Mr. Poage. I wonder if the State Department has made a request to the President to make the necessary [national security] finding that would enable you to spend funds there.

Mr. Waters. We have not.

Mr. Poage. You have not. Nor have you made any request to the Congress, have you, to change the law to enable you to spend the money there?<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Waters. No. We have made no request to the Congress.

Mr. Poage. Then how in the world do you expect anything to happen? There is not an apple going to form up there on the ceiling and fall in your lap.... How do you expect the change to come about, Mr. Waters?

As is often the case on the Hill in such situations, Herbert Waters had to sit quietly and “just take it,” as one colleague recalled. Four months after these hearings, Disaster Relief Coordination (DRC) was assigned as a “function” within AID, followed in 1965 by the formal establishment of the “Foreign Disaster Relief Coordination” (FDRC) office, headed by Stephen R. Tripp. The clear expectation was that the new office would be agile, quick responding, and creative. Equally clear was the hope of “no more Skopjes please,” as neither Herbert Waters nor anyone else at State or AID was keen on returning to Congress for a future post-disaster tongue-lashing.

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<sup>6</sup> This point bears directly on the eventual (1975) and very important “notwithstanding” clause for disaster assistance (a.k.a. “OFDA’s expedited authority”), which will be discussed below.

In fact, in light of the Skopje response problems, making AID the central coordinating point for USG overseas disaster assistance was not automatic. Consideration was given early on to placing primary responsibility for USG foreign disaster response in the Department of Defense (which had been the first USG assistance to arrive in Skopje) or in the erstwhile Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, both of which were legitimate contenders as coordination points for USG disaster assistance. In the end, however, the financing capabilities (under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 in particular) and the overseas infrastructural and logistical advantages of the State Department (embassy) and AID (mission) systems made—and still make—them the logical organizational structures within which to house what would become the OFDA operation.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of making the FDRC a *coordinating* office rather than a full field operations disaster response office also cannot be underestimated. That is, the idea underlying the future OFDA was that it would use—and fund—existing USG agencies, foreign governments, international organizations (IOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) to carry out USG disaster responses, much as AID operated generally. OFDA was not expected to have a large permanent staff and major stand-by capabilities. This made sense not only for cost reasons but also politically: Few IOs, NGOs, PVOs, or other USG agencies would oppose the creation and continuance of an office that would often fund or partially fund their

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<sup>7</sup> Extensive discussions took place in 1979 within the Carter Administration about whether OFDA should be folded into the new Federal Emergency Management Agency, the White House finally deciding to leave it at State/AID. Then, at the outset of the Clinton Administration, the issue arose again, eventually requiring the intervention of Secretary of State Warren Christopher with the White House. Christopher countered the attempt with many of the original 1964-1965 financing and logistical support arguments.

operations. Thus, FDRC/OFDA was never intended to be competitive with existing actors in disaster response—quite the opposite.<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect, the period 1964-1965 qualifies as a critical juncture for OFDA because its organizational origins (despite name changes) reside there and because the State Department and specifically AID would be its bureaucratic home. In addition, the role—the mission—of what would become OFDA as the overall “coordinator” of USG disaster response was set in those early years. That is, how the United States Government would respond to overseas disasters was never the same after 1964-1965.

One interesting test of identifying 1964-1965 as a critical juncture for OFDA is to project the likely consequences if another organizational placement choice had been made. For example, consider how USG foreign disaster assistance would have evolved if the 1964 decision had been to place coordination responsibilities in the DoD or HEW, separating them from the expertise and support structures of the State Department and AID, especially from the in-country embassies and missions. In the first alternate scenario, if the responsibilities had been placed under the DoD, it seems likely that USG disaster assistance overseas would have been slowly but inexorably “militarized.”<sup>9</sup> In the latter, since HEW no longer exists, the second alternate scenario is even more hypothetical, but how in reality an HEW-based disaster response unit would have effectively operated overseas is unclear, to put it mildly.

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<sup>8</sup> The degree to which OFDA still works indirectly can be seen by its grant pattern. In fiscal year 2000, for example, OFDA awarded 53% of its grants to PVOs, 27% to UN agencies, 18% to NGOs, and 2% to (non-UN) IOs. In 1999, the distribution was 59% to PVOs, 17% to NGOs, 13% to UN agencies, 7% to non-UN IOs, and 4% to “other” entities. Other years show a similar pattern.

<sup>9</sup> OFDA’s relationship with the U.S. military has had its ups and downs but has been very good overall, with a number of OFDA directors or acting directors having military or at least DoD backgrounds or connections (Sheldon, Anderson, Howell, Becton, Taft, Kunder, and McConnell). Interestingly, the Secretary of Defense has his own presidentially delegated authority for foreign disaster assistance in 10 USCS § 404.

Nonetheless, the placement of OFDA in a hierarchical nesting within AID and therefore also within the State Department has not been without problems. Indeed, Steve Tripp (the very first director of what would become OFDA) noted in 1976 that OFDA's "effectiveness was diminished because of ... low status in the agency and ... [inadequate] ... support."<sup>10</sup> Tripp had 12 years of perspective when he wrote this, however, and now with 40 years, the problems appear deeper and more about organizational culture than about status and resources (improvements in which would not hurt, however).

It is an inescapable fact that the State Department is a large bureaucracy that sees the world through an overtly political prism. AID is a similarly large bureaucracy that is overwhelmingly focused on development, traditionally viewing disasters as nuisances or at least as distractions. With its 911 and humanitarian mentality, the relatively small OFDA lives an almost daily culture clash with its host organizations. That is, trying to be an agile, speedy, and creative office inside two—repeat *two*—large and predominantly by-the-book bureaucracies is neither easy nor comfortable for any of the parties involved—State, AID, or OFDA.

A slotting in OFDA is especially hard on Foreign Service Officers. When OFDA Director General Julius Becton prepared his farewell memo to AID Administrator M. Peter McPherson in 1985, he noted morale problems at the senior staff level and then related the outcome of his attempts to secure promotions and advanced schooling for the FSOs in OFDA. He had failed, and he informed McPherson that he was told that "FS officers assigned to OFDA are 'out of the mainstream' ... and could not expect to receive favorable consideration [by the selection board]."

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<sup>10</sup> This quote comes from p. 2 of Tripp's very interesting, *Some Reflections on the History and Organization of the United States Foreign Disaster Assistance Program* (23 pages total, dated November 12, 1976).

Andrew S. Natsios, an OFDA director (1989-1991) who went on to become an AID Assistant Administrator (1991-1993) and then, under George W. Bush in 2001, the AID Administrator, echoed Becton's lament 10 years later. With great candor he wrote in 1995 that "foreign service personnel regard service in humanitarian offices as career damaging or, in some cases, a career obituary. Only the most hearty and dedicated souls take work there."<sup>11</sup>

Not much had apparently changed by the late 1990s. In the 89-page January 2000 *Interagency Review of U.S. Government Civilian Humanitarian & Transition Programs* (a.k.a, the Halperin-Michel Report), which the *Washington Post* called "unusually blunt" (May 9, 2000, p. A27), the authors pointed out the career costs of working in the humanitarian realm (p. 12):

Within State and AID alike, service in the humanitarian area does not have the same status or professional rewards as conventional diplomacy or management of development programs, despite the growing importance and increased resource commitments for this work.

In his 1995 piece Natsios had also captured (pp. 56-57) the upside/downside aspects of the larger issue—OFDA's bureaucratic placement in State and AID and the inherent tensions that such a placement produced:

The location of OFDA and FFP [Food for Peace, OFDA's "sister office"] in USAID gives both offices enough independence to say, "No, stop interfering," or, "We are sending what the assessed need requires rather than what is politically correct." At the same time, the diplomatic support of State is important in assisting with political access problems if disaster aid is to get where it is supposed to in a timely manner. Moving OFDA to State, as has been proposed at times, would endanger the fundamental integrity of the office and politicize disaster responses.... USAID is clearly the proper place, however inhospitable, for Foreign Disaster Assistance, Food for Peace, and the Office of Transition Initiatives. These

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<sup>11</sup> This is taken from a little known but very interesting 13-page paper, "The Politics of United States Disaster Response," *Mediterranean Quarterly* Volume 6, Number 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 46-59. This quote is from p. 52.

offices suffer from benign neglect in USAID, whereas in State they quickly would become politicized and be meddled with operationally.

The recurring problematic of OFDA's uniqueness within AID on one hand and proper organizational placement on the other was captured subtly but neatly in an internal OFDA paper from the 1990s. First the uniqueness:

OFDA must be the fastest-moving part of AID. Many programs assist people who are in imminent danger of death. While other [AID] offices plan their entire year's budget before they award a single dollar, OFDA can never be sure what disaster will occur tomorrow and how much money will be needed to respond it.

Then came a succinct summary of the tension points based on an early attempt to place OFDA within a regular bureau—Food and Humanitarian Assistance (FHA):

For a short time in the past, OFDA had been united with the current members of FHA, but the union was not successful. OFDA operates under different rules than the rest of FHA; it is housed in a separate building; it maintains its own terminology and procedures; [and] it is unusually resistant to outside interference.

Despite this periodically testy relationship with the rest of AID and with the State Department, however, Natsios had noted in his 1995 piece that OFDA activities also provided AID and State with positive public and Congressional attention, often the only time that these agencies enjoy such appreciation. This fact did not go unnoticed in the otherwise scathing Halperin-Michel report of 2000 (p. 3):

At present, widely admired U.S. humanitarian efforts are recognized as an indispensable global instrument to save lives, minimize mass human suffering and encourage effective transitions in crisis situations. USAID has achieved an outstanding record of response to natural disasters.

Of course, accolades to the humanitarian side of the house also generate jealousy. One 20-year veteran of OFDA once heard an AID officer sniff, "Why does OFDA get all the glory?" The answer, of course, is reflected in a separate riposte from another OFDA

senior staff (verbal emphasis in the original): “Well, the difference is that we actually *do* things.”

While the preceding comments capture the endemic AID-OFDA culture clash, the latter comment is more than a little unfair. AID accomplishes a great deal, but development is inherently incremental and decidedly un-photogenic. OFDA’s work is much more topical and relatively more media friendly. Indeed, OFDA personnel have at times shunned the limelight in a disaster (downplaying the office and/or moving attention to field NGOs), partly out of modesty but often to avoid further antagonizing AID and/or State. The result is a bureaucratic version of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

**Critical Juncture #2 (1975-1976):  
A Congressional Mandate, the Famous “Notwithstanding” Clause, Higher Profile,  
the United Nations System, and Blame/Credit**

As noted above in the legal foundation section, the specific mandate for USG foreign disaster assistance came in a 1975 amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, the “International Development and Food Assistance Act” (Public Law 94-161), that reflected not only a humanitarian vision but also a moment of sheer operational brilliance. In its mandate to the executive branch to specifically provide disaster assistance to stricken countries, Congress included a few providential words that made OFDA “different” from almost every other agency in the United States Government. The wording was typically legislative-bland, but the implications and impacts were enormous. The Foreign Assistance Act as amended stated that the President could provide disaster assistance to any foreign country, international organization, or non-governmental organization “*notwithstanding any other provision of this or any other Act*” (22 United States Code 2292 (b), italics added). As it eventually devolved down to OFDA, this



crucial 1975 “notwithstanding” clause meant that, in effect, “no statutory or regulatory requirements shall restrict [OFDA’s] ability to respond to the needs of disaster victims in a timely fashion” (OFDA *Annual Report FY 1995*, p. 9).

For OFDA, the notwithstanding clause had two major results. First, OFDA is allowed to bypass, during emergencies, the normally cumbersome and time-consuming AID procurement processes. That is, to address immediate disaster problems, OFDA can and often does—literally on the spot and often for large amounts—make grants, execute agreements, and contract for goods and services with foreign governments, international organizations, businesses, and/or private voluntary and non-governmental organizations. This degree of flexibility in financial commitment and contracting (often referred to informally as OFDA’s “expedited authority”) is extremely rare within the United States Government. That is, when the USG is faced with a crisis or a situation that can be defined as a disaster and that demands quick action, OFDA is set up to move or purchase goods, services, and/or expertise rapidly and in ways believed impossible for other parts of AID or the State Department.

OFDA’s particular contracting and purchasing capabilities have proven very useful in achieving USG foreign policy objectives, humanitarian and otherwise. Writing in 2001 with Vic Tanner, former OFDA Director Nan Borton noted that “[h]umanitarian assistance has become a predominant, lead dimension of U.S. foreign policy in responding to crises abroad.” Without mentioning it by name, Tanner and Borton then highlighted the enduring—and competitive—crisis response advantages conferred upon by OFDA by the notwithstanding clause: “USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance is recognized as having an exceptional ability to respond swiftly and

proactively with its field team and to disburse monies far faster than other major donors.”<sup>12</sup>

A former OFDA Director offered that the notwithstanding clause was probably OFDA’s “most significant asset” and was held “sacrosanct and fiercely guarded up until the emergence of humanitarian crises of the 80’s.” This person also pointed to an understanding between OFDA, the AID Administrator, and the AID Inspector General that there was “an unspoken 48-72 hour limit to the proper use if it.” Nonetheless, OFDA interpreted this to mean the 2-3 days after a *new aspect* of a crisis emerged, not simply the 2-3 days after a formal disaster declaration. This operational interpretation gave OFDA considerable flexibility, and this person noted that only rarely was OFDA “called on that, and then only by the IG [Inspector General].”

The second major impact of the notwithstanding clause was that OFDA could work in, or at least provide assistance to, countries where AID or other USG assistance was not present or was not allowed by USG laws, policies, regulations or by, in some instances, host governments.<sup>13</sup> To illustrate, despite prohibitions that kept most other parts of the USG from involvement in these countries, OFDA gave post-flood assistance to the People’s Republic of China in the 1970s and later to hospitals in Laos for combating water-borne epidemics. Both actions were criticized by members of Congress, who suggested that OFDA was being excessively subservient (“toady”) to the State Department’s overtly political agenda. OFDA’s consistent response was that these

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<sup>12</sup> In J. Stephen Morrison and Jennifer G. Cooke, *Africa Policy in the Clinton Years: Critical Choices for the Bush Administration* (Washington, DC: Center for International and Strategic Studies, 2001), pp. 125-126.

<sup>13</sup> The issue of trying to assist disaster victims without host government approval is obviously delicate. In some cases (mostly in Africa), however, OFDA has had to carry out such activities, especially when the “disaster” was the result—unintended or intended—of the policies of the host government itself. In one case, OFDA consultant Fred Cuny carried suitcases of cash across the Ethiopian border to support a starving sub-population being targeted by its own government—the notorious Mengistu regime.

actions represented humanitarian engagement and fell clearly within its non-political mission and the notwithstanding clause.

A particular situation where the notwithstanding clause has put OFDA “in the middle” comes with countries undergoing internal wars and/or governmental breakdowns. In 1990, 15 years after the clause’s promulgation, then-OFDA Director Andrew Natsios discussed this aspect of the notwithstanding clause and where it often led, capturing both the opportunities and the dilemmas:

Our [OFDA] assistance is to suffering people, not governments. OFDA’s unique “notwithstanding” clause in its congressional mandate permits it to provide humanitarian assistance to countries ... precluded from receiving other forms of assistance by [U.S.] legislation.... In civil strife disasters, such as those in Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Sudan, OFDA makes an effort to provide assistance on both sides.... This involves negotiating with the warring parties and mobilizing the international community ... to permit safe and free access ... to isolated populations. OFDA has also provided humanitarian assistance following the collapse of authoritarian regimes, such as in Panama and Romania (*OFDA Annual Report FY 1990*, p. 7).

In October 1992, the General Accounting Office (GAO) issued an “effectiveness review” of OFDA that was on the whole quite positive, the title reflecting the overall finding:

*Foreign Disaster Assistance: AID Has Been Responsive but Improvements Can Be Made.*

The GAO highlighted (p. 31) that the key to OFDA’s effectiveness was indeed the 1975 notwithstanding clause:

OFDA’s disaster response performance has been noteworthy, particularly given the increased number of responses over the 1980s and various operating constraints beyond OFDA’s control. OFDA uses the authority granted by the notwithstanding clause to respond quickly and creatively to many types of disasters.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> One of the GAO report authors even visited an OFDA field office supporting Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq after the Gulf War. He was, one OFDA staffer remembers, “quite taken with our daring-do style.”

Indeed, the 1975 Act could almost be considered a critical juncture for OFDA on its own because it gave the organization (by delegation) a Congressional mandate and—with the notwithstanding clause—singular operating freedoms within its organizational home (AID and, more broadly, the State Department).<sup>15</sup> In addition, the notwithstanding clause meant that OFDA could operate *anywhere* in the world—a mixed blessing it would turn out.

The far-reaching 1975 Act also authorized the President to designate a “Special Coordinator for International Disaster Assistance.” The tradition became that the person designated was the AID Administrator. Also at this time, the Foreign Disaster Relief Coordinator position was being bureaucratically transformed within AID into the Director of the (new) Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, which reported directly to the AID Administrator.

It should be noted that the 1976 FDRC to OFDA re-titling was more than rhetorical because it reflected a larger mission vision, the relatively narrow disaster “relief” of FDRC being replaced with the implicitly broader disaster “assistance” of OFDA. Moreover, as responsibilities tend to be delegated out of the AID Administrator’s office, the OFDA Director at this time became the “Deputy Special Coordinator for International Disaster Assistance.”

With the 1975 Act, OFDA also saw its mission expanded from relatively simple “response” to what would become major efforts in preparedness and mitigation. The logic of the combination was inescapable, as the later 1985 AID policy paper *International Disaster Assistance* explained (p. 1): “[I]t became evident that immediate

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<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding authority has been given at times to other USG entities as well, including those supporting the Contras in the 1980s and the insurgents in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet occupation.

disaster relief ... wasn't the entire answer, and that costs, damage, and human suffering could be better reduced by helping disaster-prone countries prepare for the inevitable."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to more emphasis on pre-disaster activities, OFDA was being moved into the later phases (recovery and rehabilitation) of what was becoming known as the "disaster cycle." The 1985 AID policy paper again explained (pp. 1-2) that the 1975 Act provided for assistance encompassing *all* phases of the disaster cycle:

to preserve life and minimize suffering by providing sufficient warning ...

to foster self-sufficiency among disaster-prone nations by helping them achieve some measure of preparedness

to alleviate suffering by providing rapid, appropriate response ...

to enhance recovery through rehabilitation programs

Within OFDA this conceptual expansion of its mission was, as one now retired officer phrased it, "not uniformly and warmly embraced." OFDA personnel who saw disasters as linear and the office's proper role as response (relief) resisted the disaster cycle concept and the concomitant expansion of OFDA's possible responsibilities. The conflict was intense, especially over proper areas of expenditure, and lasted well over a decade. Indeed, vestiges of the conflict over mission boundaries continue to surface right into the present.

Then, in 1976, Guatemala was struck by a major earthquake disaster that killed at least the official number of 25,000 and left more than one million homeless across one-third of the country. It was a response crisis not only for OFDA but also for the entire

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<sup>16</sup> It was also at this time that OFDA funded a series of independent reviews by the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council that are now largely forgotten but still worth a careful read: *The U.S. Government Foreign Disaster Assistance Program* (1978), *The Role of Technology in International Disaster Assistance* (1978), and *Assessing International Disaster Needs* (1979).

international humanitarian community, revealing major deficiencies in international (not only USG) coordination.

While the U.N. had created the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) in 1972 and expanded it in 1974, the mostly negative lessons from the 1976 Guatemala disaster (uncoordinated, duplicative, and even competitive “stovepipe” assistance) led to the establishment of a permanent UNDRO disaster coordinating center in Geneva—with which OFDA would regularly interface in future USG disaster responses.<sup>17</sup>

The OFDA relationship with the U.N. system, however, has had its ups and downs, with the last 10 years being generally better than the first 20, when the State Department demonstrated a particular antipathy for UNDRO. For the first decades, the USG feeling was that U.N. personnel tended to be disrespectful and spendthrift (a “rat hole” in one OFDA staffer’s term at the time). In addition, the feeling was that UNDRO in particular showed marked favoritism to European and Japanese suppliers of relief goods. Given the USG’s view of UNDRO as mismanaged (“the nicest word I can find,” said one OFDA veteran), this procurement bias was “a continuous thorn in our side.”

In one memorable encounter when OFDA was still in the State Department building (with the rest of AID), a senior UNDRO official was using one of the OFDA operations center telephones to talk with Geneva on routine business. The OFDA Director at the time asked him to hang up, received a reportedly impolite (or at least impolitic) reply, and ordered, “Get out of this office and don’t come back.” He never did.

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<sup>17</sup> UNDRO later became DHA, Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and is now OCHA, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Relations since then have clearly improved, especially with the more specialized U.N. system agencies. OFDA's working relationship with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), for example, is excellent. Nonetheless, as late as the mid-1990s, a former OFDA Director noted the "institutional weakness" of the U.N. in disaster response and the tendency for it to become paralyzed when it was needed the most, attributing the problem to the organization's "essentially feudal structure" and need to placate various national governments. Another OFDA veteran said in response, however, "Yes, that's all true, but we need the U.N., if only to bash around when things go wrong."

Along that line, it was also in the mid 1970s that one finds the seeds of competition in disaster response—not only between the USG and the U.N. but also within the USG itself. The underlying problem was organizational (and at times personal) blame avoidance and credit taking. The eventual bureaucratic buzz word settled upon was "attribution," and one former OFDA senior staffer described it this way:

It was a hot button word.... State, AID and others were concerned about how various responses were attributable: OFDA v. UNDRO; USG v. UN; OFDA v. State/RP [Refugee Program]; OFDA v. USAID regional bureau; DoD v. USAID; UNDRO v. UNHCR [U.N. High Commission on Refugees] etc., etc., etc.

Attribution could [also] be a plus or minus, depending on whether the outcome was presumed to be successful or otherwise.

In sum, the changes centering in 1975-1976 clearly qualify as a critical juncture for OFDA because of (1) a now explicit Congressional mandate that encompassed all phases of the disaster cycle, (2) a remarkable and Congressionally-approved expenditure flexibility, (3) an operational profile that extended beyond AID and even the State Department, (4) a role as the major focus for disaster-related USG coordination with the

U.N. system, and (5) incipient and multi-sided “response competition” that would plague everyone for decades to come.

**Critical Juncture #3 (1984-1986):  
“Borrowing Authority,” Regional Teams, and “Into Africa”**

This critical juncture actually has an earlier (1981) antecedent and then two separate mid-1980s components. The antecedent was a budget innovation called “borrowing authority.” The first actual component of the mid-1980s critical juncture was an operational innovation using a regional team approach and focused on Latin America and the Caribbean. Half a world away in Ethiopia, the second was an even larger watershed: OFDA being forced out of a pure 911 emergency response mentality and into a largely unwanted “extended care” mode.

*A. The Borrowing Authority—“It seemed like a good idea at the time....”*

Prior to 1980, OFDA derived most of its funding from International Disaster Assistance (IDA) accounts. One IDA account was the annual base appropriation; the other account comprised “special appropriations” for a particular disaster in a country or region. Because it was responding to increasing numbers of disasters in the 1980s, however, OFDA was severely constrained financially.

In FY 1981 Congress granted AID (not actually OFDA, but it would turn out that way) the authority to spend up to \$50 million annually for disaster assistance from “other AID accounts.” In reality this meant that OFDA could spend beyond what it had in its own accounts for a particular disaster. This became known as OFDA’s “borrowing authority.” The problem for the parts of AID from which the funds were “borrowed,” however, was that they did not have to be repaid. That is, if Congress later provided supplemental funding for the disaster in question, AID could repay that part of the



organization from which the funds were taken, but if Congress did not, they were not repaid. Indeed, even when Congress passed a disaster supplemental, internal repayment was at the discretion of the AID Administrator, and sometimes it didn't happen.

While well intentioned, the borrowing authority was a recipe for serious conflict within AID and would have exactly that effect by the end of the 1980s, as we will see shortly.

### *B. The Regional Team Approach*

Starting in 1981, OFDA made tentative steps toward decentralizing response management. The first was to establish with UNDRO a preparedness and response capability on the island of Antigua in the eastern Caribbean. The second was an attempt to strengthen the institutional capacity of the government of Costa Rica to respond to disasters, which led to the September 1984 establishment of an OFDA regional office in San José, Costa Rica under Mr. Paul Bell (who had headed up the eastern Caribbean effort). The original intent was to improve training and host country response capabilities in Latin America. A 20-month period changed all that.

Between March 1985 and October 1986, the Latin America region was struck by four major disasters: (1) An earthquake affecting Chile in March 1985, (2) another earthquake affecting Mexico (especially Mexico City) in September 1985, (3) a volcanic eruption and lahar that literally wiped the city of Armero, Colombia off the map in November 1985, and (4) yet another earthquake in El Salvador in October 1986. More than 40,000 people were killed in these four disasters alone. The total number rendered homeless exceeded one million.

OFDA was deeply involved in each event and came to depend upon the experience and expertise of its Costa Rica-based LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean) regional team in the management of the USG responses. It was especially important in the assessment stage of a disaster because until that time, OFDA had to depend upon ambassadors, deputy chiefs of mission, or AID country directors for information and damage evaluation, but these individuals were usually in their first disasters and often traumatized. Fred Cole, who joined OFDA in 1976 and later served as Acting Director in the mid-1980s, recalled the situation prior to establishing the regional teams, especially in the LAC region:

We were at the mercy of the ambassadors and mission directors for information. Everyone—other donors, Red Cross, the U.N.—was in the same boat, often vying for top tonnage honors. The first real breakthrough was putting Paul [Bell] in Costa Rica, giving us the opportunity to tell the missions that we needed an expert evaluation before we acted.

The regional team (sometimes a single advisor) approach qualifies as a critical juncture because OFDA now depends upon these individuals for a variety of functions, both during “normal,” non-disaster time (prevention-mitigation-preparedness activities, including training management) as well as during disaster responses.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in disaster response, the new approach essentially moved coordination from Washington to the field and provided a focal point around which to build DARTS (Disaster Assistance Response Teams), which will be discussed shortly. Without the regional presences (the LAC model is now extended to Asia, Africa, and Pacific), OFDA would have to completely revamp the ways in which it responds organizationally to events.

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<sup>18</sup> For this report, former OFDA Director Julia Taft offered an interesting corollary to 1985-1986 as a critical juncture, noting explicitly that the 1985 Mexico City disaster revealed “OFDA’s search and rescue ability as inadequate.” This led to long-term agreements whereby the fire departments of Fairfax County and Miami-Dade County became OFDA’s “first responders.”

It should be noted, however, that OFDA shifting in the mid-1980s to a regional team or regional advisor approach did not diminish the extent to which the office depended operationally on NGOs and PVOs. If anything continuing the tradition, OFDA became *more* dependent on such entities as its obligations became more complex. The problem was that NGOs/PVOs came in a bewildering variety, with one OFDA wag saying that they came in three types: “visionaries, missionaries, and mercenaries,” with the latter category expanding rapidly in the 1980s.

The relationship between NGOs/PVOs and OFDA regional advisors (and OFDA/Washington for that matter) became quite testy at times, especially on end-use-verification of disaster assistance, which is a bureaucracy’s way of saying, “Where did our stuff go?” Field personnel in chaotic and high pressure disaster situations are often running multi-pronged operations with many different types of supplies going to different locales. Tracking and accounting in such situations tend to slip down the priority ladder. At the same time, OFDA as the donor has to remember that it is under scrutiny as well. John Prendergast has captured this backside problem well:

USAID and OFDA must concern themselves with U.S. Government Accounting Office audits, with inquisitive congressional committees, with cynical media investigators and a public predisposed to suspicion about foreign aid.<sup>19</sup>

The tension between decentralization of response management to improve impact and effectiveness on one hand and accountability both in the field and in Washington on the other is thus a permanent feature of OFDA’s reality and its relationship with grant recipients.

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<sup>19</sup> In his *Frontline Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), pp. 84-85.

*C. A Change of Culture: Into (Not Out of) Africa*

Drought-induced famine is a periodic occurrence in East Africa, and signs began to appear in 1983 that another one was developing. By 1984-1985 it was roaring in Ethiopia in particular, where it was abetted rather than abated by the “Afro-Marxist” Mengistu regime’s draconian policies. Sudan was also affected, both directly (crop failure) and indirectly (refugees). It was an enormously complicated and fluid regional situation that rendered borders relatively meaningless. An internal OFDA working paper from the early 1990s described the operating environment well:

In the case of Sudan, policies employed by the Khartoum government in 1986 triggered the rural to urban migration of thousands of southern Sudanese, who were lured north from areas controlled by the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) by food ... strategically placed in government-administered cities. [Later], when the change in government in Addis Ababa [Ethiopia] forced an end to SPLA use of Ethiopian refugee camps as rear base areas ... over 150,000 Southern Sudanese refugees [returned to] Southern Sudan. In northern Ethiopia in 1984, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) organized the movement of some 200,000 civilians into neighboring Sudan ... to counter the government’s policy, which was to forcibly conscript or resettle to remote areas the Tigrayan civilians who entered government-controlled feeding centers.

OFDA leadership at that time was not keen on becoming involved in such situations. A senior staffer at the time said, “If you can see it coming, it’s not a disaster and shouldn’t involve OFDA.” Another offered, “If it can be anticipated, it’s not a disaster.” A third staff person at the time later reflected the dominant view of the famine:

It didn’t look like a disaster. It looked like a development problem that [AID’s] Africa Bureau should handle. And it looked political. On all three counts we should have stayed out.

Another concern within OFDA at the time was how to exit if it were drawn in. Just as there was often no clear starting point for this type of disaster (and sometimes not even a

formal “declaration”), the end point was at least as unclear. The phrase/concern was, “How will we know when we’re done, and if we don’t know, how will we ever get out?”

After some hesitation at higher levels (the White House and the State Department in particular did not want to help the Mengistu regime) and despite its own reluctance, OFDA was “ordered in” by AID Administrator McPherson. As a former OFDA senior staff person said in retrospect, “With that, everything changed. We were never the same again.” A truer statement was never uttered, and probably the best way to reflect the impact on OFDA of the mid-1980s involvement in Africa is with its expenditures.

Table 1 on the following page (p. 28) shows OFDA “Commodity and Service” expenditures (that is, not even including food) over the period 1964-2000 in year dollars (column 2), and in constant 2002 dollars (column 4), which is a truer representation because it controls for the substantial inflation over the period (the inflation multiplier is column 3). On the next following page (p. 29), Figure 1 shows the expenditures in year dollars and Figure 2 the expenditures in constant 2002 dollars.

The early spike (FY 1971) barely noticeable in Figure 1 but highly visible in Figure 2 reflects the OFDA response to the 1970 cyclone in East Pakistan that evolved into a civil war, intervention by India, and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh. The FY 1985 spike, again more accurately highlighted in Figure 2, was Ethiopia and East Africa in general. In retrospect, however, FY 1985 was not a spike at all. Rather, it was a precedent whereby OFDA would be involved in a series of what would later be called “complex humanitarian emergencies” (CHEs).

Table 1

OFDA Commodity and Service (Non-Food) Expenditures

FY 1964 – FY 2000

FY	\$ Actual Year	Multiplier*	\$ Yr. 2002	“Driving” Event(s)
1964	2,928,499	5.80	16,985,294	
1965	2,438,872	5.71	13,925,959	
1966	721,178	5.55	4,002,538	
1967	3,674,331	5.39	19,804,644	
1968	1,355,888	5.17	7,009,941	
1969	4,446,757	4.90	21,789,109	
1970	6,263,804	4.64	29,064,051	
1971	47,214,528	4.44	209,632,504	E. Pakistan Cyclone-Civil Strife
1972	1,505,766	4.30	6,474,794	
1973	20,036,326	4.05	81,147,120	Nicaragua Earthquake
1974	6,724,074	3.65	24,542,870	
1975	12,377,197	3.34	41,339,838	
1976	33,217,633	3.16	104,967,720	Guatemala Earthquake
1977	24,905,211	2.97	73,968,477	
1978	21,759,716	2.76	60,056,816	
1979	32,241,842	2.48	79,959,768	
1980	6,128,111	2.18	13,359,282	
1981	9,814,128	1.98	19,431,973	
1982	20,904,687	1.86	38,882,718	
1983	18,404,384	1.81	33,311,935	
1984	38,159,782	1.73	66,016,423	Africa Drought--Initial Signs
1985	186,861,970	1.67	312,059,490	Africa Drought-Famine-Civil Strife
1986	15,854,802	1.64	26,001,875	
1987	43,235,530	1.58	68,312,137	
1988	51,351,808	1.52	78,054,748	
1989	38,694,249	1.45	56,106,661	
1990	47,320,828	1.38	65,302,743	
1991	67,811,940	1.32	89,511,761	
1992	110,206,261	1.28	141,064,014	“CHE Era” Begins**
1993	191,665,762	1.24	237,665,545	↓
1994	187,068,503	1.21	226,352,889	↓
1995	181,142,167	1.18	213,747,757	↓
1996	150,142,948	1.15	172,664,390	↓
1997	135,736,779	1.12	152,025,192	↓
1998	261,504,849	1.10	287,655,334	↓
1999	315,738,624	1.08	340,997,714	↓
2000	212,251,977	1.04	220,742,056	↓
2001	Not Available	1.02		
2002	Not Available	1.00		

\* Derived from the “Inflation Calculator” at [www.bls.gov/cpi](http://www.bls.gov/cpi) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

\*\* Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs) were previously termed “Civil Strife”

Figure 1  
 OFDA Commodity and Service (Non-Food) Expenditures  
 FY 1964 – FY 2000 in Actual Year Dollars

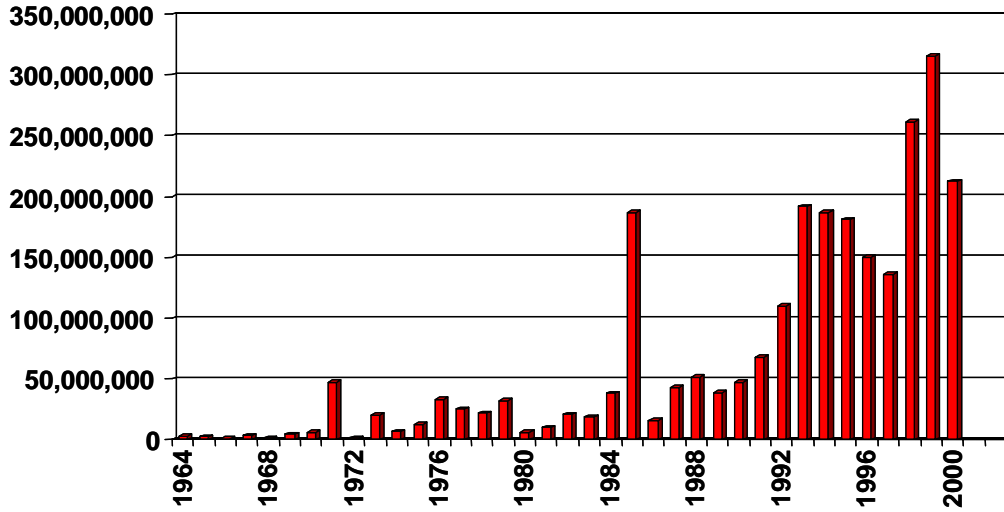
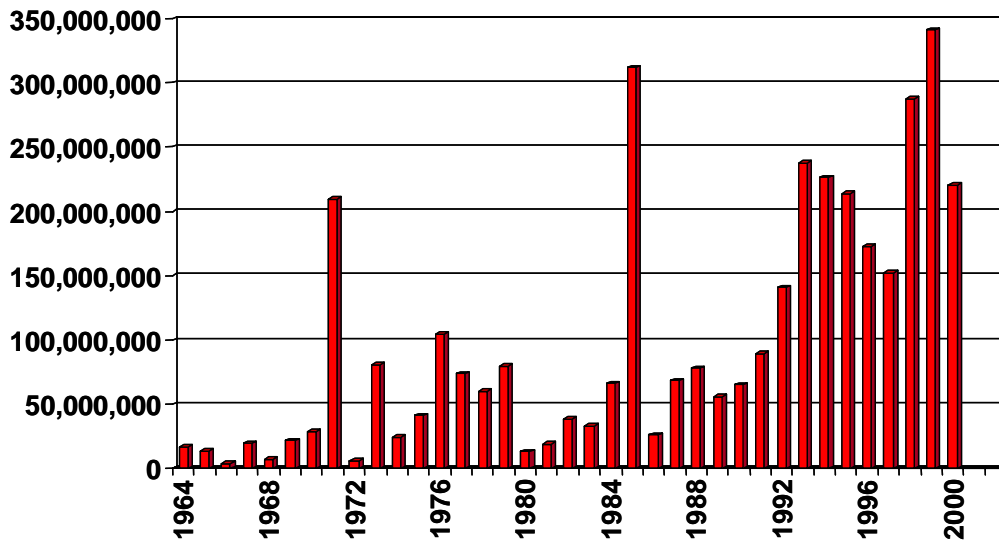


Figure 2  
 OFDA Commodity and Service (Non-Food) Expenditures  
 FY 1964 – FY 2000 in 2002 Constant Dollars



Interestingly similar to the change ten years earlier when OFDA went from linear (and very relief oriented) thinking to the broader disaster cycle concept, responding to Ethiopia was a traumatic cultural change for those in OFDA still committed to a traditional definition of its mission as responding to fairly clear-cut, unanticipated, and time-delimited events and as adhering to a 90-day time table for exiting. These Ethiopia-type “events” could (and did) go on for years.

It was also hard to adjust to a new vision of spending. Fred Cole, Acting Director in late 1985, remembers, “Prior to that we really believed that we had a time limit and that our budget was \$25 mil plus specific appropriations.” A senior staff person in the same years offered about Ethiopia in particular, “We spent our budget, we spent the supplemental, and we just kept spending.”

OFDA also felt internally stretched by its mandated obligations in Africa. In his departure memo of November 5, 1985 to AID Administrator McPherson, OFDA Director Julius Becton (who was on his way to head FEMA) reflected on some of the internal office stresses created by the Africa response:

[T]he budget in the spring of 1984 was \$25 million. In August ... Congress appropriated an additional \$25 million.... During the period October 84 to March 85, we borrowed an additional \$34 million in order to respond to the African emergency. Then in April 85, the Congress passed the African Supplemental which placed an additional \$137 million in our account. Throughout this entire period, our repeated requests for additional clerical support went unheeded. In January 1984 we had four secretaries.... We still have only four secretaries.

The intramural problems inherent in the borrowing authority also started coming home to roost at this time—“with a vengeance” in the words of a former AID Mission Director in Sudan. The problem was especially acute between OFDA and AID’s Africa Bureau, as one senior staffer in that bureau explained in 1988, “If you borrow money and then don’t



repay it, I call it stealing.” The conflict eventually became so acute that a visiting evaluation team had to schedule separate 1988 meetings with the two groups (OFDA and Africa Bureau) “to avoid blood on the floor” (which was hopefully meant metaphorically).

In the end, a resolution of sorts emerged. The 1992 GAO report (p. 32) was highly critical of the borrowing authority, noting in particular that “from 1981 to 1990, the borrowed funds were usually not reimbursed.” To relieve the internal conflict and demonstrate more openness, the GAO recommended (p. 40) a major increase in the IDA budget:

A realistic OFDA budget would restore ... transparency, reduce the friction and time spent on borrowing authority, and reflect the roles of OFDA and AID regional bureaus for long-term disasters. OFDA would then need to resort to the borrowing authority only when a large unanticipated emergency requires OFDA’s exceptional authorities.

OFDA’s IDA budget was subsequently increased, and intramural AID conflict subsided. The “borrowing authority” remains in place, however, and conflict could erupt again in responding to a large event if Congress does not provide a special supplement. At the same time, the borrowing authority remains an intramural AID issue and subject to control by the Administrator, so it also represents considerable flexibility in how AID can direct OFDA (or other offices) to finance responses to particular situations.

In sum, the 1984-1986 period constitutes a critical juncture for OFDA as an organization because (1) the borrowing authority, no matter how problematic in practice, increased its response flexibility, (2) the regional team approach decentralized OFDA response coordination, and (3) involvement in the Ethiopian drought and famine

definitively expanded its mission to slow-onset, long-term, “development failure” disasters—which segues to the next critical juncture.

**Critical Juncture #4 (1988-1995):  
Operation Lifeline Sudan, the DART Concept, Institutionalizing “PMP,”  
Bureaucratization, and “Complex Humanitarian Emergencies”**

Following hard on the heels of the 1984-1986 critical juncture, the next one also has multiple components and encompasses a time period ranging (in the opinion of many) from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Africa starts it again, however.

*A. Sudan*

OFDA’s mostly unwilling 1985-1986 involvement in Ethiopia and East Africa turned out to be not an exception but rather a precedent for an even more extensive—and extended—role in late 1980s Sudan, which literally continues to this day. Although it could be called a disaster, the driving or causative factor was a multi-sided civil war with strong cultural, geographic, ethnic, and religious components (the Arab-Moslem north versus the African-animist-Christian south) that saw the United Nations system attempting to help non-combatants caught in various “middles.” Although OFDA had been involved in Sudan previously, in the summer of 1988 then-OFDA Director Julia Taft recognized a developing famine in the west and south of the country and worked with the U.N. (specifically UNICEF) to create a functional umbrella called Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), which was designed to move food and other assistance to the affected areas along various road, rail, and air “humanitarian corridors.” Together with the State Department’s Refugee Program (now the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, PRM) and AID’s Food for Peace Program, OFDA was a major contributor to OLS efforts, which were eventually supporting more than 7 million people.

Shifting conflict, atrocities, on-again/off-again access, insecurity, and “diverted” assistance made OLS the poster child for a “complex humanitarian emergency.” One particular passage from OFDA’s *FY 1992 Annual Report* captures the context (p. 40):

Intensified fighting between the Government of Sudan (GOS, i.e. the Arab north) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA, i.e., the African south) severely limited access to the south, where conditions for the displaced were the worst in Sudan....

There was concern that the GOS and SPLA were slowly marginalizing international NGO efforts in Sudan or forcing them out entirely. ICRC, which provides assistance to civilian displaced and war wounded, was accused by the GOS of siding with the rebels and then expelled ... from the country. NGOs were denied access to many areas, particularly in the south; relief flights were suspended and then banned; registration and travel permits were denied; and of utmost concern, two Foreign Service Nationals employed by A.I.D. were executed, and several relief workers and one journalist were killed.

From OFDA’s point of view and despite its ups and downs, the Operation Lifeline Sudan experience became a critical juncture because the heretofore inviolable “sovereignty” concept became quite violable, not the absolute and untouchable it once was. The fact was that during OLS, OFDA was running assistance into southern Sudan not only through Khartoum but also from Kenya, and as one veteran of the operation noted, “We may have informed the GOS, but we didn’t ask their permission.” Taking this approach, however, put OFDA at conflict with both the State Department and much of the AID structure because the latter had official inter-governmental interests and programs and therefore remained committed to the notion of GOS sovereignty over the entire country. OFDA personnel saw GOS sovereignty as at best a polite fiction, at worst as an obstructionist official fantasy. The “real” power on the ground in the south especially—where most of the assistance had to go—was the SPLA, not the GOS in Khartoum.

After OLS, OFDA would never again automatically accept the absolute sovereignty argument of the supposed “national” government in the capital, and understanding sovereignty as existing in degrees was an entirely new lens through which to view, plan, and implement disaster assistance options. Henceforth OFDA would see the governments in other countries as “a” factor to consider, not “the” factor that determined courses of action.

The extent to which the shift in attitude about sovereignty (crystallized in the OLS effort) constituted a critical juncture not only for OFDA but also for the USG and the entire international community is reflected in the Halperin-Michel report of 2000 (p. 6, emphases added):

When the USG has intervened on humanitarian and human rights grounds in major crises (Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, Bosnia, northern Iraq), exceptional political and military actions were essential to advance critical humanitarian interests. In several instances, a policy decision was taken within a multilateral context *not to accept sovereign boundaries as a barrier to intervention*. Cumulatively, these policy choices have added a complex dimension, political and legal, to international humanitarian programs. *The ramifications of this historic shift reach well beyond any individual case and will greatly shape deliberations over future crises.*

#### *B. Establishing the DART Concept*

In most natural and technological disasters, a host government response infrastructure, albeit rudimentary at times, is available. OFDA can then work with and through the local civil defense or emergency response organization to expand and deepen impacts. Failing that but sometimes also in combination, local NGOs often provide support structures and assistance mechanisms with which OFDA may work.

A partial exception to this pattern was the 1986 earthquake in El Salvador, which at the time was in the midst of a brutal civil war. The major impact area was the capital,

San Salvador, and the host government, which lost a number of its own buildings, was of relatively little use in the response. The U.S. Embassy and the AID Mission building were also non-functional (the embassy building eventually had to be torn down). In this context, the OFDA/LAC regional team in Costa Rica assembled a relatively self-sufficient multi-sectoral (rescue, health, management, housing, communications) eight-person team to coordinate the USG response. The “lesson learned” was that under certain circumstances, OFDA might have to put response teams in the field that could not necessarily depend much—if at all—on local infrastructures.<sup>20</sup> Such teams would have to be self-contained, reasonably self-sufficient, and capable of operating in chaotic and sometimes dangerous environments.

This lesson was spectacularly reinforced by the OFDA experience in trying to respond to the 1988 Armenia earthquake in the erstwhile Soviet Union, an event that was traumatic on a variety of dimensions (tremendous impacts, response weaknesses and delays, revealed negligence in construction, public anger at local and Soviet authorities).<sup>21</sup> The important long-term result of the Armenia disaster for the USG, however, was that based on the U.S. Forest Service’s Incident Management System, OFDA under then-Director Julia Taft began formalizing the concept of a “Disaster Assistance Response Team” (DART), which was designed to be self-sufficient and modular (it could be expanded in size depending upon field necessities). The DART concept was firmly established by late 1988 and fully operational (with training, planning, and communications equipment) in 1989.

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<sup>20</sup> OFDA had previously used Department of Defense Disaster Area Survey Teams (DASTs), but they were limited to assessment only.

<sup>21</sup> Following relatively closely on the heels of the 1986 reactor disaster at Chernobyl (a critical juncture itself in the collapse of the Soviet Union, as even Gorbachev admits in his *Memoirs*), the Armenia disaster and the deficiencies it revealed were well covered by a Soviet press experimenting with *glasnost*.

One of the singular advantages of deploying a DART is that it automatically clarifies who is in charge, which avoids the usual problem of leadership and reporting confusion when multiple USG agencies go into the field. This clarity even extends to the U.S. military when they are involved in a response. One former OFDA director noted that the previously used DAST had always remained essentially in the military chain of command. With a DART, however, “it was manifest that although US military could be involved, OFDA was going to run the show and use all available resources.”

Although Mexico City 1985, El Salvador 1986, and Armenia 1988 all showed elements of what would become the DART approach, OFDA’s first official DARTs were dispatched in 1989-1990, to the Caribbean (Hurricane Hugo), Romania, and the Philippines respectively. Qualifying it as a critical juncture for OFDA, the DART approach is now the standard OFDA response for large events and/or complex emergencies where local infrastructures may be non-existent, inadequate, or unreliable. Indeed, while the term “DART” made its first appearance in the list of acronyms in OFDA’s *Annual Report FY 1989*, it comes up in every annual report subsequently.

### *C. Institutionalizing “PMP”*

OFDA has a deeply ambivalent attitude about disasters. On one hand disasters are the enemy to be vanquished. On the other, disasters give life and meaning (and employment) to the office. This may explain another deep OFDA ambivalence: how the office feels about prevention, mitigation, and preparedness (PMP), which in theory would eliminate some disasters and reduce the impacts of others. OFDA exhibits a near schizophrenia about PMP.

While OFDA had supported pre-event disaster training and other mitigation and preparedness activities as early as 1967, the National Research Council made a particular and telling criticism of OFDA in 1978 (p. 6, emphasis added):

As urbanization accelerates, disaster casualties grow. One of the greatest needs to mitigate disasters is to help relief agencies refocus their energies away from relief provision toward predisaster planning and postdisaster reconstruction. *Preoccupation with emergency relief artificially restricts the effectiveness of AID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance....* The current administrative distinctions are arbitrary and ... tend to inhibit the effectiveness of international disaster aid.

For more than decade, however, OFDA continued its shotgun approach (i.e., little pellets in a random pattern) to pre-disaster activities, and it was also only in the late 1980s (and admittedly stimulated by the U.N.'s declaration of the 1990s as the "International Decade of Natural Hazard Reduction") that OFDA internally reorganized to add a third division, "Prevention, Mitigation, and Preparedness," to its office structure (the other divisions were "Relief" and "Operations"). The new division, PMP as it was immediately called, had a particular rationale:

[W]ithout PMP measures in place, disasters will affect more lives, and years of development efforts and investment will be lost in minutes. Because the number and severity of disasters are rising each year, OFDA is assisting with an increasing number of disasters. People in developing countries suffer the greatest impacts from disasters due to the often unsound construction practices and unsafe location of their homes, key public facilities, and infrastructural "lifelines," as well as the degradation of the environment (OFDA *Annual Report FY 1991*, p. 10).

Consistent with its history and OFDA's ambivalent attitude about it, PMP has lived as a permanent programmatic stepchild in OFDA, despite the fact that all concerned recognize intellectually that without effective PMP programs, disaster losses will continue to mount. The practical difficulty is that OFDA's public, media, and congressional profiles are overwhelmingly derived from *response*, which is often vivid, photogenic, and

newsworthy, as a former OFDA senior staff member captured it in an interview for this report when he said, “Remember one thing” and then wrote out, “RESPONSE = HEADLINES” (his capitals).

In contrast, prevention-mitigation-preparedness is almost always banal, unphotogenic, and spectacularly boring to the media. PMP also faces the problem of having its successes hard to quantify (much like deterrence theory): How does one know for certain the causes of (much less count) losses that do *not* occur?

The even longer-term problem for PMP activities within OFDA is their necessary but still unfulfilled interface with development programs, especially those of AID. To illustrate this point, it is instructive to consider four statements written over nearly a quarter century:

1. The National Research Council report noted above, *The U.S. Government Foreign Disaster Assistance Program*, was issued in 1978, which meant that it was written in 1976 or 1977 at the latest. That report contained 10 “findings and recommendations,” the second of which focused directly on the problem of OFDA programs and activities being only tangentially related to AID’s development programs. More specifically, the finding (p. 66) was that the “relationship between AID’s disaster assistance programs and its general development programs currently is conceptually confused.” The NRC recommendation was to strengthen the organizational linkages between disaster and development planning because such a bridging “will be beneficial to both types of programs” (p. 67).

2. Fourteen years later, the 1992 GAO report noted with concern the lack of effective linkages between AID development programs and OFDA activities (both relief



and PMP), the GAO reaching back and even citing the 1978 NRC study. The GAO concluded, however, that the problem remained: “AID policies that link OFDA activities with AID’s ongoing development programs are unclear” (p. 5). The GAO also noted that friction in this area was especially serious between OFDA and the Africa Bureau.

3. The highly critical 2000 Halperin-Michel report noted that AID still had not conceptually connected “impaired development” with complex emergencies in particular.

It then continued (p. 9):

While humanitarian response is at one level a discrete set of activities, recent research and experience have proven that humanitarian activities cannot be designed and executed in isolation, but rather where possible ... carefully coordinated with development and other post-conflict programs. Discussion now centers on how humanitarian and development activities intersect, and on integrated approaches to conflict prevention, peace-building and economic and social progress.

4. The degree to which such disaster-development integration has *still* not occurred is evidenced in the “Humanitarian Assistance” chapter of a 2002 AID publication, *USAID’s Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The report cites and quotes a 1999 book, *Development in Disaster Prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability*, by James Lewis, who laments that disaster and development were like two wheels of a bicycle—but with each wheel spinning independently. Indeed, Lewis himself noted that even the bicycle metaphor:

does the dual system credit that it does not deserve; most bicycles have one rider and one person to do the steering. The disaster cycle and the development cycle are not driven by the same authorities.<sup>22</sup>

While progress has been made in certain regions (especially Africa), the 2002 AID report highlights (with italics from the original) that “the traditional perspective that disasters

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<sup>22</sup> James Lewis, *Development in Disaster Prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability* (London, UK: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999).

and conflict are interruptions in—but *separate* from—the development process has been hard to kill.”

In sum, although PMP can be traced back to the mid-1970s in concept and in some activities as early as the founding of OFDA, the 1991 formalization of PMP as a major division of the organization makes that a critical juncture. That is, after 1991, OFDA had an internal structure that formally reflected, however inadequately in practice, its mandated involvement in all disaster phases, not simply response.

#### *D. Bureaucratization*

Reporting lines in a large organization are always important, and OFDA has been in many places over its history in AID, including the Office of the War on Hunger, the Office of Private Resources, the Office of Private Overseas Programs, the Bureau for Private and Development Cooperation, and the Bureau for Population and Humanitarian Assistance.

For most of its earlier years, however, OFDA reported directly to the AID Administrator. This placement had advantages, especially because OFDA always had difficulty maintaining its intended ability to be agile, quick, and creative in an AID system that was becoming increasingly bureaucratic and heavily procedural. That is, for OFDA to be mission effective as a mere office, it had to resist becoming “more AID-like” while living within AID. This was no easy task. Indeed, many OFDA professionals hold that AID should become more OFDA-like, not the other way around.

Then, in early 1992, OFDA was placed within the newly established Bureau for Humanitarian Response (BHR), which was created, at least in theory, to provide more coherence and prominence to humanitarian activities within AID. In 2001, BHR was

reconfigured and became the bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA).

OFDA going under BHR had several downsides. The first was that by being placed within an AID bureau, OFDA was literally “bureaucratized.” The second downside was a corollary to the first: OFDA was obviously expected to become “more AID-like,” which set up logically intense conflicts with its mission and culture. Third, OFDA lost most of its autonomy and creativity, its hallmarks from the time the OFDA Director reported only to the AID Administrator. To be fair, however, the problem for OFDA when its Director reported only to the AID Administrator was that on a daily basis the overburdened head of AID could not pay much attention to OFDA, which was thereby marginalized in the daily grind of bureaucratic politics. Indeed, when OFDA and the rest of AID were in the State Department building, OFDA was often colloquially referred to, even by mainline AID personnel, as that “strange group down in the basement.”<sup>23</sup>

The upside of OFDA being moved into BHR was equally obvious (at least when BHR leadership is knowledgeable and appreciative of OFDA’s uniqueness): More management attention and better coordination with other parts of AID involved in disaster response. This was particularly true for OFDA coordination with three other offices within BHR: Food for Peace, Transition Initiatives, and Private and Voluntary Cooperation.

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<sup>23</sup> Actually it was the first floor. More to the point, however, this story is not meant to be as humorous as it might sound. The attitude underlying the appellation (most often heard in State’s first floor cafeteria) highlighted how difficult it was—and still is—to mainstream disaster concerns into AID and State Department thinking.

Theoretically at least, being part of BHR—and now DCHA—might confer on OFDA an additional advantage, especially when disasters and “complex emergencies” involve it in situations that reach the rarefied and highly charged radar screens of the White House and the National Security Council. Despite being at a staff disadvantage with better-supported competitors in the NSC, State, and even AID, OFDA usually has to be the “humanitarian voice” in USG security and foreign policy debates. In such situations, the BHR/DCHA layer above it might serve to protect OFDA from attacks—but only if the layer above it is able and willing to fend off those attacks.

This highly problematic question of OFDA’s role as the often unpopular humanitarian voice within USG decision-making will be dealt with more fully below.

*E. “Complex Humanitarian Emergencies”*

It is commonly argued, even within OFDA, that the organization fundamentally changed in the early 1990s as a result of responding to complex humanitarian emergencies caused by war, state failure, and/or intra-state conflict (the examples include Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia, northern Iraq, and Rwanda). While this perspective is accurate in some respects, OFDA actually has a long history of being involved in attempts to relieve human suffering in conflict situations, reaching at least as far back as the 1968-1969 Nigerian-Biafran civil war and that 1970 Pakistan cyclone that ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh.<sup>24</sup> As the National Research Council’s Committee on International Disaster Assistance noted in its 1978 publication (p. 14):

During the period 1965-1975, 60 percent of U.S. assistance for disaster relief went to countries suffering from civil disturbances, other internal political problems, and wars. Disaster assistance to Bangladesh alone has

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<sup>24</sup> This was one of the first instances of a compound or iterative disaster where a natural event (the 1970 cyclone) helped trigger a civil war, which triggered an external military intervention and the final dissolution of a nation-state into two nation-states.

accounted for about 25 percent of all U.S. government disaster relief expenditures since 1970.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, as the Soviet Union imploded and disappeared from the world stage, the 1990s were a new age for the USG—and for OFDA. Indeed, in the *Annual Report FY 2000*, OFDA listed (p. 9) its “Top Five Programs” (interestingly, not “events”) for the FY 1990-FY 2000 decade. All were CHEs:

Table 2  
OFDA’s “Top Five” Programs  
FY 1990 – FY 2000

Country	Disaster	Duration (years)	Funding (millions)
Former Yugoslavia	Complex	9	328.0
Sudan	Complex	14	280.7
Angola	Complex	12	137.6
Somalia	Complex	12	133.8
Rwanda	Complex	9	108.4

Taking a longer perspective, the pattern becomes even clearer, and Figure 3 on the following page returns to OFDA’s 1964-2000 “Commodity and Service” expenditures in constant 2002 dollars, breaks them into the periods 1964-1991 (but removing the spike years of 1971 and 1985) and 1992-2000, and shows the annual averages for each period. The difference is stark: For 1964-1991 but removing the spike years of 1971 and 1985, the average annual OFDA expenditure in constant 2002 dollars is just short of \$44 million; the annual average for 1992-2000 is 500 percent higher, at \$221 million. Interestingly, even if one retains the two spike years in computing the 1964-1991 annual average, the figure for 1964-1991 only reaches \$59 million.

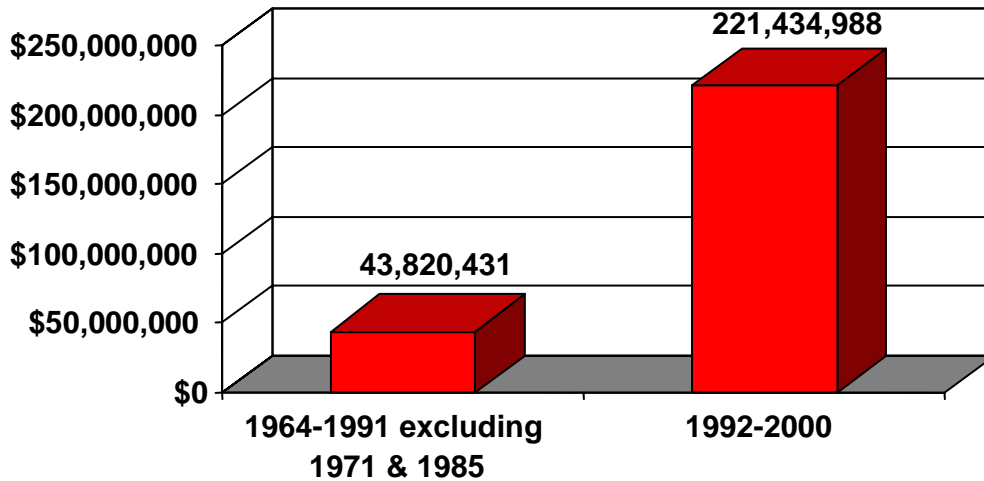
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<sup>25</sup> Along this line, it must be pointed out that the NRC Committee listed (p. 64) as its first recommendation to OFDA—in 1978—that (italics in the original): “*Greater consideration should be given to operational and planning needs related to disasters that involve conflict or slow onset.*”

Figure 3

### OFDA Commodity & Service (Non-Food) Expenditures

Annual Averages in Constant 2002 Dollars



Another interesting reflection of OFDA’s change in profile can be gleaned from media coverage. Using *Lexis-Nexis* and the keywords (headline or lead paragraph) “Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance” (15 cites) or “Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance” (67 cites, which interestingly do not overlap the 15) for all major newspapers, the earliest cite is a very complimentary December 9, 1977 piece (“The Forgotten Consolers”) by James Reston in *The New York Times*, which used OFDA assistance to victims of a cyclone in India as a point of departure to discuss OFDA activities going back to 1965. The next cite of the remaining 81 is eight years later, in 1985. Breaking the 81 cites down by five-year spans yields the following:

- 2000- : 12 cites
- 1995-1999: 12 cites
- 1990-1994: 40 cites
- 1985-1989: 17 cites

One of the primary reasons for the 1990-1994 upsurge in OFDA media coverage was the above noted post-Cold War rise in ethnic and sub-national conflict and the so-called “broken states” phenomenon. Rather suddenly, OFDA was going (or being sent) to places that would have been low priority or off limits during the Cold War. This meant, however, that OFDA’s “humanitarian assistance” mindset was often challenged by other aspects of United States foreign policy, especially by military-security and overtly political considerations in those CHEs.

In his 1995 piece cited previously, Andrew Natsios—who more than anyone oversaw OFDA’s entry and sustained involvement in CHEs—noted that such cases meant that “U.S. foreign disaster assistance has been drawn into an increasingly intimate connection with American foreign policy.” He isolated the concomitant threat to OFDA’s fundamental humanitarian mission: “The troubling side of this intimacy is the potential subordination of disaster response to the geopolitical focus of American foreign policy and its consequent politicization.”<sup>26</sup>

The 1990s involvement in broken states also meant that OFDA’s leaders began expressing increasing concern for the safety of their own as well as OFDA-supported NGO personnel in the field. An obviously worried OFDA Director James Kunder wrote early in the decade:

OFDA employees and other relief workers increasingly focus on reaching disaster victims in environments of conflict. In addition to traditional skills like measuring child malnutrition or shipping plastic sheeting for emergency shelter, emergency specialists are grappling with demining [land mine removal] assessments, the needs of demobilized soldiers, negotiations with armed groups ... and [bringing] ... military resources into the disaster relief effort.

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<sup>26</sup> In “The Politics of United States Disaster Response” cited above in footnote 11.

The summaries of the Kurdish, Somali, Ethiopian, and numerous other disaster responses ... describe this modern—and dangerous—environment. [They] also describe the creative and courageous response of the women and men who attempt to deliver disaster assistance in these circumstances (OFDA *Annual Report FY 1991*, p. 7).

The dangers inherent in CHEs were brought home to OFDA in 1994 with the murder in Chechnya of long-time OFDA consultant Fred Cuny and two co-workers from the Russian Red Cross.<sup>27</sup> Their bodies have never been found.

OFDA's involvement in responding to post-Cold War complex humanitarian emergencies clearly qualifies as a critical juncture for the organization because it placed OFDA in high level and fully political environments that, for a time at least, dwarfed previous activities and expenditures. It also raised OFDA's profile within AID, which had at least one negative consequence: less tolerance for OFDA's *differences*. As one senior staff reflected, "We were no longer an occasional blip to the rest of [AID], they couldn't ignore us anymore. We thought that would be a good thing. It wasn't."

Finally, the complex emergency field experiences literally seared an entire generation of OFDA personnel. In a poignant 2003 e-mail to this author, a retired OFDA senior staffer reflected on the internal impacts:

One of the saddest effects (in my mind) of the swing from quick onset to "complex" disasters has been the toll on the operations staff. In earlier days we'd go perhaps weeks of 24 hour shifts, but then it was over. We had won. Success.

Even with severe droughts we could sense that there would be an end. Again, success.

With the advent of never-ending politically motivated civil strife, relief officers spend months and years without the sense of winning—far more debilitating than sleepless weeks. How has the turnover rate been affected, I wonder?

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<sup>27</sup> Cuny and his colleagues were not on an OFDA-supported mission at the time, however.



In confirmation, several 2003 interviews for this report kept returning to the problem of “burnout” within OFDA. With the lack of any true downtime, even mid-level staff and personal services contractors (PSCs) note that they just “hop” from one new or ongoing crisis to another. The problem is just as severe at the higher levels.

#### **IV. An Enduring Issue: A “Humanitarian Voice” in USG Foreign Policy**

Good intentions and rhetoric aside, bureaucracies don’t encourage dissonance and difference. They don’t even tolerate them very well. Bureaucracies attempt to standardize and regularize, and within the USG and State-AID, OFDA is ... well, *different*. Along this line, Paul Bell (OFDA Senior Regional Advisor for Latin America and the Caribbean from 1984 until his death in 2003), said in a 1995 conversation with me:

OFDA’s job is to do the right thing. Our job here [in the regional office] is to tell [OFDA-] Washington what the right thing is, even when the rest of the government seems hell bent on doing the wrong thing. Our job is actually easier. [OFDA-] Washington’s job is harder, the politics there.

Bell’s sarcasm notwithstanding, the point is that articulating a non-political humanitarian viewpoint is not popular within the bureaucracies of the United States Government. It is especially problematic in foreign and security policy decision-making, where the national interest is often narrowly defined. The tension, however, is nothing new. In 1986, the House Select Committee on Hunger pointed to OFDA and noted that its humanitarian voice was needed to fulfill the national interest *broadly* defined:

While it is unarguable that the disaster assistance program does promote U.S. foreign policy interests, it seems equally unarguable that to provide relief in an apolitical fashion is much more important for long-term American image and relationships with developing countries (U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Hunger, *Enhancing the Effectiveness of the U.S. Government’s Foreign Disaster Assistance*

*Program: A Policy Analysis and Review with Recommendations*, 1986, p. 13).

Two years later (September 13, 1988) in a *New York Times* story that was effusive in its praise of OFDA and especially then-OFDA Director Julia Taft, Robert Hershey made a particular point of noting that:

Mrs. Taft, although appointed to her post by the President, is careful to keep her office free from both international politics—the United States need not have diplomatic relations with a country to offer [disaster] aid—and domestic partisanship.

Hershey's piece was almost romantic in its treatment of OFDA and its humanitarian commitment, saying that it had a "highly refined but free-wheeling" style and was coordinated by "a small band of 21 full-time people." Hershey then went over the top on OFDA:

It is there, usually around a gray, horseshoe-shaped battery of desks and telephones in its operations center that daily life and death decisions are made to deploy the planes that carry all manner of relief to victims almost anywhere in the world.<sup>28</sup>

The extent to which OFDA has been persistent, at times under duress, in its humanitarian advocacy was highlighted in, and specifically commended by, the 1992 GAO report (p. 5):

OFDA often provides assistance in politically charged environments (countries experiencing conflict or civil strife), and the agency occasionally receives pressure or instructions from Congress or higher level executive branch authorities, including the Department of State and the National Security Council, regarding the timing and extent of assistance. In general, OFDA officials have advocated nonpolitical humanitarian assistance and made a good-faith effort to ensure that assistance is provided equitably.

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<sup>28</sup> One can only imagine how this story went down in the other parts of AID and in the State Department, which can but dream of such media treatment.

The 2000 Halperin-Michel report also made a central point of the need for stronger humanitarian input into U.S. foreign policy decision-making, noting (p. 4) that:

The humanitarian voice in senior USG policy-making has often been absent at critical moments, such that the humanitarian implications of political-military choices in crisis situations do not receive adequate consideration.

Later (p. 11), the point was repeated, again using the metaphor of “voice:”

Humanitarian officers are viewed by senior policymakers as technical implementers and not as authorities who need to be present and heard when foreign policy is formulated.

As these various quotes over the decades indicate, the issue of a humanitarian voice in USG foreign policy decision-making keeps returning, and it usually centers on OFDA. The problem is that OFDA is severely disadvantaged by the “do-gooder,” decidedly un-macho image of humanitarian action (which is about as incorrect as it can be) and by its current placement in an AID bureau, with the concomitantly inexorable suasion to quiet its voice.

In political terminology, and because it often articulates an unpopular or at least a dissonant humanitarian viewpoint, OFDA is “organized out” of key foreign policy discussions, only to be brought in later when the major decisions have already been made and the errors cast in bureaucratic stone for subsequent implementation. The contradiction is thereby reinforced: Despite the increasing foreign policy importance of humanitarian activities in a world that seems to shrink daily with media globalization, the United States Government has yet to figure out a way to centrally and consistently accommodate (“organize in”) a humanitarian voice in foreign and security policy decision-making.

## V. Conclusion

### When You Have a Hammer....

In their relationship with OFDA, AID and State have given a reverse twist to the old aphorism about “when you have only a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail.” One would not want to carry the metaphor too far, but it appears that in any situation with even a faint humanitarian component, the tendency is to throw OFDA at it, especially a DART. That is, the Agency for International Development knows what to do with development nails, and the State Department knows what to do with political and diplomatic nails, but other things often seem to be sent to OFDA to hammer. The problem is that many of those other things turn out not to be nails.

To change the metaphor, OFDA appears to be a default setting for anything unusual that doesn't fit neatly into conventional boxes in the State-AID bureaucracies. The result is a tendency to miscast OFDA into roles that can only yield criticism.

This tendency to be miscast poses obvious difficulties for OFDA, but it also poses problems (albeit less obvious) for AID and State. In certain situations where OFDA capabilities and values are in fact tangential to the actual requirements but it is sent there anyway, OFDA will feel misunderstood and misused. AID and State (and the USG in general), on the other hand, will be perplexed and frustrated when OFDA does not appear to work, ignoring their own responsibility in making those shortcomings likely. The root cause, however, is not simply miscommunication or misperception but rather the deeper and still unresolved issue of setting, maintaining, and appreciating OFDA mission limits.

Indeed, a 40-year perspective on OFDA illuminates its central but problematic achievement: an extraordinary expansion of its mission with ever higher expectations,

both internally and externally. Founded in 1964 as an almost invisible part of AID with a very narrow relief mission, OFDA transformed in the mid-1970s to deal with all disaster phases. Then in the mid-1980s, OFDA again saw its mission expanded to include slow-onset, long-term development failure type events, which was a precedent for almost permanent subsequent involvement in complex humanitarian emergencies, which then facilitated OFDA's 2003-2004 involvement in Iraq. That is, responsiveness to changing environments and new challenges—organizational evolution—is one thing, but this appears to be less evolutionary and more a series of increasing mission distortions.

### A Fierce Loyalty

Finally, it may appear contradictory and even slightly masochistic because of feeling under-appreciated and even demeaned at times, but OFDA personnel are noted for their loyalty and dedication. They don't "punch clocks" and often labor heroically when a major disaster occurs (even when no one is watching). This point has been made in every review of OFDA, and it must have been especially ironic in March 1996 when AID made OFDA so prominent in its *Front Lines* for a "Special Issue: WHY FOREIGN AID?" (capitals in the original).

The irony started with the cover photo (and easily worth the proverbial thousand words, see Figure 4 on page 53 below), which clearly connotes disaster response: a woman and two children washing clothes in a flooded area.

The second level of irony came with humanitarian assistance being specifically listed (p. 4) as one of AID's "five principal areas crucial to achieving U.S. foreign policy objectives" (a view probably not shared by AID's mainline regional bureaus).

Third and most interesting, however, AID argued (p. 7) that its role in alleviating the humanitarian disaster in Bosnia was one of its major recent organizational successes:

An estimated 200,000 Bosnians had died as a result of the conflict by the spring of 1994, and over 4 million people were dependent on international humanitarian aid. USAID deployed a DART team to the region in 1992 and has funded a number of private voluntary organization relief and rehabilitation projects. Nearly all of the estimated 200,000 civilian deaths in Bosnia have been the result of war; few can be attributed to starvation, exposure, or disease due to the deprivation of food, housing or health care.

It is unlikely that the in-house authors of this issue of AID's *Front Lines* carried enough organizational history to realize how their choice of humanitarian success stories (the other was post-genocide Rwanda) closed a particular "Yugoslavian circle" for OFDA: Born out of the fiasco of trying to respond effectively to the 1963 Skopje, Macedonia earthquake, OFDA would be at the forefront in responding 30 years later to the ethnic cleansing catastrophe in Bosnia.

In conclusion, OFDA personnel both past and present overwhelmingly view their experiences positively, as the most professionally "meaningful" (the word is used repeatedly in interviews) time in their lives. Relatively rare in government service, work in OFDA has many of the hallmarks of a calling. This sense of high purpose underlies the feeling that OFDA is deserving of uncommon loyalty—despite the frustrations arising from OFDA's frequent role conflict with AID, State, and USG foreign policy in general. Unbidden and unprompted in interviews for this report, many current and former OFDA personnel consistently offered, "OFDA is a special place to work."

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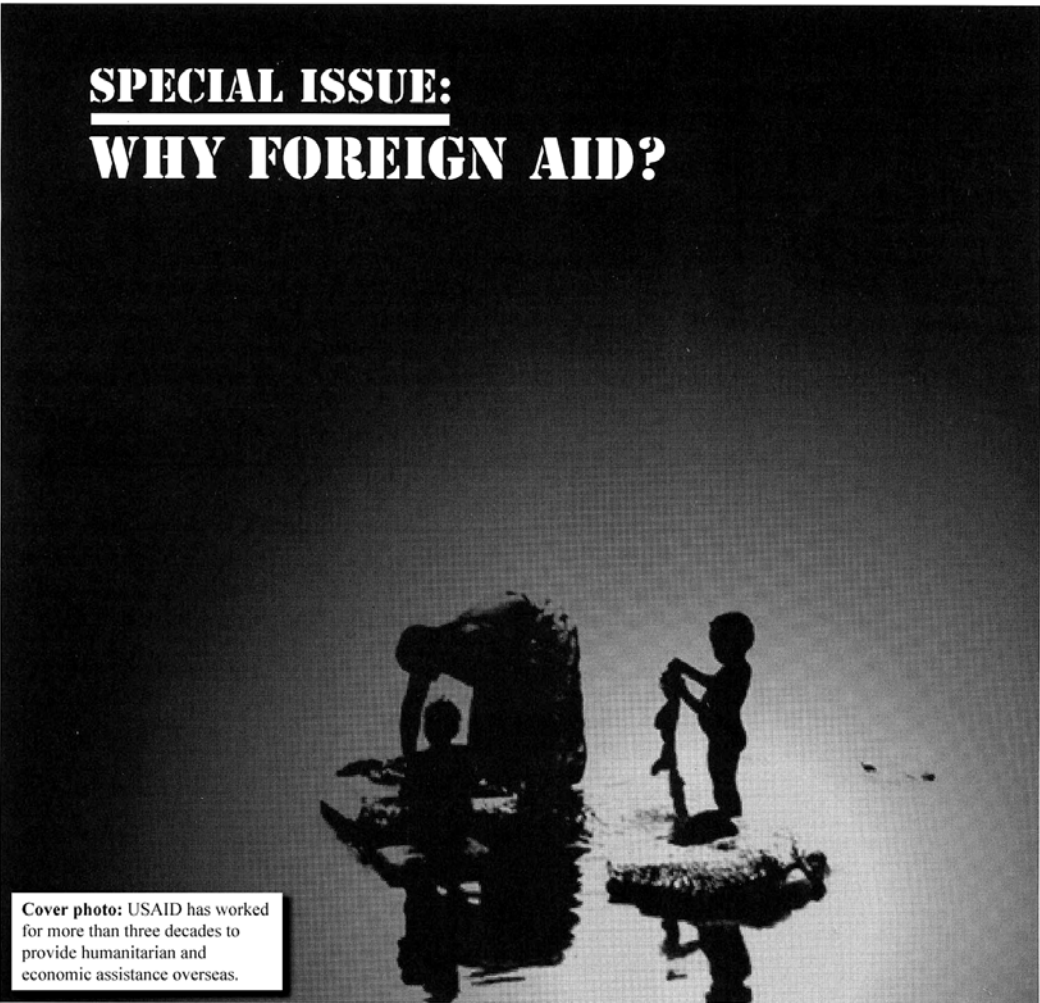
# Front Lines

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U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

MARCH 1996

**SPECIAL ISSUE:**  
**WHY FOREIGN AID?**



**Cover photo:** USAID has worked for more than three decades to provide humanitarian and economic assistance overseas.

## VI. OFDA's Directors, 1964-2004

1964	Nelson Post (DRC)
1965 - 1971	Steve Tripp (FDRC)
1970 - 1975	Tim McClure (FDRC)
1975 - 1976	Georgina Sheldon (FDRC)
1976	Chris Holmes (Acting—FDRC)
1976 - 1978	Earl Anderson (from now on, OFDA)
1978 - 1980	Anne Martindell
1979 - 1980	Joe Mitchell
1980	Stan Guth (Acting)
1980 - 1983	Martin Howell
1983 - 1985	Julius Becton
1985 - 1986	Fred Cole (Acting)
1986 - 1988	Julia Taft
1988 - 1992	Andrew Natsios
1992 - 1993	Jim Kunder
1993	Bill Garvelink (Acting)
1993 - 1996	Nan Borton
1996	Bill Garvelink (Acting)
1997-2000	Roy Williams
2001	Roger Winter
2001-2002	Tamra Halmrast-Sanchez (Acting)
2002-2003	Bernd McConnell
2003-2004	Tamra Halmrast-Sanchez (Acting)
2004-	Ken Isaacs