

Proportionalism

What should the United States do in the Third World, where there's too much to do and too much that can't be done?

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

WE are all wringing our hands over the plight of failing, unstable regions of the Third World, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa. But there is little consensus on what the American response should be. Many liberals blame the West and racism for the Third World's ills, and believe that democracy and [foreign-aid programs](#) can defeat historical, cultural, and environmental forces that have been at work for centuries. [Some conservatives think that the free market is the answer](#) to everyone's problems; other conservatives think that even a display of interest in a place like [Africa](#) indicates naive do-goodism. At one extreme is Pat Buchanan, at the Mexican border with a gun and a black cowboy hat, holding off the tide of darker peoples. At the other extreme is Mrs. Jellyby, in Dickens's *Bleak House*, whose eyes "could see nothing nearer than Africa!" Mrs. Jellyby let her London household go to ruin while she wrote letters all day in support of a tribe on the Niger River. Caught among the various mindsets are well-meaning Washington bureaucrats who are trying to craft workable policies on global humanitarian issues.



A durable foreign-aid consensus--one that might do gradual but unmistakable good where good can in fact be done--must be built on two seemingly contrary realizations:

* Although some human societies have made end runs around their own histories and environments, exceptionalism is, well, the exception. The fact that Africa continues to fall economically behind the Indian subcontinent (the second poorest region on the planet), despite billions spent on development assistance over the decades, amounts to an inescapable negative judgment. Not even Russia, with its 150 million people, 99 percent of whom are literate, can be pivotally affected by aid. To think that aid can fundamentally change sub-Saharan Africa, whose population is 3.75 times that of Russia and whose literacy rate is much, much lower, is to take a position that few people outside a narrow intellectual elite will accept. As our own historically high economic-growth rates fall, it is not even clear that American exceptionalism can be counted on: we will have less money in the future for foreign aid, not more.

* Although development assistance rarely changes history dramatically, it can do significant good in a significant number of places. And it can do good in ways that help us to reinvent ourselves as a nation in the

context of a more interconnected world, while also promoting vital security interests. A growing African middle class, for instance, would constitute an enormous market for American products. An Africa in which viruses could be monitored and controlled would preserve AIDS as a singularity rather than a harbinger of more pandemics. Given that disease is affected by poverty, migration, and environmental trends, helping Africa is strategically important if only in terms of cold self-interest.

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A development policy toward the underdeveloped world must have the ability to win political support in Washington and the nation at large. This is a simple fact that no amount of idealism or wishful thinking can get around. A development policy must engage us without overstraining us. Its criteria must be clear. And it must not set us up for failure. Expensive stunts like the invasions of Somalia and Haiti are risky in the context of an isolationist-tending climate of political discourse. If such endeavors fail, they threaten funding for useful programs in politically and economically fragile places where hope survives.

Herein is a rough sketch for a Third World aid policy. It is inspired in some measure by the principle known as proportionalism, adopted by some Catholic theologians on certain vexing moral issues. Proportionalism provides a useful moral approach to the Third World. In theological terms proportionalism is about doing or accepting a certain amount of "evil" to make possible a proportionately greater amount of good; it underlies theories of a just war and also, for some Catholics, the argument in favor of promoting the use of contraceptives as a means of reducing abortion. In everyday, non-theological terms it is about beating a retreat in order to preserve what is most important. Proportionalism is anathema to moral and ideological purists. It tempers implacable principle with common sense.

*Robert Kaplan' s
ideas generate
controversy. For
background read
the sidebar,
"Beyond ' The
Coming Anarchy.' "*

Foreign-aid proportionalism would have three aspects: the aid itself, early warning, and extremely rare interventions. What follows is a framework for disparate ideas and policies that have been bruited about and in some cases partly implemented.

First, the foreign aid itself would not be increased overall, because forging a political consensus for maintaining levels as they are is hard enough. But it would be targeted at bread-and-butter nationwide programs that seek to slow societal deterioration gradually, in order to create an environment for the emergence of healthier politics. It would *not* be targeted at making a particular country democratic in the face of a low literacy rate, the absence of a middle class, and a history of ethnic or regional strife. The Washington establishment chants that democracies don' t go to war, but what are emerging in many places are pseudo-democracies, societies teetering on ungovernability which hold elections out of desperation rather than as the final step in a process of economic and political development. Reduced emphasis on "democratic elections" would mean a new emphasis instead on [population control](#), women' s literacy, and resource-renewal projects. If more conservatives knew, for example, that an 85 percent cut in [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) family-planning programs would lead to 1.6 million more abortions a year by desperate women in developing countries, enough of them might support renewing these programs to form a

majority with liberals. Moreover, it has been shown that increased literacy among women reduces the birth rate: literate women exert more power in their relationships with men, control their own lives and those of their children better, and use financial and natural resources more intelligently. Nothing promotes positive social evolution in the Third World more speedily than women' s education.

Second, early warning. Some equate pessimism about the Third World with cynicism. In truth, pessimism is often both a realistic and a moral response: we *should* be scouting for trouble, not indulging fond hope. Probing for trouble in advance--as the United States is doing now in [Burundi](#)--will not always pay dividends. But there will be times when conflict management sooner will forestall more agonizing choices later.

The third aspect is intervention--the rarer the better. The so-called Powell Doctrine--which calls for intervention only when it can be quickly and easily accomplished--has been criticized for moral obtuseness. But the Powell Doctrine is in fact a good start. The degree of difficulty of a humanitarian relief operation *must* be a criterion in making a decision, for if it is not, our misadventures will preclude intervention even when intervention would otherwise have been worthwhile. The other criteria should be the strategic value of the place where we are considering intervening and the psychological weight that such an intervention might exert on other parts of the world. Interventions in places and situations in which morality coincides with ease, strategic value, and leverage would meet what the military calls the parents' test: when a Pentagon official can stare a soldier' s parents in the eye and tell them that their son or daughter died in the service of something worth dying for. (There are situations in which the strategic value is significant but so is the difficulty--such as in the Balkans and on the Korean peninsula. These places are historical legacies of sacrifices in three wars that saw great losses of American lives, and compared with which our historical involvement in a place like Liberia pales in significance.) In any case, here is [George F. Kennan](#), cautioning against intervention in Somalia--a warning that applies to other Third World states that have gone into the abyss.

The fact is that this dreadful situation cannot possibly be put to rights other than by the establishment of a governing power for the entire territory, and a very ruthless, determined one at that. It would not be a democratic one, because the very pre-requisites for a democratic political system do not exist among the people in question.

The framework outlined above accepts a certain amount of evil (diminished concern for elections; a willingness in many cases to stand by and watch atrocious situations without intervening) in order to pursue an attainable good (low-risk, high-yield interventions only, and only on rare occasions; modest but clear involvement in literacy and other bread-and-butter programs in places where improvement is possible). We must stay engaged, but within strict limits.

Illustration by Doug Ross