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Exporting Idealism: The Right Kind of Intervention

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"Meddling in the internal affairs of other countries." American foreign policymakers usually take pains to deny such intentions. Yet the economic assistance we provide, the development projects we sponsor, and, above all, the military aid we give to Third World countries are anything but neutral. These programs inevitably affect the internal dynamics of a country, propping up the existing government or setting in motion political changes that may eventually undermine it. The real question is not whether we are interfering in the political life of the Third World. Rather, it's whether our intervention is effective.

Vietnam, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Iran, El Salvador, Lebanon—the list of countries that have given us grief despite American aid is a long one. Our ostensible purpose in providing aid to these countries has been twofold: to contain the spread of Soviet influences and to promote democracy by encouraging such democratic institutions as a free press, fair elections, trade unions, and representative assemblies. We spend billions, sacrifice both international prestige and countless American lives—and often end up with little to show for it.

Why do we keep failing? While second-guessing is easy, I think a major reason is our

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failure to do *enough* meddling in these countries' internal affairs. Or, more precisely, we restrict our intervention to economic and social programs, hoping that well-fed people will not turn to the Soviets and that grassroots social programs will build responsive political institutions at the national level.

Economic aid obviously can be helpful, and not only in feeding malnourished villagers or building a new school or hospital. The economic and social assistance undertaken by John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress in Latin America, for example, helped solidify the democratic institutions of Costa Rica. But when such efforts go unaccompanied by the right kind of political action, they can produce results contrary to what we seek. Ethiopia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Libya all have received extensive economic assistance; but because we did not work as hard to strengthen the political institutions in these countries, the results have tended to be negligible at best and sometimes even destructive.

To be sure, some of the problems come with the territory. Economic aid can produce rising expectations among a populace that the nations in question cannot meet. (See "Great Expectations: The Real Cause of Revolution," October 1983.) But we make matters worse when we neglect a developing country's need for institutions that

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