

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

Digital Soft Power ^[1]

US government criticized for slow aid, but tsunami relief attracts record private donations online

WASHINGTON, Dec. 30 -- By the time President Bush spoke publicly yesterday and promised U.S. leadership in tsunami relief, a wave of donations from individuals had swept over the Internet.

Google and amazon.com are among the popular Web sites that have added disaster relief links to their home pages, and those electronic bits of support are already adding up to millions of dollars, according to the Washington Post.

By last night, amazon.com alone had raised \$3 million from 53,000. That means amazon.com, by itself, has raised more disaster relief than either the European Union or China, according to figures tabulated by the Associated Press and published in today's Washington Post. Amazon.com support is greater than Ireland, Sweden, Greece, South Korea, New Zealand and Singapore COMBINED, according to the AP chart.

So many tried to donate to the American Red Cross online that its site crashed. Even with the technical difficulties, Internet contributions to the Red Cross outnumbered the older phone bank donations by more than two to one, according to the Post. On Tuesday, 25,000 people contributed on the Red Cross site, while 9,000 people donated by telephone.

As of noon yesterday, the Red Cross reported receiving a total of \$18 million from donors in the U.S., over half of what the U.S. government has promised in aid. If the American Red Cross were a country, its tsunami relief assistance would rank eighth in the world.

(Of course since it is not clear what percentage of Internet donors are in the U.S., so it would not be correct to refer to attribute online donations as entirely American.)

The biggest problem now may be logistical difficulties of delivering aid to the stricken areas, according to reports from the scene.

President Bush's remarks yesterday were his first public statements on the disaster, after criticism that his response had been tardy. And Mr. Bush himself conceded that it took three days for the U.S. to recognize the scope of the disaster. One factor may have been the low level of government staffing over the Christmas holiday, with some agencies leaving only skeleton staffs in place.

The U.S. had also been criticized as "stingy" by U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland, who later withdrew his comment.

Now, many in Washington believe disaster relief could be a major opportunity for public

diplomacy, for the U.S. to show leadership in the global disaster relief effort, according to reports in The New York Times and elsewhere. The U.S. has even mobilized its spy satellites to help relief efforts.

But online, thousands of Americans have moved more quickly than government. And what the Howard Dean campaign proved in the 2004 campaign -- that small online contributions can quickly add up to millions -- is now being proven once again in tsunami relief. This time, it is on a global scale -- digital soft power, as it were -- pooling small donations across the country and directing them to the other side of the world.

And remember, in this year-end season, donations may be tax deductible.

Archived Comments:

Brianna Shepard on January 3, 2005 @ 10:52 am:

Given the amount we have been spending daily on the war in Iraq, and given the administration's vision of itself as a force of good- -- well, really, great-ness -- would it not be appropriate and in our diplomatic interest for the US to donate more than any other country, rather than rely on our technology, on the extraordinary online outpouring from private citizens and on the blatantly opportunistic visit to the region by (the other) Powell and (the other) Bush?
