

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Helping Haiti and Doing Public Diplomacy ^[1]

The global response to the catastrophe in Haiti is reassuring in the sense that it shows governments and people do care about a nation in which they have no strategic interest. If there is still some altruism alive in the world, it can be seen in this relief effort.

A year from now, while Haiti continues its long rebuilding process, what will Haitians think of the United States and other countries that have contributed so much so quickly to the impoverished nation? Will the United States follow up on emergency assistance with lasting outreach to the Haitian people, helping Haiti redevelop its institutions and improve its daily life? Will the commitment last ten weeks or ten years?

The institutionalization of compassion has always proved difficult. As a political matter, public enthusiasms are usually short-lived; “compassion fatigue” will undoubtedly set in concerning Haiti as has happened after responses to past catastrophes.

But if a comprehensive, long-term aid program for Haiti is developed, the United States would be helping itself as well as the people of Haiti. It may seem self-serving to consider these issues, but it’s a tough world out there and winning friends is important. And, as a practical matter, the United States could deliver aid that would seem massive in Haiti for what amounts to pocket change when compared to the costs of fighting wars elsewhere in the world.

Public diplomacy involves a country reaching out directly to people, not to their government. This makes sense for a number of reasons in Haiti, and if it is done well in this case, there is no reason that this approach should not be tried more frequently elsewhere, without waiting for humanitarian emergencies. The United States can afford mini-Marshall Plans where need is greatest throughout the world.

Although USAID and other agencies do fine work, it is often overshadowed in the midst of the broad array of U.S. policy initiatives. That could be changed, and making such public diplomacy the true centerpiece of American foreign policy would change the way the United States looks at the world and, more important, would change how the world looks at America.
