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Herbert Hoover and the Origins of American Public Diplomacy of the Deed ^[1]

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With the recent earthquakes that devastated Haiti and Chile, the concept of aid diplomacy has arisen in the global consciousness. Aid diplomacy is predicated on the notion that in times of crisis, nations can do well in public diplomacy terms by doing good works for those in need.

Recently, as I wandered around Stanford University, I was reminded of what might be the first case of American aid diplomacy.. On display at the museums and library of Stanford's Hoover Institution and Hoover Tower is a moving reminder of the remarkable example of aid diplomacy carried out by Herbert Hoover.

With the outbreak of the Great War, the engineering magnate Herbert Hoover undertook efforts to organize relief and transports for Americans stranded on a European continent descending into strife. As bloodshed and chaos played out in the northern European theater of Belgium, global attention turned to care of the starving women and children in the battlefield that the country had become. Hoover's previous efforts of organizing logistics for relief efforts for those Americans trapped in Europe led the American Ambassador to Britain to ask him to organize the Commission for the Relief of Belgium (CRB).

Hoover answered the ambassador's request, and went on to found and direct what was termed: "[a] pioneering effort in global altruism." Under Hoover's leadership, the CRB fed and cared for Belgian women and children who were starving under German occupation as well as from the British naval blockade. The CRB provided food, medicine and clothing to millions of Belgians as well as those in Northern France on a daily basis until the war came to a close.

The museum offers moving anecdotes related to the CRB's efforts, stating that the Belgian children were: "shivering, grasping bowls and pitchers and the precious little cards that would guarantee them a meal. Upon receiving his or her allotment, each would pause, bow and utter a single word: Merci."

Meanwhile, when America entered the Great War in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Hoover as head of the U.S. Food Administration. With the war's conclusion, Hoover served as the director general of the American Relief Administration (ARA), Hoover coordinated humanitarian relief to more than 20 countries. The ARA even conducted a massive famine relief effort in Bolshevik Russia from 1921 to 1923, and fed more than 11 million people a day at its height.

On display at the Hoover museum and libraries are various remembrances of the aid efforts and its public diplomacy value seen in the "Save the Children of Belgium" posters alongside pictures of Belgian appreciation rallies and letters of friendship to honor American fidelity to

the people of Belgium. There were other pictures of later orphan efforts carried out by the ARA in Poland, Austria and Lithuania. Alongside the pressed flower gifts sent as thanks by children in Belgium, there were numerous “Thank You” letters featuring the American and Belgian flags together. Meanwhile, there were sacks of grain in bags declaring the contribution’s provenance from Southeast Iowa or stating its nature as a gift contributed by the People of Kentucky to Belgian noncombatants.

“An American epic,” was what Hoover termed his efforts and declared that it demonstrated American responsibility to the people of Europe. The example offered by Herbert Hoover’s aid efforts are a stirring reminder that the existence of a friend in need is the possibility for good public diplomacy of the deed.

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