

Nov 04, 2016 by [Helle Dale](#)

Disaster Relief as Public Diplomacy? ^[1]

A new study by the [Pew Global Attitudes Project](#) poses the question: Does humanitarian relief improve America's image. The answer is "not much," or "not as much as one might hope." While this may seem unfair, given that the United States spends some \$4 billion annually on humanitarian relief, it is perhaps not surprising. People in disaster zones are undoubtedly relieved to see the U.S. cavalry coming over the hill (figuratively speaking) when no other agency on earth has the logistical capacity and the resources to come to their help – as in the early response to the Indonesian tsunami, and the Pakistani and Japanese earthquakes, the three disasters examined by Pew. Yet, as we all know, gratitude is but a fleeting emotion, and its effects wear off over time. Furthermore, disaster relief's greatest positive impact comes in countries where a positive view of the United States already prevailed. "The lesson for disaster relief efforts is that they are more likely to have a significant effect on public attitudes in countries where there is at least a reservoir of goodwill toward the U.S.," the Pew authors write. "In nations such as Pakistan, where countervailing issues and deeply held suspicions drive intense anti-Americanism, enhancing America's image through humanitarian aid may prove considerably more difficult."

Now, the Pew study is interesting from the perspective of demonstrating the volatility of public opinion polls. The volatility same has been demonstrated by the group [Terror Free Tomorrow](#), which did the first polling in Indonesia and Pakistan after disaster struck these countries, and found a significant bounce in views on the United States. The Pew Global Attitudes study demonstrates that positive views of the United States in Japan went up from 66 percent in 2010 to 85 percent in the spring of 2011, a few weeks after the earthquake and tsunami hit. By the fall of last year, numbers were still good, with 82 percent holding favorable views. For Indonesia, where opposition to the war in Iraq had caused opinion of the United States to tank severely, positive views of the U.S. went from 15 percent in 2004 to 38 percent in early 2005, soon after the December tsunami. While not great, this was certainly an improvement. The real bounce, though, came in 2009 after the election of President Obama, who grew up in Indonesia. Pakistan is a totally different story. From a low of 10 percent in 2002, positive views of the United States never went any higher than 27 percent in 2006 after extensive U.S. relief efforts after the earthquake. In 2011, those numbers were down to 11 percent, abysmal for a country supposed to be a U.S. ally.

As interesting as all this may be however, Pew's argument suffers from an implicit fallacy, not unusual in public diplomacy discourse. The primary purpose of humanitarian relief is not public diplomacy. This may be almost too obvious to state. However, we have a tendency to want to measure the international popularity rating of many U.S. government activities that may influence foreign publics, whereas their real purpose is something entirely different. In other words, impact on popular opinion is not the reason for military interventions, military bases, U.S. trade policy, and development aid either. Military interventions are judged by how well they effectively they dealt with the enemy, and trade agreements on how they affected the volume of goods and services traded between two countries. Similarly, humanitarian relief has to be measured by an entirely different set of metric, on the most fundamental level, how

many lives did it save? In that context, U.S. humanitarian relief globally is a huge success.

Now, it would not hurt if the U.S. government was more proactive in ensuring that U.S. relief supplies, from food to field hospitals were clearly identifiable as gifts from the American people -- given not as part of a popularity competition, but out of a sense of shared humanity.