

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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Contributor

## How to Save 45,000 Lives in a Day

By Matthew Berry

Over the past month, the world has come together in an unparalleled display of support for the victims of the Asian tsunami. This remarkable generosity need not be a singularity though; we are witnessing what sustained foreign aid could be if citizens, governments, and media would unite to support victims of less visible disasters, such as poverty, malaria, and AIDS.

Although the tsunami was devastating, 130 times as many people died in 2003 as a result of malaria, AIDS, and starvation. Why then do governments not rise up each year and pledge heroic amounts of foreign aid? We have seen footage of those giant waves erasing lives and communities, and we have acted. Why do we not see more footage of starvation and disease so that we may act on that as well?

A U.N. official recently commented that America was “stingy.” This may have been based on the fact that Bush initially pledged less aid to the tsunami victims than he spent on his own inauguration party. Or it may have been based on the fact that the United States spends only 0.15 percent of its gross national product on development aid, whereas our European counterparts spend (or have promised to spend by 2015) 0.7 percent of their GNPs. No intelligent person can argue that the people affected by AIDS, for instance, would not benefit immensely if the U.S. spent five times as much money on development aid.

Far worse than stinginess, however, are the misplaced priorities the United States displays. Every day, the U.S. government spends approximately one billion dollars on defense. Every day, approximately 45,000 people die of starvation. It would cost \$0.80 per day per person to save these lives, a daily total of \$36,000. This means that if the U.S. government spent 0.000036 percent of its daily defense budget on development, it could save 45,000 lives each day, instead of plotting to end lives elsewhere.

Terror is a legitimate concern, but the number of people who die of AIDS,

malaria and starvation in a single year is nearly 7,000 times greater than the number of Americans ever killed by foreign terrorists.

There are two primary reasons these numbers exist. First, the U.S. government and media require dramatic singularities to glorify and perpetuate their existence. Second, the average American is so far removed from conditions of true poverty that it is impossible to imagine how much \$0.80 per day could help these stricken people.

The media must have their "big story" to keep viewers hooked and justify their existence and the advertising expenditure of their clients. Similarly, it is far more beneficial for a politician to act once in response to a dramatic event than to continuously support the development of international policy. Sustained progress on just about any topic will often exceed the short attention span of the average American.

As for the second reason, the average American cannot imagine what it means to live in extreme poverty. We do not see media coverage on the topic, and nothing approaching extreme poverty exists in America.

The development sector needs to find a way to communicate directly to the American people. The marketing and lobbying that is fundamental to corporations can be used with equal efficacy by the development sector. The tsunami showed that the American people care deeply for people in need, but in order for the American public to donate toward sustainable development efforts, these initiatives must be marketed and justified.

Columbia is a leader in promoting development issues; see the Earth Institute's Web site at [www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu](http://www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu). For links to sites with information concerning development and information on donating, visit [www.caili.org/links](http://www.caili.org/links). To see how Columbia students are making a difference in the development sector, visit [www.sustainus.org](http://www.sustainus.org).

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