

## Now Bush wants to buy the complicity of aid workers

Relief groups have been told they must be an "arm of the US government"

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The Bush administration has found its next target for pre-emptive war, but it's not Iran, Syria or North Korea. Not yet anyway.

Before launching any new foreign adventures, the Bush gang has some homeland housekeeping to take care of: it is going to sweep up those pesky non-governmental organisations that are helping to turn world opinion against US bombs and brands.

The war on NGOs is being fought on two clear fronts. One buys the silence and complicity of mainstream humanitarian and religious groups by offering lucrative reconstruction contracts. The other marginalises and criminalises more independent-minded NGOs by claiming that their work is a threat to democracy. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is in charge of handing out the carrots, while the American Enterprise Institute, the most powerful think-tank in Washington, is wielding the sticks.

On May 21 in Washington, Andrew Natsios, the head of USAID, gave a speech blasting US NGOs for failing to play a role many of them didn't realise they had been assigned: doing public relations for the US government. According to InterAction, the network of 160 relief and development NGOs, Natsios was "irritated" that starving and sick Iraqi and Afghan children didn't realise that their food and vaccines were coming to them courtesy of George Bush. From now on, NGOs had to do a better job of linking their humanitarian assistance to US foreign policy and making it clear that they are "an arm of the US government". If they didn't, InterAction reported, "Natsios threatened to personally tear up their contracts and find new partners".

For aid workers, there are even more strings attached to US dollars. USAID told several NGOs that have been awarded humanitarian contracts that they cannot speak to the media - all requests from reporters must go through Washington. Mary McClymont, CEO of InterAction, calls the demands "unprecedented" and says: "It looks like the NGOs aren't independent and can't speak for themselves about what they see and think."

Many humanitarian leaders are shocked to hear their work described as "an arm" of government - most see themselves as independent (that would be the "non-governmental" part of the name). The best NGOs are loyal to their causes, not to countries, and they aren't afraid to blow the whistle on their own governments. Think of Médecins Sans Frontières standing up to the White House and the European Union over AIDS drug patents, or Human Rights Watch's campaign against the death penalty in the US.

Natsios embraced this independence in his previous job as vice president of World Vision. During the North Korean famine, Natsios didn't hesitate to blast his own government for withholding food aid, calling the Clinton administration's response "too slow" and its claim that politics was not a factor "total nonsense".

Don't expect candour like that from the aid groups Natsios now oversees in Iraq. These days, NGOs are supposed to do nothing more than quietly pass out care packages with a big "brought to you by the US" logo attached - in public-private partnerships with Bechtel and Halliburton, of course.

That is the message of "NGO Watch", an initiative of the American Enterprise Institute and the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies that takes aim at the growing political influence of the non-profit sector. The stated purpose of the website, launched on June 11, is to "bring clarity and accountability to the burgeoning world of NGOs". In fact, it is a McCarthyite blacklist, telling tales on any NGO that dares speak against Bush administration policies or in support of international treaties opposed by the White House.

This bizarre initiative takes as its premise the idea that there is something sinister about "unelected" groups of citizens getting together to try to influence their government. "The extraordinary growth of advocacy NGOs in liberal democracies has the potential to undermine the sovereignty of constitutional democracies," the site claims.

Coming from the AEI, this is not without irony. As Raj Patel, policy analyst at the California-based NGO Food First, points out: "The American Enterprise Institute is an NGO itself and it is supported by the most powerful corporations on the planet. They are accountable only to their board, which includes Motorola, American Express and ExxonMobil."

As for influence, few peddle it quite like the AEI, whose looniest of ideas have a habit of becoming Bush administration policy. And no wonder. Richard Perle, member and former chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Policy Board, is an AEI fellow, along with Lynne Cheney, the wife of the vice-president, and the Bush administration is crowded with former AEI fellows. As President Bush said at an AEI dinner in February: "At the American Enterprise Institute, some of the finest minds in our nation are at work on some of the greatest challenges to our nation. You do such good work that my administration has borrowed 20 such minds."

In other words, the AEI is more than a think-tank - it's Bush's outsourced brain. Taken together with Natsios's statements, this attack on the non-profit sector marks the emergence of a new Bush doctrine: NGOs should be nothing more than the charity wing of the military, silently mopping up after wars and famines. Their job is not to ask how these tragedies could have been averted, or to advocate solutions. And it is certainly not to join anti-war and globalisation movements pushing for real political change.

The control freaks in the White House have really outdone themselves this time. First they tried to silence governments critical of their foreign policies by buying them off with aid packages and trade deals. (Last month US trade representative Robert Zoellick said that the US would only enter into new trade agreements with countries that offered "cooperation or better on foreign policy and security issues".)

Next they made sure the press didn't ask hard questions during the war by trading journalistic access for editorial control. Now they are attempting to turn relief workers in Iraq and Afghanistan into publicists for Bush's Brand US. The US government is usually described as "unilateralist", but I don't think that's quite accurate. The Bush administration may be willing to go it alone, but what it really wants is legions of self-censoring followers, from foreign governments to national journalists and international NGOs.

This is not a lone wolf we are dealing with; it's a sheep-herder. The question is: which of the NGOs will play the sheep?

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