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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Don't Know, Should Care

By JEFFREY D. SACHS

George Tenet's resignation this week came after failures of American intelligence in the Iraq war as well as in the lead-up to the Sept. 11 attacks. But the government's intelligence failures extend far beyond the C.I.A. and the countries where we are at war or chasing terrorists. In the world's poorest regions, from the Andes to Central Asia, the government seems to operate almost blindly, facing challenges that it simply does not understand and therefore can't resolve.

This isn't a problem that started in this Bush administration, though the combination of ignorance and arrogance in President Bush's foreign policy has proved especially lethal. Since the early 1980's, American development programs have been gutted, to the point that there is little institutional understanding about societies seething because of mass unemployment, rapid population growth, pervasive disease and chronic hunger.

Whether I look at the National Security Council, the Treasury, the Council of Economic Advisers, the United States Agency for International Development, or the relevant Congressional committees, I see woefully few individuals with expertise about the low-income world. This is too bad, because the low-income world (roughly, those who live and die on less than \$2 per day) constitutes 40 percent of humanity — and most of the places where American troops have fought and died in recent decades.

When I went to key Bush administration officials in 2001 to urge stepping up the battle against the AIDS pandemic, my counterparts were lawyers, holdovers from the cold war and political operatives. What was lacking was professional expertise, which was bottled up at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health, neither of which had been given the lead in setting AIDS policy. Nor was USAID any better. Its budget and expertise had been so sapped by 2001 that there were few independent thinkers left, and even fewer who knew the details of the AIDS catastrophe in Africa.

Even though there is genuine interest in the Bush administration for battling AIDS, too much politics and too little professionalism resulted in years of delay in starting President Bush's global AIDS initiative, and millions died as a result. That disheartening loss of time and opportunity has been matched in other circumstances. When it has been urgent in recent years to confront challenges arising from African poverty, Andean political instability or environmental catastrophes in Asia, there has been almost nobody to speak with in senior positions of government. When an economic crisis pushed Bolivia's democratically elected government over the cliff last year, for instance, senior United States officials with responsibility for South America showed that they were utterly unqualified to respond.

In truth, worrying about places like Bolivia or Ethiopia is considered hopelessly soft or politically irrelevant in high government circles — until disaster strikes. That attitude is the key to understanding

why our government was unable to anticipate and head off disasters in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Haiti, Nicaragua, Somalia, Vietnam or the many other places where we have squandered lives and money.

The undoing of American foreign policy is captured in the budget numbers. Long gone are the Marshall Plan times, when we dedicated several percent of our gross domestic product to European reconstruction. The United States will spend about \$450 billion this year on the military but only \$15 billion on official development assistance. The 30-to-1 ratio is mirrored by a similar imbalance in our thinking. Our military expertise is undoubted. Our ability to understand what exists before and after wars in low-income countries is nearly nonexistent.

Changing all of this will require much more than recognizing the errors of the Iraq war. A good starting point would be to rebuild the USAID into a pre-eminent agency for understanding and resolving human catastrophes and security threats arising from extreme poverty. This agency requires a professional, nonpoliticized leadership and staff; a new mandate to study a world economy of startling inequalities; increased financial resources to help fragile and impoverished countries before they fall into chaos; and a rank as a cabinet-level department, so that expertise gets a hearing at the centers of power.

But our efforts will need to go beyond one agency. We must have leaders who recognize that the problems of the poor aren't trifles to leave to do-gooders, but are vital strategic issues. For the first time in decades, we must strive to understand problems — tropical disease, malnutrition and the like — that are unfamiliar to us but are urgent concerns of billions of people abroad. In the case of a superpower, ignorance is not bliss; it is a threat to Americans and to humanity.

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