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Review by **Robert Rakove**, United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney

Among the grim litany of the Cold War battlegrounds of the 1980s, Ethiopia represents something of a paradox. Raymond Garthoff's exhaustive history of the conflict's final decade offers the curious observation that, while "Ethiopia would have seemed an appropriate target for the Reagan Doctrine . . . The administration declined to engage itself." Despite the urgings of ardent Cold Warriors, the Reagan White House never waged the kind of bloody proxy war in Ethiopia that it did in Afghanistan, Angola, and Nicaragua. This occurred in spite of a surfeit of factors that might have motivated intervention: the fervent and ruthless communism of the regime of Mengistu Haile Meriam, the possibilities offered by a willing ally in neighboring Somalia, and the concurrent opportunities posed by rebellions in Ethiopia's Tigrayan and Eritrean provinces.¹ Recent history could only have heightened the temptations posed by continued upheaval in the Horn of Africa. The establishment of the communist Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia (PMGSE) had been perceived as a critical setback, as had the Carter administration's ill-conceived effort to support Somali designs on the Ogaden border region. Ethiopia, furthermore, hosted a detachment of Cuban troops, and had been accused by the Reagan administration of facilitating Libyan efforts to destabilize a friendly regime in Sudan.² Neither motive nor opportunity was absent in this particular case. Yet, strangely, the administration held back. Why?

¹ Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings, 1994), 693-694, 715.

² *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. 83, No. 2079 (October 1983), 75.

One answer is suggested by Alexander Poster's fascinating, well-researched article: the Reagan administration perceived a different way to contest Ethiopia during the mid-1980s. Responding to a sizable domestic outcry and attacks from political opponents who charged it with inaction in the face of a catastrophic Ethiopian famine, Reagan and his advisors battled for Ethiopia not with covertly smuggled arms, but with public shipments of food relief. It was, as Poster terms it, a "gentle war" that briefly united two Cold War foes as "partners in the largest disaster relief effort in the history of the world." Between 1984 and 1986, the United States spent more than half a billion dollars, contributing more than 800,000 tons of food to a relief effort in a country it had identified as an adversary (399).

Based on research within the files of the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID), his oral history research, the memoirs of participants, leading accounts of the famine, and contemporaneous reporting, Poster illustrates that the politics of humanitarian assistance are never a simple affair; indeed, the case of Ethiopia in the 1980s reveals them at their most nettlesome and complex.³ By this account, the Reagan administration was initially reluctant to offer aid of any kind to the implacably hostile Mengistu regime, even as David A. Korn, the senior diplomat remaining in Addis Ababa, the NGO community, and others warned of a growing famine. Finally yielding before domestic and international opinion to undertake action, the White House hoped that a vigorous response to famine in Ethiopia might serve both domestic and geopolitical ends: bolstering Republican Party prospects at the legislative level in the 1984 election, and winning the United States a propaganda victory in the Horn of Africa (405-409).

The role of media emerges as a key theme of this article. The East African famine of the mid-1980s was a turning point in Western approaches toward starvation. Images of starving Ethiopians became a staple of Western television news reports, serving to rally support for relief, though not without reinforcing images of the entire continent as destitute and incapable of self-governance. The supergroups Band Aid and USA for Africa recorded landmark fundraising anthems. Against this backdrop, the United States and Ethiopia were both sensitive to criticism by the international press, and keen to turn the narrative of the unfolding calamity to their advantage.

By Poster's account, having reversed course, the Reagan administration seems to have pivoted between dramatically different objectives. At times it seems to have nursed the idea that the relief program would sway Ethiopia toward the Western camp (410). "Surely, some in Washington reasoned, the Ethiopian regime would see that, when it came to basic matters of survival, the West had a lot more to offer than the East," Korn later

³ Poster addresses such studies as Steven Varnis, *Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant? U.S. Food Aid Policy and Ethiopian Famine Relief* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1990); Alexander DeWaal, *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991); and Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris, and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine* (London: Zed, 1987).

wrote.⁴ More often, however, the administration also sought opportunities to embarrass the communist regime, by revealing its inability to aid its own people. Secretary of State George Shultz sought to inform the Ethiopian public of the U.S. role in the relief effort; thwarted by the regime, U.S. officials shifted toward a campaign to discredit the Mengistu regime's own relief efforts (410-412).

Nonetheless, in one of this article's signature points, Poster reveals that the frequently media-savvy Reagan administration often found itself outmaneuvered by its Ethiopian counterparts. In the autumn of 1984, Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of the government's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), cannily exploited the unfolding U.S. presidential election to apply pressure on the Reagan administration (407-409). By the end of November, U.S. government policy had shifted fundamentally, as USAID had obtained Congressional authorization for a massive shipment of 200,000 tons of food. This would not be Washington's only reversal at the hands of Dawit. Faced with a calculated offer of surplus Kenyan corn that he would be unable to distribute, the wily administrator turned the tables on his American counterparts by declaring that Washington sought to feed his starving countrymen with corn unfit for human consumption (413-415). Dawit's credibility with his own government, however, had been damaged by remarks made by his American counterpart, McPherson, over the closure of a refugee camp at Ibnet after a cholera epidemic. Having only reluctantly supported the establishment of the Ibnet camp, funded by Israeli philanthropist Abie Nathan, Mengistu came increasingly to suspect the loyalty of Dawit, who eventually fled to the United States (412-413).⁵ By Poster's account, this was a Pyrrhic victory for the United States, as the RRC subsequently became far less cooperative.

Further complicating matters for the relief effort were the varying agendas of international relief organizations. Poster identifies organizations like the International Red Cross, the Catholic Relief Services, and the United Nations as occupying a critical middle ground between the United States and Ethiopia. The Reagan administration was far more comfortable giving funds and food to NGOs than to the Mengistu regime, and the Ethiopians seem to have regarded relief organizations with somewhat less suspicion than they did USAID officials. NGOs, moreover, were able to operate in rebel-held areas. Intriguingly, Poster notes that the NGOs themselves were not only independent-minded, but often lacked a common agenda. The International Red Cross proved generally sympathetic to U.S. goals in Ethiopia, and even acted to supply the media with reports damaging to the Mengistu regime (416-417). The CRS, on the other hand, valued its ties with the Ethiopian government and resisted U.S. efforts to control its work on the ground – which involved far more coordination with the RRC than Washington would have

⁴ David A. Korn, *Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union* (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986), 127.

⁵ A more critical portrait of Dawit emerges in Edward Kissi, "Beneath International Famine Relief in Ethiopia: The United States, Ethiopia, and the Debate over Relief Aid, Development Assistance, and Human Rights," *African Studies Review* 48:2 (September 2005): 120-122.

preferred. Growing tensions between USAID and CRS led to a public breach in early 1986, as CRS director Frank Carlin charged the U.S. government with pursuing an “immoral” policy that set Cold War politics ahead of humanitarian necessity (422). USAID, in turn, was dismayed by the willingness of CRS to operate feeding programs in Ethiopian resettlement camps, thereby abetting the Mengistu government’s forced land reform policies (418, 421-423). Eritrean and Tigrayan rebel organizations further impeded relief efforts by attacking relief convoys and seizing supplies (420-421).

Faced with constant public relations battles with the Ethiopians and CRS, increased domestic political criticism of the aid effort from the right (something the article might have elaborated upon), and no evidence that the PMGSE was either weakening or moderating, it is small wonder that USAID cut funding in 1986. The Mengistu regime was left to collapse under the weight of its own brutality and ineptitude, toppled by a rebel offensive in late 1991. Mengistu, the architect of much of his country’s suffering, currently resides in Zimbabwe as an honored guest of Robert Mugabe.

Poster identifies three key contributions that his article makes to the historiography of United States foreign relations: toward our knowledge of the core goals and tactics of the Reagan administration; toward our understanding of the limits of U.S. power in the late Cold War period; and toward an emerging body of scholarship examining U.S. aid in Ethiopia. These contributions can be situated at different heights of generalization (403-404). Poster’s attention is focused on the politics of disaster relief – indeed, this article is adapted from a chapter in a dissertation that examines famine relief in Ethiopia alongside U.S. responses to catastrophic earthquakes in Mexico City (1985), El Salvador (1986), and then-Soviet Armenia (1988). I think this article, however, will constitute an important resource for scholars contemplating other topics in the fields of United States foreign relations and international history.

One may ponder, for example, the horizontal linkages between Ethiopian famine relief and other African issues in the 1980s. Did the Reagan administration perceive connections between this endeavor and other policies on the continent, grasping at an opportunity to reap goodwill in the Horn to counterbalance the diplomatic fallout of its policy of ‘constructive engagement’ toward South Africa, or its more aggressive policy in Angola? Can the relief program be linked to the gradual softening of Cold War policies that occurred after George Shultz became secretary of state, and did this policy evoke the same kinds of sharp internal debates as other Third World battlegrounds? One wonders what Cold War hawks like Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey had to say about Ethiopia policy, for example. Were there other, less gentle (and broadly known) policies toward Ethiopia with which the official policy interacted? Answers to these questions must necessarily await the declassification of yet-unavailable national security files and diplomatic records related to Ethiopia and Africa. Scholars who approach such questions with the benefit of these records will owe Poster a considerable debt.

“The Gentle War” also makes a fitting accompaniment to a growing literature on food aid as an instrument of U.S. policy well outside the Horn of Africa. Nick Cullather’s *The Hungry World* and Kristin Ahlberg’s *Transplanting the Great Society* have both recently illuminated the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of linking food aid to broader policy goals. Poster’s case study of Ethiopia nicely augments the work done in these two books, which tend to examine donor-recipient relationships that are far less conflictual. Taken together, the lessons for policy practitioners are not terribly hopeful, even as such officials face the latest chorus of calls from legislators and would-be presidents to demand political support from aid recipients as a price for further assistance. Students of the role of NGOs in the modern world will also find this article to be of interest.

Poster outlines in a brief epilogue the tantalizing suggestion that the Ethiopian enterprise helped to establish a blueprint for future U.S. relief efforts: in neighboring Somalia in the 1990s, after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and in the wake of Haiti’s horrific 2010 earthquake (424-425). He has provided here a thoroughly persuasive case for the critical importance of this episode in the history of United States foreign relations.

Robert Rakove is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Sydney’s United States Studies Centre. He has taught at Colgate University and Old Dominion University, and holds a doctorate in history from the University of Virginia. His book, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, will be published by Cambridge University Press.

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