



DEVELOPMENT NEWS BRIEF

Subject: Development in the Obama Administration
Date: November 13, 2008

The Center for US Global Engagement convened a meeting on November 13th to mark the successful conclusion of its Impact 08 project, an effort to inject the foreign aid issue into the 2008 presidential campaign. Executive Director Liz Shroyer announced that all of the candidates responded favorably to the idea of expanding our foreign assistance efforts. Most important, Barak Obama committed himself to doubling the assistance budget and provided a detailed account of how he wants to do that.

A discussion between Paul Begala and Michael Gerson, veterans of the Clinton and George W. Bush white houses respectively, moderated by Jim Lehrer, highlighted the event. Focusing on prospects for translating campaign commitments into Obama Administration policy, they made a number of interesting points.

Lehrer noted that the election outcome generated a spirit of optimism around the world and asked whether that spirit could be a force of its own. Begala said that it would be a force multiplier, making American efforts more productive. Gerson agreed, adding that Obama was in a position to trade on his background. As candidates, Obama and McCain seemed to agree on the notion that “soft power” was the key to national security success. That idea is gaining bi-partisan appeal, Gerson noted, citing the recent speech by Secretary Gates in which he stressed soft power as an indispensable element of our national security. Begala said its role should be institutionalized with a cabinet level department.

The discussants agreed that a constituency for foreign aid is forming in both parties. Gerson credited President Bush with turning the evangelicals in his party toward a favorable view of foreign aid by casting it as a Biblically ordained imperative. He sees that philosophical shift, coupled with Bush’s PEPFAR and MCC initiatives, as enabling Obama to keep his commitment to doubling foreign aid. As to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Gerson was somewhat worried about its being continued. He observed that it is easier to support emergency food distribution, for example, than development efforts which are invisible to the public and take decades to bear fruit. Begala was supportive of the MCC and hoped that its goals and methods would continue if not its bureaucracy.

Against all of the factors portending a robust foreign aid effort in the new administration there is a single factor compelling a negative view – economic realities, and the very real possibility that President-elect Obama may find himself unable to deal with foreign aid for some time.