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Bethany Sharpe
University of Kentucky
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The Next Time the World Goes Downhill: America and the 1983 Ethiopian Famine

BETHANY SHARPE
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Introduction

On December 10, 1985, Ronald Reagan signed a proclamation establishing a Human Rights Day in the United States. During the ceremony, he said that “America has, since its founding, been a refuge for those suffering under the yoke of oppression.” As if to further persuade his audience of the importance of this refuge in contemporary world politics, Reagan described governments throughout the world that, according to him, stood in antipathy to U.S. liberal-democratic values. He wrote of Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. He also wrote of Ethiopia. He said, in particular reference to Ethiopia, that this was a “Marxist government that used famine to punish large segments of its own population…And the people and governments of the democracies have responded generously to those pleas with tangible evidence of our concern.” Although the famine began in 1983 with counter-insurgency strategies instituted by Ethiopian leader Chairman Mengistu in the Northern regions of the country, two years passed before attention in the United States focused on the great humanitarian emergency taking place within that country. The increased attention culminated in the great LiveAid and Band Aid concerts and “We are the world” recording which garnered over sixty million dollars intended for African famine relief. The songs, resulting concerts, and the outcry about famine conditions proved much more than a straightforward relief effort. The humanitarian aid, referred to as “tangible evidence of our concern” by Reagan, were as much about articulating a specific vision of a future world as it was about providing immediate relief to broken and vulnerable bodies so far away.

This paper argues that the vision of a future world articulated by media, government, and aid groups coalesced around the transformation of Ethiopian famine victims from “unenlightened” peoples into world citizens that would act as torchbearers of liberal values, attitudes, and behaviors. In short, relief efforts

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3 Jonathan Benthall, Disasters, Relief, and Media (UK: Sean Kingston Press, 2010).
4 In a draft response to a letter proposing a regional food crisis center, Executive Secretary Malcolm Butler wrote that he strongly urged the author to consider a more subtle approach to food crises by working with those “African states choosing to implement improved agronomic practices
acted as a beacon of hope for a unified world that conformed to these liberal principles. The management of the aid effort through the consumption of media images and the public’s purchasing power remained critical to that transformation. In the moment of humanitarian crisis that was the Ethiopian famine, the three varied forces of media, private non-profits, and government commingled to entrench a specific liberal understanding of the future world order that recognized individual choice, goal-tending, and personal accountability as the necessary ingredients to promote global progress.\(^5\) Ultimately, this world of thriving competition would render disasters like the famine obsolete. As media images and documentaries depicted the glaring reality of death in the refugee camps, relief efforts invited the public to participate in the emergency through purchasing power, and the humanitarian response generated specific claims on those receiving aid. The specific nature of this invitation allowed Americans to use the famine as an opportunity to remake and redefine visions of progress abroad.

In addition, this paper will discuss the conservative Cold War ideology that underpinned much of the future world vision that these three groups shared. The Cold War discourse used by all three groups to discuss the famine relied on a specific narrative in which communist and socialist countries subordinated the freedoms and liberties of the individual to the state which resulted in tyrannical rule. Just as importantly, such Cold War discourse framed liberal democracies like the United States as heroes who could, should, and would intervene on behalf of oppressed people. Indeed, Cold War ideas acted as an influential motivator for the public and media to pursue humanitarian aid. Even as both groups seemingly viewed the emergency as one which highlighted the basic equality of all humanity and rushed to meet the basic needs of man, it was Cold War politics that moved to the media, the U.S. government, and the public to act.\(^6\)

**Africa Redux: Media images and the need for aid**

Media coverage of the famine surged in the fall of 1984 after American news stations picked up footage shot by the BBC of a refugee camp in Korem, Ethiopia. English reporter Michael Buerk first broke the story of the famine when he found his way into the camp in October and began reporting on the huge numbers of people traveling to the area in search of food. As he described the scene as one of a “biblical famine…now in the twentieth century,” cameras panned out to show...

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thousands of bodies covered in blankets huddled next to each other. At other moments, the camera panned in to show close-ups of children crying, fear written across their faces. In other scenes, viewers saw mothers holding tiny babies in an attempt to breast-feed even though no milk remained in mothers’ malnourished bodies. The cameras highlighted the acute frustration of the babies as they cried out at the lack of milk. Within the same scene, fathers walked through the crowds carrying the shrouded, tiny bodies of babies that had died, seemingly from lack of food. Graphic images stunned audiences by showing starving Ethiopians literally dying in front of the camera.

As Fassin suggests in his theorization of humanitarianism, observers of the famine engaged with suffering at a distance, they did so only in highly qualified ways within well-defined and rigid boundaries. Media renderings of Ethiopians as a monolithic bloc of suffering allowed the reader to create their own narrative about the event and attach their own assumptions about the photos and images they saw, including the understanding of Ethiopia as a nation of innocent, dependent, and helpless children. A smaller photo inserted next to the burial preparation photo in the Life article, reinforced this theme as it showed a man gently placing his recently deceased four year-old daughter on a blanket. Like the burial photo of the woman discussed above, the central point of concern is the death of the child and the inability of the parent to prevent such an end. Readers only learn very briefly the age and name of the daughter, but no more which facilitated a connection to the images based on the imagining of a shared pain.

The limited textual context given about the victims allowed observers to rely on their own understandings of the world to make sense of the images. In this way, they disengaged with the full context of the victims’ lives, ignoring the complexity and historicity of the political situation facing the victims, by relying on their own understandings of the pain the victims faced. Little mention was made, for instance, of the continuous warfare that had been raging since at least the early 1960s between the Ethiopian government and its provinces in the north.

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10 David Breskin, “There Comes a Time When We Heed A Certain Call,” Life Magazine, April 1985, 126.
and the south. With little or no individualization of the people photographed, the consumption of media images about the famine invested the reader with a significant amount of assumptive power over what constituted an appropriate famine victim. These assumptions would eventually inform the kind of purchasing decisions consumers made in the emergency, by inviting them to anchor these images with their own narratives of the famine.

One of the most visible and cogent narratives used to make sense of the famine centered on the Cold War. The Life article highlighted the distinct Cold War discourse Americans incorporated in their reports of the famine. Speculation over how and why the Ethiopian government pursued certain food and emergency policies throughout the crisis served as an acknowledgement of deeper ideological forces at work and exposed how many Americans engaged with the political elements of the crisis. Images of innocent famine victims suffering at the hands of an evil Marxist-Lenninist regime deployed a simplified political schema to interpret the crisis: the Ethiopian people, often viewed as childlike and innocent, suffered at the hands of the communists and American responsibility mandated that efforts be made to save them. References to this simplified understanding abounded. One article, for example, argued that before any progress could be made in the crisis, American leaders needed to recognize the root cause of the famine issue as a political consequence of a communist regime. The author admonished that before the US rush headlong into a relief effort they must recognize that “adverse weather conditions set the stage for Ethiopia’s disaster, but it is the political priorities of Ethiopia’s dictator, Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, that have crippled Ethiopian agriculture and reduced its ability to cope with the drought.”

The constant heralding of American progress contained distinct paternalistic threads and acted as at least one guide marker in America’s relationships and interactions with the world. Carmen Martinez Novo discusses paternalism as a subtler version of racism. In this form of racism dominant groups use discourses “that have discriminatory effects” which are “constructed as manifestations of love” for those who have been deemed different, childlike, and

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14 “Expulsions from Ethiopian Camp Suspected,” *Washington Post*, July 28, 1985, NARA Record Group 286, Media Folder
not equal.\textsuperscript{17} In the famine, racism coded as benevolent guidance shaped ideas of what did and did not constitute progress, infused media reports of the crisis, and acted as a litmus test of how Ethiopians responded to the emergency. News reports about daily life in the refugee camps gave readers a glimpse into Ethiopian lives and created comparisons between the “progress” of an American way of life and other more “primitive” cultures. Such comparisons tended to reveal the outcomes of “primitive” cultures as tragic and backward. In the Life article, for example, a graphic photograph shows a famine victim lying on her side on a bare floor covered by a blanket. Next to her legs is a newborn baby still attached by the umbilical cord. A MSF midwife tells the reporter that although there is an obstetrics table available to the Ethiopian women, most “prefer to squat on a swatch of black plastic on the floor.” Embedded within this comment is the suggestion that Ethiopian women chose to remain outside any of the obstetrics technology that facilitates “positive outcomes.”

Such a decision privileged Ethiopian women’s own understanding of the birthing process and the body’s ability to perform in that process over Western constructs of childbirth. The aid worker does goes on to say, “I knew this method of having babies was possible but I never saw it before…Now I think: Why not? It’s more natural.”\textsuperscript{18} However, this particular photo of a natural childbirth is placed next to photos of women delousing each other upon entrance to the camps and amidst other photos of starving bodies. Implied is the subtle suggestion that the preferred natural mode of childbirth, and the attending natural lifestyle, incurs substantial risks because it eschews the authoritative knowledge of medicine and technology that manages saving lives that is presented in popular culture references like movies and television shows.\textsuperscript{19} Here, “natural” stands in for “primitive.” In this particular scenario it becomes natural for aid workers, mostly Western, to step in and guide Ethiopian women in this emergency towards a more perfect understanding of how progress in areas like medicine can ease areas of their lives like childbirth.

Utilizing a paternalistic discourse generated images and descriptions of Ethiopian famine victims as unable to meet their most basic needs and valorized the Western aid workers who acted on their behalf. According to the article, in many ways the aid workers of MSF, or Medicine San Frontiers, became the only conduit to survival. One photo underscores this with the image of a white, female


\textsuperscript{18} David Breskin, “There Comes a Time When We Heed A Certain Call,” \textit{Life Magazine, April 1985}, 127.

aid worker from MSF walking steadily ahead of a gaggle of children in her charge. She is quoted as saying after meeting with the RRC that, “I was really fed up after the meeting with the RRC…I wanted to leave. But if I can still help a few people, there is a reason to stay.” Rooted within this statement is hierarchy of power overlaid on a sense of need; the famine victims need her to stay because only she, or other aid workers like her, have the capacity to defend the victims from the Mengistu’s Marxist government. Another paragraph references Benedict Clement, a physician in the children’s ward, who is “lovingly called Mother by her patients.” In this case, Clement is providing information, expertise, and care for her charges in a way that other Ethiopians cannot— not even their own mothers. Clement fulfills a filial role by acting as a mother defending her children, who happen to be Ethiopians of all ages. In still another description, readers are told that in the face of huge numbers of refugees coming into the camp, “six doctors, ten nurses and a midwife face the wall-to-wall crush with a kind of determined cheerfulness.” Readers, working from a strong heritage of stereotypes about Africa, are given the sense that the huge numbers of poor, pitiful victims are incapable of fending off the effects of Mengistu’s government on their own. Like children, they needed stronger, wiser adults to protect and defend them.

Cold War and paternalistic discourse shaped the reception of the famine by American audiences and interjected a specific formulation of the outcome of the relief effort that surged forward. However, turning to traditional ideological explanations allowed followers of the emergency to work around the ambivalence surrounding the famine. Ideological explanations helped mask the racial underpinnings of famine representations because aid efforts were described as a way to guide and redirect childlike famine victims. Ethiopians and their nation had to be saved, but in emerging from the crisis they had to be a different kind of Ethiopian. Not only did their bodies require nourishment and sustenance, but they also needed to learn the behavioral principles of independence and choice-making. Just as American children had to be instilled with core tenets of liberalism that focused on independence and choice-making in order to forge a life of prosperity, so, too did the figurative children of Ethiopia. As the ideological vision of Ethiopia as a stronger, more liberal people and nation took shape, Americans began placing greater claims on the relief effort and recipients of aid as a means to ensure that vision came to fruition.

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20 David Breskin, “There Comes a Time When We Heed A Certain Call,” Life Magazine, April 1985, 127.
21 Ibid.
Seen in this light, viewers understood in the famine a dire need for outsiders to step in and act as defenders and provisioners of aid. In this story, the aid workers and volunteers take center stage as their actions are described as “heroic” and elevated to an almost celebrity-like status. The plight of the famine victims becomes secondary to the bravery of the volunteers working on their behalf and suggests that without the vision of the aid workers miserable conditions will remain the status-quo. One grant submitted to the USAID explicitly speaks to the dire state of affairs in Africa that could potentially hamper even the efficiency of American aid workers if not carefully addressed. The group AfriCare, a development organization that had been working in Africa since the 1970s, developed a grant project to place U.S. medical teams in the camp sites as a means to provide emergency medical assistance. Writing in line-item justifications for a grant proposal submitted to USAID, the author noted that for those individuals volunteering to serve on the aid mission team, “the living conditions in the areas of Ethiopia in which they will be working…will involve major hardships for these individuals.” The grant went on to conclude that, “One has to actually visit the areas in question to have an idea of the emotional drain on the individuals faced with trying to maintain health services for the thousands of people facing starvation and living in conditions of absolute miser. In order to alleviate the strain on the volunteer personnel, AfriCare believes it is necessary to include some time during the period for the volunteers to get away from their depressing environment.” Ultimately, the author of the grant expects the cost of doing aid work in Africa to exact a high toll, but it is the expectation of a fruitful return that pushes the aid effort forward.

Making cents: the problem of aid and the future of Ethiopia

The first visual images and text of the famine stunned many Americans into action and relied on a well-known narrative to do so; the images created a story which cast the famine victims as apolitical pawns of a communist government that would undertake any lengths to strip people of freedom. Here, the association between children, innocence, and lack of political acumen played a central role in justifying the need for American donors to invest in the crisis with aid dollars, technology, and time. Colleen Williams, a concerned citizen, underscored this connection when she wrote to Vice President Bush that “my personal opinion on all this is I feel it was the Ethiopian government’s fault …. and I feel the Ethiopian people shouldn’t have to suffer for this.”

Dramatically increasing media attention on the crisis, highlighting

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23 Africare grant, page 17, NARA Record Group 286.
24 Ibid.
25 Letter to VP Bush, File Folder: Project Ethiopia, Drought Declared, Box 6, Record Group 286.
victims’ innocence, and emphasizing them as apolitical pawns in a communist game had two consequences. First, increased media attention triggered an emotional response from American viewers and prompted huge numbers of individuals to contribute to the Ethiopian aid effort. This effort coalesced into a world-wide care community in which amounts of money flowed from both large and small aid and relief groups into the aid effort in numbers never before seen.

Second, as this compassion collective grew, a loosely structured community developed and placed greater claims on the recipients of aid. They demanded Ethiopians transform their values and behaviors into usable, workable traits that would prevent such a tragedy from happening again. In this way, aid providers circumscribed the images of adult Africans as innocent children and informed the means through which individual and group donors approached aid efforts. Donations and relief efforts became as much about providing dollars as about grooming the “children” of Africa into responsible adults.

The care community consisted of disparate segments that ranged from children, to businesses, to schools. Though the donations and offers of aid began as isolated, individual occasions to end suffering, eventually a loosely formed community formed around famine relief. Simplifying the political and historical context of the situation, media images of the disaster fostered a sense of urgency, and for a brief moment opened a window of imagined equality based on the vulnerability of broken and weakened bodies. Pulled by emotion and working under the vision of equality, people rallied to the aid effort. Many thousands of ordinary Americans called into relief centers asking how they could help and offering to donate money.

It wasn’t just adults that thought they could make a difference. In May of 1985, the Los Angeles Unified School District spent two weeks pitting schools against each other to see which one would wind up on top as the number one fundraiser for money for Ethiopian famine victims. They aimed to raise $250,000 for needed supplies in the country. The ultimate goal of the campaign was to “help stop the dying and instill in students a sense of caring for the plight of others.” The strategies various schools employed to raise money were wide-

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26 Fassin argues that emergencies attract large numbers of people in the early stages b/c of imagined equality
29 Interaction Grant, NARA Record Group 286.
ranging. Some presided over auctions, others held dances, and others had foreign-food sales, a riff on the usual bake sales common to school functions. Students did manage to reach their fundraising goal. One school alone, Birmingham High School, presented a check to the school board for $8,018.18. One school council member said of the reason for so much student involvement, “I think maybe kids are coming out of their apathy…..People are becoming aware of the world again. But it seems like it’s the ‘in’ thing to be concerned about.”

With a growing community involved in the famine and as more people entered into this community, expectations grew around the outcome of donation relief. Coalescing around a set identity and experience of caring for others, media recognition of this group effort imbued large and small donors with a sense of power over where their money went and how it was spent. Alluding to a disagreement between Ethiopia and the United States over the extent of aid in relation to the proportion of famine, media headlines cited relief officials declaring that Ethiopia was “biting the hand that feeds it.” Such sentiments were embedded within a hierarchy of power relations between nation-states and jarred with the rhetoric of Americans giving aid freely to any in need. Individual donors, for example, clamored for a visible return on the money they donated and still felt disappointment years later when Ethiopia faced the prospect of another devastating famine in 2004. During the relief effort of 2004, one radio caller “expressed irritation and outrage that Ethiopia was still in crisis fifteen years later after she had donated money to the Band-Aid appeal in the mid-1980s. What had happened to all the money, she demanded. And why couldn’t Ethiopia look after itself? The programmer presenter asked whether she would be donating money to the relief effort this time. ‘Certainly not,’ she replied.”

Public understanding of the famine soon coupled monetary accountability with ideological accountability. Heeding a certain call meant that many in the United States, and other countries, understood this humanitarian disaster as an

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opportunity for ordinary Americans to collectively remake conditions in the world which precipitated suffering and deprivation. Popular culture magazines provided a simple answer to frustrations with conditions like those in Ethiopia that allowed famines to take place. One reader summed up this sentiment when they wrote in to the editor that, “The next time someone tells me the world is going downhill, I’ll just remember what 43 of the biggest names in in music did to make it better. It took USA for Africa to make me realize that I, too, can help.”

Other facets of the emergency soon emerged that contributed to donor expectations, including anxieties about race. As the aid campaign took form through direct relief programming and development activities, deeply political assumptions about dependency, aid, and race in the domestic context informed the creation of those initiatives taking place at the international level. Domestically, race framed an on-going debate concerning the abuse of government sponsored programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Although by the time of the Ethiopian famine “racial science had long been discredited among scientists and physical anthropologists,” many Americans still continued to use racial categorization as a way to explain contemporary political contexts. Images and a discourse of African-American mothers on welfare and abusing the program flourished. As a result, stereotypes of African-Americans as lazy and dependent took root, and the role of welfare remained heatedly debated in the creation of a productive citizenry.

The Ethiopian famine magnified the discourse around dependency and aid, and placing the conversation in the international arena heightened an awareness of what was at stake with aid. With current domestic aid debates acting as the backdrop, many donors feared that aid could sap the industriousness and vitality of Ethiopia’s future. Instead, what would emerge was a nation dependent on other nations – a macrocosm of what was happening with aid in the United States. To avoid this fate, many American donors made greater ideological claims on the recipients of aid during the famine based on fears that a proliferation of unmanaged aid would create a world that discouraged the full manifestation of a thriving, liberal atmosphere and the attending freedoms, privileges, and rights.

As discussions around aid need and delivery progressed, issues over dependent behavior emerged as the core site for individual and national

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40 Ibid.
transformation and created fertile ground for donors to make claims on aid recipients. A post-famine Ethiopia had to include people who were diligent, hard-working, and able to fully contribute to the success of the nation through labor. In June 1985, a month before the largest fundraising event of the famine campaign took place with the dual concerts, Gerry Salole voiced concerns that the massive amount of aid destined for Ethiopia opened the possibility of sabotaging that nation’s future by engraining a sense of entitlement in famine victims’ perception of their circumstances. Salole, the field director for Save the Children, implied that receiving such a large amount of aid in such a short time period would cultivate a sense of dependency. He elaborated on these fears when he stated, “We need to try to understand what happens to people who are getting something for nothing… This has to be creating bizarre ideas about those who are providing the relief and generally what the world is like.” In articulating uneasiness with the relationship between aid and its recipients, Salole raised questions about the management and end-result of aid. He suggested that if aid continued unabated without some kind of investment or repayment from the victim, the victim would first, develop a misconception about how the world functioned and the place of progressive, advanced nations within that structure, and second, be stripped of any desire to develop skills needed to participate in that world. In this case, unless carefully supervised, aid efforts would produce the opposite of productive citizens.

As Salole raised concerns among the public through news reports, other private aid groups took their concerns directly to USAID officials. Some pushed for a solution to the famine that would span a greater timeline beyond money earmarked for only a short period of time within the 1985 fiscal year. Interaction, the large umbrella organization of over 100 private volunteer agencies, did just that. In a letter to the chairman of the committee that introduced HR 100 and HR 606, the President of the organization, Peter J. Davies, wrote that the group commended the legislation which “would provide both higher levels of funding and a broader range of assistance, including assistance for recovery and rehabilitation. It is our strongly held view that assistance for recovery and rehabilitation is just as important as emergency aid. Indeed, unless we make the extra efforts now to assist African countries in such undertakings as redevelopment of water resources and rehabilitation and improvement of agricultural production, we risk increasing their dependence on food aid handouts instead of encouraging greater self-reliance.”

If the public and private agencies concerns overlapped about the destructive tendency of food aid to foster dependence and entitlement thereby displacing the values of responsibility, self-reliance, and hard-work, government

42 Interaction Letter to Congressional Committee, NARA, Record Group 286, (photo 5322).
workers within the USAID also remained sensitive to these anxieties. Indeed, documents circulating in the department since April 1984 revealed that USAID continued to struggle with the same questions that the public and private aid groups held over the future of aid and relief. A speech entitled “Disasters: Acts of God or Acts of Man?”, delivered to the World Affairs Council of Northern California on April 5, 1984 made its way to the desks of USAID officials. The speech resonated with workers and made clear arguments that answered many questions about the meaning of aid assistance. A hand written note at the top of the speech claimed, “Excellent speech, should be read by everyone in our business.”43 The initials JM followed the comment.44

The speech opens with a vignette about a disastrous earthquake that struck Lisbon in 1755. After discussing the reaction to the disaster by the public, to the author asks audience members to whether “natural disasters – floods, droughts, famines, hurricanes, tsunamis and the like as well as earthquakes – are Acts of God or acts of man.”45 In a few simple sentences he forces his audience to consider that “when disasters happen in the Third World, and droughts and famines seem to be on the increase in Latin America, Asia and Africa, do we react properly? Is disaster relief part of the solution – or part of the problem?”46 After surveying a range of disasters, including the contemporaneous famine in Ethiopia, for his audience, the speaker begins an analysis of the responses to these emergencies. He concludes that “one of the myths about disasters is that after an earthquake or a flood, or during a famine, people sit around in numbed helplessness waiting for helicopters to fly in with blankets and food. The truth is almost exactly the opposite: it is the delivery of food and blankets which causes this dependence and inactivity.”47 The sentiments voiced in this speech which circulated through USAID offices, echoed the same concerns about the consequences of aid that started surfacing in the media. For many, aid represented a fine line: too little and America would be shirking its duty to help heal the world and change its course, too much and America contributed to the further degeneration of individual potential. Misdirected aid risked dangerous consequences.

Without properly managing aid, famine victims risked becoming dependent on others for survival and in that process faced regressing into acts of

44 Although there is no conclusive proof, it can be speculated that this was the signature of Julius Marks, a high-ranking USAID official.
46 Ibid.
dishonesty and idleness. Taking seriously the consequences on Ethiopia’s future, aid donors, workers, and officials set out to ensure that a future of idle, dependent Ethiopians did not occur. They did this by building new cultural expectations around work habits in carefully managed aid distribution centers. Salole proposed an unofficial solution to the dilemma of dependence by encouraging food recipients to actively participate in the relief effort by contributing their labor. He noted that a form of this plan was currently in place in certain areas near food camps where volunteers built and repaired the dirt roads that Save the Children’s trucks used. Meanwhile, other aid recipients used their donkeys to transport food to remote villages. Salole summed up the effort by saying “They’re not being paid in money or food, they’re doing it as volunteers. That way they become participants in, rather than objects of the relief effort.” Most importantly, Salole concluded that “people who work for what they receive are less likely to come away with the impression that free food is something to which they have permanently become entitled.” For Salole, current aid operations represented a danger to the larger world structure by enabling dependency. He stated, that in its current form, “Relief means you can come in and say, ‘Here’s the food, take it.’” For Salole and other donors like him, relief operations needed a major readjustment in order to create a new, world that tamped down on dependent behaviors that exacerbated, or even caused, emergency situations.

Although some media reports did applaud the resiliency of Ethiopian men, women, and children, it was clear that aid experts felt they needed to properly manage and channel inner resources like resiliency as a means to guard against dependency. Without direct supervision and management of aid, officials like Salole wondered “whether aid provided over a long period may not stifle the initiative of the recipient” and render them incompetent for a future that required productivity and industry for survival. In part, such a view stemmed from the juxtaposition of camps, described as a location of progress, technology, and comfort, and Ethiopian terrain, described as a Biblical backwater. Survivors

48 Clifford May, “Field Notes on the Psychology of Famine,” New York Times, June 9, 1985; Jennifer Hyndman’s Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Liisa Malkki’s Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) both explore a different dimension of management in refugee camps, a different kind of aid center, in their works. While they discuss “ordering disorder” as a means to control populations deemed subversive, I use aid management to explore the ways in which donors sought to advance neoliberal subjectivities.


50 Ibid.

51 Jennifer Hyndman discusses the ways in which Western organizational methods are applied to aid situations in her chapter “Ordering Disorder” in Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Michael
spent time in camps that were outfitted with “large water-proof tents, street lights, generators, a hospital, free, hot food and guards at the gate” and which were seen as “a functioning town with far more amenities than its inhabitants have ever known before or are likely to know again.” Observers noted that leaving “such an environment can be traumatic.” Such a line of reasoning reinforced concerns about dependency and expressed wonder at the apparent willingness of survivors to remain in a place of comfort that they did not contribute to making. Even as aid workers on the ground and in the urgency of the operation developed make-shift and ad-hoc aid revisions, like Salole’s labor contribution program, the USAID also worked to re-make conditions in the camps that would alter and modify certain behaviors. The kind of aid projects chosen for US funding, hinged on the kinds of goals and aims they articulated in their grant applications. Many of those chosen targeted the very anxieties over aid-dependency and the production of liberal citizens that concerned government employees like Julius Marks.

Remaking the World: Grant-making, claim-making, and the future of Ethiopia

In spite of Reagan’s staunch reputation as a Cold War warrior, during this period his public stance towards the larger Cold War conflict edged towards an appearance of rapprochement as he sought to balance the demands of anti-Soviet fervor and peace brokers within his administration. With more public emphasis on returning to warmer relations and promises to avoid military conflicts, White House officials also focused on alternatives to further their vision of a free-market world order while appearing as the broker of a rapprochement with the Soviets. Publicly, in the spirit of the olive branch, they took care to rebuild cultural relations and work together on science matters like space initiatives. Behind the scenes, however, less conspicuous means offered a way for Reagan to assuage the concerns of staunch Cold War warriors who feared that Soviet strength would outpace the capabilities of the US. Officials found one such conduit in the form of emergency aid grants and immediate relief projects that worked to rebuild


56 Ibid.
Ethiopia in the image of a liberal state. The 1984-1985 famine functioned as an important space to implement such projects. Acting on the impulses of public concern, spurred in large part by media images of the famine, the US government officially sanctioned and funded private, non-profit programs whose project aims tied neatly with a neoliberal vision of the future. While on the surface, non-profits and the US government often appeared at odds, with one favoring liberal agendas and the other favoring a conservative course, their aims dovetailed neatly because of the ways each worked in relation to neoliberalism. Reagan’s overt policies and actions to create a state and world that favored individual property rights, the rule of law, and institutions of free markets and free trade were supplemented by many NGOs more subtle measures to shape individual characteristics that would flourish in such a world.  

In order for the world Reagan and his officials envisioned to survive, reformers needed to do more than simply forestall dependency. Famine victims had to learn new skills and attitudes, such as increasing productivity, shoring up self-reliance, and goal tending, to equip them for the coming liberal oriented world. Thus, the White House had a special interest in partnering with groups that encouraged and helped bring about these behaviors in famine victims. If aid workers on the ground improvised with the behavior transforming programs they implemented, like Salole’s volunteer contribution program, the White House agencies like the USAID directed a more methodical and sustainable campaign to achieve similar results. Three USAID funded projects in particular highlight White House interest in transformative aid: the CRS health-nutrition surveillance program, the tent cities of Nathan Abbie, and the well-drilling campaign of AfriCare.

Because of the vast amount of work that would need to go into the transformation of Ethiopia as a result of its underdevelopment, how recipients used the aid they received developed into a source of contention between donors and victims. In particular, the use and abuse of food-rations became an important site for transformation. Many donors and media viewers who contributed to the campaign understood the relief camps and feeding centers as a microcosm of the progress of the Western world.  

In detailing camp life, reporters focused on the victims’ desire to remain in the camps in order to take advantage of technology and progress. Some of these stories emphasized the lengths that aid recipients went to in order to remain in the camp and be spared the “trauma” of returning to


a life without Western amenities. In particular, reporters seized on Ethiopian mothers that “nutritionally sabotaged” their children – a condition in which reportedly mothers kept at least one of their children in a malnourished state so that her family would not be turned away from the camps.\(^\text{59}\) While Ethiopian mothers may have understood this particular use of food as a survival mechanism for her entire family, aid workers equated it to thievery and manipulation of the aid system.\(^\text{60}\) The message sent by news reporters and aid workers throughout the famine concluded that a future Ethiopia, which included technology and amenities, entailed cultivating behaviors of honesty, responsibility, and accountability in famine victims. Like aid disputes taking place in the United States, there was no room in Ethiopia’s future for mothers who used their children to take advantage of the system.

A USAID funded Catholic Relief Services project, the Nutritional Surveillance program, worked to transform behaviors deemed deceptive by closely managing and shaping individual norms. This program focused on mothers and children. As children and mothers received their food rations, program managers also gave them nutrition training. The program closely tracked and monitored participants through weigh-ins. It was expected that participants would apply their nutritional training towards the rations they received and thus experience a weight-gain in malnourished children. An important component of this program centered on the ideas of community sharing in Ethiopian culture. According to the grant authors, many of the destitute adults receiving food aid intended for children took the ration and shared it amongst other family and possibly community members. To ensure that the ration intended for the children went undivided, the program monitored the weight of each child enrolled in the program and provided extra rations to other adults.

Dividing the use of rations, thus preventing the sense of communal sharing, spoke to the differences in how aid providers and famine victims understood tragedy or celebration. Preventing sharing of rations emphasized the individual experience of suffering and foreclosed the communal experience of tragedy. Accordingly, as NGOs elevated the individual experience of suffering, they also foregrounded and privileged the individual basis for overcoming adversity and challenge. Seen in this light, the feeding program helped condition participants for the rigors of the modern, neoliberal world. Success in this new world required that individuals understand the importance of self-reliance and individualism. Participating in the nutrition program allowed Ethiopian mothers and children the means to gain this crucial experience.


\(^{60}\) Walter Johnson, \textit{Soul By Soul; Life Inside The Antebellum Slave Market}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) is useful here with his ideas of survival and agency in the context of American slavery.
The second proposed project, the drilling of wells, managed to elevate efficiency and goal-orientation as the key aspect of survival in the post-famine Ethiopia. In December 1984 USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance commissioned a report on the state of water accessibility and cleanliness near the displacement camps. As the numbers of displaced persons swelled the relief centers, camp resources failed to grow accordingly. Water access proved a growing concern as only a limited number of water wells throughout the camps had to sustain thousands of campers. In the Bhati Camp, because water access was insufficient people soon began using nearby river water even though it was contaminated. Camp authorities deployed fifty-three external “sanitation guards” to keep people away from the river bed.

Unable to utilize the river and only having access to a few water pumps meant that 300 to 400 people had to wait for water on a daily basis. In their investigation of the camps, the project managers noted the response of the camp doctor towards these conditions, “The doctor did not seem concerned about the 300 to 400 people waiting for water. He agreed that it would be better if they had more water but thought the waiting was beneficial to the people as it gave them a goal, something to do, in the very act of waiting they thought they were working for their water.”

For the report preparers, the use of time played an important role in how they interpreted camp life. The doctor understood waiting as an action that gave hope, or a moment of meaning, in a life overshadowed by death. The report preparers on the other hand, understood waiting in a much different light. Waiting for water represented a passive use of time when the urgency of the situation required much more active measures. Time was a crucial ingredient in saving lives and the idea of hundreds of people using time to wait, rather than act, violated western norms of efficiency and goal orientation – if the goal of camp life was survival, then campers needed to be doing more than simply waiting passively to receive water. Building multiple and permanent well sites served as a way to save lives by providing access to clean water. But it also served as an important example of aid donors’ understanding of how to use time. Establishing multiple well sites subverted the camp doctor’s understanding of what marked a productive goal. Rather than simply waiting in line, displaced persons in the camp could actively shape their own destiny by more efficiently using time.

In addition to developing specific liberal behaviors such as individual accountability (through the nutrition program) and teaching habits that were crucial to a liberal work-ethic like managing time more efficiently (through the

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63 Ibid.
USAID funded projects also worked to foster the importance of choice-making in everyday life circumstances, a habit that many felt was missing under Marxist rule. Although many Western viewers internalized the victims as child-like in their lack of political acumen, an expectation arose that such an apolitical state was only temporary. With appropriate training and opportunities, victims could take control of their future through the kinds of choices that they made. In this way famine victims would grow into responsible beings and political adults. In ascribing choice-making, or a lack there-of, as an important feature of the crises, Western media and relief projects pointed to the role of Mengistu’s government in the creation and sustainment of the famine through the ways in which they stripped Ethiopians of their right to make choices about where and how they lived.

Doubts loomed over Mengistu’s intentions to end the famine. Reports suggested that his aid program and the use of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Committee served as a ruse for squelching the rebels who lived primarily in famine-stricken areas. Megnistu’s resettlement program served as an important focal point for these doubts. Resettlement efforts began in earnest in October 1984 by Ethiopian officials as an attempt to stem the death toll by moving people from drought stricken Northern provinces in Tigrea and Eritrea to more fertile lands in the South near the Kishe province. 64 Mengistu officials described the program as completely voluntary and one administrator stated that he was “surprised by the large outpouring of volunteers” and claiming that there was “no problem” getting people to relocate.” 65 Mengistu initiated resettlement in order to actively solve the hunger problem. 66 When describing the plan to Western donors, he insisted that those that resettled did so voluntarily. Many in the Reagan administration refused to believe the resettlement program was anything other than an attempt to institute forcible collectivization on the peasant population. Some international aid groups fed this suspicion when they questioned the tactics used to recruit volunteers to the resettlement areas in Southern Ethiopia. 67 One Red Cross official stated that “we don’t know the degree to which they are being forced and we don’t know the risks to which they’ll be exposed.” 68 Statements from those who had been resettled appeared to corroborate these doubts as one peasant “complained that they would need

68 Ibid.
bulldozers to clear rocks and trees and tractors to turn the hard virgin soil.”  

Such comments drew readers’ attention towards the possibility that not all of the resettlers moved of their own accord. Newspaper and television characterizations of the government painted a picture of Ethiopian officials working to strip individuals of essential liberties such as freedom of movement.

Public questions over Megnisti’s motivations came as a boon to U.S. officials who knew of the famine conditions in Ethiopia long before the breaking coverage of Buerke’s news documentary, but were reluctant to do anything to ameliorate the situation. They reasoned that providing funds to Mengistu’s leadership would only help the burgeoning leftist country realize national socialistic goals. The increased numbers of letters sent into USAID reminding those officials that “something must be done, current efforts were to be commended, but they were not enough,” made it clear that a reckoning was about to take place. A press release from Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, co-sponsor of the African Famine, Relief, and Recovery Act of 1985, summed up this response when he wrote that, “The continuing drought that has afflicted eight African nations in the past decade has put at risk an estimated 10 million human beings. Since October 1, 1984 the United States has shipped an estimated 700,000 metric tons of emergency food to famine-stricken regions of Africa. This is a good start, but it is not enough.”

Official U.S. policy could no longer ignore circumstances in Ethiopia hoping that widespread disease and death would topple Mengistu. Acting against the backdrop of the public’s outcry USAID reworked official policy to their benefit. If they were to help a communist nation, it would be on their ideological terms. Luckily for them, it appeared as though the public was on board, and even set the pace, for those terms. In this way, as the US became a leader in providing aid to Ethiopia, they were also able to fulfill policy goals through their collaboration with non-profit aid groups.

Reagan officials did this by placing non-negotiable conditions on

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71 Ibid., 405-407.
72 Ibid., 405-407.
73 Letter, NARA Record Group 286.
emergency aid delivered by the US.\footnote{NARA Cables, NARA Record Group 286.} One of these non-negotiable conditions was the location and placement of aid. Throughout the famine, the White House insisted USAID only provide aid to non-resettlement areas.\footnote{USAID Reports, NARA Record Group 286.} One important example of this policy manifested in the creation of tent-cities. Israeli activist-philanthropist Abie Nathan, working through the American Jewish Committee, submitted a grant to build an emergency tent city. His intended plan was to build a safe, sanitary city to act as a relief center for famine victims. Victims arriving in the cities would find tents to live in and relief to help end hunger. Wary at first, the US soon described the tent-city as an acceptable plan and if funded it would “be money well spent.”\footnote{USAID Memorandum, NARA Group 286.} They supported the grant under condition of strict controls to where Abbie built the cities. Any site had to receive US approval before any construction could take place. Approved areas meant any land that was not part of Mengistu’s resettlement schemes that had caused such consternation in Western media reports. Many of these landed in famine stricken areas that also happened to be controlled by Ethiopian groups rebelling against Mengistu’s leadership.

Funding tent cities in rebel controlled areas helped politicize the emergency and reinforced questions about Mengistu’s resettlement scheme and the nature of a communist government in its relationship to citizens’ rights. Although the tent cities served as a means of relief, they also served as an important contrast to the assumed forced resettlement scheme of Mengistu and became emblematic of the importance of choice-making in individual life. In US funded tent-cities famine victims had the choice of where, when, and how to seek aid. They could go as far or as near their homes as they liked. This served as an important foil to reports about the lack of choice-making in resettled areas. Newspapers reported the resettled areas as places where victims were told when and where they had to report. In addition, journalists portrayed resettled areas as also affecting the daily lives of every other Ethiopian who did not face starvation; taking away choice from one group entailed denying choice for other groups. Journalist Clifford May reported on compulsory activity when he wrote of the “thousands of Ethiopian college students and teachers” who were “ordered to spend the summer working with famine victims” who had been resettled in the south and west of the country. One student stated of his assignment, “I don’t know anything about plowing or building tukuls (traditional thatched huts used by Ethiopian peasants).”\footnote{Clifford May, “Ethiopia Orders Students to Aid Resettlement” \textit{New York Times}, June 2, 1985.}

Also reported in the article were concerns about what resettlement meant for the future of Ethiopian famine victims. One aid official stated that the
The resettlement scheme had been poorly designed and that “those being resettled have little chance to become self-sufficient soon.” The victims’ passage into adulthood and beyond the famine crisis depended, in part, on their ability to make decisions free from government interference, and the tent cities represented an oasis in a land dominated by government interference. In this way, tent cities allowed the US government to emphasize the importance of giving individuals the freedom to make choices that could and would lead to health and happiness in life. In keeping famine victims out of resettlement areas, the US worked to undermine Mengistu’s policies and served as a way to keep the act of choice-making a relevant point of concern in the eyes of American donors.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the undercurrent of doubt about the aid campaign and the ensuing work to save bodies firmly rested on understanding aid as a transaction. Media interpretations of the crisis opened space for Westerners to place claims on the victims by re-casting Ethiopians in pejorative, childlike caricatures reminiscent of early depictions of Africans and African-Americans. The larger Cold-War background further simplified the situation for many Americans. In stripping the famine of its political complexity and suggesting that Africa needed saving from the evils of communist leaders, donors imbued the famine with an ideological use; providing money to Ethiopian famine victims transformed them into tools to save the world from Communists and allowed donors to regenerate Ethiopian values and behaviors appropriate to a world free from socialism. As development and relief merged, the kinds of programs chosen as recipients of federal dollars reveal how the means to save bodies were also intended to transform those bodies into a new neoliberal citizen at the conclusion of the famine. The public played a key role in pushing the Reagan administration into creating preemptive relief and aid policies by relying heavily on non-profit groups which resulted in closer relationships between private non-profit groups and US aid agencies. This newly cemented relationship provided alternative means for the United States to pursue Cold War policies amidst the evolving relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. This changed relationship allowed the US to cede much of its authority in managing many future human rights and humanitarian crises to private groups.

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80 Ibid.
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