United States Institute of Peace

KUFM Commentary: June 3, 2011
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Several months ago, Father Ted Hesburgh, the 92-year old former president of Notre Dame, let it be known that he had seen enough in his long life. “Some would have that by the time you have lived almost a century, you have seen it all,” wrote in the Washington Post. “What I saw the House of Representatives do with its continuing resolution is beyond the pale. To eliminate funding for the United States Institute of Peace is abhorrent and unthinkable. Congress should know better.” Faced with global adversity, now was not the time for Congress to say it could do away with the main agency charged with helping the United States government foster international peace. As one of its early staff members, I would like to describe a bit more about USIP, as it is often called, and provide some historical perspective to help understand the importance of Father Hesburgh’s sentiments.

A man of reason and faith, Father Hesburgh was not the only person to speak out against the House vote. Sen. John McCain, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Generals Wesley Clark, Anthony Zinni, and David Petraeus, and Admiral Mike Mullin, the current commander---in---chief of the United States Central Command, made their objections known as well. Zinni, for instance, bluntly took House members to task for not doing its research and pointed out that the Army’s 10th Mountain division asked USIP to go into the “triangle of death” area in Iraq when all other international organizations were getting out, and that its success in negotiating with warring Iraqi factions to consolidate security and restore services turned the war around; their actions had allowed the Army to reduce its strength from 3,500 to 650 soldiers and to lower casualties. The Institute’s budget request was miniscule, Zinni went...
on, comprising less than the cost of one F-15 fighter. “America deserves better from Congress than eliminating something that saves American lives and taxpayer dollars,” he concluded.

Fortunately the U.S. Senate ultimately overrode the House of Representatives and, while not approving the Institute’s full funding request, authorized the rest-of-the-year budget with a reduction of 20%. Nevertheless, after 27 years of consistent Congressional support, the message was clear. A substantial majority of the House, consisting of almost all Republicans as well as a good number of Democrats, was less inclined to support USIP than in the past. A notable Republican exception was the chair of the Appropriations subcommittee, who voted to retain USIP funding.

All of this raises the questions: what is it that a little-known organization like USIP actually does, and why were so many Congressmen and women willing to say it was a luxury the U.S. government could no longer afford? Indeed, what does diminishing support of USIP say about the United States government and the commitment of its people to non-violent approaches to peacemaking, the implementation of methods for resolving conflicts before guns are drawn, and the prevention of war?

Outside the Washington Beltway, many Americans do not know that USIP was created by an act of Congress with the blessing of President Ronald Reagan in 1984. Located in our nation’s capitol, it is an independent non-profit federal agency and is governed by a bipartisan board of directors consisting of Republicans and Democrats from the general public, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the president of the National Defense University. Its statutory purpose is to serve the American people and the government through (quote) “the widest possible range of education and training, basic and applied research opportunities, and peace information services on the means to promote international peace
and the resolution of conflicts.” USIP is prohibited from receiving public funds is limited strictly to international as opposed to domestic affairs. During the first years of its existence toward the end of the Cold War, a newly hired staff concentrated mainly on research, education and study, and establishing grant, and international fellowship programs aimed at developing a foundational basis for understanding different approaches for bringing about international peace. Such approaches range from pacifism, deterrence, negotiation and mediation, to international law and economic development. Because of its “ecumenical” approach to peace, early institute projects often were criticized from different sides — by peace—movement activists disturbed by its heavy emphasis on education and research, as well as “hard line” professors of international relations for whom any talk of dialogue with the Soviet Union was perceived as “selling out”. Nevertheless, the balanced quality of its many early publications, as well as its reputation as a non—ideological “think tank” were greeted with growing respect – and with yearly increases in Congressional appropriations that were gladly received.

With the end of the Cold War and collapsing empires, however, Congress and the Departments of State and Defense increasingly asked USIP to turn its attention to more practical ways for dealing with internal violence between political groups in newly independent countries, increased ethic and religious strife, the rise of terrorism, and the wars in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan. As a result, it became more than just a “think tank” and participated more directly in conducting third party interventions, leading parties toward negotiation or mediation, and providing on---the---ground training and technical assistance on the rule of law.

In addition, Congress turned to USIP to convene the influential bi---partisan Iraq Study Group chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton as well as the Congressional Commission on the Strategic
Posture of the United States and the Task Force on the United Nations. Together with other organizations it also spearheaded the work of the Genocide Prevention Task Force and conducted an assessment of the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review. In Africa, it took a lead role in supporting the Reconciliation Commission after the fall of apartheid in South Africa, promoted dialogue among religious groups in Nigeria, and helped organize free elections in Sudan. In the Middle East, it has worked on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for many years and recently was asked to join the “Quartet” chaired by Tony Blair. And through its offices in Kabul, USIP conducts mediations on Afghan issues ranging from refugees to property and water disputes; in the past year alone, it has helped resolve 18 tribal disputes mostly involving the abuse of women, and concluded 30 training programs for government officials, lawyers, mullahs, tribal councils and community leaders. Staff members are also supporting dialogue along the Afghan–Pakistani border, the home to Taliban and Al Qaeda, and teaching of conflict resolution in Islamic religious schools.

So why is it that the House of Representatives wanted to close USIP down? Was it their lack of knowledge of USIP as Zinni said? Sources close to the House says that its budget-cutters were upset by the stunning new building that now serves as the USIP headquarters and soon will be open to tourists, scholars, diplomats and visitors from around the world. Facing the Mall and designed as a national symbol for peace, the new building dramatically overlooks the Potomac River with a view of the Lincoln and Washington Memorials. Perhaps the design is too much, but the building is a public–private partnership whose was modest by Washington standards. Yes, we need to balance the budget, but not at the expense of peace. Today, when war and peace are intertwined, USIP is needed more than ever. If the United States government is serious about bringing peace to other parts of the world, its citizens and political leaders must support the institutions charged with helping to make the difficult transition
from war to peace. USIP has an impressive track record that supports exactly such efforts throughout the world. We live in difficult times, but we should not abandon the core principles on which it was founded. For moral, material, and human reasons, every effort must be made to end the death and destruction that war inevitably brings.

And yet, in what has been called the “Most Head--in--the--Sand” effort of the year, the House of Representatives on May 26th voted to defund USIP by revoking its charter as a non-partisan independent institute, once again leaving its fate for the Senate to decide. To whom will the Senators listen? To the voices of Father Hesburgh, Sen. McCain, Secretary of State Clinton and the Pentagon generals who have spoken out on behalf of USIP? Or to House members intent on using appropriations without consideration of its accomplishments? Let’s hope the 4 more deliberative mode of the Senate prevails. As Father Hesburgh has pointed out, there really isn’t an alternative.

This is Otto Koester of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center. Thank you for listening.