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Who pays for and who benefits from American generosity, or not all friends are real friends

As we all know, we are living in very turbulent times – politically, economically, in international affairs and in almost every aspect of our lives. We have many tasks and problems to solve in order to continue our existence in peace and prosperity and any mistake, be it in international relations, finance and/or economy could be catastrophic. History can be a good guidance how to avoid costly mistakes, and as Winston Churchill once profoundly said, “The one that does not learn from history is bound to repeat it.”

For that reason my brief contribution to our discussion looks into the period of the WW1 and how the U.S.A. played its role in assisting the European countries in rebuilding after the fighting was over and the armistice was declared in 1918.

Herbert Clark Hoover, before he became the 31st president of the United States was hired by a large British mining company, Bewick, Moreing and Co. in 1897 as its chief engineer. He was very bright and only in his early twenties and for the next decade travelled the world ceaselessly as the company troubleshooter – to Burma, China, Australia, India, Egypt and whenever else its mineralogical interests demanded. He was so diligent and successful that after a decade he was brought back to London and made a partner in the company.

Hoover would probably have passed his life in wealthy anonymity but for a sudden change in circumstances he was thrown in and unexpected limelight. When the war broke out in 1914, Hoover, as a prominent American in London, was called on by the American government to help evacuate Americans strained in Europe – there were over 120,000 of them – and he performed this duty with such a remarkable efficiency and distinction that he was asked to take on a much greater challenge of heading the new Commission for relief in Belgium.

At that time Belgium was completely overwhelmed by war, its farms completely destroyed, most of the factories were closed or destroyed and its foodstocks was seized by the Germans. Almost 8 million Belgians were in peril of starvation. Hoover managed to find and distribute $1.8 million worth of food every week for two and a half years – 2.5 million tons of food altogether – and deliver it to people who would otherwise have starved to death. This achievement made it the greatest relief effort on earth ever undertaken and made Hoover an international hero.

Belgium was just the beginning for Hoover and solving crisis became his role in life. When America joined the war, the US president, Woodrow Wilson called Hoover home and appointed him the national food administrator, looking after every aspect of wartime American food production, to make sure that plenty was grown, every citizen sufficiently fed and profiteering rooted out. Hover also coined the slogan “Food Will Win the War.”

At the end of the war Hoover was sent back to Europe to save millions from starvation again as the Head of the Relief Administration. This challenge was even bigger than any previous that he headed, where he was responsible for 400 million starving people. He oversaw relief operations in more than thirty countries. In Germany alone his administration ran 35,000 feeding centers which collectively provided 300 million meals to people that otherwise would not eat them.

At that time Austria was especially in a very dire and perilous state. The Versailles Treaty – the peacemakers – had done their best to make Austria a foodless nation. To save Austria’s starving population, Hoover estimated that the country needed at least $100 million of food aid until the next harvest that could alleviate this dire situation. Unfortunately, Hoover could note raise even a fraction of this sum and the United States was unable to assist him in these efforts, since US law prohibited assisting and lending to enemy states, even after they ceased being enemies.

To get around this restriction, Hoover arranged for America to lend $45 million to Britain, France and Italy and for them to lend the money to Austria on the condition that it by used to buy American food. This way Hoover cleverly averted starvation, while helping American farmers dispose of surplus crops.

However, American Congress subsequently caused indignant dismay among the three nations by insisting that this loan must be repaid after Austria defaulted. The allies argued that they borrowed the money only in a technical sense to help American relief efforts and did not benefit from this arrangement, whereas American farmers were enriched by $45 million. Congress was unmoved and insisted on repayment.

Actions such as this one later on helped building American prosperity, but did very little to enhance American popularity and prestige abroad. This created many anti-American sentiments, especially in France, which can be seen even today.

In conclusion, you can deduce what I am trying to illustrate regarding American policies. It is a depiction of American modus vivendi and modus operandi, and illustrates why American relief intentions are constantly viewed with caution and suspicion by other countries. Similar relief episodes by the U.S.A. in later years have used the same scenarios, especially after the WWII. One could almost allegorically infer by saying – “It’s very hard to teach old dog new tricks.” Especially when the dog is in control.