

# “Delay, Postpone, Obfuscate, Derail”

## A Case Study of U.S. Government Response to Criticism of Assistance Programs to Russia

Many supporters of U.S. assistance to the former Soviet Union have been frustrated at the stewardship of the federal aid and cooperation programs. Ineffectiveness, slowness, cronyism, conflicts of interests, cross-purposes among bureaucracies, and an atmosphere of intimidation against contractors who air constructive criticism rank high among the complaints of aid proponents in the private sector who want to see assistance programs run well.

Many officials, chief among them Ambassador Richard Morningstar, special advisor to the president and secretary of state on assistance to the new independent states, have actively solicited input from contractors and other well-informed supporters of aid and cooperation initiatives. Morningstar has taken many concerns to heart and implemented some needed changes. Even at the program level within the assistance bureaucracies, civil service and foreign service professionals have been quick to recognize problems or potential problems, to seek outside advice, and to attempt to take remedial action.

However, for every such official, there is at least one other who makes it difficult for private contractors and others to provide the needed feedback. In interview after interview, I have spoken to contractors who fear loss of contracts and other forms of reprisal if they go on the record. In fact, some previous *Demokratizatsiya* authors or their institutions have been faced with very real threats of losing future funding—and therefore jobs—in retaliation for their views expressed in these pages. Yet we cannot publish the details because of these concerns. It sounds like Moscow in 1976, but it was really Washington in 1996.

A pressing need for greater glasnost, as it were, persists with regard to Washington officialdom. The assistance bureaucracy is extremely difficult for researchers and even federal lawmakers to navigate; statistics in one office often conflict with those in another, and more than rarely does it become simply impossible to fathom even basic data. Part of the problem is the nature of the system, but substantial guilt rests with a malignant attitude that not only resists improving efficiency and making funds go further, but attacks those who try. The result is a sense of frustration and helplessness on Capitol Hill and in the public that actually undermines support for continued international assistance programs.

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An illustration of this malignancy is a 3 May 1995 memorandum circulated by U.S. Agency for International Development Deputy Administrator Sally Shelton concerning a controversial initiative to merge the agency with the State Department in an effort to save funds and make aid programs comport with government foreign policy goals. The memorandum does not discuss Russia specifically, but it is important to the Russian aid debate because of the mindset it reflects in the upper levels of part of the foreign policy and assistance machinery. This mindset fears real discussion. The memorandum, which Shelton sent to posts around the world, stated bluntly: “The strategy is ‘delay, postpone, obfuscate, derail.’” Part of that strategy, the memorandum said, citing National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, was to “tar” critics as “back-door isolationist.”<sup>1</sup> So critics, in the administration’s view—even constructive critics who share many of the policy goals—are not to be debated on the merits of their views or of the facts.

Not all administration aid officials have adopted the obfuscation and tarring strategy, and to their credit have welcomed independent commentary. The following pages offer a case study of sorts about how leading government officials respond to criticism of the programs. The case is based on my article, “To Russia, With Cash,” published in the June 1996 edition of *Reader’s Digest*. More scholarship can go into a *Reader’s Digest* story than meets the eye. The fact-checking process is more rigorous than most academic peer reviews. The article involved fifteen months of research, including scores of interviews and thousands of pages of documentation. The magazine’s research editor spent a month double-checking the article for accuracy, inquiring with every person cited as well as with the State Department, USAID, the Office of the Vice President and elsewhere to verify every single statement and assertion. At the suggestion of USAID and Vice President Gore’s office, I made several changes prior to publication.

Nevertheless, aid officials subjected the article to extensive criticism upon publication. At a House International Relations Committee hearing to assess the aid programs on 13 June, Chairman Benjamin Gilman used the article to cross-examine Ambassador Morningstar and USAID Assistant Administrator Thomas A. Dine. Rep. Tom Campbell, the juniormost member of the committee, asked Morningstar and Dine to issue rebuttals. Morningstar did so, and Campbell circulated the document on Capitol Hill; the response is published below. Dine made a verbal response at the hearing, but did not issue a public written rebuttal.<sup>2</sup>

Readers wrote President Clinton of their concern about issues raised in “To Russia, With Cash.” The Office of the President referred some of those concerns to Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Ashton B. Carter, who wrote a response for the Department of Defense that appears in this section.

The original *Reader’s Digest* article, the written responses from the Department of State and Department of Defense, and the author’s rebuttals offer insights to how senior officials responsible for the aid programs fit into the administration’s “obfuscation” policy in their reporting to Congress and the public. I hope that this case study contributes to public discussion, particularly in the aid community. As always, reader responses are welcome.

**NOTES**

1. Sally Shelton, USAID staff notes to U.S. posts abroad, 3 May 1995, 7:58 a.m.
2. Let the record show that in September 1995, *Demokratizatsiya* invited Dine to write an article for publication in the journal to address USAID's critics. His article would have been the first of what has become a series of critiques of the U.S. aid programs. Dine did not respond to either the letter or to telephonic follow-ups to his office. I extended the invitation a third time via a USAID press officer in April 1996, with still no response.

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