A Catholic Relief Services worker is pictured in a file photo helping a young woman at a food distribution area in Marojela village, located in the Marolinta commune in southern Madagascar's Beloha District. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Relief Services/Jim Stipe)

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Matthew Schmitz, the conservative convert to Catholicism who contributes essays to The New York Times, recently blamed liberals run amok for President Donald Trump's decision to essentially eliminate the United States Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy.

"To understand why American soft power became so politically vulnerable, it helps to understand the damage progressives did to its broad legitimacy over the past decade and a half," Schmitz writes. "They did this by implicating soft-power institutions in domestic political controversies, especially on issues of sexual politics. They conflated American interests overseas with progressive priorities, using taxpayer money to advance a set of claims over which Americans strongly disagree."

He goes on to cite examples of such funding for progressive priorities: "$70,884 in Ireland for a musical event celebrating diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, $32,000 in Peru for a comic 'featuring an L.G.B.T.Q.+ hero to address social and mental health issues,' $19,808 in Montenegro for gay-straight alliance clubs."

This was the first I heard about the Montenegro grant, but the other two grants have been cited again and again in various conservative media, even by the White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Let's set aside the fact that Schmitz — and the many, many others in Trump's camp who cited these examples — ignore the fact that USAID did not award the Irish or Peruvian grants, the State Department did. But, the point stands: Especially when it comes to foreign aid, taxpayer money shouldn't be used to export American culture wars.

If the source of the grant, USAID or State Department, doesn't vitiate the argument, however, it is also true that a few misguided grants shouldn't cause the administration to shut down foreign aid entirely. When you need to replace the

refrigerator in your kitchen, you don't burn down the house. There is a principled argument to make against the kinds of grants to which Schmitz objects, but that argument in no way justifies ending programs that help desperately poor people get food and water, or work that promotes democracy, or disaster relief efforts.

Certainly, Catholic Relief Services was not using its USAID funding to promote gay rights. Why could Schmitz not offer a word about the importance of CRS' work? Bill O'Keefe, the vice president for Mission, Mobilization and Advocacy at CRS, asked Congress "to share a Catholic, pro-life vision for U.S. international assistance — one which identifies the state as an indispensable partner to live out American values towards common purpose."

O'Keefe's vision certainly avoids the objections Schmitz cited. Do conservatives not see the pro-life values — and pro-life consequences — at work in CRS' mission?

There is nothing American, and nothing Catholic, about failing to help suffering people. To ignore all the good works accomplished by USAID and its many partners over the years in order to justify Trump's taking a sledgehammer to foreign aid is morally and intellectually dishonest.

Democrats should nonetheless heed what Schmitz writes about not entangling foreign aid with culture war issues.

The GOP anti-USAID propaganda works because a lot of people make less than the $70,000 spent on the DEI musical event in Ireland. Democrats are not wrong when they point out that $70,000 is a drop, or not even a drop, in the bucket of federal spending. Indeed, the entire $71.9 billion spent on foreign aid in fiscal 2023 is a drop in the bucket. But most Americans can't wrap their heads around such large figures. The complaints about the $70,000 spent on a DEI musical hit home not only because some Americans oppose DEI initiatives, but because they can relate to the dollar amount.

The Democrats must use this time in the political wilderness to decide what values and issues they think are most important and how they can build a majority coalition around those values and issues. Pursuing policies that half the American people hate is no way to overcome polarization. If the Democrats are going to tolerate

performative politics, especially on controversies surrounding sexuality, they will continue to make themselves vulnerable to the kind of propaganda attacks Trump's acolytes have perfected.

Whichever party commits itself to governing from broadly held values is likely to forge the kind of sustained, governing coalition the Democrats built with Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and '40s and the Republicans crafted with Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Pursuing foreign policies — not just foreign aid, but all foreign policies — with a view to reestablishing the kind of broad, bipartisan consensus that held sway from World War II until the Iraq War is a part of that kind of common-sense agenda.

It will require the Democrats to rein in some activists who may staff a future administration. It will allow them to start restoring faith in democracy and decency again, if they survive the remaining four years of Trumpism.

If the special interests and the dollars they contribute keep Democrats from this obvious, morally necessary path, they should have the decency not to whine when Trumpism wins. And Schmitz should have the decency to defend Catholic Relief Services and the many other USAID programs that help people and spread American values and generosity throughout a suffering world.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.