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Ex-Presidents as pitchmen

An Associated Press dispatch from a Thai fishing village summed up the media spin a few days ago: "Former President Bill Clinton's voice trembled with emotion as he and George H.W. Bush put aside their once-bitter political rivalry..."

Ever since his initial checked-out responses to the catastrophic tsunami two months ago drew worldwide derision, the current president has largely relied on two predecessors to do the image-repair chores. In effect, an ad hoc PR outfit – Bush, Bush & Clinton – has the three partners laboring to make themselves look good as compassionate great nephews of Uncle Sam. But there are deeper messages and functions here than mere image-polishing.

When an American president wants to make war, he doesn't rely on private contributions. The U.S. warfare in Iraq has already cost taxpayers more than \$150 billion, not counting the regular Pentagon budget that is now well over a billion dollars per day.

The global-scale PR work of Bush, Bush & Clinton underscores the idea that the era of big government is over – for humanitarian efforts, anyway. From tuberculosis to AIDS to tsunamis, while global disasters ravage the public, the responses are increasingly private. Thanks to President Bush, the U.S. government dropped out of the tsunami-relief bidding war at \$350 million, after the White House's earlier offer of one-tenth that amount sparked caustic criticism.

Instead of boosting the U.S. Treasury's commitment – or, heaven forbid, devoting a major portion of the Pentagon's aircraft and vessels to swift delivery of aid to remote stricken areas – Bush dispatched two ex-presidents to the PR rescue. The pair appeared on major TV shows and taped a television commercial before heading off on a four-day whirlwind photo-op trip to Asia.

At a news conference in Thailand the other day, Clinton said that worldwide commitments for tsunami relief have reached a total of \$7 billion from government and private sources combined. Meanwhile, U.S. media air continues to be filled with testimonials to the warm-hearted generosity of American society.

The president emeritus of an elite national-security club, the Council on Foreign Rela-

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tions, has praised the PR game while urging that it be played more deftly. "People do watch and see what we do," said Leslie Gelb. "Here's an opportunity to remind people of the good we do, and he [President Bush] can do it without changing his policy on Iraq or terrorism." In other words, good deeds worn on Uncle Sam's sleeve can help to distract attention from the copious blood on his hands.

After a career that has spun through revolving doors of media and government, Gelb knows a lot about propaganda. At various times, he has worked as a press officer for the Defense Department, a "national security" reporter for the New York Times, the director of the U.S. government's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs and the editor of the Times op-ed page. Back in 1978, while at the State Department, he helped set up a covert CIA program to get the European press to write favorable articles about the neutron bomb, a weapon designed to kill people while leaving property intact.

On the surface, the humanitarian zeal of Bush, Bush & Clinton transcends ideology. "When it comes to helping people, politics is aside," the elder Bush proclaimed, while his companion Clinton said: "On issues about which there can be no debate, there should be no problems." But the roles of the ex-presidential poster-men in tsunami relief are profoundly ideological, amounting to more bricks in the propaganda wall that girds against collective solutions and reinforces privatization of social action.

About such agendas there can – and must – be debate.

Pieties from ex-presidents do not change the kind of realities that Mark Engler, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, has described in the wake of the tsunami: "Those of us in wealthy nations believe that our governments donate generously to help these people. Yet many poor countries pay out more in debt service than they receive in aid – the Jubilee Debt Campaign reports that India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Maldives, and Indonesia together make over \$23 billion in debt payments each year to multilateral banks and wealthy governments."

Methodically stealing from destitute people is not exactly a sign of generosity. Washington prefers to dress up Uncle Sam as some kind of star-spangled Santa Claus, but in the real world the resemblance is much closer to the Grim Reaper. No amount of media spin can bring victims back to life when a superpower opts for militarism and greed.

Norman Solomon's next book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer by Wiley. His columns and other writings can be found at www.normansolomon.com.