

# Fill empty airliners with food for refugees

**RICHARD STARTZ**  
*Economics professor*

Ever been embarrassed to talk about a good deed you've done? America has opened aid channels to the displaced victims of our enemies. But America must be bolder. Our response must be bigger. And we must be brag more. Our national leadership has announced millions of dollars in aid for Afghan refugees. (Who else but the United States sends medical aid even before the military battle?)

This first response, amounting to \$15 or \$20 per refugee, is too modest. We need to send more. And we need to let the whole world see us do it.

The Great Seal of the United States shows both arrows and an olive branch in the eagle's talons. Soon we will respond to terror with

our mighty military. As we take a club to the guilty we must offer the hand of friendship to the innocent. We should again share a small sliver of the great American cornucopia with the hungry refugees of war and terror abroad.

Four million Afghan refugees sit today in neighboring countries having fled years of civil war and the fright of the Taliban. Pakistan alone "hosts" 2 million Afghans, with as many as 1.5 million more expected as the border opens. Will the refugee camps breed friends of America or enemies? It would be a great act of compassion, and also of self-interest, to open the flow of food and medicine to these refugees.

Once America knew how to win in peace as well as in war. In 1948, American planes ferried coal and candy to Berlin, breaking the communist blockade. The Berlin airlift was a pretty good investment in earning a friend and defeating an enemy. Let's do it again.

Fifty years ago it was a stream of prop planes that fed Berlin. Let's make it a flood of jetliners today. Around the country, airliners sit idle. Airline workers sit at home. Tens of thousands of Boeing workers face layoffs. We have committed as a nation to write checks to the airlines to offset lost business.

Rather than just writing checks, let's replace the lost business with food-for-peace flights to the refugee camps.

This week, those airliners should be re-configured to carry cargo. Stick the airline seats in warehouses until passenger traffic returns to normal. If yanking out seats is too hard, then cover them with canvas. Boeing workers can jury-rig a solution. Next week, fill the planes with food - stamped with American flags - and fill the skies to Pakistan. "Food," President Eisenhower said, "can be a powerful instrument for all the free world in building a durable peace."

There is a right-now-today advantage to turning on the flow of food. Aid to the hungry will remind the world that this is not a fight between "us" and "them" - it is a fight between good and evil.

We can send a political message to our friends while we send a military message to our enemies. We are the good guys.

Don't we already send massive aid abroad? Sadly, we send much less than we think we do. Fifty years ago, American foreign aid as a fraction of gross domestic product was 20 times the level it is today.

The hard facts are that we no longer invest much in foreign aid. Out of a 40-hour work week, about three minutes' worth of production goes to foreign aid (two minutes' worth outside of what we provide to Egypt and Israel.)

As a fraction of GDP, our neighbors in Canada contribute more than twice what we

do. So do the Irish. The Danes spend eight times what we do as a fraction of GDP. Even the Spanish and Portuguese are ahead of us.

In Pakistan, in neighboring countries and inside Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as many as 7.5 million are at risk. More than two-thirds are women and children. More than a million are children under 5.

These millions of civilians have "a fragile grip on survival," says UNICEF. And winter will shortly arrive. We should act with charity.

But we should combine our charity with self-interest, without embarrassment. Images of the trade towers dying are burned in our memories. Visualize the pictures of the skies filled with American planes bringing food - and hope - to the victims of our enemies.

Richard Startz is the Castor professor of economics at the University of Washington.