

January 10, 2005 In the past ten days, Americans have donated several hundred million dollars to help Asian tsunami victims. Despite this outpouring of support for private charities, the Bush administration has pledged to send at least \$350 million in federal aid, a figure that is open-ended and certain to climb. It's admirable that Americans have been so willing to open their hearts and pocketbooks for the victims of this enormous tragedy, but it's not the job of the federal government to make a show of generosity to the world with your tax dollars. Remember, government officials cannot be generous or charitable, because the money they dispense does not belong to them. The original coalition of donor governments has been disbanded, meaning the United Nations will control all government-funded relief efforts going forward. Surely the oil-for-food scandal demonstrates that UN officials are the worst possible stewards of the tsunami relief funds, yet that's precisely who will be overseeing the expenditure of our \$350 million. Bush administration officials have promised to keep a tight watch over how those tax dollars are spent, but the truth is that we cannot control this money once it's sent overseas for UN administration. We are mistaken when we assume governments must be the central organizing agents of the relief efforts. Private-sector charities and free-market social cooperation are the real saviors in any natural disaster, despite the intense desire of politicians to be seen as heroes on a white horse-- heroes who use other people's money. Government-to-government transfers are inherently inefficient, and adding the UN as a middleman will only ensure that even less of the money actually reaches those who need it most. Money is critical for disaster relief, but it is not the only issue. Efficient organization of relief services is equally important, and efficiency means circumventing the government bureaucracies that tend to boss people around after natural disasters. Doctors Without Borders, a private group known for providing medical care in poor nations, actually requested that people stop sending them money last week. Their operating model relies on very low overhead and complete independence from governments, and they understand that throwing more and more money at a disaster is not necessarily the best approach. Lew Rockwell of the Ludwig von Mises Institute explained the problem of government "generosity" for disaster relief in the context of the 2004 Florida hurricanes: "The whole enterprise of disaster aid has become one of the great rackets of modern government. Today we have the disgusting spectacle of senators and presidents coming to visit weather-injured places, as if they have within their capacity the ability to size up damage and make provisions for making it all correct. We are supposed to believe that they know more about the proper course of action than insurance adjusters and property owners." "If we had honest politicians, they would say: 'Of course I'm sorry about what happened to that beach in Florida, but my presence there would only distract from the essential work being done by owners and their insurers. I don't know anything about the topic, and even if I did, I would not want to steal from some to give to others to realize my political priorities.'" The Asian tsunami is the worst natural disaster of our lifetimes, and we should all do everything we can to help. Investigate the charities and private groups involved, and send what you can. But let's get governments and the United Nations out of the way, please.