



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on January 15, 2010

Obama: Both Right and Wrong on Haiti Earthquake Relief

President Obama has two initiatives to help victims of Haiti's devastating earthquake, a private initiative that deserves lavish praise and a new government dole that lacks constitutional authority and merits condemnation. The January 12 earthquake in Haiti has unquestionably wreaked unspeakable violence.

Reuters wire service [reported](#) the International Red Cross estimates of the 7.0 magnitude quake in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation: "The Haitian Red Cross said it believed 45,000 to 50,000 people had died and 3 million more were hurt or left homeless by the quake." Note that these figures are in of a nation with less than 11 million total population.



But the good news is that Reuters has also [reported](#) January 14 that aid is already arriving in waves: "Planes full of supplies headed to the Port-au-Prince airport on Thursday, but they arrived faster than ground crews could unload them. Aviation authorities had to restrict non-military flights from U.S. airspace because they feared the planes would run out of fuel while waiting to land."

Because governments are notoriously inefficient, one can only hope that the U.S. military (which is generally more efficient than civilian government entities) called to aid Haiti has not exacerbated the airport logjam. President Obama noted that same day that "Our military has secured the airport and prepared it to receive the heavy equipment and resources that are on the way, and to receive them around the clock, 24 hours a day. An airlift has been set up to deliver high-priority items like water and medicine. And we're coordinating closely with the Haitian government, the United Nations, and other countries who are also on the ground." A January 14 CNN report seemed to indicate that the U.S. military had helped the situation at the airport rather than compound the congestion. The need for the tiny one-runway airport near Port-au-Prince has grown all the greater as the capital's major shipping port was heavily damaged in the quake.

For his part, President Obama has shown both the very best and worst with the aid efforts for Haiti. Sadly, President Obama's first act was to go to the nearly bankrupt U.S. Treasury and dole out another \$100 million in borrowed funds that weren't his to give. He [noted](#) January 14 that "today, I'm also announcing an immediate investment of \$100 million to support our relief efforts. This will mean more of the life-saving equipment, food, water and medicine that will be needed. This investment will grow over the coming year as we embark on the long-term recovery from this unimaginable tragedy."

The same issue of government "charity" has come up time-and-again in American history, with government increasingly giving (and often wasted) funds to victims of calamities. This has happened more in recent years despite the lack of a constitutional authorization for the President or the Congress to give the tax dollars of citizens to any needy person. This principle was once recognized by presidents,



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such as President Grover Cleveland, who vetoed an aid bill on February 16, 1887 for Texas farmers hit by a severe and prolonged drought. His [veto message](#) mirrored the limits of the U.S. Constitution:

I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution, and I do not believe that the power and duty of the General Government ought to be extended to the relief of individual suffering which is in no manner properly related to the public service or benefit. A prevalent tendency to disregard the limited mission of this power and duty should, I think, be steadfastly resisted, to the end that the lesson should be constantly enforced that though the people support the Government the Government should not support the people.

The friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied upon to relieve their fellow-citizens in misfortune. This has been repeatedly and quite lately demonstrated. Federal aid in such cases encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character, while it prevents the indulgence among our people of that kindly sentiment and conduct which strengthens the bonds of a common brotherhood.

It is within my personal knowledge that individual aid has to some extent already been extended to the sufferers mentioned in this bill.

Just as was the case with Cleveland's observation, private citizens have once again rushed to the aid of natural disaster victims. This explains the airport logjam of supply flights. President Obama's other initiative on Haiti deserves only praise. According to various news reports, Obama has recruited former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to head up a private fundraising effort. Obama's initiative appears to be modeled on the Clinton/elder Bush effort organized in 2004 to aid victims of the tsunami in Southeast Asia. The results of such private initiatives have always been greater than government aid donations. Former Presidents Clinton and Bush (41) [raised twice as much money in private donations](#) for tsunami victims as U.S. government aid (\$950 million) offered to victims. And perhaps more importantly, private aid is almost inevitably distributed both more economically through volunteers and more efficiently through churches and non-profit organizations with professional aid administrators who are already working on the ground with the needy.

President Obama has correctly used the presidential "bully pulpit" for publicity to generate sympathy and private donations for Haiti's needy, even if he has also forced the U.S. taxpayers to go deeper into debt for the aid. He should be commended for the former and roundly criticized for the latter.

Photo of Haiti earthquake victims: AP Images



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