H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXVI-13

Julia Irwin. *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century*. University of North Carolina Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781469677231

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Contents

Introduction by Megan Black, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2

Review by Shoon Murray, American University 6

Review by Kevin O'Sullivan, University of Galway 13

Review by Davide Rodogno, Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies 18

Review by Ian Seavey, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley 25

Review by Lauren Turek, Trinity University 28

Response by Julia F. Irwin, Louisiana State University 33

Introduction by Megan Black, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

In the wake of hurricanes, earthquakes, and other catastrophes, US personnel arrived on distant shores. Julia Irwin's brilliant book *Catastrophic Diplomacy* reveals how this disaster aid has been a near-constant, if out-of-sight, feature of modern US state power since the late nineteenth century. These actors provided urgently needed assistance to nations that were reeling from immense loss. But Irwin also amasses an astonishing array of evidence to show how the key operatives involved—the US State Department, the US military, and the American Red Cross—not only rebuilt hospitals, roads, and houses, but also built a scaffolding for American global power. Leafing through the pages of the book, I was struck by several images which give visual form to this dual dynamic on display: an American flag spanning a two-story building housing relief efforts in Tokyo after the Kanto earthquake (119); an inscrutable US Marine posed with bodies picked from the rubble in Nicaragua during the US military occupation (144); a hulking US Air Force transport plane in non-aligned Yugoslavia in the Cold War (250). Irwin summarizes these convergences clearly, "By assisting survivors of international calamities, US officials thought not only to *ameliorate distant suffering* but also to *promote the diplomatic and strategic interests* of the *United States*" (2, emphasis mine).

Disaster aid, put simply, became a stepping-stone for an increasingly far-ranging American power. This is a topic of great relevance to multiple fields—diplomatic history, as well as disaster studies, histories of humanitarianism and development, and environmental studies—a point that surfaces in the lively roundtable discussion featuring Shoon Murray, Kevin O'Sullivan, Davide Rodongo, Ian Seavey, and Lauren Turek. Each brings different subfield-level expertise to bear in analyzing Irwin's encompassing book. These careful readers find much to celebrate, especially the bold and ambitious scope of the narrative and the author's singular ability to draw out insights about continuity and change across such a wide periodization and terrain. They also raise questions with an eye to different scholarly literatures that share a stake in the history of what Irwin cleverly terms "catastrophic diplomacy." Their sharp insights prompted an equally insightful response from Irwin, who ends the roundtable by reflecting both on the writing process and on where the conversation might go.

As a starting point, the roundtable participants note many benefits from a book that pursues an international story of case studies that have never before been linked together in one chain. Turek commends Irwin's "seizing the intellectual possibility" that is inherent in responses to "rapid-onset disasters," which helped leaders construct a "politically palatable" bridge between the United States and the world. Murray explores the intellectual stakes of the broad periodization and nimble approach to the temporalities of US interventions overseas, noting the tendency of "blurring lines between short-term disaster relief and longer-term development assistance" over time. Rodogno celebrates the way the book provides a model for bringing the state back into studies of humanitarian work that are often focused on civil society and nongovernmental organizations. Seavey flags the book's contributions to an environmental history of US foreign relations, attending to climatological and geological phenomena that precipitated crises across a material world—hinting that much more work might be done thanks to Irwin's revelations about the extent to which presidential administrations documented most disasters in real time. And O'Sullivan praises Irwin's ability to examine the ideological foundations—indeed the racial and classist

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foundations—of aid that shaped an uneven set of US engagements across borders. Many more features of Irwin's achievement rise to the forefront of these careful contributions between the different essays.

The roundtable participants also draw from their impressive multidisciplinary range to raise questions and point to pathways of inquiry not taken or developed as deeply. Some ponder how insights from the transnational turn and international history might broaden the scope of this conversation. O'Sullivan, for instance, notes that other nations put forward their own visions for disaster relief through the Red Cross movement and the United Nations. In this vein, Seavey asks what might happen if the voices of locals are prioritized alongside outsiders. The reviewers also query the conceptual mapping, both that of the author and the historical actors in the book. Rodogno, for instance, wonders how Irwin's historical actors thought about terms like "self-help" and "charity," as well as how their actions might connect (or not) with scholarly analytics such as "soft power." O'Sullivan reads the book as contributing to scholarship on soft power, but also asks how Irwin might use these wide-ranging case studies to theorize the "associational state" and "permanent emergency." The participants also interrogate the nature and scope US power in the wake of natural disasters. Murray raises questions concerning scale within the broader foreign policy establishment, as well as proportion and impact: what, she asks, might happen if aid could be quantified, for example, by weighing the small token provisions alongside the more obviously impactful large-scale contributions? For Turek, meanwhile, the book piques curiosity about domestic publics, whether the shifting opinions and Congressional debates placed constraints on the disaster aid establishment.

Julia Irwin responds with much enthusiasm, agreement, and insight to these queries, sharing, for instance, an enthusiasm for work that might be done by future historians. She reflects thoughtfully on the possibilities and challenges inherent in a history of disaster aid—the yearning for a global view but the unwieldy details in a world of catastrophes. Throughout her response and the book, Irwin underlines the urgency of asking questions about the nature of US power—coercive or collaborative, inflexible or responsive—as current US operatives undertake missions to rout disasters around the world. The questions will surely only be more pronounced in a human-altered world where once-a-century disasters become increasingly, distressingly frequent. One walks away from Irwin's book not only with a clear sense of the past, but also a yearning to hope that the United States disaster establishment might learn from this past to leave a better legacy—one which is less hierarchical, whimsical, and ambivalent—behind in its wake.

Contributors:

Julia F. Irwin is the T. Harry Williams Professor of History at Louisiana State University. In addition to *Catastrophic Diplomacy*, she is the author *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford University Press, 2013). She is currently writing *Humanitarianism: A Very Short Introduction* for Oxford University Press. She serves as a founding co-editor of *The Journal of Disaster Studies*. She is also a founding co-editor of the new book series *InterConnections: The Global 20th Century* (University of North Carolina Press).

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Megan Black is Associate Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Harvard University Press, 2018) which won the George Perkins Marsh Prize from the American Society of Environmental History, Stuart L. Bernath Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, W. Turrentine-Jackson Prize from the Western History Association, and the British Association of American Studies Prize. She has published articles and review essays in *The Journal of American History*, *Modern American History*, *Diplomatic History*, and *American Quarterly*. Her new book project follows a community in Colorado who battled a powerful international corporation intent on blasting through their mountain in search of a mineral of increasing importance to 1970s globalization.

Shoon Murray is a professor specializing in US foreign policy at the School of International Services at American University. She is currently working on a book analyzing the institutional balance between the State Department and US military overtime. She is co-editor of *Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy?* (Georgetown University Press, 2014).

Kevin O'Sullivan is Associate Professor in History at the University of Galway. He has written extensively on issues of aid, development, human rights, global justice, and Western encounters with the Global South, including the books, *The NGO Moment: The Globalisation of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), and *Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire: Small State Identity in the Cold War* (Manchester University Press, 2012). He is also co-editor of the Royal Irish Academy's Documents in Irish Foreign Policy project (www.difp.ie). His current research, titled "Green Futures," explores how people in the past understood the future of the environment, and what this means for present day climate change adaptation strategies.

Davide Rodogno is Professor of International and Development Studies and head of the Interdisciplinary Program of the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. He is the author of *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), *Transnational Networks of Experts in the Long Nineteenth Century: Experts, Networks and Issues from the 1840s to the 1930s* (Berghahn Books, 2015), *The League of Nations' Work on Social Issues: Visions, Endeavors and Experiments* (United Nations Publications, 2016), *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire (1815–1914): The Birth of a Concept and International Practice* (Princeton University Press, 2011), and *Fascism's European Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He co-edited with Emmanuel Dalle Mulle and Mona Bieling, *Sovereignty, Nationalism, and the Quest for Homogeneity in Interwar Europe* (Bloomsbury, 2023) and co-edited and authored *Humanitarian Photography. A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Ian Seavey is an Assistant Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Engagement (SIPCE) at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He previously held a Brady-Johnson Fellowship in International Security Studies at Yale University. He earned his PhD in History from Texas A&M University in 2024. His research examines US empire in the Caribbean through the lens of disaster relief, environmental policy, and rum production. His book manuscript under contract with the University of Pennsylvania Press, *Huracán del Norte: Disasters and US Colonialism in Twentieth Century Puerto Rico*, tells the story of how evolving ideas about disaster relief policy fundamentally shaped and continue to shape the

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colonial relationship between the Puerto Rico and the United States. He has published articles in a variety of venues including the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, *AHA Perspectives*, and the *Journal of Environmental Hazards*. His next project investigates the intersection of rum consumption and production with U.S. cultural empire throughout the twentieth century Caribbean. His research has been funded by the Harry S. Truman Library Institute, the Albritton Center for Grand Strategy, and Yale's Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy. In his free time, he enjoys playing guitar in various heavy metal bands.

Lauren Turek is an Associate Professor of History at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX. Her first book, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and US Foreign Relations*, was published in 2020 as part of the Cornell University Press US in the World Series. She is currently at work on a book about the Congressional debates and alliances that shaped US foreign aid policies during the twentieth century and is co-editing a Routledge Handbook with Cara Burnidge on the history of religion and politics in the United States since 1776.

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Review by Shoon Murray, American University

Julie Irwin's *Catastrophic Diplomacy* uncovers a surprisingly long history of US government involvement in delivering overseas disaster assistance to victims of natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions dating back to 1902. *Catastrophic Diplomacy* documents how short-term emergency disaster aid—which occasionally transitioned into slightly longer-term reconstruction assistance—was a regular feature of US foreign policy, motivated by a humanitarian impulse to relieve human suffering mixed with more self-interested aims of reaping diplomatic benefits by doing so.

The book will be eye-opening for many students of US foreign policy; while the post-World War II European Recovery Program, the Marshall Plan, is commonly thought of as the first time the United States used foreign aid for strategic purposes in peacetime, Irwin, drawing on decades of US officials' correspondence found in the National Archives and presidential libraries, describes dozens of earlier US foreign aid missions, albeit some brief and ad hoc.[1] And while many foreign policy experts and commentators expressed worry about the US military's involvement in humanitarian and development aid starting in the 1990s and peaking after 9/11, Irwin shows pre-WWII examples of such operations, illustrating that the US military services have a long history of utilizing their unique mobilization capabilities for emergency responses overseas.[2]

Most important, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* shines a rigorous light on an understudied US foreign policy tool—overseas disaster assistance—that was consciously wielded, Irwin argues, to burnish the image of the United States, to extend its influence and power, and to create conditions of stability in critical areas.

The practice of overseas US disaster assistance started in response to the devastating volcanic eruption of Martinique's Mount Pelée in 1902. Captivated by the horrific news, US citizens spontaneously sent private donations and offers to help. President Theodore Roosevelt jumped into the effort, organizing

[1] For an example of the conventional wisdom, one popular textbook observes: "Following World War II, the US government began to engage in the practice of foreign assistance. Most of this assistance in the postwar years went to Western Europe in the form of the Marshall Plan to help those countries reconstruct their economies and stabilize their political system." See Jerel A. Rosati and James M. Scott, *The Politics of United States Foreign Policy*, sixth edition (Wadsworth Centage Learning, 2014), 143. Of course, there are other examples of pre-Marshall Plan foreign aid, such as the American Relief Administration's efforts after World War I, which are outside of *Catastrophic Diplomacy's* focus on rapid-onset natural disasters, excluding calamities due to war, or slower moving disasters such as famines or pandemics.

[2] For examples of post-Cold War concern about the military's involvement in development and humanitarian activities, see US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Defining the Military's Role Towards Foreign Policy," (Government Printing Office, 2008); Gordon Adams and Shoon Murray, eds., *Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy?* (Georgetown University Press, 2014); Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything* (Simon and Schuster, 2016) 79-83, 95-101. Irwin's examples of the military's involvement in disaster assistance are a useful addition to other accounts of the US military engagement in nation-building efforts in places such as the Philippines and Cuba in the early twentieth century. See, for example John Morgan Gates, *Schoolbooks and Krags: The United States Army in the Philippines, 1898-1902 (*Greenwood Press, 1973).

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businessmen to start a national campaign to collect materials and monetary donations and urging Congress to contribute federal funds as well. Swept up in the national reaction, the US Congress agreed, authorizing $200,000 in relief supplies, thereby breaking with tradition.[3] The War Department sent army supplies—tents, bacon, flour—that were positioned close by in the newly-acquired territory of Puerto Rico. The Navy sent the cruiser *Dixie* filled with 900 tons of supplies, with army physicians aboard. Americans gave the supplies to the French authorities to distribute. While much of the American impulse to help was heartfelt, Irwin points out that strategic considerations also played a role. "Coming on the heels of the Spanish-American War and subsequent US occupations of Puerto Rico and Cuba," Irwin explains:

> the disaster presented the United States with another opportunity to flex its imperial muscles in the Caribbean Basin. By delivering swift and generous aid to Martinique, officials understood, they could exhibit the United States' financial and military prowess to rival empires in Europe while also cultivating the friendship of France, a potential ally (30).

Irwin argues that the Martinque effort set basic patterns that are seen in subsequent US relief efforts. Significantly, the effort depended on "the government's chosen partners in the American voluntary sector"—a practice especially important in the pre-WWII era (36). Other guiding norms were evident: that the United States should assist only "with an affected country's permission," usually offering only "short-term, emergency forms of relief," and that assistance should "flow mainly through bilateral channels, with Americans maintaining considerable latitude over how that aid was distributed" (35).

Still, the US response to the 1908 earthquake and tsunami in Messina, Italy strayed into reconstruction efforts; the case highlights how Americans' condescending attitudes toward aid recipients in some parts of the world affected how they wielded the tool of disaster aid by controlling distributions themselves. In this case, the outpouring of contributions from the US public was especially strong, overfilling the American Red Cross (ARC) coffers that were designated for this relief effort. Congress, too, stepped up, contributing $800,000. Importantly, the ARC designated Lloyd Griscom, the US ambassador to Italy, as the on-site official who was authorized to oversee the distribution of the aid. Rather than turning the supplies and money over to the Italians, however, Griscom personally took charge of its distribution, deputizing his naval attaché as well as other prominent US citizens living in Italy to assist, largely because he had doubts about the efficacy of the Italians, thereby revealing his own cultural and class prejudices.

Largely because Griscom came to have so much money at his disposal, the relief effort evolved into a reconstruction effort involving the building of thousands of permanent cottages for survivors, an orphanage, schoolhouses, a church, a hospital (named for Griscom's wife), and a grand hotel (named for Italy's queen). As Irwin points out, Griscom and other US agents rationalized that they were leaving a permanent mark of American generosity in Italy, seeing it as a significant act of public diplomacy. Here we

[3] Irwin documents one previous instance in 1812 when the US Congress authorized $50,000 to help victims of the newly independent republic in Venezuela after an earthquake as a way "to support Venezuelan revolutionaries while nurturing fledging Pan-American sentiments" (23). The 1812 Congressional appropriation is a remarkable amount of money considering that State Department expenditures in 1810 were only $118,782. See David F. Trask, *A Short History of the US Department of State 1781–1981* (US Department of State,1981) 37.

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see the blurring lines between short-term disaster relief and longer-term development assistance (on-site work lasted a little over five months), motivated in part by US interests and marred by the prejudices of the actors involved.

Irwin gives other examples where the US disaster relief efforts became more extensive and intrusive, such as Guatemala in 1917, when an ARC expert recommended new sewage and water infrastructure, as well as public health and child-rearing lessons, after an earthquake. In Tientsin, China, after a 1917 flood, the US Army Fifteenth Infantry administered a refugee camp with overly-disciplined hygienic requirements and also constructed a modern highway—using the manual labor of survivors in exchange for desperately-needed relief assistance.

In these cases, US State Department, and military officials, as well as ARC employees, were using the opportunity of a natural disaster to reform what they saw as deficiencies in other societies' hygiene practices or their work ethic. The much more common pattern, though, was for the US officials to ask the foreign authorities whether their assistance was welcomed, to assist during the emergency, and then to leave, sometimes rejecting requests for reconstruction assistance.

Irwin documents a fascinating public/private institutional collaboration at the heart of overseas disaster relief between the American Red Cross (ARC) and the US government in the pre-WWII era. The American Red Cross, founded in 1881, was chartered by the US Congress in 1900, and again in 1905, as the country's instrument for responding to humanitarian emergencies, domestically and abroad, giving it a quasi-governmental status. For more than a decade, ARC's offices were inside the US government—in what was then called the State, War, and Navy Building (now the Eisenhower Executive Office Building)—immediately adjacent to the White House. High-level State Department officials and military officers populated ARC's governing central committee; the 1905 Congressional charter dictated that the US president appoint one-third of the committee members. When a specific disaster occurred, it was customary for the US president to use his bully pulpit asking the public to donate to the ARC. ARC officials often authorized US ambassadors or consuls on-the-ground within an afflicted country to decide how ARC funds and supplies should be distributed, as with Griscom in the Italian case.[4]

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[4] It is worth mentioning that the US diplomatic corps was still in the early stages of professionalizing, behind consulate officers, in the early twentieth century, and that the State Department did not pay ambassadors enough to do their jobs at most posts without relying on personal independent wealth until the Rogers Act of 1924. Before the Act, US diplomats came from wealthy families, and these men, in particular, would likely bring a class bias to disaster assistance. The example of Lloyd Griscom fits this characterization: he was the son of a millionaire shipping magnate. See Lloyd Griscom, *Diplomatically Speaking* (Literary Guild of America Inc., 1940). For accounts about how the State Department relied on the wealthy to be diplomats and its effects on the culture of the diplomatic corps, see Waldo H. Heinrichs Jr., *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the United States Diplomatic Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1986); Warren Frederick Ilchman, *Professional Diplomacy in the United States 1779–1939: A Study in Administrative History* (The University of Chicago Press, 1961); Robert D Schulzinger, *The Making of the Diplomatic Mind: The Training, Outlook, and Style of United States Foreign Service Officers, 1908–1931* (Wesleyan University Press, 1975); and Martin Weil, *A Pretty Good Club: The Founding Fathers of the US Foreign Service* (WW Norton & Company, 1972).

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As Irwin explains, the foundations the US disaster relief rested on three pillars: the civilian government, primarily the State Department (and White House), whose diplomats initially assessed whether a country needed assistance and whether it was in the interests of the United States to provide it; the military services, who had stockpiled tents and rations, the capacity to deliver materials, medical specialists, and manpower; and the ARC, which financed the lion's share of American assistance with private donations. As a symbol of the public/private partnership, US presidents are given the honorary title as ARC president during their term in office.

Using additional rich case studies and a compelling institutional analysis, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* firmly documents that US disaster assistance has long been a tool in the US foreign policy toolbox. Between 1902 and the mid-1970s, the US government in partnership with ARC and other voluntary organizations sent disaster aid "hundreds" of times to other peoples across the planet (14).

What remains ambiguous, however, is whether disaster relief was a "central" tool for US foreign policy (275). As shown above, Irwin does provide examples of the United States using the occasion of a disaster for diplomatic ends and examples of American agents trying to impose their own values or methods on other peoples. But it still seems that in most cases, the United States was simply pitching in during a state of emergency elsewhere, along with other nations, often with a token effort to show American support, without the expectation of much payback in return.

Part of this uncertainty stems from the intermingling in Irwin's narrative of minor gestures of assistance with more substantial relief efforts that have strategic aims. It might be more helpful to have a differentiation between minor cases—where the ARC sent token amounts of money to a country, or where the US ambassador pitched in a small contingency fund, or where a US navy crew assisted a country for a few days in rescue operations—from the more sustained and impactful operations that had a chance of engendering long-term public diplomacy rewards. The political scientist in me wants to know what percentage of the numerous disaster relief efforts (particularly before WWII) were substantial and sustained in order to discern whether this tool was central to US foreign policy.

Take the period between 1917 and 1947 when, as Irwin argues, "catastrophic diplomacy… occupied a central place in US foreign policy planning" and she reports that the United States provided relief to "dozens" of other countries (16). She gives detailed and compelling accounts of "some of the most extensive US disaster assistance operations during these years" (16). Irwin cites at least seven instances of assistance: the Guatemala City earthquake (1917), floods in Tientsin China (1917), the Great Kanto earthquake in Japan (1923), a Dominican Republic hurricane (1930), a Nicaraguan earthquake (1931), and a Chilean earthquake (1939).

Most disaster relief responses, though, were small in scale. In the latter part of the 1920s, "ARC leaders," Irwin writes, "in close concert with the State Department, made financial contributions to many nations" but the "majority of these relief allocations…were small in scale. Most were in the range of $5,000, though some reached a more substantial $15,000, $20,000, or $25,000" (133). Even the allocation of much larger amounts, say more than $100,000, in the middle of a devastating crisis would be a drop in the bucket of

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what the recipient country would need and would likely not accrue much in terms of diplomatic benefits. Irwin documents how disaster aid did not stop even during the Great Depression; yet "the US government and ARC reined in their foreign aid commitments" for the remainder of the 1930s (153). Between 1939 and 1947, Irwin names nineteen countries that received disaster aid; most assistance took "the form 'of token gifts of one, two, five or ten thousand dollars" (175).

Adding to the difficulty of defining disaster assistance as a central tool of US foreign policy is the unpredictability of natural disasters; reacting to the unexpected is not conducive to diplomatic strategic planning. True, US diplomats repeatedly saw a public relations benefit from helping stricken countries, and sometimes the risk that natural disasters could create instability and harm US trade was a motive for United States assistance. Still, most disaster responses do not seem to have been planned to contribute significantly to US geopolitical interests.

One relief effort which can be seen as strategic is the response to the September 1923 Great Kanto earthquake in Japan, which occurred the year after the Five-Power Treaty.[5] Clearly, amicable relations with Japan—a country which possessed a regional military advantage in the far Pacific where the United States had territorial acquisitions, such as the Philippines, as well as national prestige and economic interests tied to the Open-Door policy in China—made strategic sense. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that the Great Kanto relief effort became "the costliest foreign disaster aid operation the US government and ARC had ever undertaken" and also stands out as an operation where US officials were unusually respectful and courteous of the people they were assisting outside of Europe (111). *Here* is an example where disaster relief was wielded as an important tool of US foreign policy. The United States provided "more than $20 million worth of cash and supplies to Japan, more than all other nations combined" (124). Unfortunately, as Irwin shows, the story did not end well. Soon after US generosity impressed the Japanese government and its citizens, the gains made were undone by ugly racist domestic politics in the United States, specifically the passage of the anti-Japanese Johnson-Reed Immigration Act in May 1924.

Irwin recognizes the ambiguous status of the foreign-disaster aid tool. She documents how the unpredictable and episodic nature of natural disasters led to a long-term neglect by the US government to formally institutionalize a bureau or any legal procedures devoted to them. As Irwin describes it:

> The roots of American catastrophic diplomacy ran deep, as this book has shown, with disaster aid occupying an important place in US foreign relations throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. And yet, after all these decades, after participating in hundreds or relief and recovery operations around the world…US officials *still* responded to foreign catastrophes in a strikingly ad hoc, impromptu way. Before the mid-1960s, the federal government had no agencies, bureaus, or departments devoted exclusively to foreign

[5] A result of the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, and Italy signed the Five-Power Treaty, a naval disarmament program that called for each of the countries involved to maintain a set ratio of warship tonnage.

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> disaster assistance. Before the 1970s, moreover, no federal laws explicitly affirmed the US government's powers to conduct international aid operations (259-260).

The book ends with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) assigning a foreign disaster relief coordinator for the first time in 1964, and then the reform activism that led to the codification of disaster assistance into federal law by 1975.

An asset of *Catastrophic Diplomacy* is that it reveals the broad outlines of the institutional evolution of US diplomatic and military instruments of power, two of the three pillars supporting US foreign disaster aid. Irwin observes that the United States possessed a comparatively small State Department, Army, and Navy until late in the nineteenth century, which prohibited the country from participating in disaster relief abroad. The US "humanitarian geography" (37) grew larger with modernization of the Navy starting in the 1880s, the subsequent acquisition of new bases after the Spanish-American War, and with the increase in state capacity as the military services grew and as reforms professionalized the military services, consulates, and diplomatic corps. In other words, overseas humanitarian efforts require state institutional capacity and a geographic footprint, which the US started to develop by the early twentieth century and became full blown after World War II.

As already noted, Irwin identifies three pillars as the foundation of US disaster assistance; she also acknowledges how each of the pillars evolved, sometimes dramatically, over time. For example, the American Red Cross gained an enormous jump in membership and financial resources after World War I and later lost its privileged quasi-governmental status after WWII, when other voluntary organizations entered the field and the US government relied more on public monies to fund its foreign aid efforts. Regarding another pillar, Irwin discusses how the global footprint of the military services grew from modest pre-WWII to world-spanning after the war, with new access to hundreds of bases.

Irwin's narrative downplays important changes in the leadership role of the last pillar, the State Department, from 1902 to the mid-1970s. *Catastrophic Diplomacy* offers a rich account of how "authority for directing the government's response to international catastrophes was vested principally in the State Department" (75) before the Second World War. Diplomats and consuls in the field reported when disasters happened, requested aid, and were often put in charge of its administration, affording them "tremendous sway over the direction of US international disaster aid operation" (76). As Irwin notes, both in Washington D.C. and in the field, State Department officials dominated decisions about whether to give disaster aid and how to administer it. But after the war, many other organizations entered the sphere of foreign policy, and starting with the Marshall Plan, foreign aid was administered primarily by agencies other than the State Department. Still, Irwin asserts that "the three-pillared system" remains "firmly intact…although the State Department has delegated its disaster aid authority to USAID since the 1960s,

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both the State Department and US Foreign Service continue to play an important role in these efforts" (272).[6]

Catastrophic Diplomacy is an important, deeply researched, finely crafted, and readable book. It breaks new ground in detailing the long history of the understudied subject of US disaster aid overseas. It challenges conventional wisdom about when the United States became involved in foreign aid. It offers a window into foreign policy decision-making in the early twentieth century, showing the dominance of the State Department and collaborations with the private sector. And it shows that the United States often acted on a humane impulse to relieve suffering in other nations, albeit sometimes doing so in a self-interested, controlling, and/or condescending manner.

[6] For analyses about how the State Department lost direct control over foreign aid and other elements of policy, see Gordon Adams, "The Institutional Imbalance of American Statecraft," in Adams and Murray, eds., *Mission Creep*.

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Review by Kevin O'Sullivan, University of Galway

Every book should have a character called "Mr. Catastrophe." The American version, who appears towards the end of Julia Irwin's fascinating new monograph, *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century*, was given that moniker in profiles by *Time* (January 1968) and *Reader's Digest* (October 1968). His name was Stephen R. Tripp, a career civil servant who joined the US International Cooperation Administration in 1956, worked for its successor the US Agency for International Development (USAID, which was formed five years later), and was appointed US foreign disaster relief coordinator in 1964. Tripp's career as "Mr. Catastrophe" was relatively short; he left the role in 1971. Yet in her description of his time in charge, Irwin provides a useful overview of how American disaster responses were made. Tripp's team was small, and the suite near the White House from which they worked was "minuscule" and thus an indication of the marginal position of disaster relief within the American foreign policy-making apparatus.[1] From that base, they had the unenviable task of coordinating diplomats, military and naval officers, and non-state actors in response to myriad small and several large-scale emergencies across the world. Tripp called this "bureaucratic bogdown."[2] It served a higher purpose, however. As Irwin puts it, "Mr. Catastrophe...certainly earned his title," not least by enhancing the "humanitarian and political effectiveness" of American disaster relief (264).

This relationship between humanitarian and diplomatic imperatives is at the heart of Irwin's book. In it, she traces the emergence of what she calls "catastrophic diplomacy:" how "disaster aid served as a consistent and flexible tool of US foreign policy" from the beginning of the twentieth century to the formalized system of emergency relief introduced by "Mr. Catastrophe" and his successors in the late 1960s and early 1970s (2). She describes that process in terms of two trinities (my term, not hers): the three pillars on which catastrophic diplomacy was built; and the three phases of its development. One of the most impressive elements of this book is how Irwin shapes what were often ad hoc processes of deciding when, where, and how to deliver relief. As she describes it, the State Department, and the wider diplomatic service it commanded (the first pillar), frequently initiated those responses, often supervised them, and sometimes even dispensed aid. US Navy ships and supplies, as well as US Army officers, soldiers, and equipment (the second pillar), in turn were vital to the delivery of relief. And those diplomats and representatives from the armed forces collaborated with American non-state actors (the third pillar), most notably the American Red Cross (ARC), which identified crises and raised money for them, while also responding to government calls and working through American diplomats to provide that assistance. In Irwin's telling, these pillars were mutually reinforcing. For example, she documents the US response to an earthquake in Guatemala City in December 1917 and its aftermath, when the call for relief was first raised by Walter Thurston, the local US chargé d'affaires, and aid was delivered by a mix of US army officers and soldiers and ARC aid workers, drawing on government and privately donated resources (87-109).

Case studies like this challenge the orthodoxy on the chronology of US foreign aid. As Irwin meticulously lays bare, processes that would later be described as "aid" were already underway at the beginning of the

[1] "Foreign Aid: Mr. Catastrophe," *Time*, 26 January 1968.
[2] "Foreign Aid: Mr. Catastrophe."

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twentieth century. In Guatemala, emergency relief not only translated into "an opportunity to exercise additional influence…within Guatemalan society and politics" (99); it was also followed-up with the building of hospitals and emergency housing projects that blurred the lines between short- and long-term aid. Those interventions projected and protected US interests. It is telling, for example, that the ARC team that arrived in Guatemala City in January 1918 did so on a ship belonging to the United Fruit Company, which was a symbol of US economic power in the region. From these starting points, Irwin sets out a three-phase chronology of catastrophic diplomacy. The first phase, which ended with US entry to the First World War, mirrored the country's widening engagement with the outside world in the early twentieth century. The second phase, which ran to the early 1940s, matched increased American concern for the well-being of others (best captured in the growth of the ARC during the 1910s and early 1920s) with the country's emergence as a global superpower. The third phase was one of expansion and increased professionalization of emergency relief—similarly mimicking the emergence of a post-Second World War foreign aid regime.

Irwin is not the first scholar, of course, to put forward the claim that aid was used as a diplomatic tool by the United States. On the one hand, her book offers a "disasters" corollary to the pursuit of a *pax Americana* through development described by scholars like Nick Cullather, David Ekbladh, Daniel Immerwahr, and others in recent decades.[3] On the other hand, the case studies she documents add considerable empirical weight to work by constructivists like David Lumsdaine and Carol Lancaster, who since the 1990s have theorized the soft power inherent in the delivery of aid.[4] Such scholars will find much that is familiar in the changing position of China, for example, in Irwin's book. American responses to flood-related crises on the Yangzi River in 1911, where relief was a tool for maintaining social order; near Tianjin in 1917, where aid was a way to both reinforce American interests in that city and curry good favor with the Chinese government following its entry to the First World War; and in southern China in 1931, where food relief was a route to managing US agricultural surplus, all fell within the bounds of building US diplomacy in Asia. In 1950, by contrast, the decision by American agencies, including the non-state sector, not to deliver aid to the ten million people who had been displaced by flooding in the Huai River Valley was taken as a direct result of the Chinese Communist Party's victory in the civil war that had ended just a few months before.

Beneath such geopoliticking, however, Irwin also gives us an important insight into the ideological underpinnings of the US aid regime. American views of recipient populations were simultaneously conditioned by racial- and class-based prejudices *and* by debates about the proper role of government in the delivery of relief. In emergency situations these assumptions frequently translated into mistrust of local authorities and their ability to deliver aid. Irwin describes the $2 million US response to the earthquake and tsunami in the Strait of Messina, Italy, which destroyed much of the surrounding area and local communities in December 1908 (50-67). There, American officials retained control over projects that drew

[3] Nick Cullather, *Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2010); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernisation and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2010); and Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Harvard University Press, 2015). See also the contributions to Francis J. Gavin and Mark Atwood Lawrence, eds, *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
[4] Carol Lancaster, *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); and David Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics: The Foreign Aid Regime, 1949–1989* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

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on US government or ARC funding on the grounds that their Italian counterparts were not well-enough equipped—intellectually as much as logistically—to deliver relief. Such disdain for the Italian authorities was echoed in American attitudes to those they helped. The US vice consul in Milan, Bayard Cutting, complained that the displaced belonged "chiefly to the very lowest classes and are very hard to deal with" (58). Follow-on projects were also framed as an opportunity to "improve" recipient communities—by putting people to work or by implementing "better" hygiene regimes. In spring 1909, for instance, an American-led construction party enlisted more than 600 Italians to build a housing project for displaced people at Messina. Quite apart from providing an opportunity to pursue American diplomacy by, quite literally, marking the contribution with the American flag, this was also a chance to "set the refugees to work" and to establish a community that was a "model of cleanliness, order and industry" (62). As Irwin explains, these sentiments were to become recurring themes in US emergency relief.

Similarly prominent in this story of "catastrophic diplomacy" are the ideological questions that framed the government's role in helping people beyond the borders of the United States. These conversations take two forms in the book. The first, and most obvious, is the well-worn debate over the purpose of the US government. To take just one example of many, Irwin quotes Joseph Bailey, a senator from Texas, who argued against sending relief to Italy in 1909 on the grounds that he did "not believe that the Federal Government possesses the power to apply the people's money in this way" (53). He and others implied that it was better to leave it to private individuals and charities to express popular morality.

Yet, such sentiments were complicated by the relationships that developed between the US government and non-state actors in administering relief. The second debate highlighted by Irwin focuses on the position of private donors in delivering US foreign policy aims. In *Catastrophic Diplomacy*, she provides plentiful empirical data (building also on her research on the American Red Cross) to expand on Akira Iriye's famous call for scholars to write the history of the "century of NGOs."[5] As the US disaster relief apparatus grew more complicated, so too did the government's relationship with the non-state sector. The ARC, in particular, enjoyed a privileged relationship with the Federal government, which was formalized through successive legal instruments passed by Congress in 1900, 1905, and 1947 and strengthened through the porous boundaries between the ARC hierarchy and the American foreign policy-making regime. In 1911, President William Taft, who became the first US President to also serve as the ARC's honorary president, described the organization as "the official volunteer aid department of the United States" (72). These links were extended to other non-state actors in the post-Second World War period. The creation of the War Relief Control Board (1942) and the Advisory Committee on Foreign Aid (ACVFA, 1946), for example, gave US diplomats considerable control over the delivery of 'private' emergency relief. By the time that Tripp took steps to improve coordination of US emergency relief in the late 1960s, non-state agencies were deeply embedded in the "catastrophic diplomacy" regime.

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[5] Akira Iriye, "A Century of NGOs," *Diplomatic History*, 23:3 (1999): 421-435, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/0145-2096.00175. For an overview of her research on the American Red Cross, see Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Irwin's command of a wide range of archival sources and detailed descriptions of the policy-making process make *Catastrophic Diplomacy* an empirically rich and insightful piece of work. There are, however, two areas where the analysis might have been pressed just a little further. The first relates to how we theorize the history of humanitarian aid. Although Irwin frames the book as a contribution to understanding the functions of the "associational state," that concept is not fully developed in the text (7). Irwin might have explored further what the American experience of catastrophic diplomacy can reveal about the "non-governmentality" of disaster relief, or the processes through which non-state actors advanced the interests of states, which was documented most expertly by Gregory Mann in his study of French responses to famine in the Sahel in the 1970s.[6] Similarly, Irwin's descriptions of how emergency aid frequently translated into development projects might be better explained by reference to Mark Duffield's idea of "permanent emergency," through which he maps out how donors justify their continued presence beyond the immediate emergency phase of relief.[7] Finally, and closer to the United States, Emily Baughan's work on international adoption provides an instructive framework for understanding what Irwin calls the "transformative" potential of emergency relief (7). Baughan's research is anchored, indeed, by a case involving a US Navy officer, Admiral Newton McCully, and his "McCully tots," the seven children that he adopted from orphanages in Crimea and brought to the United States in 1920. This offered a high-profile example of how aid could make the world anew in the aftermath of the First World War.[8]

What all this hints at is a second criticism of this book, based upon the view that American foreign aid (in all its forms) cannot be understood primarily as a project conceived of by, and executed from within, the United States. This is partly the consequence of my position as a global historian reading this history from the opposite side of the Atlantic. But it also echoes an older call, made in the La Pietra Report (2000) and subsequently by Ian Tyrrell and others, to "transnationalize" American history.[9] Viewed from this perspective, the key moments in the development of American "catastrophic diplomacy" can be mapped on to both a narrative of growing US power and wider changes in the global aid system in the twentieth century. The normalization of disaster relief in the pre-First World War period, for example, was not simply a US phenomenon; it reflected the rise of global humanitarianism through the Red Cross movement. Similarly, the re-definition of international legal responsibilities in that period, which was visible in attempts to formalize disaster relief at sea in the aftermath of the *Titanic* disaster in 1912, had an impact on American humanitarianism in ways that are not always evident in *Catastrophic Diplomacy*. Irwin's second and third phases of "catastrophic diplomacy" likewise belong to significant moments in the development of global humanitarianism: the dramatic expansion of the international aid system in the

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[6] Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[7] Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Polity Press, 2007).
[8] Emily Baughan, "International Adoption and Anglo-American Internationalism, *c.*1918–1925," *Past and Present*, 239 (2018): 181-217, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtx059.
[9] Thomas Bender, *The La Pietra Report: A Report to the Profession* (Organization of American Historians and the New York University Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History, September 2000), https://web.archive.org/web/20010504214702/http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/final.html; and Ian Tyrrell, "Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Global History*, 4:3 (2009): 453-474, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809990167.

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1940s, particularly through the United Nations; and the concerns that led other states, most notably Sweden and Canada, but also the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD), to develop wide-ranging aid bureaucracies in the 1960s and 1970s.[10] Even Stephen Tripp, the pioneering "Mr. Catastrophe," prioritized concerns, like aid effectiveness and the problems associated with global population growth, which were common across the world in that period.[11]

That said, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* is an important book. It adds significantly to our understanding not only of how US foreign aid functions, but also of its entanglement with the pursuit of wider American interests abroad. Scholars of international relations, development studies, and international history will find much to interest them in Irwin's analysis. Their practitioner colleagues will also benefit from taking notice of its conclusions. As Irwin notes, US aid workers and officials in the twenty-first century, like their predecessors, are shaped "by their own social and economic positions, political objectives, racial and cultural biases, and ideological assumptions" (274). They could do much worse than to read this book in order to appreciate why and how that came to be the case—and, maybe, to understand what to do about it.

[10] On these "moments," see Kevin O'Sullivan, Matthew Hilton and Juliano Fiori, "Humanitarianisms in Context," *European Review of History*, 23:1-2 (2016): 1-15, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1117422.
[11] Tripp identifies these priorities in his conversation with *Time* magazine. "Foreign Aid: Mr. Catastrophe."

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Review by Davide Rodogno, Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

The story historian Julia Irwin tells in *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century* is embedded in its apt title, which can be read in at least two ways: the diplomacy of catastrophes or, in a more provocative way, as a catastrophic (kind of) diplomacy. Playing with this ambiguity was a smart editorial decision. Referring to diplomacy and, in the subtitle, to US foreign disaster assistance, is a precise indication of Irwin's historical analysis, which is the diplomacy of the US government and of its civilian and military authorities. Generally, by using terms like foreign assistance or foreign aid, scholars indicate a focus on state-aid and bilateral assistance rather than on the activities of non-state actors or multilateral aid.[1] For the last twenty-five years, as a reaction to older historiographies, international and transnational history books have focused on historical analyses of non-state actors and international organizations. By dusting off the central role of the state in humanitarian actions and explaining state-interests, sovereignty-related issues, and "geopolitics"—a term that made a loud comeback in the last three years—Irwin's work serves as a reminder that the state should not be the elephant in the room of Western humanitarianism. For these reasons, the choice to use "diplomacy" in the title is appropriate, as is the use of the phrase "American century," since the bulk of the book tells a twentieth-century history.[2]

Catastrophic Diplomacy is articulated in three chronologically organized parts. The American Century becomes the American centuries. Part 1, "The Three Pillars of US Foreign Disaster Assistance," starts with Venezuela and Martinique, two instances of foreign assistance that were almost a century apart—1812 and 1902, respectively—and ends up with activities up to 1916, the year before the United States entered the First World War. Part 2, "Routines of Relief and the "'Development' of Disaster Aid," starts in 1917 and ends in 1947, encompassing the First and the Second World Wars, effectively breaking conventional chronologies. Part 3, "Drifting toward Centralization and Coordination," ends in 1976. In the table of contents, Irwin places the term development in inverted commas signaling two concomitant and convergent meanings: the development of the practice of international disaster aid and the ideology of international development. The overall structure of the book is accessible and intelligible; especially intriguing is the chronological span of the book, as 1812 is an unconventional beginning for a monograph on the American Century, and 1976 is an equally unconventional and abrupt end.

[1] The literature on foreign aid is vast. The term is predominantly used by historians of the Cold War and by scholars—economists, political scientists, anthropologists—analyzing the policies, politics, and practices of development. Recent historical research includes, Andre Pagliarini, "'Real Self-Help' and the Seeds of Neoliberalism: Foreign Aid to Brazil from Kennedy to Johnson," *The International History Review* 45:6 (2023): 919-938. Classic readings include William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (Penguin Books, 2006); Carol Lancaster, *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics* (The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Roger C. Riddell, *Does Foreign Aid Really Work?* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
[2] The coining of the term is attributed to Henry Luce, the founder of *Time*. He used it in a 1941 editorial. Today it is commonly used and debated by scholars, not just historians. For instance, Joseph S. Nye, "Is the American Century Over?" *Political Science Quarterly* 130:3 (2015): 393-400.

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I greatly appreciated Julia Irwin's first book and several of the articles she published in the last decade or so. Irwin's publications have been instrumental to my own research. I have learned much from her publications, their primary-source base, and her precise and balanced exegeses.[3]

The first chapter of the book is more than an introduction. The "Politics of Disaster, the Politics of Aid" shows that foreign disaster assistance as an instrument of US foreign relations has a long history, even though US policymakers in the second half of the twentieth century had no personal memory or recollection of it. Scholars of governmental and non-governmental international organizations have often noted the amnesia of policymakers and civil servants that has led them to reinvent the wheel.[4] Interestingly, Irwin posits that US government officials suffered the same dissociative disorder. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, US diplomatic and military officials have devoted attention to catastrophes in other nations and empires. Their motivations were geopolitical, and the issue of the state's interests was central. There was no univocal catastrophic diplomacy; it covered a panoply of catastrophes and a diverse range of activities including relief, recovery, and reconstruction operations, which Irwin places under the same umbrella as humanitarian efforts. Irwin does not further define these terms, as they changed over time wherever the US government undertook a humanitarian action. The main protagonists of her story are "[first] the State Department and the staff of diplomatic, consular, and development missions; second the Departments of War, Navy, and Defense and the service personnel of the US Armed Forces; and third, the US government's preferred partners in the American voluntary sector, among them the American Red Cross and various missionary societies, philanthropies and aid organizations" (3). They are referred to here as the three-pillars of US foreign disaster assistance.

Irwin explains her book's focus on sudden catastrophes and why she leaves aside man-made disasters, such as the effects of war or industrial accidents. Conceptual and ideological reasons as well as material factors explain her choice. Irwin historicizes the decisions taken by the main protagonists, what motivated them, what the continuities, ruptures, and contingencies that changed over time. Though this choice is debatable, it was the right one. Her approach to the concept and practice of development and development assistance, which she sees as an integrated part of US practices, is convincing. As she avers, "the book calls attention to places where different types of foreign aid activities coexisted, coevolved, and converged, emphasizing the *development* of relief" (7).

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[3] Among them her first monograph: *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and the following articles: "Sauvons les Bébés: Child Heath and US Humanitarian Aid in the First World Era," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86:1 (2012): 37-65; "Taming Total War: Great War-Era American Humanitarianism and its Legacies," *Diplomatic History* (2014): 763-744; "The Disaster of War: American Understandings of Catastrophe, Conflict and Relief," *First World War Studies* 5:1 (2014): 17-28.

[4] Three example concerning aspects of the reinvention of the wheel and humanitarian organizations: Arthur C. Helton, "Rescuing the Refugees," *Foreign Affairs* 81:2 (March/April 2002): 71-82; Michael Schloms, "Humanitarian NGOs in Peace Processes," *International Peacekeeping* 10:1 (2003): 40-55; Fiona Terry, Helen M. Kinsella, and Scott Straus, "Fiona Terry of the International Committee of the Red Cross talks about The Roots of Restraint in War and the intersection of research and humanitarianism," *Violence: An International Journal* 1(1): 2020: 185-204. https://doi.org/10.1177/2633002419899796.

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Irwin's explanation, which distinguishes the kind of operations with the controversial international practice of humanitarian interventions, is convincing. These humanitarian interventions, she contends, were often humanitarian invasions.[5] If there is a quibble with this otherwise solid introduction, it is about the lack of granularity. For instance, Irwin writes:

> As a rule, US officials believed their assistance should be restricted to this short-term phase. They typically expected foreign governments and societies to shoulder the primary burdens for recovery and reconstruction. Such assumptions reflected prevailing beliefs about charity and self-help, commonplace in the twentieth-century United States (8).

It might have been useful to expand further on key concepts like self-help or charity as well as on the biased, civilizational, and racist postures of US foreign aid missions. A few introductory lines on the logic underpinning the anticipated shouldering of the recipients of aid would have been expected, as would more on the role of domestic experiences. This criticism notwithstanding, the takeaway point of the introduction is clear: the promotion of US diplomatic and strategic interests determined the geography of catastrophic diplomacy and the unevenness of US operations, as well as the allotted means and the duration of these operations. This is the *fil-rouge* of the book.

Part 1 begins with a humanitarian state-led operation that took place in Venezuela after the 1812 earthquake in Caracas. The US Congress allowed President James Madison to purchase and send provisions to Venezuelans in need. The cause of humanity mattered as much as showing empathy and support for a people who were fighting against Spanish colonial rule. The latter became a politically relevant issue at the time of decolonization. After this assistance to Caracas, for almost a century the US Congress prevented the federal government from providing significant relief experience abroad. Irwin explains that before the late nineteenth century, the federal government was not well equipped to respond quickly. Resources, geography, and technology explain the decades of US relief inactivity, rendering the operations in Venezuela a romantic exception. During these decades, however, the role and size of the US government expanded considerably. These decades of inactivity abroad are explained by the significant disruption of the Civil War and its long and tumultuous aftermath. Moreover, Irwin notes, the restraint of the activities of relief beyond national frontiers contrasts with a steady increase in activities—and federal appropriations—in cases of domestic catastrophes. Because of the long time-period covered in this chapter, Irwin does not explore the role of churches and charitable societies. Irwin might have also further expanded upon the operations in Venezuela and discussed who did what and for how long; the involvement of non-state actors and missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic; and the reaction of the Spanish government and its effects on US officials.

The context of the 1902 US government relief operations in Martinique was completely different. The 1890s saw US policymakers becoming "assertive and at times aggressive…in their relations with other nations" (26). Technologies had drastically changed since 1812, and with the increased domestic experience of US

[5] Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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officials, relief practices had as well. The onset of the twentieth century marked the beginning of the Progressive Era, a period which was marked by a rooted and transversal trust in competent, scientific interventions aimed at the uplifting, betterment, and improvement of the human condition, especially of the ignorant, the poor, and those who were perceived by US ruling and culture elites as the "undeveloped" and "uncivilized." Building on her comprehensive knowledge, Irwin also explains the profound internal changes of institutions like the American Red Cross (ARC), which followed the Progressive Era trends and beliefs. In 1900, the ARC was a quasi-state, quasi-voluntary organization. The management of the organization changed: its finances, communication strategies, personnel, and administration of relief techniques were steadily professionalized, and trend was followed by other US charities, missionary societies, relief associations, and philanthropic foundations.[6] In this chapter, Irwin only lightly touches upon morality (28), a concept that begs further exploration, particularly in its relation to the multiple religious revivals that marked the Progressive Era. The operations of 1902 in Martinique were preceded by several relief operations that took place at home, in territories with a hybrid status such as Puerto Rico, and in colonial territories like India. Relief operations in Martinique showed that these humanitarian missions were politically useful, promoted US interests abroad, and boosted US confidence. By the beginning of the "American Century," the federal government was adept at administering disaster relief abroad.

Irwin then explains the importance of the fifteen years (1902–1917) that led to the US entry into the First Word War. She shows the increasing symbiotic relationship between the US government and the ARC, the fundamental experience of the San Francisco earthquake of 1908, and the mobilization of the Army and later, overseas, of the Navy. Irwin details one instance of foreign aid after another, moving from Chile to Jamaica. Her narrative style is sober and succinct. Irwin details the French humanitarian intervention in Greece in 1827, and in Lebanon in 1860, showing that the intervening French Army was used for sanitary tasks, such as the burying of corpses, akin to the American relief activities in Jamaica (47). This is an example of how the monograph intelligently intersperses the horizontal *longue-durée* narrative, with more vertical and granular analyses. The case of assistance in Jamaica is particularly interesting since Irwin shines a light on issues of sovereignty, authority, and tensions between US relief workers and British colonial authorities. This conflict was a feature of future US relief activities overseas, especially during the decolonization decades (1940-1970).

The chapter on US relief activities in Messina and Southern Italy is of paramount importance in the developing role of relief in US diplomacy. US operations after the 1908 San Francisco earthquake were an opportunity to show Americans and the world that the US government, with the help of its *longa manus*, the ARC, could administer relief in the most efficient and modern way. The US government displayed its technical and financial means—and superiority—to Europeans. Along with this superiority, the US also exported racist and classist views on deserving and undeserving recipients of aid. These were concepts and practices that had been applied during the San Francisco's earthquake relief operations. Activities in

[6] This is one of the arguments of Irwin's first monograph *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and Nation's Humanitarian Awakening*. I made a similar argument concerning US actors operating in the Near East, see: Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth. A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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Messina and Reggio Calabria encompassed long-term projects that cannot be qualified as relief. Irwin explains what it took to move from relief to reconstruction, an ambitious plan that interfered with Italian sovereignty, and Southern Italian cultural sensitivities (60-67). Irwin might have further explored the racist views that the white, educated American elites held and shared. What views and biases did the Army and Navy officers, the State Department civil servants, and the ARC who were workers deployed in Italy, share? Among Italian immigrants in the United States, Sicilians were placed low in the hierarchy of races. Was this prejudice something that relief workers brought with them to Southern Italy?[7] How many of them had encountered Southern Italians in the US before embarking for Messina?

In the 1910s, the US solidified and expanded the practices of the three pillars of foreign disaster aid: the ARC, the US Armed Forces, and the State Department. From Tientsin to Guatemala, relief activities now encompassed humanitarian government. Camps for civilians in distress were established, allowing surveillance techniques to be implemented, and civilians to be disciplined. The ARC collaborated with new important actors, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, especially in public health-related matters. In an arrogant way, as later occurred in the aftermath of the First World War in Europe and in the Near East, US foreign assistance actors, especially the ARC, unilaterally decided their exit strategy without consulting with recipients of aid or local authorities. They believed that they knew what was best for the beneficiaries and knew how to administer relief and rehabilitation.

Contrary their actions in Southern Italy, in 1923 US actors in Japan allowed the oversight of US supplies by Japanese authorities and ended the operations after three weeks, only staying longer at the invitation of Japanese officials. Irwin notes that this instance represented more than a humanitarian undertaking. It was a critical chapter in US-Japanese relations. Beneath the surface, "deep-seated racial, cultural, and nationalist prejudices toward Japanese people" persisted (127). The long-lasting effects of the operation and the gratitude that followed it were ephemeral. The same can be said of relief operations that took place in Central America and the Caribbeans in the 1920s. One wonders whether Irwin would qualify them as diplomacy that had catastrophic results. As it had happened in the nineteenth century, after the operations in Caracas, during the difficult decade of the Great Depression, the three pillars of State relief focused on relief at home, committing unprecedented federal funding to assist victims of the economic and social crisis. Foreign disaster aid shrank, though in early 1939, a number of operations took place in Central America, China, and in Chili.

In 1941, "seeking to better regulate and coordinate the work of (voluntary aid organizations) and ensure it aligned with the US government's interests and objectives, the State Department created a Committee on War Relief Agencies" (181). This was followed by the President's War Relief Control Board, which was established in July 1942. The latter served as "liaison between licensed voluntary agencies and relevant federal agencies," with the ARC being the only exception (182). This was an exceptional decision, and it was terminated in 1946 when the war ended. President Harry Truman replaced that Board with the

[7] Jessica Barbata Jackson, *Dixie's Italians: Sicilians, Race, and Citizenship in the Jim Crow Gulf South* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020); Brent Staples, "How Italians Became White", *The New York Times*, 12 October 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/12/opinion/columbus-day-italian-american-racism.html.

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Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, which was guided by the Department of State, a decision that favored US interests during the Cold War. All major US voluntary agencies, such as Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE), Catholic Relief Services, Church World Services, the Jewish Joint Distribution Service, Lutheran World Relief, and the American Friends Service Committee, registered with the Committee by 1949. Irwin writes that centralization under the auspices of the federal government increased during the Cold War decades. If the ARC remained the privileged partner of the US government, all major voluntary organizations increasingly coordinated their actions with it first through the Foreign Operations Administrations (FOA, founded in 1953) and later through the International Cooperation Administration (ICA).

In the last part of the book, Irwin examines instances when US authorities navigated the political intricacies of decolonization. Balancing European allies' interests and solidarity with post-colonial countries was complicated. Finding consistency between the imperatives of the "development decade" and the objectives of recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction implemented by the three pillars of US catastrophes' aid ended up disappointing both US actors and the recipients of this aid. The Foreign Assistance act of 1961 and the subsequent creation of United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which replaced the ICA, affected practices of coordination that had been in place for decades. In 1964, Stephen R. Tripp became USAID foreign disaster relief coordinator. He worked to better coordinate and respond to catastrophes abroad, continuing the "three pillars" framework, and gaining national attention as "Mr. Catastrophe" on the cover of *Time* (263). In late 1975 Congress passed a bill that was devoted to International Disaster Assistance, which created the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), an architecture that Irwin argues has not changed to this day. Within it, the three-pillar system remains intact. The State Department and USAID take the lead, the Defense Department and US Armed Forces support. Relations with ARC and other voluntary organizations are maintained and remain as important as they were in the past. This is when, chronologically speaking, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* ends.

Each book is the result of compromises and *Catastrophic Diplomacy* is no exception. Irwin employs a broad level of analysis, and focuses on the *long-durée* examining the politics, diplomacy, and the state and non-state actors involved in foreign aid operations in response to natural disasters. These choices allow her to reveal the continuities and ruptures in the design, objectives, and practices of the three-pillars of foreign assistance. Irwin is the first scholar to uncover the remarkable continuity of the three-pillar of this US practice throughout the American Century. Still, the privileging of breadth over depth entails losing something in terms of granularity. Actors like US embassies and consulates, ambassadors and consuls, the League of Red Cross Societies and, later, the International Federation of Red Cross appear like "cameo" roles in film. The League of Nations and the United Nations are not discussed. Irwin does not explore the role of other nations that were present at times of catastrophes, with the result that is it not clear whether they were collaborators of competitors of the US. Given the nature of the analysis here, reversing the

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perspective and trying to give space to the recipients of aid would have entailed turning this contained monograph into a multi-volume endeavor.[8]

The practices of foreign aid, including the interesting merging of relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction which began long before the "development decade," are not examined in a detailed way. This is a pity because Irwin challenges many platitudes on the history of international development aid, merging two historiographical strands that separate, in a dichotomic and often ahistorical way, short-term relief and long-term reconstruction or development projects. Irwin also does not base her argument on critical theories, Foucauldian or Agambenian.[9] There is also relatively little space in the book for the role of US traditions and practices of secular and faith-based charity, for philanthropy, and for concepts that underpinned humanitarian actions at home and abroad such as the "deserving poor" or "self-help." Surprisingly, Irwin did not to peg her argument to concepts like "soft power," which are clearly at play in US catastrophic diplomacy.[10]

These quibbles aside, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* is a meritorious achievement, the first monograph covering the history of catastrophic diplomacy. It will become the standard text for historians and other scholars and opens avenues of future scholarship on the more specific and granular geographic, thematic, actor-based, practice-based, comparative research on one or more of the innumerable instances that Julia Irwin uncovers in her book.

[8] Allison Carnegie and Lindsay R. Dolan, "The Effects of Rejecting Aid on Recipients' Reputations: Evidence from Natural Disaster Responses," *Review of International Organizations* 16 (2021): 495-519; Elisabeth Piller, "(In)Gratitude: US Ascendancy and Transatlantic Relations after the First World War," *Contemporary European History* (2023): 1-19 https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077732300053X; J. Charles Schencking, "Generosity Betrayed: Pearl Harbor, Ingratitude, and American Humanitarian Assistance to Japan in 1923," *Pacific Historical Review* 91:1 (2022): 66-103.
[9] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 2017); Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, eds., *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions* (Zone Books, 2010); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (Penguin, 1991); Ben Golder, "Foucault and the Unfinished Human of Rights," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 20:10 (2010): 1-21.
[10] A classic example is Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2004).

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Review by Ian Seavey, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Amidst the ongoing climate crisis that continues to affect every region of the globe and produces compounding calamities, Julia F. Irwin's new book is incredibly timely. *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century* explores how the US became the global leader in distributing humanitarian aid after disasters. Through extensive research in seventeen archives around the world, Irwin expertly argues that throughout the twentieth century, the rise of US power in the international system was directly connected to US policymakers' prioritizing humanitarian relief as an instrument of diplomacy. She identifies three pillars within the US government structure that enabled the expansion of disaster assistance as foreign policy: the State Department, the Departments of War, Navy, and Defense, and the US government's partners in the voluntary sector, most prominently the American Red Cross (3). By analyzing the development of the pillars over the entirety of the twentieth century, Irwin tracks the changes and continuities that were inherent in the US government's decisions to provide disaster aid. These pillars also serve as the overarching structure for the book's three sections, which cover key periods including the Progressive Era, both World Wars, and the Cold War.

Catastrophic Diplomacy makes important contributions to both the history of the US in the world and to the field of Disaster Studies. First, Irwin answers previous calls from scholars to connect environmental history with the history of US foreign relations.[1] Though the field of environmental history has existed since the 1980s, few historians of US foreign relations have actively engaged it.[2] By focusing specifically on "catastrophes triggered by sudden geological, climatological, hydrological and meteorological phenomena," Irwin asserts that these environmental processes directly impacted how the US exercised foreign policy in the international community (3). Therefore, events like a hurricane in the Dominican Republic or an earthquake in Morocco prompted US policymakers to send aid to these countries as a direct instrument of foreign policy. She convincingly demonstrates that environmental concerns, and specifically disasters, were consistently on the minds of officials throughout many branches of the US government. Irwin makes the case that disaster aid needs to be taken seriously as a legitimate factor when evaluating how US leaders forged foreign policy throughout the twentieth century.

In the realm of Disaster Studies, Irwin's book expands the scope and scale to incorporate disasters in a multitude of locations around the globe to great effect. Previous studies have focused on a specific locale during a disaster event to fully understand how the disaster impacted the politics, economics, social, and

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[1] Mark Lytle, "An Environmental Approach to American Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 20:3 (1996): 279-300; Kurk Dorsey, "Dealing with the Dinosaur (and Its Swamp): Putting the Environment in Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 29:4 (2005): 573-587; Julia F. Irwin, "Stuart L. Bernath Lecture: Our Climatic Moment: Hazarding a History of the United States and the World," *Diplomatic History* 45:3 (2021): 421-444; Gretchen Heefner, "The Accidental Environmental Historian," *Diplomatic History* 46:4 (2022): 659-674.

[2] Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Oceanographers and the Cold War: Disciples of Marine Science* (University of Washington Press, 2005); and Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Dorsey, *The Dawn of Conservation Diplomacy US-Canadian Wildlife Protection Treaties in the Progressive Era* (University of Washington Press, 2010); and Dorsey, *Whales and Nations: Environmental Diplomacy on the High Seas* (University of Washington Press, 2013).

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cultural processes of a community over time.[3] Building upon contributions from scholars like Stuart B. Schwartz, Spencer Segalla, and Maria Cristina Garcia, Irwin's work is truly one of the first to employ an international lens in the field of disaster studies.[4] This strategy effectively evaluates US disaster assistance missions as brief case studies in order to better understand larger questions about great power competition, the global Cold War, and Global North/South relations. Instead of reconstructing the timeline of disasters in certain locations, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* mainly analyzes the motivations and actions of US policymakers, examining how and why they choose which disasters to distribute relief.

By primarily focusing on US motivations and actors, Irwin also engages with a predominate view in the field that "there is no such thing as a natural disaster."[5] Rather, natural catastrophes like earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes are not inherently "natural," but are caused by human actions or inactions before and after the disaster. In this vein Irwin states that, "in choosing to prioritize emergency humanitarian response over prevention and preparedness actives, US officials did little to mitigate the myriad factors that created vulnerability to natural hazards in the first place" (5). Thus, not all humanitarian aid was created equal nor achieved its intended objectives. Her example in Chapter 10 about the US relief efforts to Haiti following Hurricane Hazel in 1954 underscore this point. US officials in the Foreign Operations Administration (FOA) chose to use the US armed forces to deliver and administer disaster aid which stirred up "painful memories" from the military occupation of 1915-1934 for the Haitian government (208). In this instance, Irwin writes that "FOA representatives admitted that their actions had unavoidably complicated the US mission to Haiti and detracted from the overall effectiveness of the emergency program" (208). In this case of Haiti intervention, US efforts made the disaster worse.

The only complication with taking an international case study approach is that in some places the narrative moves from place to place without establishing the local context. In addition, the voices of many of the actors from the nations where the US undertook relief operations are not prioritized, which renders *Catastrophic Diplomacy* US-centric at times. However, Irwin qualifies this point in the introduction by stating that, "admittedly, the book concentrates less on how US disaster aid was perceived and received by foreign populations or the US public and more on what this humanitarian assistance meant to the architects

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[3] See Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Greg Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines* (Routledge, 2003); Mark Healey, *The Ruins of New Argentina: Peronism and the Remaking of San Juan After the 1944 Earthquake* (Duke University Press, 2011); Jacob A. C. Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (University of Illinois Press, 2016); Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); Caroline Grego, *Hurricane Jim Crow: How the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 Shaped the Lowcountry South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

[4] Stuart B. Schwartz, *A Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Spencer Segalla, *Empire and Catastrophe: Decolonization and Environmental Disaster in North African and Mediterranean France since 1954* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021); Maria Cristina Garcia, *State of Disaster: The Failure of US Migration Policy in an Age of Climate Change* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

[5] Chester Hartman and Gregory Squires, eds., *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (Routledge, 2006); Remes and Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

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of twentieth-century US foreign policy" (14). In no way does this methodological choice devalue the significant contributions of *Catastrophic Diplomacy*.

From an archival perspective, Irwin struck gold by mining the libraries of presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt through Richard M. Nixon (328-332). While presidential libraries have long been important repositories for historians of US foreign relations, she uncovered a new set of previously unexamined sources. Irwin discovered that each presidential administration kept a file for every disaster that occurred, both domestic and foreign, and that all the after-action reports, correspondence, and related legislation were compiled into specific disaster series at the libraries. These sources are incredibly detailed and provide rich material that forms the foundation of the narrative of *Catastrophic Diplomacy*. With these documents, Irwin highlights just how important providing disaster relief was for the makers of US foreign policy from the Great Depression through the late Cold War. Future scholars who are interested in international humanitarian relief, disasters, or US foreign aid broadly conceived must now consult these sources and libraries because Irwin has showcased their fundamental importance.

Irwin's masterful account will be useful for all scholars of US foreign relations, humanitarianism, and disaster relief. In addition, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* will also appeal to policymakers who are interested in understanding how the US came to prioritize foreign aid as a major arm of international diplomacy during the twentieth century.

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Review by Lauren Turek, Trinity University

Histories of US foreign aid have the potential to offer significant insight into the extraordinary range of strategic, ideological, and moral considerations that have figured into foreign policy making, not to mention the roles that federal agencies, Congress, and private organizations have played in developing and executing those policies. Foreign assistance programs reflect evolving economic orthodoxies, racial biases, and cultural assumptions about who US assistance should help, which entities should administer the aid, what form that aid should take (whether it be humanitarian, development, economic, military, food, health, technical or agricultural, or some combination thereof), and how aid recipients should respond to that support. It is, in short, a rich vein for understanding the interplay of national security concerns, core values, diplomacy, and power in US foreign relations, not to mention how the United States is and has been perceived on the world stage.

Julia Irwin's *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century* addresses all these aspects, seizing the intellectual possibility that is inherent in this area of study. *Catastrophic Diplomacy* begins in the nineteenth century and covers the broad history of foreign disaster assistance through to the 1970s, when foreign disaster aid policies and their administration crystallized into their modern form. It identifies the most important developments and turning points in that history as well as, crucially, the aspects of these policies that remained consistent over extended periods of time. *Catastrophic Diplomacy* is commendable in its scope and structure, and especially in the cogency of its argument, which ensures that the specifics of the cases it covers never obscure the fundamental insights that Irwin develops through her methodical and thorough exploration of this story.

Given the colossal scale and complexity of the subject of US foreign assistance, Irwin is careful to define tight parameters for her study. She makes clear that it is the US response to "rapid-onset natural disasters," such as tornados, volcanic eruptions, and floods, "and the humanitarian emergencies they precipitate[d]" abroad that are the focus of this book (3). With the signature clarity of argument that carries throughout the book, she explains this stricture by noting that there is an element of universality in how humans understand these types of events as "unique or exceptional," and that this shared conception had (and has) an ideological dimension (4). She notes that in casting "'natural' catastrophes as apolitical crises," and "unpredictable emergencies," societies can more easily ignore "the underlying political, socioeconomic, and environmental factors that leave some populations at greater risk from natural hazards than others" (4). Providing aid for singular events was time-limited and more politically palatable to US leaders and the public than the longer-term commitments that were required to ameliorate the conditions that led to floods, famine, and other humanitarian crises.

Narrowing in on this particular type of foreign assistance allows Irwin to trace this aspect of US foreign relations over an extended time period, reaching back to the early nineteenth century (though the book focuses primarily on the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries). This specificity provides the perspective that is necessary to identify significant turning points, even when it took years for the effects of political, bureaucratic, or programmatic changes to reveal themselves. The timeline of the book also distinguishes it from other works on the history of US foreign aid, many of which tend to focus on specific

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aid programs or aid to specific regions or countries.[1] Through this methodical approach, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* reveals that the United States provided foreign disaster assistance with increasing regularity over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The decision-making, policies, and procedures of aid delivery in this era was "ad-hoc," and remained so until later in the twentieth century when it gradually evolved into a "routine and formal instrument of US foreign relations" (15). Irwin also illuminates a number of continuities in the provision of foreign disaster assistance, including the importance of partnerships between government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the ideological assumptions about "charity and self-help" that led to a strong preference for only providing short term relief, the belief that offering aid paid dividends in terms of generating goodwill and promoting US interests, and the paternalistic attitudes towards certain countries that revealed racism and class biases and contributed to the tendency toward "attempts to police, coerce, and govern" aid recipients (8, 12).

Irwin identifies US relief to Martinique after a volcanic eruption in 1902 as one of the first major turning points in the history of US foreign disaster assistance. She makes clear that this was not the first time that Congress had ever provided this type of assistance. Indeed, Congress passed its first measure to provide relief to a foreign country suffering from a natural disaster in 1812, a decision that reflected the cognizance that aid could have strategic value. Irwin argues that despite this, through most of the nineteenth century, the congressional provision of aid was both minimal and sporadic, both because the United States lacked the capacity "to respond quickly to disasters in most parts of the world," and because most Americans did not believe that the federal government should provide such relief (24). She contends that as the United States grew more economically, militarily, and technologically powerful and became more engaged internationally during the late nineteenth century, not to mention more ideologically open to aiding other countries, a shift was in the making. Sending aid to Martinique in 1902 brought the United States considerable gratitude from the people there as well as from the French colonial officials, which in turn fostered "Franco-American amity and demonstrated the beneficence of US power in the Caribbean basin." (34).

[1] For example, John Norris, *The Enduring Struggle: The History of the US Agency for International Development and America's Uneasy Transformation of the World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Thomas Field, *From Development to Dictatorship: Bolivia and the Alliance for Progress in the Kennedy Era* (Cornell University Press, 2014); Salvador Santino F. Regilme, Jr., *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia* (University of Michigan Press, 2023). There are certainly histories of US foreign aid or aspects of aid spending that aim for comprehensive coverage in terms of time period and/or types of aid, but even those that mention aid in the nineteenth century usually focus mostly (or even entirely) on the twentieth century (which of course makes sense for types of aid that the United States did not provide, or which did not exist, in the nineteenth century). See Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Against Aid: A History of Opposition to US Foreign Aid Spending* (Routledge, 2022); Vernon Ruttan, *United States Development Assistance Policy: The Domestic Politics of Foreign Economic Aid* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Irwin's book contributes to a growing body of literature that focuses on specific types of aid (development, military, humanitarian), but here again, its focus on disaster assistance specifically over this long sweep of time distinguishes it from the extant work in the field.

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It also laid the foundation for a set of norms that guided the provision of foreign disaster aid during the early twentieth century. These norms included "the beliefs that US officials should provide disaster aid only with an affected country's permission; that US aid should normally be limited to short-term, emergency forms of relief; and that American assistance should flow mainly through bilateral channels," and under American guidance (35). In addition, the aid to Martinique established the expectation that all efforts would involve the collaboration of what Irwin describes as the "three key pillars of the US humanitarian system:" namely, the State Department, War and Navy Departments, and voluntary organizations such as the Red Cross (35-36).[2] These norms and pillars guided foreign disaster assistance through the First World War, as Irwin demonstrates through a number of case studies that reveal how foreign disaster assistance became a more common feature of US foreign relations, even as the operations themselves often "remained improvised" and subject to a range of contingencies (83). At the same time, the improvisational and contingent nature of aid made for considerable experimentation on the ground, a trend that continued after World War I, which Irwin marks as another significant turning point in this history.

US disaster relief efforts continued apace in the years between the end of World War I and the end of World War II, even if at times economic or political pressures meant that the country responded to fewer disasters than at other times. Despite the tumult of the times, foreign disaster relief operations grew "ever more routinized" thanks to the solidification of a "consistent set of norms and procedures" (88). New technology, such as airplanes, contributed to changes in the scope of aid projects, and Irwin argues that during this transformative period, "a developmentalist mindset" emerged that led US leaders to extend the length of time and the amount of resources they committed in the aftermath of a disaster (88). Bureaucratic changes, such as creation of the modern Foreign Service and the American Relief Administration, also contributed to these shifts. The case studies demonstrate that, over time, the scope widened to include not only reconstructing damaged buildings or cities, but efforts to "reform" the people and societies as well, with the attendant racist and classist notions that undergirded such goals (88).

One of Irwin's cases for this period, which covers the US response to the Great Kantō earthquake in Japan in 1923, is especially illuminating on this score. With tensions between the United States and Japan seething, the US decision to provide aid held clear potential diplomatic benefits. The willingness to grant Japan the authority to control the relief efforts, which was unlike the US approach elsewhere, likewise promised to engender goodwill between the two nations. Initially, this approach seemed to pay dividends, and US agents abided by the desires of Japanese officials by keeping the relief activities brief and focused. As with other foreign disaster relief projects of this era, after the immediate relief activities concluded, the United States stayed on (at the invitation of the Japanese officials) to work on longer term development projects, such as the construction of a new hospital. Yet, as Irwin reveals, despite outward expressions of goodwill and collaboration, the "deep-seated political animosities and racial prejudices" of US officials undermined diplomatic efforts, "tearing apart the fragile comity that emerged in the disaster's wake and squandering the diplomatic gains US assistance had achieved" (112). US policies toward Japan afterward certainly did not

[2] This last element connects this book with Irwin's first book, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

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help. As such, the incident reveals much about the limits (and limiting factors) of US foreign disaster relief as a tool for diplomacy.

By the time the United States emerged from World War II, its increased power and global reach had provided the groundwork for a new era in foreign disaster relief. The final chapters of *Catastrophic Diplomacy* chronicle the core developments that wrought this new era, tracing the centralization of disaster relief administration under the authority of federal agencies (including new agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development, USAID), the continued importance of the voluntary sector as a partner in aid distribution, and the growing scale and frequency with which the United States responded to global disasters. Furthermore, the case studies underscore the implications of the Cold War competition, as well as how anticolonial nationalism and decolonization shaped "decisions about where to send disaster aid and whether it was in the United States' strategic interest to do it" (185). This was also the period when disaster relief "became more tightly linked to American international development assistance projects and agendas" (212). As with the other sections of the book, the case studies are wide ranging and explore disasters and relief efforts that touched nearly every corner of the globe.

She also highlights a core continuity across the decades of disaster relief that finally shifted in the 1970s. Despite the increasing routinization and centralization, disaster relief responses remained ad hoc into the 1960s and there were "no federal laws [that] explicitly affirmed the US government's powers to conduct international disaster aid operations" (260). When Congress finally remedied this situation in the mid-1970s, the contemporary structure for disaster relief assistance was set. With this, Irwin offers hard-won insights, noting that to this day "catastrophic diplomacy remains a valuable and flexible instrument of US foreign policy," but one that is neither neutral nor perfect (274). The agents who provide disaster relief are still "indelibly shaped by their own social and economic positions, political objectives, racial and cultural biases, and ideological assumptions," and the voluntary agencies that the federal government partners with bear more scrutiny (274). Since natural disasters will likely only grow more frequent and more serious due to climate change, introspection by aid agencies (both state and non-state) is sorely needed. Irwin's work is thus both a sweeping, global history of a consequential aspect of foreign policy that has shaped US diplomacy since the nineteenth century and a call to arms.

As should be clear, *Catastrophic Diplomacy* is a deeply researched, tightly argued work that brings needed attention to an understudied aspect of US foreign relations. The analytical clarity and commanding argument also make this a model for historical studies of policymaking, particularly those that seek to make sense of US policies that unfolded over extended time periods, involved bureaucratic agents as well as non-governmental organizations, dealt with evolving cultural and ideological norms, and contended with highly contingent events. The book does, of course, leave room for future studies on foreign disaster aid; while it is expansive, it has a smartly defined scope. There is ample opportunity for historians to build on Irwin's work by exploring the domestic politics of foreign disaster assistance, both in terms of public opinion as well as congressional decision making.[3] Despite the considerable influence that Congress exercised in this area

[3] The domestic politics thesis is explored in Carol Lancaster, *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

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through the appropriations process, it makes relatively few appearances in the book which, as noted, focuses primarily on the federal and voluntary agencies involved. There is also room for future historians to explore evolutions within foreign disaster assistance policies after 1970, to consider multilateral aid (this book focuses primarily on bilateral assistance), and to delve further into the moral, emotional, and ideological motivations for providing aid;[4] Irwin of course does not ignore these latter motivations, but they are not the focus of the work.

Since these aspects are outside of the scope that Irwin defines for *Catastrophic Diplomacy*, this is not a criticism but rather an effort to imagine options for future explorations on this theme. Irwin has taken a massive and unwieldy set of policy interventions and managed to draw from them a clear, cohesive narrative. The story she has pieced together from a staggering array of natural disasters, historical actors, locations, and eras adds considerably to our understanding of how the United States has engaged with the world since the nineteenth century. In addition to the value the book holds for historians of US foreign relations, it should also be required reading for government officials and NGOs that provide relief in the aftermath of disasters, as it offers an unflinching look at where such relief can and has had damaging effects. The cultural and ideological biases, paternalistic attitudes, and desire for control in the provision of aid that Irwin so carefully exposes are not necessarily vestiges of the past. Since natural disasters will always be with us, we should hope that policymakers, state agents, and NGOs heed the lessons Irwin's book provides.

[4] A related text is Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

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Response by Julia F. Irwin, Louisiana State University

I will begin my response with a thank you (several of them, actually). I am grateful to Shoon Murray, Kevin O'Sullivan, Davide Rodogno, Ian Seavey, and Lauren Turek for the time they spent reading my book and for writing such thoughtful reviews of it. It is truly humbling to read the insights of scholars whose work I so admire, and I truly appreciate their collective engagement with my book. Thanks, too, to Megan Black for writing the introduction and for summarizing the various argumentative threads so clearly. Finally, many thanks to the editors at H-Diplo for organizing this roundtable and providing us with this forum for conversation.

As other authors know, one feels a sense of trepidation when a book goes out into the world, wondering how it will be read, understood, and received. And so, I was heartened to read these incredibly generous responses to *Catastrophic Diplomacy*. I am pleased that all five readers found my overarching claims about the messy politics of US foreign disaster aid to be persuasive and compelling. I am also glad that its ideas seem to resonate with different scholarly audiences, including specialists of international humanitarianism, US foreign relations, and disaster studies.

At the same time, I value the constructive and nuanced critiques that each reviewer offers. Indeed, I found myself nodding in agreement with just about all of them. I also appreciate the reviewers' questions and suggestions for future research. There is so much more to say on this topic—much more than I could fit into a single monograph—and I hope to address some of these gaps in my future research. More than that, I hope that *Catastrophic Diplomacy* will provide a useful foundation for other scholars who are working on both US and international disaster assistance. I look forward to reading new histories of this topic in the years to come.

I think the critique that resonates with me most (and which most of the reviewers touched on in some way) is the call to decenter the United States in this history. Lauren Turek notes that my book leaves "room for future historians… to consider multilateral aid." Kevin O'Sullivan wishes I had done more to situate my story in the "global aid system in the twentieth century," while Davide Rodogno observes that I privilege US state and non-state actors over other nations and international organizations. Not only do I agree with these points, but I also plan to engage with the international system more thoroughly in a future book.

When I first began researching *Catastrophic Diplomacy*, I planned to analyze the United States' evolving relationship with the international humanitarian system, situating US aid efforts alongside those of other donor nations and non-US aid organizations. Much of my early research focused on the League of Red Cross Societies (today's International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) and various United Nations (UN) agencies that were involved in global disaster assistance, such as the World Food Programme. After writing a couple of articles and drafting some early chapters, however, I began to feel that the project was getting too unwieldy. I ultimately made the decision to focus more on the US side of the story, privileging the experiences of US state, military, and non-state actors over either their "competitors or collaborators" (as Rodogno puts it). Like my reviewers though, I recognize that this

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decision comes at a cost. In the future, I intend to return to some of this initial research, and to delve more deeply into the international structures of disaster relief and disaster management.

On a related note, several of my reviewers wish that I had focused more on the experiences of relief recipients. Ian Seavey, for instance, notes that I do not prioritize "the voices of many of the actors from the nations where the US undertook relief operations." Rodogno, likewise, writes that "the privileging of breadth over depth entails losing something in terms of granularity." Once again, I could not agree more. While I tried wherever possible to include the voices of relief recipients and external critics of the US foreign aid régime, these figures are admittedly not at the center of my story. I often describe *Catastrophic Diplomacy* as taking a "horizontal perspective." That is, it seeks to examine US assistance across much of the world and across many decades. I believe there is much value in this approach: it allows me to track changes over time and to compare aid operations in different nations and regions. That said, such an approach comes at a cost. I sacrifice the more intimate social and cultural histories of people on the ground, as well as a deep discussion of local and regional contexts. Taking a more "vertical perspective" on disaster history would have allowed me to focus on the relationships between local, national, international, and US actors during specific disaster events. Once again, I hope that future scholars will take some of my case studies as a starting point, providing a deeper, more nuanced look at their histories than I have done here.

In addition to these points, the reviewers raise many other thoughtful suggestions and observations. Rodogno asks about morality and religion, while Turek notes there is room to "delve further into the moral, emotional, and ideological motivations for providing aid." The motivations for aid have long fascinated me as well. In *Catastrophic Diplomacy*, I focus primarily on the diplomatic and strategic motives that led policymakers to contribute disaster aid to other nations and empires. I recognize, however, that many aid workers, practitioners, and private citizens had their own reasons for doing so. Spiritual, moral, emotional, and cosmopolitan sensibilities—not national interests and foreign policy aims—compelled them to help. Historical motivations for aid were often competing and contradictory, and I agree with Turek and Rodogno in wanting to know more about the authentically humanitarian motivations behind foreign aid.

Another area the reviewers call attention to is the place (or absence) of theory. Rodogno observes that I do "not base [my] argument on critical theories, Foucauldian or Agambenian," while O'Sullivan asks, "how we might theorize the history of humanitarian aid." In particular, O'Sullivan urges me to develop my discussions of the associational state and non-governmentality, as well as the relationship between relief and development. Rodogno would have also welcomed more direct engagement with the concept of "soft power." I will be the first to admit that I prefer telling stories to making arguments—I like to show rather than to tell. That said, I agree that there is still more I could have done to develop my arguments and to make them clearer and more direct, rather than relying so heavily on narrative to illustrate my points. Despite these limitations, I do hope readers come away with a better sense of the important role non-state actors play in advancing state interests and their role in projecting American soft power. I also hope that they see how humanitarian actors attempted to effect long-term, transformative changes through emergency relief.

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Shoon Murray raises several terrific questions about the centrality of US foreign assistance and how to measure it. Although my approach is qualitative, I would certainly love to see the sort of quantitative data that she asks about (and would be delighted to see work by political scientists in this area). Though I do not have raw numbers, I am comfortable arguing that foreign disaster assistance became *more* central to US foreign policy planning over time. The decision to include international disaster aid in the bureaucratic and legal architecture of US foreign assistance (both in United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and within the Foreign Assistance Act) is indicative of this shift.

Murray also points out the challenges of trying to plan for unpredictable events, adding that this adds "to the difficulty of defining disaster assistance as a central tool of US foreign policy." Perhaps. But in a friendly rebuttal, I would contend that the very *attempt* to plan for disasters can be viewed as an important development in US strategic thinking. For much of US history, funding for foreign disaster assistance was ad hoc and improvised, and heavily reliant on the whims of private donors. In the decades after World War II, however, that began to change. In the 1950s, policymakers first created a contingency fund, designed for use in unexpected events geopolitical events like disasters. By the 1970s, they had established permanent funding for foreign disaster assistance and a designated Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. Together, these commitments suggest that policymakers understood the strategic value in preparing for potential catastrophes and other unpredictable events, and therefore took concrete steps to improve their capabilities in that regard. I hope that readers will come away from the book thinking more about the role of contingency in history and how both historians and political scientists can effectively engage with it.

Across their rich responses, the reviewers raise still more important questions. Among others, they ask about the domestic politics of aid, the role of Congress in my story, the ideologies of self-help, the biases of US aid workers, the decision to prioritize relief over preparedness and mitigation, and what has happened since the 1970s. As these questions and critiques suggest, there is a lot more to say on the topic—more than I can say in a short response, and indeed more than I could even write in a 276-page monograph. My book does not pretend to have all the answers, nor does it attempt to tell the full history of US foreign disaster aid. There is definitely more work to be done. I hope that my book, together with these five insightful reviews, will help to generate inspiration for future researchers. I look forward to reading more histories of disasters and humanitarian assistance in coming years—focused at the international level, the granular level, and everywhere in between.

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