



## Are Americans Cheap? (1)

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The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorialize about America's "stinginess." Former President Jimmy Carter says when it comes to helping others, "The rich states don't give a damn." Standing outside the White House, the singer Bono told the press that America doesn't do enough to help the needy:

"It's the crumbs off our tables that we offer these countries."

It seems obvious to Bono and President Carter that America offers "crumbs" because the governments of most other wealthy countries distribute a larger percentage of their nations' wealth in foreign aid. Yes, the U.S. government gave out \$20 billion last year, much more than other countries give, but that's only because we are so stupendously wealthy. If you calculate foreign aid

as a percentage of our wealth, the United States gives much less than others.

Actress Angelina Jolie calls that "really disgusting" in my new TV special, titled "Cheap in America." "ABC News" will broadcast it tonight (Wednesday, Nov. 29 at 10 p.m. -- sorry -- I know some of you are reading this column after that). Jolie goes on to say, "I think most American people, you know, really do think we give more. And I know that they would if they could understand how little they give and how much more we can afford to give, absolutely, without even noticing."

But wait a second ... when talking aid, why do Jolie and the others talk just about what the government gives? Why conflate America with our government? America is the people.

Jolie could look to herself as an example of the generous American. She gives weeks of her time and millions of her own dollars to charities. America is 300 million private individuals, and their contributions far exceed what government gives. When you include those, America is anything but cheap.

After the Asian Tsunami two years ago, the U.S. government pledged \$900 million to tsunami relief. American individuals donated \$2 billion -- three times what government gave -- in food, clothing, and cash. Private charities could barely keep up with the donations.

Americans' preference for voluntary contributions over forced giving through government is one way in which Americans differ from other people. (Don't think it's forced? See what happens if you don't pay your taxes.)

Syracuse University professor Arthur Brooks's new book, "[Who Really Cares](#)", points out that Americans give more than the citizens of any other country. Individually, Americans give seven times more money than people in Germany and 14 times more than Italians give. We also volunteer more. And thank goodness we do, because charity does things better. I notice the difference on my way to work. In my neighborhood the "Men in

Blue" -- that's what they call themselves -- clean streets. I wondered who the "Men in Blue" were. Day after day they did menial work energetically ... even enthusiastically.

It turns out that they are mostly former street people, ex-alcoholics, and drug addicts. A private charity, the [Doe Fund](#), puts them to work while trying to teach them to be responsible and stay clean.

One year later, 54 percent of the "Men in Blue" are drug-free and employed. That's twice the success rate of other city shelters.

I'm still not sure exactly what makes Doe Fund successful, but they clearly have discovered something. I never see government workers clean anything with enthusiasm. Doe Fund workers do. It's why I voluntarily give them some of my money.

Charity almost always does it better.

America is a uniquely charitable country. So when you hear that "Americans are cheap," just remember: We gave \$260 billion in charity last year. That's almost \$900 for every man, woman, and child.

Of course some people give nothing. Some people are cheap. Which raises the question: Who gives and who doesn't? I'll report on that in my next column.

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