

Peter McPherson
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Transcript

My name is Peter McPherson. I was administrator of USAID from 1981 to 1987 under the Reagan administration.

President Jimmy Carter worked hard to advance democracy in South America and Ronald Reagan strongly supported democracies there as well. Reagan's famous Westminister speech on democracy and freedom was inspiring to everyone. In time, there were more democracies, real democracies, with fair, open elections in Latin America and some other parts of the world. AID, not surprisingly, was called upon to provide assistance to democratic voting processes.

Elections aren't just a concept. They involve concrete procedures and technology. What are a country's voting registration roles? How are voting rolls constructed? How are they protected? What about voting locations, and how do they work? These and more are matters important in conducting fair and open elections.

USAID found, as we began to help countries with elections, that no outside organization had the kind of expertise to really do the needed election work, but we hoped some organization would help step up to the challenge. AID at the time, and for years thereafter, would contract outside groups. It was these organizations that we were looking to get help from.

So USAID issued, as we sought such help, a request for proposals that outlined what needed to be done. A number of organizations responded, including international accounting firms, for example. We gave grants for work in several countries. We had elections in, for example, Bolivia or Peru, and the work was done by various contractors, as I suggested. No single contractor developed stood out in performance of the work, and USAID, in fact, felt that the performance was quite mixed.

My number two at AID was Jay Morris, and Jay handled many special projects for me. Jay and I regularly sat down and thought about some of the problems we were seeing and trying to address. I remember a meeting very well in which we discussed the fact that our election contractors were not doing the level of work we needed, and there was not an organization that had the people, the body of knowledge, and capacity to do the level of work that we thought was really required. So at the meeting, we said, well, why don't we create one? We didn't want to control it in the sense of owning it, but we could create an NGO to do what was needed, an outside NGO. That was a broad concept.

So we asked Eddie Mahe, with a very small grant, to develop some options on how that might be done. Eddie was a very capable man (he had been U.S. Senator Domenici's administrative assistant), and a very capable colleague, Ladonna Lee, who worked with him. They came back with ideas—that is, Eddie and Ladonna—on how this might be done. Eddie's passed away, but I believe Ladonna is still very active.

So when Eddie came back with these ideas, Jay and I met again alone. It was just the two of us. We decided we wanted this to be a bipartisan organization where there was an equal number of Republicans and Democrats on the board, and an absolute mandate that there was a bipartisan structure, and we felt that the board should have a substantial number of people with campaign knowledge and experience. After all, we're talking about how to conduct elections. We wanted a permanent organization, with staff and structure that would do the work, that wasn't going to be an organization that farmed out the work. This is an organization that was to hire, build, and use in-house expertise. So how'd I get this done?

Well, as I said, we wanted some real campaign expertise. I had worked closely with Cliff White in the 1976 campaign. Remember, this was in the 80s. I was an assistant to President Ford in the White House, and Cliff, in 1976, helped us at the Republican Presidential Nomination Convention, where Ford prevailed over Reagan.

A little more about White. White had managed Goldwater's campaign in 1964 for the Republican nomination. He managed the campaign through the convention. White had managed dozens of congressional, gubernatorial, and U.S. Senate campaigns over the decades, and he also had been involved in at least one, perhaps more, presidential campaigns in Venezuela, as well as some other international work. So White, we thought, was an ideal person to help us. So Jay and I agreed that White would be the person to put together the organization.

I called White and laid out our thoughts, and said we'd provide a small grant to him to put this organization together. White agreed, and proceeded with the work. White recruited Senator Stone from Florida. I think that Stone had been a business partner in some of White's international campaign work. Stone was a Democrat—key that we have bipartisanship—and Stone was a very key guy at that early time. And from there, White and Stone proceeded to put together the organization. There was outside legal work to create the entity, the IRS exemption, for example, which took a little time.

I became Deputy Secretary of Treasury in the late summer of 87, but Jay continued to track the development of this new organization as he stayed there as a deputy at AID. Not long after the organization was formed, at the encouragement of Jay and me, Sarah Tinsley joined IFES. Sarah had been in charge of Women's Development for me at AID. My understanding is, I believe, you will be interviewing Sarah, and perhaps already have. She will share a lot of the details concerning those early days of IFES's operation.

I should note here that White died a few years later, but overlapping him some was Charles Manatt, who had been the chair of the Democrat National Committee, and he became the Democrat part of this organization, in fact, a very important figure throughout the next several years.

IFES was established to solve a major, immediate problem, and became, in fact, a gold standard for technical election work. I was briefly on the IFES board, 10 years or so ago, briefly, after I was

administrator. However, recently, I became the co-chair and then chair of the board of IFES. I deeply believe in IFES, and the work that it has done and is doing.