There were many questions raised just before President Bush visited the African nations early this year that developed countries are not doing much to uplift the masses in poor countries. However, it appears that most of the problems in many African countries and other poor nations are the result of their own internal problems. Countries like Angola and Nigeria are rich in oil and other natural resources, yet the benefits rarely reach the masses. The control of the wealth is in the hands of a few who prosper at other’s expense. Often this leads to civil unrest and complete chaos.

Nation building has to be within its own people; others cannot fix it. There are many things that the people of nation can do. Let me take one aspect – profound and sustainable – of nation building that America exemplifies. It is not American government or its policies that make this nation great. It is the invisible culture that shapes this nation – giving and volunteerism. These are deeply embedded in this nation’s psyche. Giving and volunteerism have a goal – the betterment of the society.

Unfortunately, the world sees wealthy America as arrogant, or simply “ugly Americans” and fails to see the good side. Scan the world’s non-U.S. media, it becomes apparent. Many across the world and within this country associate America with slow erosion of family values, high divorce rates, violent killings, MTV culture, and teen-age sex. The constant debate and fight for balance are often perceived negatively rather than perceived to be the strength of a flourishing democracy and freedom of expression. Of course, Jerry Springer type shows give ample fodder to reinforce such perceptions. Every nation has its good side, but it is the degree to which that good side is demonstrated that defines the spirit and the culture. Capitalism without concern for humanity has little relevance. And, this country shows why capitalism thrives and why it is relevant. This is from the perspective of an immigrant who wonders at the strength of this nation’s giving and volunteerism. Maybe most developing countries should try to emulate this nation’s underlying spirit and not simply aspire to acquire fashion, movies, technology and the rich living standards of this nation.
The giving and volunteerism in the U.S. are not simply triggered by the emotions of September 11, floods, or other tragedies. The culture of giving and volunteerism can be seen in every activity of community interest: K-12 schools, higher education, places of worship, medical help, caring for homeless, abused children and women, rehabilitation centers, housing, training, etc. The University of Texas at Austin raises over half a million in its Hearts of Texas Campaign – an annual event promoting employee charitable contributions through deduction. This scenario repeats in most government offices, profit and non-profit organizations and big and small businesses in each city around the U.S. every year. According to Independent Sector (www.independentsector.org), 89% of the households in the U.S contribute on an average $1,620 each year to charities including places of worship that are also involved in social causes. Over 44% of the adults (about 83.9 million adults) are annual formal volunteers. These volunteers contributed 15.5 billion hours with an estimated value of $239 billion. Individuals in the U.S. donated $157 billion for various charities in the year 2000. Various corporations, private foundations, and bequests contributed another $51 billion during 2000.

Volunteerism and giving have much broader implications to the nation as a whole. They reduce the dependency on the government to make social changes that are best left to the local communities and neighborhoods. The local communities understand their problems and requirements and, can therefore, address the issues much more rapidly, and with high intensity. Any governmental programs with limited resources will quickly become embroiled in political manipulation, corruption, communal overtones, and bitter infighting. This raises questions of foreign aid to “governments.” Billions of dollars in aid may be squandered and may never reach the intended people. The communities targeted in so many countries for financial aid still live in poverty and difficult circumstances, while the governmental agencies and their cronies become wealthy. Individuals in developing countries collectively can make a difference. The less a government interferes, the better the effectiveness of social programs. Social reforms driven by the people for the betterment of its community will bring the entire people together, divert the attention of the masses to tasks that benefit the society, and transcends into peace and harmony. Such people-driven social programs can lead to a healthy competition between communities and neighborhoods to excel.

Education is an important aspect for a strong society and economy, and giving makes a remarkable impact. A nation is as powerful as its ability to create new knowledge. The greatest gift a society can leave to the future is knowledge itself and, probably, no other country exemplifies this
role better than the U.S. Other countries can certainly borrow how the U.S. system for education works and the role of individuals to sustain and prosper such a system. Hewlett and Packard – co-founders of HP – family and foundations have given over $800 million to Stanford University alone. Not to be left behind, Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel, announced a startling $600 million gift to California Institute of Technology in 2001. These gifts are an exception only from the point of dollar figures, but not in the spirit of giving by the hundreds of thousands of individuals and businesses. The impact of Andrew Carnegie on education and learning, and the recent efforts from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for education are profound that last forever. Colleges and Universities in the U.S. raised over $24 billion for the academic fiscal year ending June 2001 from individuals, foundations, and corporations (Source: RAND Corporation). The dream of these contributions is to provide a better future for the next generation, promote excellence, leave a lasting legacy, and simply give back to the school/community that has given them so much.

Why shouldn’t other countries embrace the remarkable role how individuals and businesses form a partnership to restore, support, and run learning institutions and social causes of enormous impact to the very existence of a strong society? Giving and volunteerism have no boundaries and not constrained by the race, color, or religion. What the world needs to see is that invisible culture that has shaped this nation.