

# The Baby Business

*American couples adopting from abroad often think they're helping vulnerable children. The reality is more complex—and poorly regulated.*

# W

hen Katie and Calvin Bradshaw adopted three young sisters from Ethiopia in 2006, they believed they were saving AIDS orphans from a life of poverty or near-certain prostitution. But after learning English, the girls told their new parents that they believed the adoption agency, Christian World Adoption, had paid their birthfather for them. The girls said they had expected to return to their extended Ethiopian family, who were middle-class by local standards, as both CBS News and Australia's ABC News reported. The Bradshaws were rightly horrified. (Today, the two younger girls are still with them, while the oldest daughter lives with Katie Bradshaw's mother; in a lengthy response to the CBS News report, Christian World Adoption said it had no contact with the girls' birth family).

---

*E.J. GRAFF is associate director and senior researcher at Brandeis University's Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, which will put supporting documents and more details about this article's suggestions on its website, [www.brandeis.edu/investigate](http://www.brandeis.edu/investigate).*

I've heard a string of similar tales from families in Italy, Canada, Austria, and other Western countries adopting from Ethiopia, the current hot adoption source. In the past five years, Ethiopia's adoptions to the United States alone have expanded exponentially: Americans adopted 442 Ethiopian children in 2005, and 2,277 in 2009, ranking Ethiopia right behind China as a source for our international adoptions. The combination of skyrocketing numbers and troubling stories suggests that Ethiopia has become the latest country beset by an all-too-common problem: a poor country in which unscrupulous middlemen are sometimes buying, defrauding, coercing, or even kidnapping children away from their families to be sold into international adoption.

Most nations' adoption programs are relatively clean. But during some periods, in some countries—Cambodia between 1997 and 2002, for instance, or Vietnam between 2005 and 2009—evidence from government, newspaper, and NGO investigations strongly suggests that many international adoptions involved fraud. Serious problems have also been documented in such countries as Liberia, Nepal, the Marshall Islands, Peru, Samoa, and most notably, Guatemala, whose processes were so riddled with corruption that it was finally closed to adoption in 2009, after 10 years during which Americans adopted more than 30,000 of its children, in some years bringing home an astonishing one of every 100 babies born there.

Large-hearted Westerners—eager to fill out their families while helping a child in need—have adopted tens of thousands of children from these and other poor countries. Very few are aware of this heartbreaking underside of international adoption—and many have trouble believing it when they do hear such stories. But the fact is that for decades, international adoption has been a Wild West, all but free of meaningful law, regulation, or oversight. In the past ten years, upward of 20,000 Western families each year have adopted internationally. Tens of thousands more are on waiting lists for years. Western adoption agencies, seeking to satisfy demand, have poured millions of dollars of adoption fees into underdeveloped countries. Those dollars and Euros have, too often, induced the unscrupulous to take children away from families that loved and would have raised them to adulthood. Corruption skips from one unprepared country to another—until that country gets wise, changes its laws, and corrupt adoptions shift to the next unprepared nation.

Such corruption can happen in part because American perception and policy about orphans have been distorted by a fundamental myth. Many people believe that millions of healthy babies need Western homes, lest they wither in institutions or die on the streets. This myth is perpetuated, to some extent, by UNICEF's misleading estimate that the world includes 163 million orphans. It's not so. Most of UNICEF's "orphans" are "single" orphans, having lost just one parent; others

live with extended family. Most children in need of international adoption are older than five, sick, disabled, or otherwise traumatized. Many Westerners find it counterintuitive, even impossible, that the world isn't filled with healthy babies needing Western families. It's certainly true that millions of children are in desperate straits in benighted parts of the world: stacked up in brutal institutions in former Soviet bloc countries; roaming the streets in African cities; scavenging from Latin American trash heaps; enslaved in gravel pits in South Asia. Some of these children do need new homes abroad—because their families have failed, their health needs are extreme, their communities have cast them out, or because of unusual conditions like China's one-child policy or the Communist legacy of institutionalization (in which workers were encouraged to let their children be raised by the state, in what proved to be horrific institutions). Quite understandably, fewer Westerners are prepared to take in the older, ill, or more challenging children. And so they put their names down for the healthy babies they believe are available.

Ending corruption in international adoption may seem like an obscure and narrow issue, but its implications reach throughout child welfare and development efforts worldwide. What's the right

way to help children after the Haitian earthquake or the Liberian civil war? How can the United States help African AIDS orphans become productive citizens instead of pirates or insurgents? What is international adoption's correct role in child welfare? The answers are linked. What the United States needs now are improved policies, practices, and regulations that simultaneously help prevent the criminal underside of the adoption trade and support child welfare and protection systems, so that impoverished families and disrupted communities can keep most of their children home. Already in place are a treaty, a law, sets of regulations, and a host of aid efforts on behalf of children. But significant gaps remain. Plugging some important holes—and heightening our investments in, and coordination of, services that help children stay with their families—would go a long way toward saving children from being wrongfully taken from their birth families, and Americans from later discovering that they unwittingly paid someone to buy them a child.

**Many Western families find it counterintuitive, but the world isn't filled with healthy babies in need of adoption. The reality is much more complicated.**

## **The Hague Convention On Intercountry Adoption**

The international community woke up to unethical adoptions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1989, the United Nations enacted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which included principles about preventing wrongful

international adoptions. But the need for still more protections became clear after Nicolae Ceausescu fell in 1989, exposing Romania's brutal warehouses of orphaned or abandoned children. Thousands of well-meaning Westerners flocked to Romania to bring home orphans. Predictably, some entrepreneurial locals saw ways to make money from Westerners' good intentions. By 1991, most American adoptions from Romania were coming not from institutions but from "facilitators" who solicited children directly from birth families in hospitals, on the streets, even in individual homes, in some cases while dumb-struck Westerners stood by.

In 1993, 66 countries, including the United States, gathered at the Hague Conference on Private International Law to create the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation In Respect of Intercountry Adoption. To join the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, as it is known, a nation must commit itself to cooperate "to prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children" for international adoption. The United States signed the treaty in 1994, ratified it in 2000, and implemented its requirements on April 1, 2008.

The 1993 Hague Convention's biggest gap is easy to identify: it allows signatories to continue adoptions outside the Hague system. Western signatories (including the United States, Italy, France, and Spain) can, and do, still permit adoption from the "non-Hague" countries that lack the treaty's protective systems. Of the world's 195 or so countries, only 81 have entered the Hague Convention. More than two-thirds of U.S. citizens' international adoptions come from "non-Hague" countries, including Russia, Korea, Kazakhstan, and Ethiopia. A number of countries outside the system have experienced significant adoption scandals. But according to Susan Soon-Keum Cox of Holt International Children's Services, a highly respected Oregon-based international adoption and child welfare group, who attended the conference that crafted it, the convention's "minimal standards" were as far as participants would go; pushing for more restrictions would have scuttled the treaty entirely.

The Hague Convention's overarching instruction commands signatories to take "all appropriate measures to prevent improper financial or other gain...and to deter all practices contrary" to the goal of ending trafficking for adoption. Toward that end, each Hague Convention country must have a "central authority"—a government body—that oversees international adoptions. The central authority's tasks differ, depending on whether that country is on the supply or demand side (let's oversimplify and call them "poor" or "wealthy" countries) of international adoption.

The convention's "subsidiarity" principle declares that keeping children with their original families should be the top child-welfare priority. This implies that

each nation should have child-welfare and protection systems, social services, and other supports to help families stay together despite financial, medical, or other kinds of distress. That's a big investment for poor countries, and it holds some back from joining the treaty. Other nations remain outside Hague because of national political concerns about sovereignty; still others, such as Nepal, are not committed to ending corruption, according to a report from the Hague Permanent Bureau. When original families are unfit, the convention urges nations to try to place the child with kin, neighbors, or others within the country, saving the child from the trauma of total relocation. Only as a last resort—to keep a child out of institutions, for instance—should the nation refer a child for international adoption, and then only to foreign adoption agencies that it has screened and licensed.

The adopting countries are also charged with creating “central authorities,” whose tasks involve certifying that the prospective adopting families are prepared to be good parents, and assessing that whoever will be working on adoption is ethical, competently trained, has nonprofit goals, and maintains sound business practices. Central authorities on both sides are supposed to communicate directly, in part to keep Western adoption agencies from contracting directly with poor nations' orphanages or “facilitators.”

Some countries reputed to have the best “Hague systems” excelled before signing, or without formally entering, the Hague adoption convention. Before signing the convention, for instance, Thailand and Colombia had centralized oversight of child-welfare programs, trained social workers, begun aiding families in distress, and installed oversight so that only children who have no other good options are offered to foreign families. And in other countries that *have* signed—India is the prime example—ongoing scandals suggest that the central authority may be either inept at screening out bad actors or perhaps corrupt.

### **How Does the U.S. Regulate International Adoption?**

But what of non-Hague adoptions, which as we recall make up two-thirds of all international adoptions to the United States? Let's take a look at what can happen when they go bad—this time, in Vietnam, a non-Hague nation. Between 2005 and 2009, Americans adopted 2,220 Vietnamese-born children—and the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi became concerned that a great many involved fraud. One example concerned the Ruc, an ethnic minority living in remote mountain villages. When Swiss anthropologist Peter Bille Larsen was there on a field visit in 2007, Ruc families told him that officials in Quang Binh province pressured them to place 13 children temporarily in a government social welfare center. In 2009, *Irish Daily Mail* reporter Simon Parry visited

the Ruc to follow up, and interviewed Cao Thi Thu, a 35-year-old mother of five who says she tried to bring home the two daughters she'd placed in the center, was refused, and later learned they had been adopted internationally. "Those men lied to me," Thu told Parry. "They said the children would return to the village when they finished school... But they sold them as if they were livestock." Some Ruc children have been traced to Italy, and one to the United States. The "nourishing center," to use its Vietnamese name, received about \$10,000 per adoption, Parry reported.

The Hague Convention offers only a general outline of what signatories must do. Each nation defines its own "Hague regime" and writes its own "Hague regulations," so long as those conform to the treaty's basic sketch. The United States' "Hague implementation" is a tremendous improvement over what we had

**Only 81 countries have entered the Hague Convention meant to regulate adoption; two-thirds of U.S. adoptions come from non-Hague countries.**

before: For the first time, the federal government has *some* legal oversight of most international adoption agencies. Before it had none. But our Hague regime could still improve. The federal government could require Hague review for *all* international adoption agencies; it could close some regulatory and statutory loopholes through which

children can be adopted unethically; and it could more firmly link our Hague system to international child welfare efforts.

Six years after the Senate passed the Intercountry Adoption Act (IAA) of 2000—by which the United States ratified its Hague participation—the State Department, which was designated the United States' "central authority," published its final regulations and selected its accreditation partners. The State Department instructed its partners to write regulations, accept applications, train reviewers, and issue or deny adoption agencies their accreditation by April 1, 2008. The Council on Accreditation (CoA), the main accrediting body, has received 346 applications for Hague accreditation from adoption agencies, far more than expected. Of those, 223 have been accredited so far and just 13 denied.

Too many agencies were accredited. For instance, one accredited agency had an arrangement with a Vietnamese orphanage that was buying children for adoption, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) appeals decisions. Another brought in children from the Quang Binh orphanage accused by Ruc families of corruption. Others brought children to the United States from similarly corrupt sources (according to local courts, NGO research, or news coverage) in India, Guatemala, Cambodia, Nepal, or other countries.

These U.S. adoption agencies may not have known what was happening at the other end; or they may have been unable, uninterested, or unwilling to investigate how their foreign partners were “finding” adoptable orphans. But unless the adoption agency has undertaken a serious investigation into, and correction of, whatever lapses resulted in those unethical adoptions, such inattention should disqualify them for accreditation.

There are other legitimate concerns about whether our Hague regulations are effective enough at screening out unethical adoptions. For instance, the IAA bans the State Department from using federal funds to accredit adoption agencies. (Kathleen Strotzman, who as a senior aide to Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana helped write the IAA, explains that because accreditation itself was so contentious at the time, those who were writing the IAA didn’t want to incur the additional opposition of budget hawks.) Because of this, the CoA’s review must be paid for entirely by adoption agencies’ application fees. State required that fees be low enough to allow all reputable agencies to apply—while high enough to fund a “successful” amount of review. That rules out paid staff reviewers—or even occasional contract investigators.

As a result, the CoA’s accreditation review system trains “professional volunteers”—primarily U.S. adoption agency directors and senior managers—to examine one another’s operations. Observers like Richard Klarberg, the CoA’s CEO, and Susan Soon-Keum Cox of Holt note that this is standard practice in the human services field, that the ethical agencies are highly motivated to weed out the bad ones, and that only people experienced in the field can spot and catch lapses in practice. That may indeed be the right approach to accrediting standard office operation—ensuring, for instance, that an agency has privacy safeguards, insurance, staff with sufficient professional credentials, business-like budgets, and so forth.

But limited funds mean that CoA cannot afford to hire overseas investigators to check on agencies’ operations in other countries, or to investigate either allegations or suspicions of overseas wrongdoing. For instance, if an agency’s filings assert that it is spending \$10,000 per month on aid to an orphanage or other humanitarian operations, the Council has no spot-checks to see whether that money is being used to fund family welfare programs or in less reputable ways. And CoA can’t afford to contract with someone overseas to take a look. Staff at the State Department’s Office of Children’s Issues (OCI), responsible for Hague oversight, say that they regularly talk with Klarberg’s group about all relevant information coming in from their embassies. But outside the small and relatively low-level OCI office, the State Department’s consular officials overseas aren’t mandated to check on where “humanitarian donations” actually go. Nor is anyone else.

The biggest problem with the U.S. Hague implementation efforts is similar to the one that exists in the convention at large: the United States officially applies its “Hague” rules only to adoptions from other Hague nations. Which means that, for most American families seeking to adopt, full Hague safeguards do not apply. In fiscal year 2009, Americans adopted 12,753 children from other countries. Fewer than 4,000 of those came from countries that have entered the Hague Convention. Those numbers aren’t as dire as they seem. Most non-Hague adoptions come either from “semi-Hague” countries—for instance, Russia won’t license U.S. agencies unless they are Hague-accredited—or are arranged by Hague-accredited agencies. But U.S. agencies without Hague accreditation may nevertheless arrange adoptions from countries outside the Hague Convention—and can be found working in problem countries like Nepal and Ethiopia.

### **Lies, Damn Lies, and Immigration**

So how does the United States oversee adoptions from countries that have not entered the Hague—i.e., most of them? Through immigration law, which is inadequate to the task. Consider what international adoption looks like when it involves non-Hague countries. For months, prospective parents deal with private adoption agencies and social workers, filling out documents, getting finger printed, and paying thousands of dollars in often non-refundable fees. Finally, their adoption agency sends a “referral” picture of a child who the agency says is available for, and in need of, adoption. They pay their final \$5,000-10,000 in fees to reserve this child. They can scarcely wait to fly over and bring her home.

Then the agency tells them to take their final step: fill out the U.S. immigration service’s I-600 application (the form for adoptions from non-Hague countries) for an orphan visa for that child. The agency assures them this is just a bureaucratic formality. That’s usually true; in most countries, in most cases, the I-600 application will be approved after an immigration agent takes a quick look at the documentation.

But here’s the catch. Few prospective parents realize that those forms authorize the U.S. government—for the first time—to investigate whether that child is adoptable under law. The family almost certainly does not understand that, by filing those forms, they as prospective parents take on sole legal responsibility for proving that child is an orphan. The USCIS has no relationship with the adoption agency. Its only legal power is to investigate whether the I-600 application’s facts are accurate, without considering context. It does so on the fiction that the prospective parents have knowledge, independent of the adoption agency,

about their promised child. Again, for most children and most countries, this is no problem. But when USCIS or the State Department has spotted corruption in a country's adoptions, this can set up the clash from hell.

If a family is adopting from a Hague Convention country—say, China—both the form and the process are different. The American family still has the legal responsibility for proving to the U.S. government that the child is adoptable, but they are not left alone to do so. Instead of going through USCIS, the family's Hague visa application will travel through the State Department, which will check on the child's status *before* the prospective family travels overseas, and which can interrogate both the adoption agency and the foreign country as needed. Under the Hague, China's government is responsible for ensuring that the child needed a home abroad. Just as important, if the American family's agency has violated State Department regulations, it jeopardizes its ability to work in Hague countries.

But on I-600 adoptions—adoptions from non-Hague countries—those safeguards are missing. If there were corruption in such a case, it's not clear that an agency would automatically lose Hague accreditation. As a result, the federal government has no consistent way to hold agencies accountable for actions in countries that haven't signed onto the Hague Convention.

Worse, unlike in other immigration conflicts, immigration officers have very little power to say no to orphan visa applications. To deny an orphan visa, the immigration officer must explain how he knows that child's documents are fraudulent—without referring, say, to the fact that that particular orphanage is “finding” abandoned infants at a rate that's startlingly high compared with orphanages that do not have contracts with that particular American adoption agency.

The immigration officer must have overwhelming evidence to back him up. The prospective parents have the burden of proof in establishing that a child is an orphan—but the standard is absurdly low. Because visa applications are rarely denied, there are very few appeals. Reading them and seeing how much evidence is required to sustain the denial reveals why USCIS so rarely denies a visa. Trish Maskew, who worked on untangling problems in Cambodian adoptions and who is one of the authors of The Hague Convention's *Guide to Good Practice*, believes that if USCIS could deny suspect applications more easily—with, say, a higher burden of proof for the prospective parents, and the ability to use a wider range of evidence—corrupt adoptions could be stanching more quickly, allowing the “good” adoptions to continue. But why stop there? Why not allow the State Department or USCIS to look at the larger picture, and call a temporary halt to all of an agency's adoptions once it spots troubling patterns?

USCIS and the State Department don't believe they have that authority now, but Congress could give it to them.

### **Responsibility: What's Your Policy?**

If Congress is going to act, it should require Hague accreditation for all agencies arranging intercountry adoptions. Nearly everyone I've interviewed who tracks adoption corruption, inside and outside the government, endorses this; Democratic New Jersey Representative Albio Sires's office is working on legislation toward this end. Accreditation may be imperfect, but at least it allows the State Department (and the Justice Department, as we'll see below) some way to hold agencies responsible for what they do overseas. Doing so is now feasible in a way it was not in 2000 when Congress passed the IAA. In the decade since, mass media and policy outlets have broadcast or published in-depth reporting on unethical adoptions. The State Department and the U.S. immigration service have worked to educate Congress about the real problems in, for instance, the Vietnamese adoption system and the need to tighten rules. I regularly hear from agonized parents who believe they may have unintentionally been party to corruption, who are searching mightily for the facts, and who wonder what they will someday tell their children. As a result, there's a constituency for reform.

But requiring Hague accreditation for all international adoptions will be effective only if some holes are plugged first. That's because in an adoption from another Hague country—Thailand, say, or the Philippines—the Thai or Philippine central authority is presumably checking to see that the child needs an international home. That's not necessarily true in “non-Hague” countries. The United States can tighten some critical statutory provisions, policies, and regulations to screen out agencies that may try to evade responsibility for corruption overseas. These reforms should involve a few key principles:

First, prohibit cash transfers. No adoption agency should ever require individual parents to carry in and hand over large sums of cash—to government officials, orphanage officials, or anyone else—in exchange for adoption services. Although once required in some countries like China and Russia, cash transactions have been made obsolete by the expansion of modern banking systems and wire transfer services. Some agencies still tell families to carry large sums of cash for direct payments—which the Hague Convention's *Guide to Good Practice* frowns upon. The State Department's Hague regulations must be revised to stop this.

Second, hold U.S. adoption agencies accountable for all their overseas partners' actions. In theory, this is now required by the IAA of 2000, but the State Department's regulations allow an important exception, called “unsupervised

providers.” In these cases, foreign sources, like hospitals or facilitators, can submit documentation saying they’ve done the right thing when getting parents’ consent to relinquish a child or when reporting on a child’s background. But fraudulent documents have been a large part of the problem. The State Department should change the regulations so that agencies have a legal duty to scrutinize and check on all their overseas sources’ activities, period.

Third, limit and track adoptions’ overseas fees in more detail. International adoption involves amounts of money that are disproportionately large in relation to poor countries’ economies. The State Department’s Hague regulations require agencies to disclose the *total* that the adoptive parents will be charged in each of nine categories. Three are especially relevant to corruption: the totals for all overseas adoption-related activities; for caring for the child; and for contributions to a country’s child welfare programs. But in 2009, according to the State Department, that first category—called “foreign country program fees”—ranged from \$3,500 to \$35,790, while contributions to child welfare programming went as high as \$11,000. Those categories are all but impossible for consumers to compare from one agency to the next, since each agency has its own way of naming and categorizing its fees. They’re unclear in part because State Department regulations are unclear; agencies don’t necessarily know what to list where. Surely most agencies spend (or donate) every penny righteously—and just as surely, some do not. Exactly where does all that money go? Consumers and investigators could more easily find out if the State Department required agencies to list fees in a standardized format, and to itemize overseas efforts in more detail—in some cases, producing bank transfer statements or receipts, as the Hague’s *Guide to Good Practice* advises, both for prospective parents and accreditation reviewers.

Fourth, limit and track how much agencies can pay their overseas partners, workers, and independent contractors. Under current regulations, U.S. agencies are permitted to compensate their in-country workers and partners with amounts that are disproportionately high compared to the country’s economy. Those large payments can be a problem. If an adoption facilitator is making so much per adoption in service fees that he could easily pay a Vietnamese police officer or a Guatemalan nurse a year’s salary for “referring” one child for adoption, might not that induce some to “find” children unethically? If a

**If a Guatemalan nurse could be paid a year’s salary for “referring” a child for adoption, might that not induce some to “find” children unethically?**

government orphanage could receive 10 times as much money for referring a child for international adoption than it could for a domestic referral, wouldn't that be an incentive to send children overseas rather than seek a local family? Wages for international adoption work should be proportionally related to comparable in-country work.

Fifth, earmark some small amount of federal funds for CoA investigations. If CoA gets allegations of wrongdoing but can't afford to check them with a random sample of an agency's adoptive parents, or can't contract with someone to look overseas at an agency's humanitarian expenditures, it can't be as effective as necessary in screening out wrongdoing.

Sixth, inform the American public about individual adoption agencies' records. Right now, it's nearly impossible to find out about agencies' past practices. Corrupt agencies don't advertise that they find children unethically—and are quick to threaten lawsuits if anyone suggests their practices are flawed. The State Department should publicly announce *which* agencies' referrals have been denied visas, and why, without compromising the prospective parents' privacy. Such denials are so rare that they should be considered major red flags. And if investigators have substantiated a complaint against an agency, the State Department should consider posting at least a brief statement of its substance publicly—even if the problem isn't large enough to revoke accreditation.

Seventh, enable the State Department to heighten the scrutiny of, or suspend accepting, an individual adoption agency's visa applications from a particular country, whether that country is "Hague" or not. Several sources told me that "everyone" knew who the handful of bad agencies were in Vietnam—but that the U.S. Embassy did not have the power to treat their visa applications as a group. Congress should enable the State Department to consider suspicious patterns in each agency's referrals; to report any unusual patterns on its website; and to temporarily add a higher level of scrutiny or stop accepting an agency's applications in a particular country if evidence suggests that its adoptions may *not* be in children's best interests.

Eighth, criminalize the purchase of children for international adoption. Under U.S. law, buying a child for the purpose of adoption isn't a crime—except in connection with a Hague-country adoption, under the IAA. Congress should expand that to criminalize *all* child-buying for adoption.

## **Beyond the Hague: Child Welfare Worldwide**

Preventing corrupt international adoptions won't happen simply through statutes, rules, and regulations. Children can be bought or stolen for adoption for the same reasons they're vulnerable to other horrors: dire poverty, ill

health, plague, disaster, civil war, weak legal systems, and nonexistent social infrastructures. That's also why they can be bought or stolen for sex and labor; why they end up on the streets instead of in schools; why they are vulnerable to starvation, rape, HIV, homelessness, and other preventable diseases. International adoption shouldn't be a way of finding children for families; it should be a way of finding families for children. The Hague Convention offers tools to prevent, police, and prosecute crime and corruption related to international adoption. But children and their families need more than police and prosecutors; they need the teachers, nurses, and social workers who help prevent them from falling into danger in the first place. How should the United States help provide that affirmative aid?

A few years ago, realizing that no one in Washington was tracking what the federal government spent to help children worldwide, Representative Barbara Lee, Democrat from California, sponsored a statute to track, add up, and coordinate all those different child-related aid efforts out of the government's octopal arms. The resulting Special Advisor on Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) sits in USAID, and holds regular coordinating meetings with the federal staff and agencies that have invested in children's well-being in a myriad of ways. It includes the State Department's OCI office, which handles Hague enforcement efforts, as well as the various offices that administer, say, micropayments for seeds and school uniforms, so that African grandmothers can feed and educate AIDS orphans instead of sending them to orphanages. It includes the USAID officers who worked with the Romanian government for more than 10 years to develop a workable child welfare system and culture in that country. Many international child welfare groups back this office's approach, and want to see it more fully funded.

Another Washington faction has also proposed a new diplomatic-level office at the State Department, akin to the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, that would promote efforts to strengthen families worldwide: funding a census of orphans, assessing "best practices" in helping fragile and vulnerable families, and offering poor countries assistance in building the kind of social welfare infrastructures that would ease entry into the Hague Convention, in order to help ensure that every child in the world was being raised "in parental care." Landrieu is sponsoring this bill.

Many in the two factions seem to distrust each other's approaches and motives. Essentially, one side—which includes such groups as Ethica, Global Action for Children, and Holt International—believes the other wants to offer humanitarian aid on the condition that poor countries send more children to the United States via international adoption. The other side—which includes

the Joint Council on International Children's Services, National Council for Adoption, and Kathleen Strottman of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute—believes that USAID, UNICEF, and many child welfare NGOs are dedicated to giving children full bellies and getting them out of institutions, but are not dedicated enough to ensuring that they end up with permanent families.

Given Secretary Hillary Clinton's dedication to the welfare of children, women, and families worldwide, her State Department should examine existing systems against these new proposals, including those in this article, to ensure that everything necessary is being done to keep families together during poverty, turmoil, and crisis. The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption is merely a legal regime to enable countries to transfer the relatively small percentage of children who need international homes. International adoption will never be the solution for all, or even most, of the world's vulnerable children. Tens of millions of children and their families, in desperate straits in their home countries, need and deserve assistance so that they can thrive in place. Defrauded birth families from Nepal, Vietnam, Cambodia, Guatemala, and Ethiopia may never see their children again. But surely the United States can work harder to see that such losses don't strike other families. When done right, international adoption is a last-ditch effort—not induced at the intersection of hope, greed, and poverty, but undertaken in the best interests of children. ■