

APRIL 3, 2006

IDEAS -- BOOKS

## Throwing Money -- And Missing

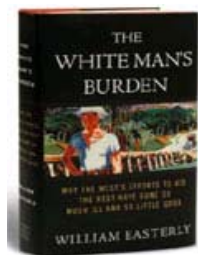
### THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good

By William Easterly

Penguin Press -- 436pp -- \$27.95

**EDITOR'S REVIEW** ★★★★★ [\(Readers' Reviews below\)](#)



**The Good** A brilliant diagnosis of the failings of Western aid to underdeveloped lands.

**The Bad** Easterly himself is disappointingly skimpy on solutions.

**The Bottom Line** His indictment may be overbroad, but aid agencies deserve criticism.

The international development community is still reeling from William Easterly's 2001 book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*. In it, the former top World Bank economist demonstrated how the panaceas concocted by the West to save the Third World, such as huge injections of aid, conditional loans, population control, infrastructure spending, and debt forgiveness, have all failed to stimulate sustainable growth and cut poverty.

Easterly is at it again. In *The White Man's Burden*, he marshals a wealth of fresh studies, original statistical analyses, his own anecdotal reporting, and historical precedents to buttress his argument that today's foreign-aid system doesn't work. He shreds practically every new strategy by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, U.N. agencies, and other donors aimed at lifting the world's poor out of misery. This book is disappointingly skimpy on solutions, but it is brilliant at diagnosing the failings of Western intervention in the Third World.

The real tragedy, says Easterly, isn't Western indifference toward the human crises in Africa and elsewhere, as many advocates of huge aid hikes claim. The problem is the development community's miserable record of treating the most basic needs of the poor. The West "spent \$2.3 trillion on foreign aid over the past five decades and still has not managed to get 12 cents medicines to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths." Throwing greater sums at the problem under the existing system will actually be detrimental because "the current wave of enthusiasm for addressing world poverty will repeat the cycle of its predecessors: idealism, high expectations, disappointing results, cynical backlash." So before digging further into their wallets, rich donors should demand hard results and hold international aid agencies accountable.

Easterly's 16 years as a World Bank economist and his broad experience in developing nations make the critiques hard to dismiss. He is as harsh on U.S. conservatives as on free-spending liberals. He blasts the Bush Administration's antipoverty programs as naive and poorly conceived. He rips into the President's much-ballyhooed African AIDS initiative because it focuses mainly on expensive drugs while discouraging the use of condoms, whose widespread application could save many more millions of lives. He also ridicules neoconservatives who believe the U.S. can make poor failed states better places by forcibly removing dictators and imposing democracy and free-market economics.

Yet the author admits he has no big answers of his own. In fact, he says he's allergic to anything smacking of ambitious planning. The fatal flaw of big aid initiatives, he writes, is that they derive from rich Westerners' utopian agendas rather than input from the needy. Another problem with broad, collective goals is that no one agency bears responsibility for achieving

anything concrete.

Instead, Easterly advocates "piecemeal interventions." For instance, donors should fund well-focused projects created by "seekers," highly motivated individuals who find creative ways to solve real-world problems. He profiles many grass-roots success stories that deserve help, from a private college in Ghana to an Indian outfit that cut HIV incidence by working with prostitutes. Aid agencies should focus on specific tasks, such as building roads and clinics or providing textbooks. Independent auditors should scrutinize sample projects in the field to see if they are delivering results. Poor villagers ought to decide for themselves what they need, receive cash vouchers supplied by donors, and use these to hire the most effective agencies to provide what's wanted.

These are great ideas. But would hundreds of thousands of independent microprojects really make a bigger impact -- or be more cost-effective and freer of abuse -- than if such efforts were coordinated through existing channels? More to the point, well-off, conscientious Westerners are unlikely to sit by and watch millions of Africans die of preventable causes as they wait for verifiably waste-free aid projects to materialize.

Easterly's book also has some glaring omissions. What to make, for example, of the immense foundations guided by tycoons such as Bill Gates that aim to bring the focused, results-based methods Easterly advocates into the war on AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases? Nobody would label Gates a central planner, but he does believe in international coordination, high goals, and big expenditures. Surprisingly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation isn't mentioned in this book.

Easterly's thesis may be overstretched. Still, he is right that we should be tough on aid agencies that don't deliver. *The White Man's Burden* is disturbing but essential reading for would-be Samaritans -- and a powerful call for reform.

#### READER REVIEWS

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