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Utopian planners are always wrong

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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, \$27.95, 436 pages

REVIEWED BY ERNEST W.

LEFEVER

This lively book by an anti-crusading crusader is designed to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. The comfortable, of course, are contemporary exponents of the "White Man's Burden" who are determined to bring economic development and all its blessings to the underdeveloped world by massive transfers of wealth from the rich countries to the poor.

The author is William Easterly, an economics professor at New York University, who believes that the developed world -- specifically the United States -- has an obligation to help the undeveloped world.

Mr. Easterly argues that for the past 60 years the developed world, led by Washington, and institutionalized in the World Bank, WHO and other high-profile international bodies, has been persuing Third World development in precisely the wrong way.

Further, he insists, our well-intentioned efforts have been tragically counterproductive. In his first chapter, Mr. Easterly mocks Rudyard Kipling's crusading words: "Take up the White Man's burden-- / The savage wars of peace-- / Fill full the mouth of Famine, / And bid the sickness cease."

Over the past five decades, Western utopian bureaucrats have spent \$2.3 trillion to aid the poor countries with almost no visible improvement in the health or welfare their people. They failed to prevent five million unnecessary child deaths.

Mr. Easterly's analysis rests on the two actors in the tragic drama -- Planners and Seekers. The author's rogues gallery of utopian Planners includes James Wolfensohn (former World Bank President), assorted UN agencies, the U.S. AID effort, Bill Clinton, the Bush administration and a bevy of pop stars. His conclusion: "Utopia is making a comeback today."

In contrast to the Planners are the Searchers, epitomized by the merchandising of the Harry Potter books throughout the world. The Searchers rely on local tastes, incentives and the market. "In a single day," writes Mr. Easterly, "on July 16, 2005, the American and British economies delivered nine million copies of the sixth volume of the Harry Potter children's book series to eager fans."

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In short, says Mr. Easterly, the market mechanism is a far more efficient way to spread development because it is rooted in the tastes, needs and initiatives of the consumer. The Searchers include both the Third World peoples and the First World leaders who recognize that massive grants or trickle-down theories are just that -- theories.

The author addresses the tragic and widely acknowledged gulf between the rich and poor countries. Well-intentioned past policies have failed and there is no easy answer. It is well and good to point to the economic miracles of the dynamic Third World countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, that have developed largely on their own, but their success cannot be replicated in the much more numerous countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, that languish in a state of poverty and corruption.

One reason for underdevelopment in traditional societies, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is the persistence of tribalism, a persistent barrier to responsible economic and political development. The tribe was, and in many cases still is, the primary focus of identity, governance and morality itself. According to an old African proverb, "The tears of a stranger are only water." This means that strangers are beyond the pale and that restless stronger tribes feel free to enslave weaker ones.

When the Western colonial powers withdrew their governance, the old tribalism reasserted itself in many places, including the former Belgian Congo (now Zaire), Rwanda and Nigeria, where tribal warfare has erupted and economic and political development has become difficult at best.

Political corruption among the new African elites is also a major barrier to economic development, democracy and respect for human rights. Examples abound. President Sese Seko Mobutu of Zaire was both brutal and corrupt. In the late 1970s, Mr. Easterly reports, Mobutu dispatched an army unit to attack an uncooperative representative of the World Bank and the IMF. "The soldiers beat him up and raped his wife and daughters."

During his 25 years of misrule, Mobutu received \$20 billion in foreign aid, much of which ended up in his pockets and luxury homes abroad. Finally, in 1990, the IMF and World Bank turned off the aid spigot.

As late as April 24, 1991, the IMF continued to give aid to Rwanda, just before the Rwanda's genocide erupted. These are but a few of the catastrophic consequences of Western aid given to corrupt and cruel African states.

Addressing the scourge of AIDS that has hit tropical Africa with tragic consequences, Mr. Easterly notes that one-third of adults in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Zimbabwe are HIV-positive.

Recognizing that AIDS is primarily a local problem and that promiscuity is its major cause, Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, inaugurated a public health campaign that emphasized abstinence or the use of condoms before marriage, and fidelity in marriage.

Under his campaign, Uganda's HIV infection rate plunged from 22 percent in 1992 to seven percent in 2002, winning plaudits from the World Health Organization. It is a remarkable example of Mr. Easterly's local or Searchers approach to improving public health.

This problem should be addressed locally as well as internationally. But for reasons of political correctness, the international development establishment has focused almost exclusively on the international Planners approach to AIDS in the underdeveloped world.

Active in promoting life-saving drugs for AIDS patients in Africa, the Planners have virtually neglected Uganda's campaign of behavior modification. This is largely true of the UN agency UNAIDS, the World Bank, WHO and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS.

In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush announced the release of \$15 billion to help AIDS victims. It was duly passed by Congress. And, the predictable celebrities signed on -- Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela and Bono.

Mr. Easterly has been called a contrarian for his unorthodox views, but they are certainly

timely and deserve the attention of all Americans who recognize that our country has a obligation to assist the less fortunate. In this sense, America has an imperial burden, but it has no mandate to attempt to transform other societies in our own image.

We must recognize that democracy and freedom cannot be exported; they must be earned. And we must guard against the arrogance of American power. As Shakespeare said in "Measure for Measure": "It is excellent to have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant."

Ernest W. Lefever, founding president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, is the author of "America's Imperial Burden" (1999) and "Spear and Scepter: Army, Police, and Politics in Tropical Africa" (1970). His most recent book is "Liberating the Limerick." He can be reached at Elefever@aol.com.

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