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## Letters

Sunday, March 27, 2005; Page BW12

### Up From Poverty

William Easterly, who reviewed my book *The End of Poverty* (Book World, March 13), is notorious as the cheerleader for "can't-do" economics. For years as a World Bank staffer, he watched failed programs during the era of World Bank "structural adjustment lending" and reached the erroneous conclusion that any bold effort to help the poorest of the poor would fail. He wrongly made the Bank's shortcomings into a general theory. The World Bank has since moved on, but Easterly has not.

When The Washington Post asked Easterly to review my book, therefore, it knew it would get a polemic, not a review. True to form, Easterly provides a crude caricature of my ideas. Easterly asserts, as he has falsely done before in the New York Times, that I envision a vast central-planning apparatus led by the U.N. secretary general and legions of U.N. staff. What I actually say is that the specialized U.N. organizations like UNICEF can offer great expertise to poor countries, not that they should be central planners. I also say that the

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secretary general should help coordinate the efforts of U.N. agencies, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and donors. As the book makes utterly clear, poverty reduction must be managed by poor countries themselves, starting in the villages.

Easterly criticizes my "mind-numbing technological jargon" concerning nitrogen-fixing trees, antiretroviral medicine and rainwater harvesting. Sorry, but that's the stuff of real life for poor people -- how to grow crops, fight disease, survive droughts. Easterly has a trained incapacity -- seeing every development problem as a problem of corruption, rather than an issue as well of soils, disease and isolation. Both governance and geography play a role.

Easterly's simplistic approach fits well with many conservatives in Washington, who would rather blame the poor than help them. Somehow the world's poorest people are made out to be our enemy. According to this upside-down worldview, the people dying of malaria are out for our money - - all \$3 per year that it would cost each person in the rich world to help Africa mount an effective control program!

Easterly's call to do things piecemeal is vacuous. Shall we do vaccinations this decade, AIDS control the next, malaria control in the 2020s, clean drinking water in the 2030s, and food production in

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the 2040s? There is no reason why we can't help poor countries to invest in clinics, schools, roads and improved farms during the next 20 years. The size and scope of the requisite effort -- less than 0.7 percent of rich-world GNP (i.e., 70 cents on each \$100 of GNP) -- is modest.

Easterly's tendentious claims about decades of wasted aid are flat-out wrong, and my book takes on these fallacies in detail (as does an article of mine in the March/April issue of *Foreign Affairs*). Most of the small flow of U.S. aid to Africa has been for emergency food relief and consultant salaries, rather than investments in clinics, schools and the like.

Easterly's charge that I am utopian gets it backward. Easterly's World Bank experience made him into a dystopian, seeing the worst in everything and expecting failure everywhere. I have had the good fortune to participate in successful efforts to stop hyperinflations, introduce new and stable national currencies, convert centrally planned economies to market economies, and establish the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and malaria. The results are practical solutions to pressing problems.

Easterly's diatribe is his stock and trade. What is less predictable is that *The Washington Post* would have passed up the chance to discuss the ideas in my book. It's too bad, since our nation's misguided under-investment in ending poverty is one of the great blunders of our foreign policy and one of the great missed opportunities of our time. It's so wrong-headed, in fact, that it is likely to change significantly in the next few years.

**JEFFREY D. SACHS**

New York, N.Y.

*William Easterly replies:*

Well, at least he didn't mention my bald spot! It's a shame that Jeffrey Sachs chose *ad hominem* attacks over intellectual debate. His colorful vitriol didn't leave him room to answer the key questions. Why didn't aid officials implement his easy solutions to world poverty already, after half a century of foreign aid? How will his top-down, many-pronged solutions conceived in New York get feedback from the faraway poor on whether they are actually getting what they most need? For example, Sachs says that modest sums would control malaria in Africa. Doesn't he have a little curiosity about why this easy problem wasn't solved with some of the \$568 billion (in today's dollars) in foreign aid given to Africa over the last 43 years? His answer seems to be that there was too much aid going to emergency food relief (5 percent of rich-country aid to Africa from 1975 to 2003) and consultant salaries. It's intriguing that someone calling for (and providing) so much foreign technical advice to Africa (including advice on controlling malaria) implies that consultant salaries are a waste -- they were 25 percent of aid to Africa over 1975-2003. Anyway, if it takes so little, the other 70 percent of the aid budget should have had enough room to control malaria, but it didn't. And yet there was progress in other areas, like increased vaccination and access to clean water in Africa. Shouldn't we examine why these things worked and others didn't? The piecemeal approach doesn't mean less money or less effort for the poor; it means redirecting resources away from the utopian schemes at the top (that have already failed) toward

rewarding those at the bottom who find things that work for the poor.

*The Editor adds:*

In reference to Jeffrey Sachs's assertion that The Washington Post "passed up the chance to discuss the ideas" in his book: Sachs appeared on Book World Live on Tues., March 15, to discuss those ideas directly with our readers.

### **Right Turns**

James Bowman is certainly entitled to dislike my book *Right Turns* (Book World, March 6), but it is unfair to badly misrepresent its contents. The reader of his review would conclude, for instance, that I focused my exclusive autobiographical attention on my past as a TV film critic -- a subject that occupies less than 10 percent of the chapters of my book. While Bowman alludes to the "35 moral, political and prudential 'lessons' " that compose the structure of my work, he fails to cite a single one of them -- instead devoting his entire review to the detailed, out-of-context retelling of an isolated anecdote designed to make me look ridiculous. No, I never claimed that "the Almighty" arranged for me to have a TV show, though I do share with other believing Jews (and Christians) the conviction that an apparent coincidence can occasionally mask some purposeful pattern in our lives. In fact, the story that provoked Bowman's contempt served to illustrate my own very gradual progression from disconnected, viscerally liberal secularist to observant synagogue president and outspoken "theocon" -- the main theme of *Right Turns*, although ignored by the review. In a similar vein, he derides my purportedly smug description

of my "perfect marriage and family" without acknowledging that I go into painful detail about my divorce 22 years ago, my wife's multiple miscarriages and other obvious signifiers of imperfection. In short, I neither recognize -- nor wrote -- the silly, one-dimensional book that James Bowman described in your pages.

MICHAEL MEDVED

Seattle, Washington

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