

More than a Little Good

by Kevin W. Crean



William Easterly's new book, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, is long on provocation but short on delivery. Easterly, a professor of economics at New York University and a former World Bank economist, is capable of both serious scholarship and a compelling narrative, as evidenced by his earlier book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics*—a book I highly recommend. However, when compared to his previous book, Easterly's new book is both less coherent in its overall design and less cogent in its execution.

The overarching narrative of *White Man's Burden* is familiar. The West has devoted \$2.3 trillion dollars over the last sixty years to foreign aid. Nevertheless, billions of people lack access to the most basic goods and services. Easterly rightly calls this a tragedy. He further suggests, as he has previously, that broad, top-down solutions solve nothing, that foreign aid suffers from too much bureaucracy and not enough accountability, that feedback loops are vital for the effective delivery of aid, and that circumstances on the ground are so complex that they defy solution from afar—all sound positions.

What is clearly new in this book,

however, and more than a little disturbing, is the extent to which Easterly engrafts onto these arguments an inflamed rhetoric and a truly gratuitous bashing of the West. One finds in particular a penchant to raise the theme of racism (witness the title) and to ascribe racial motives, regardless of the facts. Recounting the history of structural adjustment lending in Eastern Europe, for example, Easterly claims “the Western whites were convinced they had missionary gifts for their Eastern counterparts.” Such spurious asides seriously detract from both the flow and the merit of his arguments.

Easterly should have spent more time analyzing and explaining the facts. For instance, a graph of Eastern European growth after structural adjustment lending in the 1990s shows dismal results—except for Hungary and Poland, the latter showing a surge in growth, especially in the latter half of the decade. Yet Easterly never discusses why Poland had a different experience with structural adjustment loans. Easterly seems more intent on making a villain of the West than on the more challenging task of tackling the facts.

When Easterly returns to the merits of the book's most interesting arguments—how and why aid has failed and what can be done differ-

ently—he advocates common-sense reforms like the scientific evaluation of aid programs and the avoidance of collective responsibility. Easterly could have strengthened these arguments with a more detailed examination of currently successful interventions (of which there are at least a few), including groups such as KickStart that address the work of poverty alleviation in a scientific and professional manner. His failure to do so is unfortunate. Other authors I've read, such as Daniel Taylor in *Just and Lasting Change*, do a far better job of identifying useful strategies for intervention and acknowledge that there can be productive relationships between Western experts and their local counterparts—that, in fact, these relationships can be essential to success.

This certainly has been the experience of OneRoof, the company for which I work. We think that long-lasting change can most likely be attained through a genuine cross-cultural partnership. Indeed, our business model is almost entirely demand driven and requires us to adjust to local conditions, not the other way around. But if our experience is any guide, the West has important lessons to share, not least an entrepreneurial approach to risk and an appreciation of what is best described

as gumption. These characteristics and values are no less the products of culture (albeit Western) and no less deserving of respect than the ways of our in-country counterparts. Respect should flow both ways.

In the last third of the book, Easterly draws an analogy between grandiose, failed aid projects and what he asserts are Western imperial misadventures, including America's current efforts in Iraq. After a survey of colonial and neocolonial history, Easterly serves up damning judgments of the West for its alleged misdeeds in places as diverse as Angola, the Sudan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, the Congo, Uganda, and Pakistan. Yet Easterly takes inadequate account of actual historical circumstances and the very real dangers that occasioned the hardship, bloodshed, and strife in these varied locations during and after the Cold War.

Easterly laments, for example, that the "Americans" (of which he is one) "lost interest" in Pakistan in the 1980s and that we "failed to clean up after ourselves." At the same time, he criticizes us for being presently engaged in Pakistan but "tactfully overlook[ing]" Pakistan's "nuclear proliferation." Yet, you can't have it both ways: you can't carp when we stay, then carp when we leave. At least one reason we disengaged from Pakistan in the 1980s was Pakistan's pursuit of a nuclear program, which, as A.Q. Khan has demonstrated, can be inimical to our security. Easterly, however, never wrestles with the real dilemmas that underlie his examples of alleged Western malfeasance.

Furthermore, in places like Angola, the sad fact remains that control of debt by the West can, at times,

promote better behavior than the alternative. When Angola was reliant on the World Bank and the IMF, it made improvements in its human rights record. Not so, now that China is selling arms to and investing in the country. As a friend of mine in the intelligence community puts it, "Cue the rise of another African strongman."

As a result of his considerable bias against Western intervention, Easterly portrays the West as not having had a significant role in the spectacular economic rise of East and Southeast Asia. He further suggests that never having met the West is the far preferable path to economic development. This is a ludicrous position to take. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Singapore are all heavily indebted to the West, particularly to the British and American militaries. The British fought a long counter-insurgency campaign against the Malayan communists—probably the most successful campaign of its kind in history—which ultimately enabled Singapore's birth. Moreover, Singapore's economic success manifestly depends on values and institutions that were profoundly influenced by the West: a respect for the rule of law and private property rights, an independent judiciary, and an intolerance of corruption.

Singapore was also lucky. As a small country sitting astride a geopolitical choke point, it was well positioned to become prosperous during and after the Cold War. But again, that choke point—the straits of Malacca—only remained open as a result of the deployment of United States forces. Similarly, it was a foregone conclusion by the middle of the 1950s that the United States would

build up Japan as a counterweight to Soviet power in the Western Pacific. Consequently, geopolitics, Western resolve, Western values, and Western intervention—including military intervention or the threat thereof—appear to explain a significant part of the East Asian miracle. It cannot primarily, or even in significant part, be chalked up to simply being free of the West's meddling influence, as Easterly would have it. The White Man, as Easterly provokingly characterizes him, indeed shouldered a heavy burden throughout the last seven decades, and the world has been shaped in some strikingly positive ways as a result. We should scarce forget it. ■■■

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