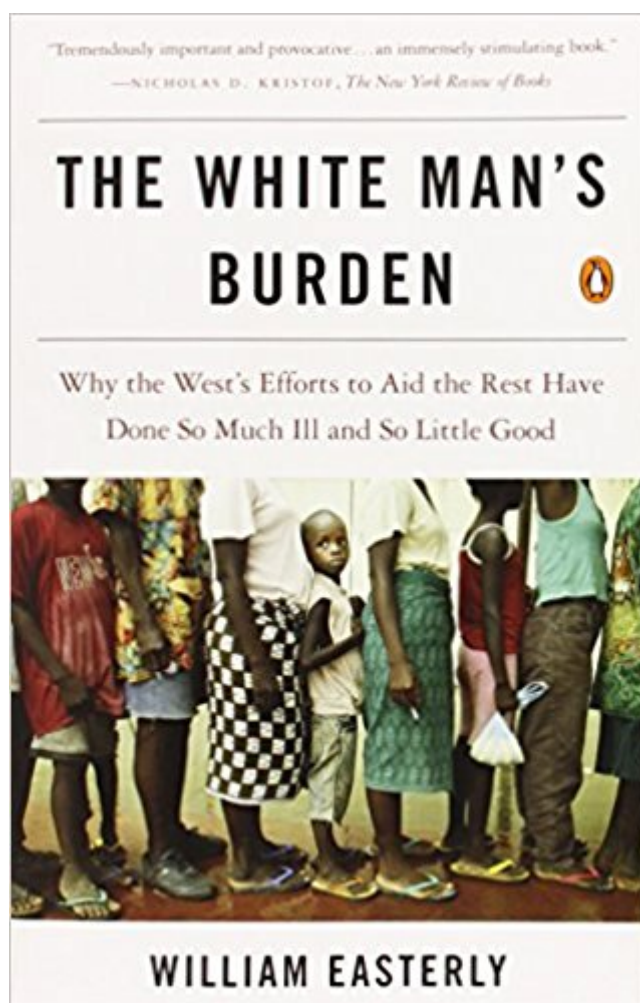


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# The White Man's Burden: Why The West's Efforts To Aid The Rest Have Done So Much Ill And So Little Good



## Synopsis

From one of the world's best-known development economists; an excoriating attack on the tragic hubris of the West's efforts to improve the lot of the so-called developing world. In his previous book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, William Easterly criticized the utter ineffectiveness of Western organizations to mitigate global poverty, and he was promptly fired by his then-employer, the World Bank. *The White Man's Burden* is his widely anticipated counterpunch; a brilliant and blistering indictment of the West's economic policies for the world's poor. Sometimes angry, sometimes irreverent, but always clear-eyed and rigorous, Easterly argues that we in the West need to face our own history of ineptitude and draw the proper conclusions, especially at a time when the question of our ability to transplant Western institutions has become one of the most pressing issues we face.

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## Customer Reviews

No one who attacks the humanitarian aid establishment is going to win any popularity contests, but, neither, it seems, is that establishment winning any contests with the people it is supposed to be helping. Easterly, an NYU economics professor and a former research economist at the World Bank, brazenly contends that the West has failed, and continues to fail, to enact its ill-formed, utopian aid plans because, like the colonialists of old, it assumes it knows what is best for everyone. Existing aid strategies, Easterly argues, provide neither accountability nor feedback. Without accountability for failures, he says, broken economic systems are never fixed. And without feedback

from the poor who need the aid, no one in charge really understands exactly what trouble spots need fixing. True victories against poverty, he demonstrates, are most often achieved through indigenous, ground-level planning. Except in its early chapters, where Easterly builds his strategic platform atop a tower of statistical analyses, the book's wry, cynical prose is highly accessible. Readers will come away with a clear sense of how orthodox methods of poverty reduction do not help, and can sometimes worsen, poor economies. (Mar. 20) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**\*Starred Review\*** As the dictator of Haiti for decades, Papa Doc Duvalier had good reasons--tens of millions of them--to praise international aid agencies for their generosity. As a former analyst in the World Bank system that coordinates such generosity, Easterly thinks it is time to start listening to people other than corrupt dictators and self-congratulatory bureaucrats in assessing international-aid projects. Though he acknowledges that such projects have succeeded in some tasks--reducing infant mortality, for example--Easterly adduces sobering evidence that Western nations have accomplished depressingly little with the trillions they have spent on foreign aid. That evidence suggests that in some countries--including Haiti, Zaire, and Angola--foreign aid has actually intensified the suffering of the poor. By examining the tortured history of several aid initiatives, he shows how blind and arrogant Western aid officers have imposed on helpless clients a postmodern neocolonialism of political manipulation and economic dependency, stifling democracy and local enterprise in the process. Easterly forcefully argues that an ambitious new round of Western aid programs will help the suffering poor only if those who manage them wake up from the ideological fantasy of global omniscience and begin the difficult search for piecemeal local approaches, rigorously monitoring the results of every project. Proffering no blueprint for bringing poverty and disease to an end, Easterly does set the terms for a debate over how to give foreign aid a new start. Bryce Christensen Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“The White Man’s Burden,” despite its inflammatory title, is a measured analysis of the ability of the West to help alleviate poverty in the rest of the world. The title is actually ironic, for the book concludes, in essence, that most of the burden the West has taken on has led to no improvement and much waste. This book is a companion, in many ways, to Easterly’s later book “The Tyranny of Experts.” It also has much in common with other books focusing on both the Great

Divergence and the lifting of the poor out of poverty, in particular Angus Deaton's recent book, *The Great Escape*, and James C. Scott's seminal *Seeing Like A State*. Easterly's general framework is to contrast *Planners* and *Searchers*. Planners are what we typically think of when we think of development aid. They are external organizations like the United Nations or the Gates Foundation, well-funded, pursuing a range of big, difficult-to-achieve goals. Searchers are smaller, usually locally-based organizations and people, focusing on smaller, quickly achievable goals, where the methods used are adjusted based on immediate evaluation and feedback. The argument of the book is that Planners, totally dominant in the development industry for 60 years, have failed miserably, except at making people in the West feel good about themselves, and it is time for Searchers to dominate. The mantra of the Planners is that of Bob Geldof: "Something must be done; anything must be done; whether it works or not." Usually, it is hard to determine if the goals of Planners have really been accomplished, so accountability is minimal, and feedback adjustment loops do not exist. Nobody ever really investigates whether progress, and the right progress, has been made, and adjusts accordingly. Nobody is willing to admit that tradeoffs have to be made in the allocation of resources. Instead, in a few years, another call goes out for another giant, costly, shotgun-type development program. An example of the difference between Planners and Searchers is anti-malarial mosquito nets. You've heard of these—they're cheap, and extremely effective in reducing disease and mortality, particularly in children and pregnant women. Much money has been spent on distributing them for free as part of big Plans. What you probably haven't heard is that when free nets are given out to people, they take them and use it for other purposes they value more highly, such as using them for fishing nets or wedding veils. (While Easterly doesn't mention it, a side effect of this well-intended program is the destruction of African fish populations—see [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/world/africa/mosquito-nets-for-malaria-spawn-new-epidemic-overfishing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/world/africa/mosquito-nets-for-malaria-spawn-new-epidemic-overfishing.html?_r=0)) Therefore, most of the mosquito nets don't reach their intended targets. This is a natural consequence of providing a free good—it distorts the incentive mechanisms inherent in the free market, leading to all sorts of unintended consequences. But great success has been achieved by a small, Searcher, organization in Malawi modifying the Plan, by selling the nets, cheaply, directly to pregnant women and mothers, where the

selling nurse also gets to keep a small profit to incentivize her. Because the end users paid for them, and thus have a stake in them, their actual use is nearly universal. In other countries, where Planners distribute them free, the vast majority of the nets are not used, or not used for their intended purpose. But even though central planning has been shown, in every walk of life, to be a defective nightmare, Planners still dominate the development industry. What Easterly calls “The Big Push” is still the universal development model. The prototypical example is the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, which also involves private organizations, notably the Gates Foundation. Easterly goes to considerable length to demonstrate exactly how and why Big Pushes don’t help poor people become not poor. Among other things, he demonstrates that is a fiction that there is a “poverty trap” where countries need external help to jump-start their growth. In fact, most countries that can grow do grow, regardless of external aid, and those that can’t, don’t. (This is the essence of Angus Deaton’s argument as well.) Therefore, Big Pushes are a waste of money. Rather, Easterly argues that what developing countries need is the rule of law (and democracy, at least to the extent it helps the government respond to actual needs), and free markets. Development aid is frequently anti-democracy, because it props up non-democratic regimes. In fact, development agencies dislike democracy in practice, because grand plans concocted by specialists (what James C. Scott, whom Easterly quotes to this effect, called “high modernism” and not as a compliment) are easily frustrated in democracies. Easterly also gives innumerable examples of the heinous bureaucratise that dominates and enervates the development industry. The norm seems to be mealy-mouthed, passive-voice, voluminous reports that say nothing much but insist that more money is needed to achieve the success that is finally just around the corner. His own background is the World Bank, so Easterly certainly has first-hand familiarity. I’m pretty sure, though, that he’s not welcome at World Bank parties anymore. Of course, Easterly isn’t going to just throw his hands up and declare that aid is stupid. He is not opposed to aid • he wants it implemented in an incremental, accountable, properly incentivized fashion by Searchers, instead of spent poorly by unaccountable, utopian, not-very-bright Planners. While he is careful to note there is no panacea, and probably he would admit there is little reason for optimism, he also offers narrow specific methods for improving aid. He suggests more approaches, even radical approaches, be tried and the results examined, such as development vouchers, where the poor themselves choose how to allocate aid. He endorses the crowdfunding of GlobalGiving.com (he wrote this in 2006, and it still

appears to be going strong in 2015). In sum, he wants the poor to be given tools to create their own future. One highly original and useful idea is to target aid to project maintenance. Most Western aid goes to grandiose projects that make both donors and recipients look good—dams, road networks, school buildings. In reality, though, once the bunting comes down and the politicians leave, such projects decay because the politically dysfunctional aid recipients fail to maintain the dynamos, fix the roads, or provide textbooks. And donors don't want to fund ongoing maintenance, repair and consumables, because they believe that local people should take some responsibility. But they don't. Easterly says Western aid organizations should just "bite the bullet and permanently fund ongoing costs for projects, accepting that recipients are not going to reliably do it themselves. Easterly does go somewhat off the rails toward the end of the book, in which he criticizes past colonialism and modern (American) "imperialism" for creating problems and approaching development in the same way as modern Planners. I'm not really sure what the point of these two sections is, other than perhaps to prevent the author being perceived as conservative due to his bias towards free markets as necessary for development. No doubt the hasty British departure from, and partition of, India in 1948 created all sort of bad things. But does anyone really think that India would be better off if the British had never ruled, or that the British were the ones who wanted partition? And Nehru-style socialism, rather than colonial after-effects, was responsible for decades of Indian stagnation, only reversed when India shook off that socialism in the 1990s. Doubtless Western national security interests can prop up bad regimes and create ill effects, such as in Pakistan and Sudan, but does anybody really think that either Pakistan or Sudan is ever going to be anything but a crappy country? I

don't. Easterly also seems to think that American attempts to engage in nation-building, usually combined with serving American security interests, are a disaster from a development perspective. He may be right, but his history is pretty selective, and often distorted. For some reason he spends a lot of time on the Nicaraguan civil war of the 1980s, not an exercise in nation-building, where he continuously slanders the heroic indigenous resistance (the Contras) and swallows the left-wing propaganda of the time disseminated by the Communist Sandinistas and their Western lackeys. He bizarrely refers to the Communist-friendly and violently anti-American pressure group Americas Watch simply as a "human rights organization" and he blithely states that "the Contras executed on the spot any civilian associated with the Sandinistas." The Contras are all "homicidal" and so forth; no negative adjective or stigma attaches to

the terroristic Sandinistas and their mass graves. Actually, killing of prominent local civilians as a terror tactic has always been a key and required ideological element of left-wing and Communist revolutionaries, from Lenin on, including the FMLN in El Salvador (notorious for killing scores of village mayors) and Sendero Luminoso in Peru. Such killing has generally not been associated with right-wing organizations (admittedly a much smaller set of data, given that right-wing organizations, revolutionary or government, have been responsible globally for a miniscule fraction of the tens of millions killed by left-wing groups). While there may have been occasional such incidents involving the Contras, they were very few, or they would have been extensively publicized at the time, which they weren't. I remember once a group of Contras in the field, in 1985, killed a military prisoner they had, because they were being pursued and could not transport the prisoner silently. A Western photographer happened to be with them. The resulting picture was headline news for days, if not weeks, in the United States, as the media desperately tried to use the "news" to attack the Contras, and by extension, President Reagan. The American media would have had a field day if they ever could have shown the Contras deliberately killed a single civilian. The Contras were an indigenous and generally popular resistance movement, which ultimately was able to overcome the Sandinistas in a free election (although credit has to be given to the Sandinistas for even having a free election, the only Communist state ever to voluntarily do so). That Easterly shows violent irrational bias against them is strange in someone who generally seems very even-keeled. Easterly's other blind spot is the same one found in "The Tyranny Of Experts" — Easterly never seems to consider that some cultures simply aren't capable of advancement, no matter how much money or other aid is handed to them. He implicitly assumes that every culture wants the same thing and is capable of progress. He believes that Searchers can come to predominate in any culture, as they did in Japan, Botswana and Singapore, once backward and now very or more advanced. But that's not always true, or maybe even often true. Afghanistan was a pit with a defective culture when Alexander the Great swept through; it was a pit when Winston Churchill fought the Pashtun in the 1890s on the Northwest Frontier; and it is a pit with a defective culture today. All the money in the world, no matter how distributed or applied, will not change that and there is nothing more futile than trying to force change on those who do not want to change. But Easterly is an optimist, so perhaps he does not see this, or perhaps he simply thinks pessimism will not help his cause. And the world can always use more realistic optimists.

Easterly simply points out the fact that nothing will work across the board, and that western

interventions based on appeasing the western public and economic interests does not work in all cases. In fact, it hardly works at all. He shows that specialized plans created by those who will be implementing and gaining from them are much more effective than grandiose schemes created "planners." This idea can be directly translated to sustainability where scientists are quickly finding that many different solutions is the real solution. The problem most people find with this is that a) he says things they don't like to hear and b) some claim that he doesn't provide evidence of what would have happened without intervention. BUT he uses many examples such as China and Chile to in fact show this, so clearly these people just haven't finished the book. He really doesn't say anything that can be contradicted as if there really was "one giant plan" to end all plans, it would be discovered from the bottom up, as equally as the top down (which I don't think would be the case at all). My only critique is that he's pretty hostile towards Sachs for an academic work, but I don't care because I think that Sachs is a pompous idiot that's needed to be knocked down a notch for a while. I think that combining Easterly's work with those of Paul Collier and the theory of Amartya Sen would be the ideal combination, but that's just me.

I have been a self-described Easterly fangirl since reading his excellent book *The Elusive Quest for Growth*. In that book, he had managed to be precise, supported, readable, humane and funny-- all at the same time. In the world of reading about development economics, this was no mean feat. I had known that this book was out for a while, but had only gotten around to reading it after seeing Easterly here in Amsterdam. He was debating Jan Pronk about what he calls the difference between Planner- and Searcher-based methods of developmental aid. Planners, in his terms, prefer the sweeping top-down approaches to poverty eradication-- all governed by a central committee somewhere else. Searchers adopt a more piecemeal approach to solutions, looking from the bottom up without benefit (or as much benefit) from Utopian ideals. It was a very interesting debate. The audience was full of folks working in various NGOs and developmental organization. It inspired me enough to go ahead and buy *The White Man's Burden*. The arguments that Easterly make feel so intuitively correct that they make me suspicious. The bottom line for him seems to be that real situations are individual, and solutions cannot be extrapolated from overriding principles. He is savage towards the unrealistic thinking of the neo-imperialists and unsparing of many of the political sacred cows. He points out that given limited resources, tradeoffs do have to be made. Too many people forget that even given unlimited funding (which is far from the case), resources can still be scarce-- attention, will power, distribution infrastructure, etc. He also says that if goals in aid programs are failing, then throwing more money at them will not help. I think that Easterly's stand is



often misconstrued based on the last point. I have heard detractors say that he is arguing towards limiting aid to the needy poor. There is no substantiation of that-- at least not in his books or in the lecture I attended. Instead, what he argues is that if unrealistic goals and cumbersome structures prevent aid from reaching the poorest, then adding more money on top of the pile will not fix the problem. For any experienced project managers out there, this is going to feel very "right". Easterly is not calling for less spending; he is calling for more sensible spending. He is calling for accountability, practicality, focus and honest evaluation. These are things that should be self-evident, but are apparently very difficult to achieve. He asks the very disturbing question whether the developed countries are more interested in selling their personal ideology in the form of a Utopian vision than they are interested in achieving real change on the ground where it is needed the most. Other topics include examples of successful "Searcher" strategies for bringing change to the life of the poor; historical numbers looking at the effect of aid on growth; a discussion of the different aid agencies and their limitations; and some thinking about the role (or lack of one) in local governments when it comes to development initiatives. *The White Man's Burden* is, as *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, precise, supported, readable, humane and funny. I think that it is in many respects a stronger book as it better integrates the stories of the poor with the structure. There are many fascinating pointers for further reading. I would have appreciated an annotated bibliography instead of just pulling references from the notes, but I guess that you cannot have everything that you want in a single book. Recommended reading.

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