

Title: Philanthropy As Seen Through the Eyes of Bill Gates

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By Laura M. Sands

If money reveals a person's true character, be prepared to find out who Bill Gates really is. In his own words he's a troublemaker who is perfectly willing to court controversy. He's also intent on closing the gaps between the haves and the have-nots-- so much so that his ranking as one of the world's wealthiest people has recently slipped. Understand, however, that his financial status hasn't diminished because he isn't making the money that he used to, but it *has* diminished because he's giving so much of it away.

Gates is proud of being a troublemaker when it comes to campaigning for greater access to quality health care, food and education worldwide. Not only is he willing to cause a stir, but he was clearly challenging the throngs of students who poured into Pomona College's Bridges Auditorium on March 10 to join him in becoming rebels with a cause. On that evening, the billionaire philanthropist appeared relaxed and eager to share his thoughts about how to better serve billions of people in developing countries who are dying from preventable diseases, such as AIDS, malaria and polio.

A college dropout himself, Gates offered compliments to the students and the faculty of the Claremont colleges for their academic enthusiasm. He even went so far as to declare his optimism about America's future because of institutions like the Claremont colleges. He was quick to point out, however, that while America has made great strides in terms of innovation, specifically in the areas of food production and medicine, which now allow people to live twice as long as they 200 years ago, his concern about the poorest citizens of the world matches his optimism, since the poor do not by and large benefit from this innovation. In particular, he noted that those suffering from the poorest health are also living in countries with the largest population growth, such as Pakistan and parts of Nigeria.

According to Gates, one of the largest problems in closing the gaps in healthcare between developing countries and wealthy countries is the approval times needed to green light vaccines and other crucial medicines. In America, while the Federal Drug Administration normally takes up to 10 years to approve a drug, medications that are urgently needed can be approved in as little as two to three years. Such has helped improve the quality of life of AIDS patients in the U.S., but has also made research for new drug treatments less of a priority. Yet, though existing drugs are expensive, they are available.

In developing countries, however, where Gates shared that 85% of AIDS infected patients live, approval times are still dangerously long. Reasons for such delays include a mistrust of regulatory leadership and the absence of a streamlined process for researching, testing and approving sorely needed medications. In Gates' view, another major problem in narrowing the existing healthcare gaps is cost. Poorer people in other countries simply cannot afford expensive medications, so bringing costs down to \$1.00 US Dollar (USD) or less is what Gates said needs to occur. In order to bring prices down

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that low, however, a completely new regulatory process must take place and, therefore, the cycle of delay continues.

Sipping on a diet Coke between questions, students also learned that diseases which were long ago eradicated in the Western world still currently plague other countries. One in which Gates is passionate about eliminating is polio. Since President Roosevelt and the citizen-funded March of Dimes raised enough money in the 1950s for research and vaccinations to essentially eliminate the disease in this country, it no longer plagues the western world. In 1988, however, polio outbreaks in approximately 125 different countries began to kill or cripple hundreds of thousands of children before vaccinations halted its spread. Currently, high rates of polio continue to strike children in places like Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and as infected individuals travel to other countries, the disease often spreads. As U.S. government spending on medical research for vaccines continues to be reduced, diseases like polio lie on the horizon threatening to spread once again.

Currently, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, which is dedicated to advancing education, fighting poverty and improving healthcare in developing countries, spends more money fighting polio than the American government does. To be more specific, Gates confessed that his foundation actually spends twice as much on such an effort. His fear, however, is that the remaining government funding may be cut even further and that Europe may follow suit. This could allow the disease to become a larger threat and reverse previous efforts to completely eradicate it.

Mr. Gates also didn't mask his frustration with the American public when it comes to government spending. He criticized voters who strongly advocate budget cuts, yet disagree with eliminating subsidized programs like Pell grants and medical research. According to Gates, what the American public really has trouble with is not government spending, but what they're really "against is arithmetic".

When asked about universal healthcare in the United States, Gates described the current healthcare system as having serious equity problems. He stated that we currently spend 17.8% of our GDP whereas countries like Switzerland spend 12.3%. He said that one out of every 20 people in the U.S. are "excess people" and that people in other countries get better healthcare treatment than do American citizens. He freely admitted to favoring the German and the Swiss healthcare systems, and counted the U.S. as having "provably" the worst system of all developed nations in that it is the least equitable and the most expensive. He punctuated these thoughts with the contrasting fact that the U.S. spends far more money on research than does any other wealthy country.

Asked what would he major in if he were just entering college as a teenager, Gates didn't hesitate in placing math and science at the top of his list. His reasoning is that these majors are needed to do more research for the creation of vaccines in order to stop diseases that are ravaging the rest of the world. He went on to say that physics majors, in

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particular, have phenomenal opportunities to impact the world by creating new, inexpensive and safer ways of making energy for the poor. While he mentioned the importance of software development, surprisingly he only did so in the context of its importance in advancing education and carrying out research to create better medications and vaccines.

Gates described capitalism as being a “good thing”, as it enables people to give back. In fact, one would have the impression that in this billionaire’s mind capitalism is *only* a good thing for giving back. Deeply committed to philanthropy, he shared that after multiple conversations with his wife, Melinda, billionaire investor Warren Buffett and other philanthropists, the Gates’ and Mr. Buffett have created an elite group of super wealthy individuals willing to give the bulk of their fortunes away for philanthropic efforts. While he didn’t name names, he did say that this group is currently 60 members strong and growing, and that personal meetings with billionaire philanthropists in countries like India and China indicate that similar groups are likely to be formed in those countries, as well.

A proponent of the estate tax and the Dream Act, Gates’ flirtation with controversial issues doesn’t begin and end there. Currently, his foundation is investing in the research and development of genetically modified seeds to benefit poor nations, such as those that comprise Sub-Saharan Africa and that are the most threatened by climate changes that damage crops and doom natives to starvation. While he admits that genetically modified foods spark controversial debates, with his focus on a single imperative of ending hunger and starvation, he indicated that he is perfectly willing to court such controversies.

In trying to bring the conversation back to what he is best known for-- technology, Joshua, a senior at Harvey Mudd College, asked about how the poor have benefited from innovations in computer technology. Gates was clear in noting that the poor in developing countries haven’t directly benefited much in this area at all. He went on to say, however, that they have benefited indirectly in that technology has been useful in helping to develop new seeds, vaccines and medicines that are helping to prevent hunger and failing health.

When asked by Hal Hargrave, Jr., a 21 year old freshman at the University of LaVerne who suffered a spinal cord injury four years ago, how to take his “Be Perfect” foundation, which benefits others affected by spinal cord injuries, to the next level, Gates advice was simple: keep a narrow focus and continue to tell the story of his foundation’s success and effectiveness.

Admitting that he didn’t begin his philanthropic career until his late 40s, Mr. Gates further urged students to pick a cause that they’re interested in now and learn as much about it as possible. With so many to choose from, he advised against becoming overwhelmed by too many, but suggested that a narrow focus, particularly one that affects the poor, will make a lifelong impact.

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When asked why his efforts were so focused in other countries outside of the U.S. when there are so many others that can be addressed in America, he reminded students that we are “one human race”. He expressed that, while his foundation does support causes such as improvements in education and technology in the U.S., a few thousand dollars spent on vaccines can literally save a life in a poor country, whereas it may take a few million dollars to save a life in America. His point being that the greatest impact per dollar is in helping the poorest of the poor in other countries. He posed the question of which life is more valuable and if it is determined that each are of equal value, then we can see that the dollar-for-dollar effect of helping the poor is quite remarkable.

The bottom line, according to Gates, is that everyone should work to create better economic conditions for the poor. He quoted his young son who, after spending a day helping the homeless by serving food and handing out toiletries, brought the issue down to its simplest solution. At the end of the day, the junior Gates asked his dad, “That’s nice, but if they’re homeless, why don’t we just get homes for them?”

The final question of the evening didn’t deter Gates at all. When pointedly asked by Will, a junior and a math/chemistry major at Pomona College, about his thoughts on defense spending, he spoke candidly by first admitting that there are some topics that he knows more about and some that he knows less about. In his mind, however, war is the biggest waste of money there is. It is illogical to him how invading a country and shooting people creates an expectation of being well-liked by a country’s citizens.

With this reasoning, it’s no surprise that Gates feels the nation’s defense budget needs to shrink and that more money should be directed toward medical research and education, specifically higher education. Referring distinctively to recent tuition increases at public colleges in California, Gates expressed heartfelt concern that young American minds are sorely lacking the public’s investment.