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The Father of Millions

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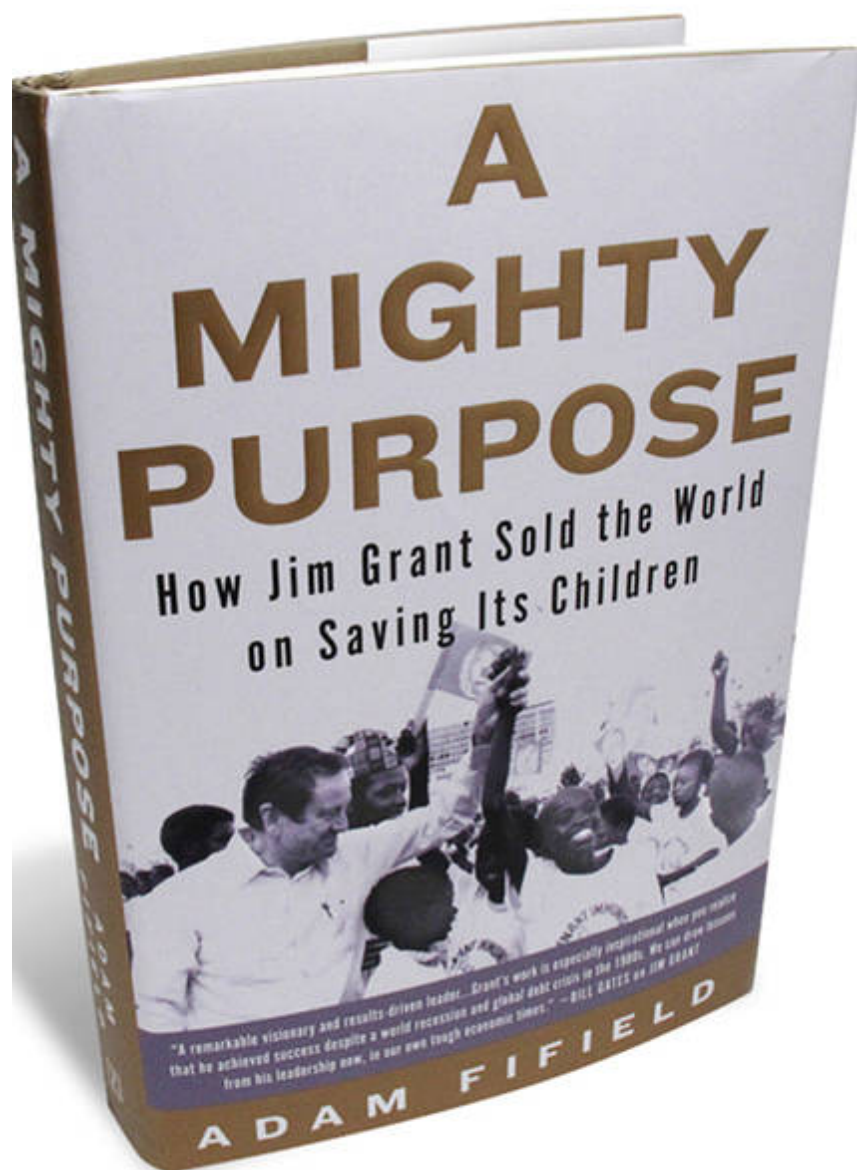
By **WILLIAM EASTERLY**

Oct. 15, 2015 6:28 p.m. ET

With every new round of bad news about Islamic State or desperate refugees, the world seems to be getting worse. But there is also good news about the world getting better. In 1960, low- and middle-income countries saw an average of 23% of children die before they reached their fifth birthday. Today that average mortality rate is about 5%. The revolution in child mortality has many impersonal causes—including the spread of lifesaving medical technologies—but also some very particular heroes, of whom perhaps the biggest is James P. Grant, the director of the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef) from 1980 to his death in 1995.

Adam Fifield’s entertaining biography of the little-recognized Grant shows that entrepreneurs can appear in the most unpromising environments—such as within the dysfunctional bureaucracy of the United Nations. When Grant took over Unicef after a long career in U.S. foreign aid agencies, he quickly saw that just two interventions—vaccinations against childhood diseases like measles, and oral rehydration salts to prevent fatal dehydration from infant diarrhea—were under-utilized and could make a large difference in saving children’s lives. The vaccination rate for diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus in Africa in 1982 was only 12%.

Vaccinations have to be completed only once for each generation of children, the effort can be monitored, and the chain of results from vaccinations to lives saved is straightforward and possible to measure. This allowed Unicef to hold aid agencies and governments responsible for results, an accountability usually lacking in aid. Once Grant had bullied and cajoled all these actors into a first round of vaccinations and the introduction of oral rehydration salts, it was hard to go backward.



Mr. Fifield relates many colorful stories. During one night-time plane delivery of 40,000 doses of vaccine to one mountainous town in northeastern Colombia that had no lights at its airport runway, more than 100 villagers surrounded the runway with their car headlights to guide the plane to a safe landing. Grant convinced even brutal dictators like Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in Haiti to go along with his plans, so that usage of oral rehydration salts for children with diarrhea in Haiti went up to 34% from 2% in the first six months of the Unicef program. He persuaded bitter enemies embroiled in civil wars in El Salvador and Sudan to temporarily make a truce so that the vaccinators could do their work.

A MIGHTY PURPOSE

By Adam Fifield

Other, 426 pages, \$27.96

Grant can be forgiven if his self-image became a bit grandiose and (literally) paternalistic: In his climactic address to the U.N. World Summit for Children in 1990, he saw himself speaking “on behalf . . . of the

world’s children,” when he thanked the world’s leaders for their munificence. After all, by the following year vaccination rates worldwide were 85% for DPT and 80% for measles.

Grant was the right man in the right place at the right time. He was born in 1922 in China, where his grandfather had been a Baptist medical missionary. His father, John

Black Grant, was a public-health pioneer in a now forgotten economic development effort conducted by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1920s China. Jim Grant himself started in the family business of saving China in the 1940s, before the victory of Mao in 1949 ended that Western aid effort. Grant later participated in another aid debacle as chief of the USAID mission in Vietnam in the 1960s. Perhaps Grant's presence at such momentous failures made him all the hungrier for an aid success. The Unicef breakthrough on vaccinations and oral rehydration salts is still cited today as one of the rather few successes in foreign aid.

While top-down planning is usually misguided in aid (and most everywhere else), it turned out to be suitable for the particular challenge of vaccinations. Unfortunately, the aid establishment learned the wrong lessons from Grant's career. Instead of seeing him as an entrepreneur who saw a very specific unrealized opportunity to spread vaccination and oral rehydration salts, they viewed his success as vindicating top-down planning in general.

The U.N. has since witnessed the failure of such an approach with its Millennium Development Goals from 2000 to 2015—which included reductions in poverty, hunger, illiteracy, gender inequality and lack of access to clean water and sanitation. That did not stop them from announcing, this September, the even more ludicrous and ambitious Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The approach that may have worked for the specific problem of vaccination will not work for more general goals like reducing poverty or ending hunger.

Those who came after Grant also seem to have developed even more of the paternalistic savior complex than he had—his counterparts today are the likes of Bono, Jeffrey Sachs and Bill Gates. But the condescending image of a powerful white male as the savior of helpless nonwhite children is thankfully a lot less acceptable today than it was in Grant's time. Since 2000 we have witnessed the mainly homegrown economic growth of low- and middle-income countries surpassing that of rich countries—plus many other positive long-term trends from democratization to the explosion of cellphones. Aid alone cannot explain these large triumphs in poor countries. There is still room for humanitarian entrepreneurs like Grant to find new breakthroughs, but we can appreciate much more today that the poor are their own best saviors.

Mr. Easterly, a professor of economics at New York University, is the author of "The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor."

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