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The White Man's Burden by William Easterly

The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good by William Easterly discusses the many failures and triumphs of the West in aiding the Rest. The book is separated into four parts, Why Planners Cannot Bring Prosperity, Acting Out the Burden, The White Man's Army, and The Future, and each part is separated into chapters. Each chapter consists of sections with different stories, examples, and discussions of certain aid situations throughout the past.

In the beginning of the book Easterly classifies groups of people in foreign aid as either Planners or Searchers. Those following the traditional approach to foreign aid are known as the Planners, while those who are interested in alternative approaches to the problems are called Searchers. "A Searcher hopes to find answers to individual problems only by trial and error experimentation. A Planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A Searcher believes only insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions, and that most solutions must be homegrown" (6).

Throughout the book, Easterly discusses nearly every aspect of foreign aid that you can think of. Everything from not properly communicating with the poor to war and military intervention are discussed. He uses many personal experiences and stories throughout the book to help get his point across. When discussing the failures of aid organizations, he relates the organizations to ambulances rushing to accidents and says, "if ambulances keep showing up at the accident, but the injured still do not get any help for their injuries, you would question how good the ambulance service is" (52). For some reason, this quote put everything into a new perspective for me. If ambulances were not doing their jobs and not saving people, something would be done to change that. Why is this not the case with foreign aid? Why are aid organizations having such a hard time realizing that they are often the ones causing more problems? Why don't they realize their plans are not working and their money is being wasted? Why are the same mistakes being made over and over?

The final point that really stuck out to me was when Easterly was discussing the "alphabet soup" of aid organizations that the world has. There are so many organizations striving to do the same thing and they are often working in the same place. This only makes things more difficult. When something goes wrong, whose fault is it? Who is being held accountable? Each organization can blame the other, no one takes responsibility, and the problem remains a problem.

Reading this book was slightly difficult; it often felt like reading a textbook because Easterly does such a thorough and complete analysis of the ways of the West helping the Rest. But I appreciate his logic, the way he gives every perspective of a situation rather than being biased, and how upfront he is with his opinion. Rather than dancing around the point, he gets right to it, "the only Big Plan is to discontinue the Big Plan. The only Big Answer is there is no Big Answer" (30).