

The Gates Plan

Comment on Address at Harvard by Bill Gates

Sixty years ago, on June 5, 1947, the Harvard Commencement talk demonstrated again that the message, as good as it may be, is facilitated by the right speaker and the right audience. The Marshall Plan is forever embedded in our memories as involving George Marshall and the Harvard Commencement. Sixty years later that speech still provides a gold standard as people talk about the need for a “Marshall Plan” for Africa, for AIDS, for “marginalized countries,” or for malaria.

Forgotten is the fact that the Marshall Plan had already been presented by other speakers but there was insufficient traction for it to become policy. President Truman had presented some details to Congress on March 12, 1947, almost three months earlier. Marshall’s plan was actually the idea of Undersecretary of State William Clayton. Perhaps because Clayton was a Mississippi native, the official launching of the idea was at a meeting of the Delta Council at Delta State Teachers College in Cleveland, Mississippi on May 8, 1947. The plan was presented by Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson and reported on by a young James Reston...but the story went no-where. The State Department decided to try again when Marshall was asked to give the Harvard Commencement address. This time it was different as message, messenger and venue reinforced each other. But not immediately. The significance of the speech required an incubation period for fermentation. After all, polls showed the U.S. public was not supportive of the idea.

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But those were the days when leadership was based on ideas rather than polls and with President Truman taking the lead and with bipartisan support, the speech acquired power over time.

Sixty years in the future, in 2067, we will look back at the recent Harvard Commencement speech, which by that time will be known as “The Gates Plan,” and find that once again it took time for the full significance to be grasped, but it will be clear the speech had the same power for promoting an idea whose time has come. Arnold Toynbee once said the 20th century would be the time when the world would finally reach equity in global health. He was very wrong and the century ended with the health gap larger than it had ever been. But in a few short years, a combination of scientific tools, resources, political interest, accompanied by the profound impact of leadership by a few people of means, especially Melinda and Bill Gates, has made health equity an objective not only worthy of pursuit, as it has always been, but actually realistic and possible to pursue. Again, bipartisan leadership will prove important, but this time we may find that public opinion is ahead of the politicians and much more supportive than generally appreciated. For some strange reason politicians often cite that there is reluctance of the voters when the politicians resist increases of foreign assistance. But the polls show otherwise, that the public thinks the U.S. is giving far more for foreign assistance than it actually appropriates.

It takes no special insight to predict that the “Gates Plan” will turn out to be, in the long run, far more significant than the “Marshall Plan.” The Marshall Plan targeted a fairly small area of the world. The Gates Plan is nothing short of a world-wide revolution. The Marshall Plan was aimed at renewing something that had existed before the war. It promised resources and of course the available technology, but it was time-limited and the providers were very U.S.-oriented. That fact provided reason for immediate push-back, with some claiming the plan had the U.S. interest in mind rather than Europe. Andrei Vyshinsky, Soviet spokesman at the United Nations, spoke on September 18, 1947 saying, “This policy conflicts sharply with the principles expressed by the General Assembly in its resolution of 11th December, 1946, which declares that relief supplies to other countries ‘should at no time be used as a political weapon.’ It is becoming more and more evident to everyone that the implementation of the Marshall Plan will mean placing European countries under the economic and political control of the United States.”

The Gates Plan not only targets health inequities every place in the world but it also attempts to harness current and future global science in the effort to solve

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those inequities. It invites a cohort from around the world to be part of that effort. It defines a vision where a level playing field is a reality rather than a rhetorical tool. And it describes a place for every person in solving the problem. It provides a vision of a totally different world than anything seen in past history.

The Gates Plan will still require informed decisions by the biggest players—governments and global agencies—but it calls on millions of daily decisions by millions of people to make the market place work better for the poor and to provide support for politicians willing to make poor-friendly judgments. And it calls on Harvard to encourage its faculty and students to take on the truly big problems of the world.

The Gates Plan is based on a coming-together of many forces. It is dependent on both partnerships and individual actions. It requires a research community willing to focus on tools useful in diseases of the poor. It requires corporations to be willing to bring these tools to useful forms, marketing them and finding ways to make them available for both rich and poor markets. It requires country organizations to figure out how to deliver the tools in resource-poor settings. It requires finding ways to level the playing field so that anyone with skills and knowledge can apply that acquired expertise in the culture of their upbringing. This reduces the need for people to migrate to rich countries to effectively use such skills and knowledge, and instead builds up the strength of the infrastructure and health services of their own country. It requires, finally, recognizing that we are truly all in this together.

It is the ending that is most powerful. We often talk about how in order to open up dialogue between the U.S. and China, it required President Nixon to go against public expectations. In closing, Bill Gates leaves a challenge that may go against public expectations and can only be given by one who has succeeded as a scientist, a technologist, an entrepreneur. His authority comes from that success, and yet he reminds us that there are more important measures of success. Historians have written endless essays on measuring civilization. They find that every measure comes up short—knowledge, wisdom, control, happiness—and yet the measure of civilization is no more complicated than, “How people treat each other.” He and Melinda are demonstrating what success means by that criterion. Bill Gates tells graduates that every life has equal value and he hopes in 30 years they will judge themselves on how well they treated people a world away who have nothing in common but their humanity. It is a success plan for a graduate, a University, an organization, a church, citizens and indeed, a country.