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The subtitle says it all: Why the west's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good. It is certainly a statement that is obvious to almost everyone, except the UN, IMF, the World Bank and other acronyms that make up the foreign aid industry. According to William Easterly more than $2.3 trillion has been spent in the last 5 decades on foreign aid by the west. Although not all wasted – there has been some success – most of the money has done little of what it was supposed to do: alleviate poverty and disease while improving the economic record of the developing world. In his book, The White Man's Burden, Easterly a former World Bank economist, now teaching at New York University, runs us through a litany of failure and waste. He offers his reasons for these failures and a few small suggestions as to how we may improve the situation.

A large portion of foreign aid has, of course, gone to politicians in the developing world who have, thoughtfully, used the money to keep the Swiss and other unaccountable banking industries in robust health. This does not seem to have had any effect on the aid donor community: in 2002 the most corrupt and least democratic governments attracted the lion's share of aid money, over $1 billion each. However, it is not just the kleptocrats at the top of the developing nations, the police and public servants of these nations are often in league with criminals, and bribery is a way of life. Easterly points out that the police are often the stick with which the rich can beat the poor.

Of course, as Easterly notes, there are several other very western sources of waste. A particularly interesting example was in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism, where the major recipients of aid were not the emerging nations, but the West's big six accounting firms who drafted new laws and trained the locals in the use of these new laws. And, many of these new laws and much of the training had little effect.
The UN itself is not outside these miscalculations and misguided attempts to ensure that foreign aid appears to go to the most corrupt governments. In its usual resort to bureaucratic doublespeak a UN report lists 5 out of 7 countries nominated as the most corrupt in the world, as 'potentially well-governed'. This then opens up the possibility of these 5 nations receiving even more foreign aid. As Easterly notes: 'The voting power of the large group of undemocratic states makes the UN susceptible to coalitions of tyrants.'

But, Easterly's real problems arise with what he describes as the planners and searchers. Planners are those who, by Easterly's reckoning, are seldom accountable for projects that they initiate or whether the project is suitable to assist the supposed beneficiaries. They seem to be the bureaucratic, central-planning nightmare par excellence, and include a large section of the acronyms that are foreign aid planners and distributors. Searchers think on a smaller scale, are entrepreneurial, take responsibility for their decisions and respond to feedback from below. However, Easterly, while correctly lauding Mohammad Yunus and his microcredit Grameen Bank as the perfect searcher, does tend to overly simplify these distinctions into a very Orwellian scenario of all planners bad, all searchers good, and underplay the occasional success of the planners. Although, I am sure it is a good idea for Easterly to insist that planners be made more accountable, perhaps his faith in the self-corrective virtues of the searchers may be overstated.

Some parts of Easterly's historical analysis of the west's not very successful role in foreign aid, underplays the importance of the cold war. It appears that the former Soviet Union had little involvement in the cold war, and its proxy battles between the USA and what must have been an imaginary enemy. Despite his cautious praise of markets, which could anger some on the left, Easterly especially given the economic growth of China and India, offers a very traditional left wing historical analysis of the decolonisation struggles that marked the post World War Two era, where once again the Soviet Union, apparently, played almost no role. This is disappointing in a book that claims to be politically even-handed. Or, perhaps, much of post World War Two history of the former Soviet empire has been air-brushed, as successfully as conservatives claim, by highly politicised humanities departments.

One of the interesting characteristics that Easterly notes is, that activists for the poor seem to judge success on how much money is raised rather than on any results that projects might have. As an example, The White Man's Burden shows clearly that sub-Saharan Africa is the biggest recipient of aid, yet
poverty is still on the rise below the Sahara, and activists are still demanding ever more money.

Although there are areas where it is possible to disagree with Easterly's analysis of the problems, and his solutions, involving foreign aid, overall this is an important book. The White Man's Burden should be widely read, particularly by vanity driven popstars and those who offer unequivocal support for the UN, IMF, the World Bank and all the other organisations involved in foreign aid.