

**A TRIBUTE TO THE WORLD BANK'S TREASURER'S  
DEPARTMENT**

**by Gene Rotberg**

**April 30, 2022**

When Don Allison asked me to make some remarks at this 50-year reunion, I was ambivalent. For several reasons:

I was concerned that I would sound like one of those out-of-it old-timers who pretended that we were smarter, more innovative, bolder, worked harder, than those who followed us, that things were better in the good old days. Such nonsense.

I was also concerned that the reunion would morph into a memorial service for those no longer with us or those on the cusp.

I was reminded of the story about the customer, who upon entering a restaurant, asked to be seated. The maître d' explained that there were no empty tables and that the customer had no reservation. The customer insisted on a table. The maître d' again explained it was not possible. They were overbooked. The customer persisted. "Don't you know who I am?" The maître d' replied, "No, who were you?"

I was also ambivalent about this whole business of reunions. As Byron put it eloquently:

"When we two parted  
In silence and tears  
Half-broken hearted  
To sever for years  
...

If I should meet thee  
After long years  
How should I greet thee?  
With silence and tears.”

And, I was distressed that you would notice my walker, my slowness and slurring of speech and the quivering in my left hand. You would whisper among yourselves, “He’s changed. Parkinson’s.” My original draft had a question mark after the word, Parkinson’s. Now, there is no question mark; also, a pacemaker, one heart attack, two by-pass surgeries, stents, two hip-replacements – all on top of the Parkinson’s junk. I remembered that when I was 80, I bragged to my doctor that I saw no evidence of dementia, I had no short-term memory loss, my deductive skills were just fine and I could still figure present value calculations in my head. He simply replied, “Just wait until you’re 90.”

And then and now I am uneasy that my current vulnerabilities make it impossible to talk to you face to face at length, about old times, our families, and remembrances. The vulnerabilities simply make perfunctory hugs and kisses too risky.

Soon, however, I realized that my ambivalence about speaking to you simply reflected my overwhelming need to be loved and respected without any qualification by all of you – that I was the same as 50 years ago. But, as a friend recently put it, “You soon will be 93. Get over it already.”

But one thing I will not get over is what you have done.

You and your successors raised \$900 billion and invested those funds in world capital markets pending disbursement to poor countries.

To what end, you may ask? Life expectancy went way up. Fewer children died before the age of five. Hundreds of millions of boys and girls for the first time went to school. Safe water and electric power became available. Far fewer lived in absolute poverty. Far less starvation. Hundreds of millions more could read and write. Fewer little girls need work knee-deep in mud in rice fields. Far less infant and maternal deaths at childbirth. More democracy. More civil discourse. Hundreds of millions more now have hope because of you.

In the 1980s two billion people on our planet lived in extreme poverty earning less than \$2 a day. Today, 500 million. In 1970, 280 million children under the age of five were underweight. Now 80 million. Life expectancy in India went from 41 years in 1958 to 65 years today. In Bangladesh 21% were literate in 1960, 65% today can read and write. In China, in 1960 37% were literate; now over 90%. Child mortality worldwide in 1960 was 22%. It's now 4%.

That's to what end. And you might tell that to your children and grandchildren and friends who needle you about you're being part of the investment banking establishment.

The bottom line is there would have been little direct foreign investment or commercial bank lending had you not first provided the resources needed for infrastructure, roads, airports, rail, ports, schools, hospitals, health centers, agricultural finance, dams, disease control, power grids, safe water supply, matters rarely financed by the private sector.

But, you will not get credit - your name will not be recognized - because immortality is mostly reserved for writers and poets, for artists and composers and sculptors who leave behind the evidence of their work,

with their names attached, and whose works are loved and seen and heard over and over, generation after generation. Verdi's "Va Pensiero," Puccini's duets, Mahler's "Adagios" will bring chills forever. Just listen to Angela Gheorghiu singing Puccini's Vissi d'Arte.

(Musical interlude)

And sometimes the immortality goes like this. Listen to Joyce's Molly Bloom:

"and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl  
where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair  
like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he  
kissed me under the Moorish  
wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with  
my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes  
my mountain flower and  
first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he  
could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad  
and yes I said yes I will Yes."

No, you will have no such legacy. Your name will not be attached, though without you, the enormous changes for a better world not have happened. Children simply would not have been born. That little kid flying a kite in Afghanistan, that little girl bent over washing her clothes in a stream in Peru, owe their births, their very existence, to you. One day they will work together, at Mayo Clinic or in Geneva and find a cure for cancer. That is your immortality. It is of a different kind- silent, unknown. No medals, no chills. No recognition. No name attached. Just no more cancer.

And, you shared your wisdom and expertise with the poorest in the world. And with your successors: You trained and mentored thousands who went back to their home countries with your expertise.

The result: Some of the poorest countries in the world, in their own names, have raised \$250 billion in capital markets throughout the world – to alleviate the corrosive effects of poverty – violence, lethargy, heartache. The likes of Ghana, Bulgaria, Columbia, Ivory Coast, Dominion Republic, Egypt, Equador, Fiji, Indonesia, Morrocco, Pakistan, Peru, Vietnam – even IDA.

And, there is another development which reflects on what you did – rarely acknowledged. Those in this room showed the world how a country could intermediate another country's savings to purchase goods and services from a third country to be used to facilitate the economy of all countries. You provided the indispensable finance – the link to facilitate trade amongst nations, to integrate the economies and output of the peoples of the world. You were, are – the linchpin – the “sine qua non” of globalization. Irreversible.

## A DIGRESSION

But suppose I am wrong and it is all reversible. Giles Harvey in *The New York Times* recently quoted Kazuo Ishiguru's acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature: Ishiguru spoke the unthinkable: quote “I woke up recently to the realization I have been living some years in a bubble. I realize that my world—a civilized place filled with ironic liberal-minded people—was in fact much smaller than I ever imagined. ... the most unstoppable advance of liberal humanitarian values I'd taken for granted since childhood may have been an illusion.”

I share Ishiguru's angst. I fear that our liberalism may have been checkmated. We have seen political movements to the right throughout the world, not just in North Korea or Iran or Yemen or Syria, but in Greece, The Philippines, Poland, the Stans, Cambodia, Venezuela, Hungary, yes, even France. Beggar thy neighbor. Do it alone. Isolate. Brexit. Punishing tariffs. Restrict the flow of savings to within one's borders, limit immigration, subsidize domestic investment, penalize foreign investment, impose quotas and taxes. The world elected conspiracy theorists whose explicit goals are to destroy, not just the separation of powers, but the very existence of an independent legislature and judiciary and the underpinnings of democracy—the right to vote. The bedrock principle of these policies is to insulate – perhaps isolate is the better word – one's own country from the foreign influence of ideas, trade, or external financial resources – all of which are considered a weakening of the purity of society. That is a direct confrontation with globalization and the free and open transfer of people and financial resources between nation states and individuals.

And there is another matter which has limited the independence of nation states whose policies increasingly are controlled from Moscow or Beijing. If you want and need our oil, pay for it in rubles. And leave to us the execution of your foreign affairs else that railroad across Africa or South America will not be built.

You will argue that these are merely temporary aberrations, that we have seen this push and pull before which do not in any way threaten the basic lessons of morality of Moses and Plato. Burnished over the last several centuries by John Stuart Mill and Thomas Jefferson who taught that society will reward the truthful, that human beings are rational and liberal animals. We celebrated the Age of Enlightenment. We rejected Hobbes and Machiavelli. We are much better off now you argue.

We point out with pride that each structural change beginning with the violent French and American revolutions in the late eighteenth century, through the social revolutions of 1848, even through the assassinations

of royalty in the late nineteenth century to the dissolution of monarchies at the end of World War 1, through the rebalancing in the 1930s of the social structure in the United States, through the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s, each society became fairer, more liberal, and more sharing. It was with pride and no sense of embarrassment that I could quote John Donne:

“Any man’s death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind;  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.”

Perhaps, the question I would put for a later speech is whether the body politic would rather identify with the words of Carl Sandburg:

“Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation’s Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders ...  
Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage  
pitted against the wilderness,  
Bareheaded,  
Shoveling,  
Wrecking,  
Planning,  
Building, breaking, rebuilding.”

The question haunts whether the teachings of the past have already been vanquished. I hope not. The great debate, which policies will win out, is not over: beggar thy neighbor or share with thy neighbor, hegemony or diversity, forgiveness or punishment, admit to mistakes or failure, or just lie and cheat over and over. I suspect that our grandchildren will still be debating these matters.

Let me conclude with some personal remarks. When I came to the Bank, I hardly knew a stock from a bond. You protected me from foolishness. You let me take the credit for what you developed. You covered up my mistakes. You let me introduce innovative ways to evaluate risk and raise resources as if they were my ideas. When I left the Bank, you were still working on that magic zero coupon bond with a perpetual maturity. And your successors are still trying. You let me pretend, because I was the public face of the Treasury Department, that I understood the cash flow of swaps. No, only Lester Siegel and Philip Spray did. You permitted me to ignore administrative and management matters. Indispensable stuff for which I was quite unequipped and disinterested in handling. In short, you permitted me to love going to work every day for two decades. All of that goes way beyond, thank you. When I left the Bank over thirty -five years ago, in a letter to all of you, I quoted the English poet, Robert Bridges:

“I will not let thee go  
I hold thee by too many bands  
Thou sayest farewell and lo,  
I have thee by the hands  
And will not let thee go.”

It still applies to all of you.

I can only hope that you will email me and share your life, and though I would have preferred to meet you face-to-face, email is probably much better than a perfunctory hug or handshake. Don has distributed these remarks with my email address.

A word, finally, about those who informed all of us. And whose names mostly have already disappeared/been forgotten. Those whose names

will never appear in the history books. Those whose names soon, probably in a generation, will not be spoken again out loud publicly except for this one last time.

(accompanied by the “Intermezzo” from Mascagni’s Cavalleria Rusticana)

Burke Knapp, Bernie Bell, Shahid Hussein, Munir Benjenk, Dennis Ricket, Bill Diamond, Mohamed Shoab, Siem Alderweld, Raymond Cope, Joe Uhrig, Jocelyn Radifera, Ray Deely, Del Harris, William Clarke, Bill Van Saagsveldt, Hugh Scott, Ronnie Broches, Ray Goodman, David Hopper, Monte Yudleman, John Adler, Ben Prinz, Jean de Boeck, Aritoshi Soejima, Lester Nurick, Peter Cargill, Sheldon Rappaport, Y.L. Chang, Victor Chang, Frances Poole, Bob Cavanah, Maboub Al Haq, Roger Chaufournier, George Gabriel, Ibrahim Shihata, Warren Baum, Hans Hittmair, Ernie, Kessie.

Gene Rotberg  
former VP and Treasurer of the World Bank  
[genebanker@aol.com](mailto:genebanker@aol.com)