

He Saved a Billion Lives

By ACSH Staff — July 18, 2007

This piece first [appeared on July 18, 2007 in the \[1\] Washington Times \[1\]](#):

Could there be a man alive today who is virtually unknown to the vast majority of Americans yet is described by those who know his work and accomplishments as "the greatest human being who ever lived"? So it is for Dr. Norman Borlaug.

As the result of multiple appeals to Congress by his friends and colleagues, yesterday at the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, President Bush and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi bestowed upon Dr. Borlaug the highest civilian honor: the Congressional Gold Medal.

Dr. Borlaug has already received the Nobel Peace Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, being one of only five people in history to achieve all three of these honors (reason enough to think he should be better known than Paris Hilton).

Who is this man whose greatness has been overlooked by many but was honored by Congress? Dr. Borlaug has spent his life staving off world hunger. In a sense, the fact that people have become so complacent about having a plentiful food supply is itself a testament to his accomplishment -- revolutionizing the production of basic foodstuffs, and in the process proving wrong better-known scientists such as Dr. Paul Ehrlich, who argued that starvation would inevitably increase as population did.

In his early career, Dr. Borlaug worked with the Mexican government (and the Rockefeller Foundation) on plant breeding, plant pathology, soil science and cereal technology--efforts aimed at expanding the food supply. Over the course of twenty years, he was successful in developing high-yield, disease-resistant wheat. The results were spectacular: Mexico evolved from a wheat importer to a net exporter by 1963. Between 1965 and 1970, Dr. Borlaug 's work nearly doubled wheat production in Pakistan and India, saving millions from starvation. These examples of dramatic increases in crop yields in countries around the world became known as the " Green Revolution" -- and through his work, Dr. Borlaug is credited with saving over one billion people from starvation.

My first encounter with Norman Borlaug was in 1975, after I co-wrote the book *Panic in the Pantry*, about unscientific food scares. One morning, I found in my mailbox two letters about the book, and I was incredulous to see that both came from Nobel Laureates.

One, from Dr. Linus Pauling (who received both a Chemistry and a Peace Nobel), criticized me for praising agricultural and food technology--he preferred more "natural" living. The other letter was from Norman--who lavishly complimented the book and said he had already purchased twenty-five copies to distribute. Norman proposed a meeting the next time he was in New York working at the Rockefeller University. That meeting was the beginning of a thirty-year collaboration aimed at

confronting and defrocking the hyperbolists who want to scare us about the safety of modern food production methods. Norman Borlaug became a founding board member -- and remains an active trustee -- of the organization I head, the American Council on Science and Health.

For a man of such unique accomplishments, he is surprisingly modest and self-effacing. He didn't suspect that I was moved to tears whenever he called to express his support.

Nearly every time he is in New York -- on his way to India, Pakistan or North Korea -- he stops in to share with us his stories about combating world hunger. He also describes the challenges he faced from those who claimed genetic engineering and crossbreeding were "unnatural" and that vast increases in wheat yields came at the cost of "big business" replacing subsistence farming.

He visited a little over a year ago -- on his ninety-second birthday, en route to India -- and we surprised him with a party, which led to a discussion about his anxiety over the growing problem of wheat rust -- a fast-spreading wind-borne fungus that shrivels wheat stems -- and about his frustration over the rejection of biotechnology by many environmentalists. During another visit, we showed him videotapes of the episode of *The West Wing* in which the president of a fictional African country describes the "miracle" performed by "an American scientist who was able to save the world from hunger through the development of a new type of wheat." Martin Sheen (as the U.S. President) replies with Norman Borlaug's name. We also pointed out to Norman (who understandably does not have much time to watch television) that Penn and Teller declared, on an episode of their show, that "Norman is the greatest human being, and you've probably never heard of him."

We all should be grateful that Dr. Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution, will be honored this week for feeding the world -- or, as Norman more modestly puts it, for orchestrating "a temporary success in man's war against hunger and deprivation."

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See also: ACSH's report on [Biotechnology and Food](#) [4].

Whelan and Borlaug at the July 17 ceremony:

Dr. Norman Borlaug with Dr. Elizabeth Whelan at his Congressional Gold Medal ceremony, July 17, 2007.

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