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## Alter: How Superficial Has Our Culture Become?

By Jonathan Alter  
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July 30, 2007 issue - It's a trifecta much bigger and rarer than an Oscar, an Emmy and a Tony. Only five people in history have ever won the Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal: Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Elie Wiesel ... and Norman Borlaug.

Norman who? Few news organizations covered last week's Congressional Gold Medal ceremony for Borlaug, which was presided over by President Bush and the leadership of the House and Senate. An elderly agronomist doesn't make news, even when he is widely credited with saving the lives of 1 billion human beings worldwide, more than one in seven people on the planet.

Borlaug's success in feeding the world testifies to the difference a single person can make. But the obscurity of a man of such surpassing accomplishment is a reminder of our culture's surpassing superficiality. Reading Walter Isaacson's terrific biography of Albert Einstein, I was struck by how famous Einstein was, long before his role in the atom bomb. Great scientists and humanitarians were once heroes and cover boys. No more. For Borlaug, still vital at 93, to win more notice, he would have to make his next trip to Africa in the company of Angelina Jolie.

The consequences of obscuring complex issues like agriculture are serious. Take the huge farm bill now nearing passage, a subject Borlaug knows a thing or two about. Because it seems boring and technical and unrelated to our busy urban lives, we aren't focused on how it relates directly to the environment, immigration, global poverty and the budget deficit, not to mention the highly subsidized high-fructose corn syrup we ingest every day. We can blame the mindless media for failing to keep us better informed about how \$95 billion a year is hijacked by a few powerful corporate interests. But we can also blame ourselves. It's all there on the Internet (or in books like Daniel Imhoff's breezy "Food Fight"), if we decide to get interested. But will we? Sometimes it seems the more we've got at our fingertips, the less that sticks in our minds.

Born poor in Iowa and turned down at first by the University of Minnesota, Borlaug brought his fingertips and mind together in rural Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s to develop a hybrid called "dwarf wheat" that tripled grain production there. Then, with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, he brought agronomists from around the world to northwest Mexico to learn his planting and soil conservation techniques. "They [academic and U.S. government critics] said I was nutty to think that it would work in different soil," Borlaug told me last week. The resulting "nuttness" led to what was arguably the greatest humanitarian accomplishment of the 20th century, the so-called Green Revolution. By 1965 he was dodging artillery shells in the Indo-Pakistan War but still managed to increase Indian output sevenfold.

The experts who said peasants would never change their centuries-old ways were wrong. In the mid-1970s, Nobel in hand, Borlaug brought his approach to Communist China, where he arguably had his greatest success. In only a few years, his ideas—which go far beyond seed varieties—had spread around the world and disproved Malthusian doomsday scenarios like Paul Ehrlich's 1968 best seller "The Population Bomb." Now the Gates Foundation is helping extend his innovations to the one continent where famine remains a serious threat—Africa.

Borlaug, who launched the prestigious World Food Prize, has little patience for current agricultural policy in the developed world. "The claims for these subsidies today by the affluent nations are pretty silly," he says. So far, Congress isn't listening. The octopus-like farm bill does little to curb the ridiculous corporate welfare payments to a tiny number of wealthy (and often absentee) "farmers" who get more than \$1 million a year each for subsidized

commodities that make our children obese. (Did you ever wonder why junk food is cheaper than nutritious food? Because it's taxpayer-funded).

Borlaug scoffs at the mania for organic food, which he proves with calm logic is unsuited to fight global hunger. (Dung, for instance, is an inefficient source of nitrogen.) And while he encourages energy-conscious people to "use all the organic you can, especially on high-end crops like vegetables," he's convinced that paying more for organic is "a lot of nonsense." There's "no evidence the food is any different than that produced by chemical fertilizer."

In 1960 about 60 percent of the world's people experienced some hunger every year. By 2000 that number was 14 percent, a remarkable achievement. But as Borlaug cautioned at the ceremony in his honor, that still leaves 850 million hungry men, women and children. They are waiting for the Norman Borlaugs of the future to make their mark, even if they aren't likely to get famous for it.

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