



Bill Gates: Reconsider

Guest View

By Scott Cassel

On Monday, January 15, we honored a man who challenged the entire country to dig deep into our souls and seek justice for a people. Reverend Martin Luther King made a plea for social responsibility. Environmental protection is also about social responsibility. We often harm each other and ourselves in our choices, even though we depend on a healthy environment for our livelihood.

It was jarring, therefore, to read in the *Financial Times* (January 13, 2007) that Bill Gates “snubbed the ethical investment movement” by saying that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the world’s largest philanthropic body with \$35 billion in assets, “should concentrate on grants rather than judging the social impact of businesses in which it invests.”

Microsoft, the software giant, has been largely responsible for the need to increase software storage space, forcing rapid change in computer hardware, and relegating previously usable machinery into obsolescent junk. But does Gates’ focus on return on investment have to be the bottom line? Absolutely, said the late neoclassical economist, Milton Friedman, who wrote that a business executive has direct responsibility to his shareholders to “...make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of the society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom.”

While many argue that acting in society’s best interest can also be consistent with the corporation’s best interest, others seek to go further by moving companies to a “triple bottom line” that synthesizes financial, social, and environmental results as equally important. Still others use the power of shareholder resolutions to force corporations to spend resources on social programs.

But what do we say about a company that does not account for its social impacts on the society that allows it to operate? Is this fair? Is this ethical? Is the bottom line of return on investment all that humans crave?

In his book, *Inspiring Progress: Religions’ Contributions to Sustainable Development*, Gary Gardner argues for the need for a “broadly agreed set of ethics” to guide us through the 21st century, and views religion as “...one of the four key sources of individual behavior change.” As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his 1955 book, *God in Search of Man*: “There must be a counterpart to the immense power of man to destroy, there must be a voice that says NO to man, a voice not vague, faint and inward, like qualms of conscience, but equal in spiritual might to man’s power to destroy.”

Consistent with this call to action, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, on January 17, 2007, jointly

called for the nation's leaders to fundamentally change values, lifestyles, and public policies that adversely affect the environment.

Our challenge as a society is to balance the two competing natural instincts within ourselves to “fill the earth and subdue it” and to “cultivate the garden and to keep it.” Corporate social responsibility has begun to create this system of ethics, but it needs to go deeper, into the spiritual, ethical, and religious dimensions of humanity’s need for greater fulfillment than the creation of wealth. We all have a legacy to uphold. I hope that Mr. Gates will reassess his position on the social responsibility of Microsoft and his foundation...and let the (blue) chips fall where they may.