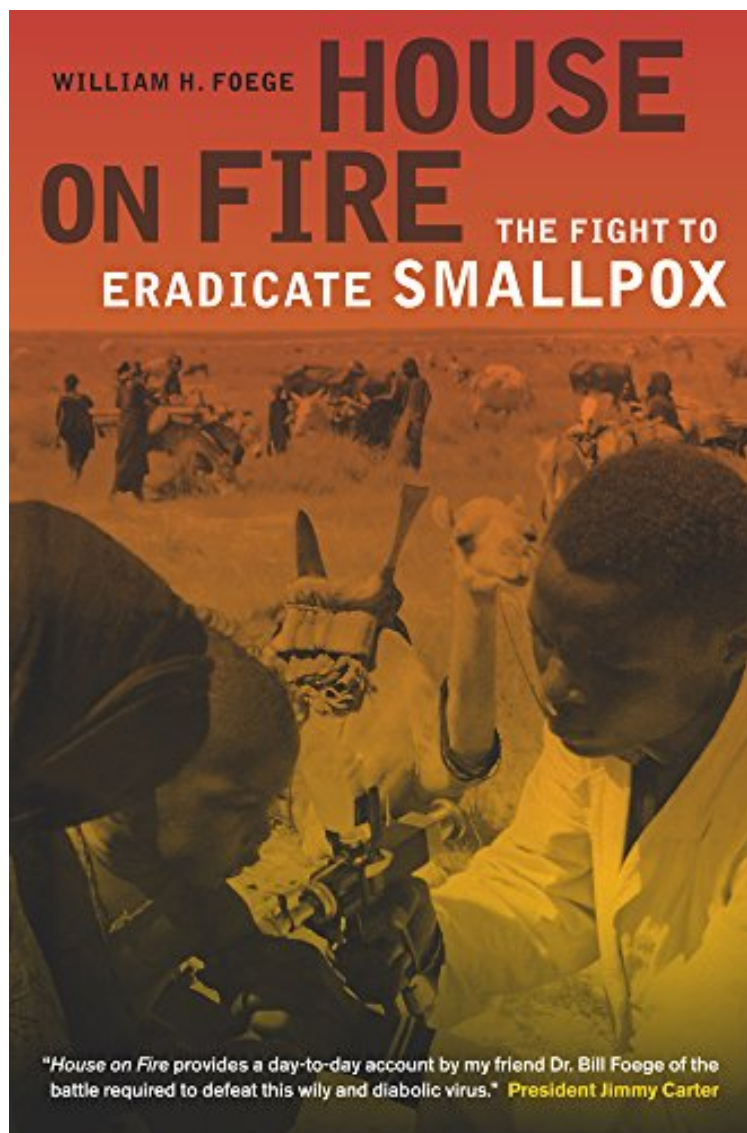


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## House on Fire: The Fight to Eradicate Smallpox (California/Milbank Books on Health and the Public)

William H. Foegen

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#156306 in Books University of California Press 2011-06-06Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.00 x .80 x 6.00l, .70 #File Name: 0520274474240 pages | File size: 19.Mb

**William H. Foegen : House on Fire: The Fight to Eradicate Smallpox (California/Milbank Books on Health and the Public)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised House on Fire: The Fight to Eradicate Smallpox (California/Milbank Books on Health and the Public):

22 of 22 people found the following review helpful. A 6% Solution for a 100% ProblemBy BillI've read four books on

the smallpox eradication campaign, probably the greatest triumph in human history, and this is the best. The story is told from William Foege's personal perspective and the writing style flows easily. William Foege is one of the most unknown remarkable men of science. Working originally as a missionary doctor in Nigeria, he discovered and scientifically proved the surveillance and containment method of vaccination that reduced the number of people needing to be vaccinated from near 100% to 6%. As well as doing the science, then administering the strategy, he had to be an action hero, encountering many adventures in Nigeria during the Biafran Civil War and in hugely populated India. There is lots of story here, not just dry science. In the African section alone I counted thirty-three interesting anecdotes. Here are two of my favorite quotes from the book.\* One had to be an optimist with a feel for numbers to be ecstatic at the same time that Bihar had over 5,000 known smallpox outbreaks and had just reported over 11,600 new cases of smallpox in a single week.\* It wasn't science that threatened to stop us. It wasn't even nature per se. Rather, it was human nature: the human factors that involve strikes, job security, political concerns, turf. I remembered those words from graduate school: "When you tangle with culture, culture always wins." As hard as the daily work had been, this was the only time I was discouraged and uncertain about the outcome. I thought we had lost the battle. Four separate books should be written about Dr. Foege, a tireless promoter of global public health - his time in Africa, in India, as the head of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and his work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This book covers two of those times and when I finished the book I was energized and itching to go out and help save the world. 13 of 13 people found the following review helpful. A must read. By Godfrey P. Oakley, Jr. I am fortunate enough to know Bill Foege, to have worked for him at the CDC, to be mentored by his example, and to enjoy many lectures he has given. He is simply one of the great people of our time. Although I went to Nigeria for 3 months in 1969 to work on smallpox immunizations and worked at the CDC for 30 years (in birth defects), there was much about the smallpox eradication story I did not know. I found this book so exciting that it was difficult to put down. I think that all who work in public health will enjoy this book. New students in public health should be inspired by and learn from reading this story of public health action that made such an important difference for mankind. I suspect many a layman or woman will also enjoy this wonderful, readable book. I draw attention to one of Foege's important messages. If you seek to improve a human condition, it is important to know that you have an intervention that works and that you can tell whether or not the intervention has improved the outcome. It is not just enough to throw good will and money at the problem. As Foege says: "this is a cause-and-effect world, and smallpox disappeared because of a plan, conceived and implemented on purpose by people." On a lighter note, I enjoyed his saying never hire a pessimist. If you need one for a while, contract for one. 9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Smallpox Eradication by the Tallest Man in the World. By Mary Guinan. This is a wonderful account of the final phases of one of the greatest public health accomplishments of the 20th century, the eradication of smallpox. Bill Foege realized during the African campaign that the mass vaccination strategy which was successful in other countries would be unlikely to work in the remaining countries with smallpox. First in Africa and then in India he and others implemented the search (surveillance) and containment strategy based on the mode of spread of the smallpox virus. Using epidemiologic evidence they showed that this method was far superior and advocated for it to be the primary strategy for elimination in Africa and the India. It was a radical change, not embraced by many and vigorously opposed by others. The "Fight" in the title may refer to the political and scientific fight as well as to the arduous work by the multitude of people involved. The background story of how smallpox was feared from earliest history and how the countries of the world came together and planned its elimination is fascinating. The excitement and ingenuity of those involved in the elimination campaign was remarkable. The author credits the success of the program to these workers. Imagine millions of people in every country of the world working for the same goal for decades. What an accomplishment. More sobering are the conclusions and Appendix entitled "A Plan in the Event Smallpox of Bioterrorism" which should be required reading for those in the field. The author pleads for evidence-based decision making. Read the book to find out about the tallest man in the world, how General Washington's knowledge of smallpox helped win the American Revolution and how President's Lincoln's Gettysburg Address may never have been given because of his smallpox infection.

A story of courage and risk-taking, *House on Fire* tells how smallpox, a disease that killed, blinded, and scarred millions over centuries of human history, was completely eradicated in a spectacular triumph of medicine and public health. Part autobiography, part mystery, the story is told by a man who was one of the architects of a radical vaccination scheme that became a key strategy in ending the horrible disease when it was finally contained in India. In *House on Fire*, William H. Foege describes his own experiences in public health and details the remarkable program that involved people from countries around the world in pursuit of a single objective: eliminating smallpox forever. Rich with the details of everyday life, as well as a few adventures, *House on Fire* gives an intimate sense of what it is like to work on the ground in some of the world's most impoverished countries and tells what it is like to contribute to programs that really do change the world.

Dr. Foeges book . . . remind[s] us how fragile life looks.