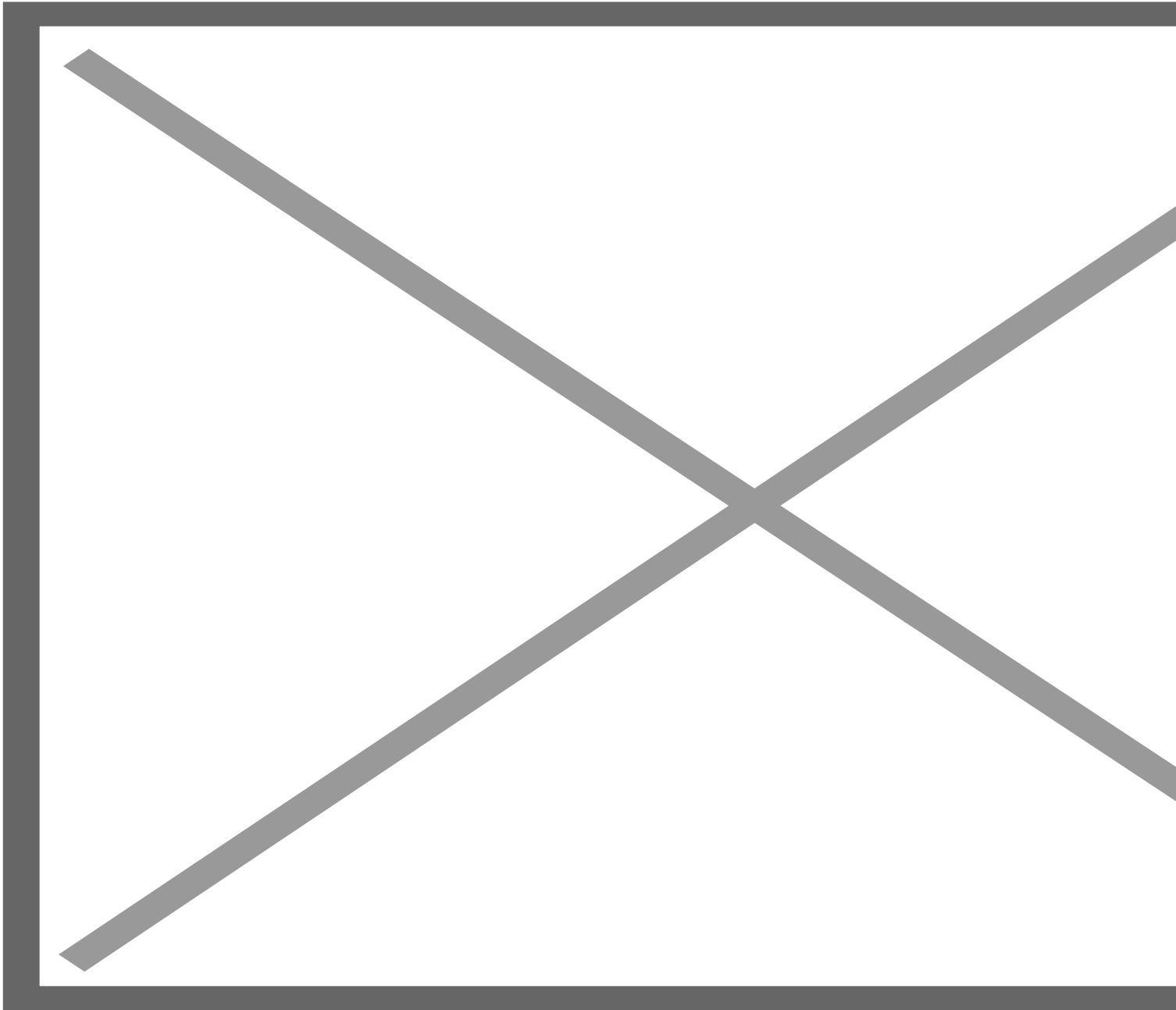


Public health's humble giant

Bill Foege, who oversaw the eradication of smallpox, was soft-spoken, self-effacing, and focused on other people's achievements more than his own.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue
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Directors of CDC Smallpox Eradication Program in 1980, from left: J. Donald Millar, William H. Foege, and J. Michael Lane (Photo courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

I met Bill Foege only once in my life. My ten-minute conversation with the epidemiologist, who died in January at age 89, is one I'll never forget.

I had just preached at the Chautauqua Institute in New York State and was exiting the service with other worshipers when Bill and his wife, Paula, walked up to introduce themselves. His imposing 6'7" frame is hard to miss. The worship program noted that I was a Lutheran pastor from Iowa, which prompted Bill to say that his father pastored a Lutheran church in the small Iowa town where he was born. I soon learned that a missionary impulse landed Bill at a Lutheran mission outpost in eastern Nigeria in 1966 to concentrate on infectious disease control. It was just 200 miles from where, some years later, I would spend 16 months working construction at another Lutheran outpost.

What I remember more than anything else about this encounter, however, was the way Bill Foege made me feel. This soft-spoken, self-effacing giant of global health behaved as if I was worth his time, as if I mattered to his day—a warm feeling that most everyone who ever worked with him seems to have experienced.

David Sencer—like Foege, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—described Foege's instinct to celebrate other people ahead of himself as remarkable "ego suppression." Writing about Foege's enormous achievements, Sencer explained that success for him was never about what he had done but always about what others had done.

Foege may have acquired this character trait as a 13-year-old when he fell in love with medical science, thanks in part to the care and encouragement of a drugstore owner in Colville, Washington, where he landed his first job. This pharmacist's personal interest in Foege's curiosity about science and life helped inspire his lifelong habit of attending closely to the needs and circumstances of others. Various epidemiologists with whom Foege worked over the years have noted his admonition to public health students to always look for the faces of affected people in the graphs and charts that plot diseases.

Foege loved science, but he'd also tell his students: "Don't worship it. There's something better than science; and that's science in the service of humanity, science in the service of equity, and science distributed with compassion." Albert Schweitzer's writings were an early influence on Foege's commitment to serve the health needs of the world's poor. In fact, many times throughout his life he reiterated his belief that the measure of a civilized society will always be revealed in how the most vulnerable within it are treated.

Foege's achievements are simply remarkable. Tom Frieden, another former CDC director, calls Foege "the Babe Ruth of public health," someone "who stands in a league of his own . . . and whose moral compass was unerring." Of all his achievements, awards, and leadership roles, the single accomplishment for which he'll be most remembered is overseeing the eradication of smallpox, a cruel disease that killed 300 million people in the 20th century alone. He saved the lives of literally hundreds of millions of people through his surveillance-and-containment strategy. While working in Africa and India in the 1960s and '70s, it became apparent to Foege that mass vaccination was unrealistic due to the population logistics and insufficient vaccine supply. So he altered course. He built a ring of containment around every new outbreak and vaccinated only those connected with the infected. By 1980, smallpox was declared eradicated from the face of the earth.

Foege understood as well as anyone the responsibility of being a good and generous citizen of the world. But what really excited him was an idea from the polio vaccine developer, Jonas Salk: "Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors." William H. Foege proved that it's possible to be an extraordinary ancestor. Rest in peace.