Pox vobiscum, or How I learned to stop fighting malaria and love killing smallpox

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Puzzle
In 1958, the USSR proposed the World Health Assembly (WHA) undertake the eradication of smallpox. The US and its allies opposed the initiative, arguing that the sunk costs of a malaria eradication program made it more pressing. A decade later, the malaria program had failed and ended, the US had entirely reversed its position, and the global campaign to end smallpox was underway.

• How do countries justify significant shifts in foreign policy positions or priority?
• How do int’l orgs decide which public goods to provide?

Potential Explanations
1. Organizational incentives in the US and/or the WHO
2. Changes in powerful member interests, incentives, politics (i.e., the “second image revisited”)
3. A change in scientific consensus

Story thus far
Historians (Manela 2014, Reinhart 2010) argued that the rise of smallpox on the US agenda was due to a “globalizing” of LBJ’s aspirations for the Great Society. LBJ’s own words seem to indicate such

But we would be shortsighted to confuse our vision to this nation’s shorelines. The blessings we count at home cannot be cultivated in isolation from the worldwide yearnings of men....

We mean to show that our dream of a great society does not stop at the water’s edge, that it is not just an American dream. All are welcome to share in it and all are invited to contribute to it. The most urgent work of our times—the most urgent work of all time—is to give that dream reality.

What other reasons exist? Why smallpox?

1. Foreign Policy: Disease eradication appealed to Cold Warriors and granola-eaters.
   • LBJ also wanted to contribute a program to the UN’s Int’l Cooperation Year (ICY) (1965).
2. Natural Science: More amenable than malaria. As with nuclear scientists, physicians could speak an agreed-upon language of medical intervention
3. Rise of Int’l governance:
   WHO could act as neutral broker/forum. A global institution turned disease into a global problem. Blocks at WHO delayed response.

What’s not yet clear is why the administration picked up the smallpox program as its flagship for ICY and how the idea wended its way from an idea among physicians and technocrats to the level of the President.

Next Steps: Parsing Explanations
• Investigate resources that WHO provided
• How would this have differed without global governance?
• How did US commitments differ for this program as versus other health prog’s?

• Examine the path by which smallpox came to presidential attention (June 1964–June 1965)
• Was domestic politics responsible? What about the epistemic scientific community?
• What international pressures (bilateral, other IGOs) came on the US to support this initiative?

Questions to you:
• What other explanations occur to you?
• What research strategy or materials would be most convincing?

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