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Remarks
For the
Smallpox Eradication Celebration
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This was an inside party. Something that would be celebrated – we thought – only once in time. As this introduction is being written in 2003, when we are constantly being bombarded about preparedness or lack thereof in reference to a smallpox attack by terrorists, one cannot be so sure that smallpox might sometime have to be eradicated all over again. An interesting little review of things that went on behind the scenes: There were those who felt that it would be nice if the only two major powers (in so far as we knew) who had any smallpox virus, both destroy everything. If there was no smallpox there was no need to have the virus around to make a vaccine. Russia was not prepared not to do that, and I was in the middle of that controversy, because I was going back and forth to Moscow re-writing the health agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States. Then, unfortunately, there were those trusting souls that said, “If we destroy our supply of smallpox virus, the Soviet Union will do the same.” In my opinion, fat chance then and fat chance now. Accordingly, I fought hard against such unilateral action.

This was an inside party in one of our own agencies, but there James Mason, Director of CDC was the Chair, thus I started in by citing the World Health Organization’s campaign probably as the most ambitious undertaking in the history of medicine. I read a letter to Halfdan T. Mahler, MD, Director-General, WHO from the President of the United States. The letter from President Reagan to Dr. Mahler is included in this address in its entirety. The President described this effort as having heroic dimensions. I repeated a little history about its beginning with the Soviet resolution in 1958 to the effect that smallpox could theoretically be eliminated. The former director of the CDC, David Sencer, shared the belief and was instrumental in making it happen.

The next historic advance was the famous jet-gun that was one of the key elements in the success of vaccination. It was given a dress rehearsal in Brazil, and the campaign began in earnest in 1966-worldwide

It is hard to believe, but in 1966 smallpox was raging through South America, Asia, and Africa. Two and a half million people reported as infected in 30 countries. A figure estimated to be about one per cent of the actual incidence. The historic part of this to me was that hundreds of

public health practitioners, white and black, Arab and Jew, Russian and American, worked side by side to rid humanity of the scourge of smallpox.

In Africa for example, it was estimated they worked with 4,000 local health workers. Certainly it would not have worked anywhere, if it had not been a grassroots campaign. For the United States, it extended our public health network internationally, permitting us to help our friends overseas, and for those who worked so hard with us, the experience helped build the public health infrastructure necessary to prevent such epidemics.

Then, too, the World Health Organization began an expanded program on immunization, which was an outgrowth of the effort to eradicate smallpox.

I noted that I was to be followed by Dr. D.A. Henderson, one of the prime movers and shakers, in this country, in the whole effort. He was to deliver the Joseph W. Mountin Lecture.

I was there in my role of Surgeon General, and I presented 309 awards to those who had participated in our side of the marvelous achievement. Just to mention a few of the outstanding people, Dr. Donald Millar, a personal friend, who led the early vaccination and jet injector studies in Brazil and then directed the WHO/CDC effort in West Africa, accepted the representative campaign ribbon on behalf of the 110 members of the Commissioned Corps, who participated in the smallpox campaign. Then Jane Cooley, who handled travel administrative details for the CDC team, accepted the representative Surgeon General's certificate of appreciation on behalf of the 199 civil servants who participated. It was a great day for public health.

A copy of President Reagan's letter to Director General Mahler, is attached.

There is no index.