

Bono

# This Generation's Moon Shot

A rock star turned activist challenges the world to wipe out poverty and disease

**I** WAS A 9-YEAR-OLD BOY IN DUBLIN WHEN A MAN FIRST walked on the moon. It wasn't just any man—it was an American. I thought I already knew something about America from Elvis, the movies and the hip gear sent home by Irish people who crossed the Atlantic. But now *American* meant something new. It meant having a sense of infinite possibility, doing the things everyone says can't be done. Even this freckle-faced Irish kid could see that America went to the moon not just because it was a scientific milestone—a career move for the human race—but because it was an adventure.

More than ever, we need to renew that sense of adventure and purpose. Never before has the West been so scrutinized. Our convictions and credibility are under attack. Who are we? What are our values? Do we have any at all?

We can't answer these questions by going back to the moon. But there is a goal out there worthy of our generation. It's earth-bound this time, but no less exhilarating. It is the defeat of humanity's oldest foe: disease.

Just a few years ago, this was Mission Impossible; today it is tantalizingly within our reach. It is no longer crazy to suggest that we can eliminate tuberculosis and malaria from the planet. It is no longer unthinkable to imagine a world without AIDS or extreme poverty. And this isn't hope talking, or faith. This is hard science pointing us toward a better, healthier world.

In the past year we learned that for the first time there's a vaccine that offers real, if partial, protection against malaria. No more death by mosquito bite is a goal that is within sight. Two new vaccines have been developed for rotavirus, the main cause of diarrheal disease. Today nearly a million people with HIV in poor countries are on lifesaving antiretroviral drugs—more than double the total just 18 months ago.

That's enough to get even a rock star out of bed in the morning.

The question now is whether politicians will prove themselves the equal of scientists. Biomedicine today is where high tech was in the 1990s—it's where the energy and excitement are. But scientists alone can't get lifesaving vaccines and treatments to the people who need them most—not without our help.

On that score, there is cause for optimism. From NGOs to

CEOs, truckers to nurses, philanthropists to pharmaceutical companies and even Presidents and Prime Ministers, people are putting their talents, time and money to work in the fight against deadly diseases. Just check out Bill Gates.

Momentum is building, but disease is still way out in front. The numbers are so big that they can numb us into indifference: 5,000 people dying every day from tuberculosis, 1 million dying every year from malaria. Behind each of these statistics is someone's daughter, someone's son, a mother, a father, a sister, a brother.

We cannot save every life. But the ones we can, we must. It is—or it ought to be—unacceptable that an accident of longitude and latitude determines whether a child lives or dies. In America and in Europe we have dealt with polio, malaria and TB with the ruthless efficiency they deserve. Beyond our own borders, we have offered excuses instead of solutions. We need to stop this two-steps-forward, one-step-back tango that we have been dancing for years and start marching. The good news is that a lot of people have their boots on.

This year millions of people gathered to persuade world leaders to invest more in fighting poverty and disease in Africa. In July they listened: the Group of Eight pledged an additional \$50 billion annually to poor countries, half of it for Africa. The G-8 also agreed to write off \$56 billion in old multilateral debt for 38 of the world's poorest countries. And they promised to get AIDS drugs not just to everyone who can afford them but to everyone who needs them—a great promise, if they keep it.

We must keep the pressure on our governments if we want them to follow through. As voters and taxpayers, we must give our leaders permission to invest just a fraction of our taxes in \$5 mosquito nets and drug treatments that cost pennies apiece. Right now in Washington, Congress is deciding whether to provide \$3.6 billion in global AIDS funding, including \$600 million for the global health fund, thanks to Democrat Dick Durbin and Republican Rick Santorum. If this money is not approved, people across Africa will have to be taken off lifesaving medications. How mad is that?

Beating AIDS and extreme, stupid poverty, this is our moon shot. This is our civil rights struggle, our anti-apartheid movement. This is what the history books will remember our generation for—or blame us for, if we fail. ■



**UPLIFT:** Bono and fan at an AIDS benefit in South Africa

MIKE HUTCHINGS—REUTERS