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**Bill Frist Interview  
Kaiser Family Foundation  
October 1, 2009**

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Good day. I am Jackie Judd. Bill Frist, former U.S. Senator and Majority Leader, heart and lung transplant surgeon, college professor, and humanitarian has written a memoir, *A Heart to Serve*. It is a story of a full life from childhood to the present. Senator Frist writes about what he describes as the vital role health diplomacy can play in U.S. foreign policy. He joins us today. Thank you so much for being here.

**BILL FRIST:** Jackie, great to be with you thank you.

**JACKIE JUDD:** The beginning of your book tells a truly harrowing tale about your first foray into international medicine into the Sudan. Tell us about that trip and what it taught you.

**BILL FRIST:** Jackie, it is the opening chapter of the book and part of it is to capture people which authors like to do, but part of it is this whole service thing, you just kind of fall into certain

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situations, and we all got to be smart enough to sort of seize them.

And it changed my life and resulted in all sorts of things in global health that wouldn't have happened otherwise, unforeseen things. But, it was going down to southern Sudan having never really been in Africa and actually in Nairobi initially, and then I started hearing about the lack of healthcare because of an 18 year civil war that had gone on in the south.

And in the book I talk about all sorts of serendipitous happen chance things that allowed me over a period of days to actually fly in, under the radar, 200 or 300 feet above the trees, a lot of fighting going on, to a region of southern Sudan called Mundri County. In Mundri there was no international relief, no aid, the villages destroyed, nothing there, a demolished church, and old hospital clinic with land mines around it, a dilapidated school house.

Villagers had deserted the place because of Antonovs dropping bombs over occasionally to frighten

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people. And then we, over a period of days, began, me as a surgeon working with another surgeon delivering care, and then a few people came and then word spread. These operations which are simple hernia operations here are life saving there.

And then the trust being built up. People started coming back, and then I tell the story, I go back every year to the same community. And the first year I went back and all the fighting of the civil war had stopped. So why? In a large part, it was because of the hope that was brought by one person, one people helping other people.

It doesn't matter what countries they're from. The trust that is engendered through making others lives more secure, not partisan, not political, not rich/poor, not racial, not ethnic, not tribal. That all of a sudden quiet, peace. The church reopened. The school house where we were operating all of sudden returned to a school.

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People started coming from all around, hundreds of miles bringing people because it's built around this health and hope for healthcare. And that's really got me started in this whole realm of using medicine, using, lifting people out of poverty as a currency for, built on trust, a currency for peace.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Be more specific about the link that you see between administering healthcare and what it could lead to.

**BILL FRIST:** Well, that's a-

**JACKIE JUDD:** It seems almost too simple, in a way.

**BILL FRIST:** You know it does and that's the beautiful thing about it that historically we spent billions of dollars in this country on international relief and on aid and most of it is not sustainable, and to be honest with you a lot of it has not worked.

I mean it makes us feel good and nice for a short period of time. What I came to realize is that regardless of politics - remember I was in the United

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States Senate, the highest levels and operated at the government levels, but at the end of the day this touching one person, another person this core of humanity does, really as Martin Luther King said, it involves us in a single garment of destiny.

And King said what affects one directly affects all indirectly. And you see it in healthcare, and you see it through taking care of people. It doesn't have to be a doctor, it can be building a clinic, it could be helping dig a well for clean water so women don't have to walk three and four hours a day and their time can be spent with their kids.

It can be the simple administration of vaccines which are life-saving. It's not that we don't know how to do stuff, but it's that we don't distribute it. So, this trust, this central intimacy that is built up, really does lead to better understanding, and I see it again and again and again. Through clean water, through delivering of vaccines in places like

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Bangladesh and Uganda, and Sudan, where you mentioned in Mozambique, you see it again and again.

And then it translates very quickly, going back to two or three years ago, Iraq and what goes on there in terms of yes, democracy is important and yes freedom's important and yes, people participating is important, but a way to reach deep into the hearts and the souls and the spirit of people is touching them and giving. One thing that I will always say is you don't go to war with somebody who has just saved the life of your child.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And, in your vision of health diplomacy is it the delivery of services and goods, or does it go beyond that to transferring skills, so that when you pull out something is still there?

**BILL FRIST:** Probably much the latter. And I think that it is key because at a global developmental aid standpoint, America is just figuring out how to give and invest in sustainable systems that empower

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people. And a good concrete example is, so I do medical mission work.

Forget the politics, forget, the doctor at Vanderbilt doing heart transplant, but every year I go do medical mission work and it might be for two weeks—even as Majority Leader, two weeks, three weeks, four weeks. People say why do you do it?

I have a foundation right now Hope Through Healing Hands and we send medical residents, doctors to Kenya. At the same time we send a doctor there and the funding that supports that doctor, we train four nurse anesthetists that are indigenous to the country that will stay there.

This linkage when I go to a donor and say invest in Hope Through Healing Hands is that yes we'll send an American physician there to teach, to teach people to fish, but in addition to that we will take the human capital that is there—there are no nurses there, there is nothing sustainable there and for every person we send for a period of six months, we will

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train these four so-called nurses, but they're nurses that when we leave are sustainable, are committed to stay there for ten years.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Are far more than what they had before in that community.

**BILL FRIST:** Is far more—oh, no and it could do—this is not rocket science, it's not heart surgery, it's not brain surgery. This stuff is easy. We're talking about clean water, sanitation; 1.2 billion people in the world don't have access to clean water. We take it for granted here. Not having access to clean water in the developing world, in the low income world, becomes the number one killer of children in that country.

So something as basic, when people say healthcare it doesn't have to do with surgery. It can be simply basic things like sanitation and clean water. Things like vaccines. Things like less than 50 cents worth of antibiotics. Things like a little bit of Vitamin A.

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This stuff costs nothing, but once you go in and get it distributed appropriately, the life, not just the lifestyle, but the life values come up, the productivity comes up, the demand for civil order comes up, policemen, ones with HIV AIDS and policemen and nurses and teachers and civil society who have been wiped out.

All of a sudden they start living, so this linkage between peace and understanding and not fighting and productivity are tied inextricably to health.

**JACKIE JUDD:** What are your frustrations when you go in on a mission? What's the hardest part?

**BILL FRIST:** On the missions the hardest part for me is that go and apply, make sure that everything you do comes back to what you said, and that it is sustainable over time. It's too easy to do what we've done historically, come in deliver medicines, deliver antibiotics, watching a child get better because they've been cut with a spear and you give antibiotics

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and it's cured and before that child would die, that's just the way it is.

To translate that sort of feedback, that powerful feedback as a physician you get to see it, you get to touch it and then make sure it's sustainable over time. To work with country ownership, community ownership—if that antibiotic they can't get. It's kind of, not crazy, but it's very limited in the impact, so what you do you work with the herbs there, you work with the local infrastructure there, you empower them and yes share in sort of public/private partnership. Share with them that infrastructure.

So the most frustrating thing to me is that there is not enough thinking like that. We need to innovate; we need to tell people what you can do to empower people. In our development aid, again jumping back because I like, I go on the ground and learn this stuff, or I'm exposed to it, and I'm kind of a vehicle to come back to Washington, D.C. where we're sitting now and talking.

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There are organizations like the Millennium Challenge Corporation. What is it? It's a brand new entity that takes your money, taxpayer money, the viewer's money and we spend, take about a billion dollars a year, and give it to the poorest 17 countries in the world.

But we do it in a way that we demand transparency, accountability, built on partnerships, public/private partnerships and built on, and I stress this probably more than anything, country ownership. They own it, they help design it, they are a part of it, they're invested in it, they put money into it, and that's where the sustainability is.

So, it's linkage this thing of taking care individuals directly to these large system development which I both love, but also is much less frustrating.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Senator, though, how do you make that sale to the American public because tax dollars are involved, how do you make that sale when there is so much economic turmoil right here at home now?

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**BILL FRIST:** And it's very important because, you know, imagine me, a physician that's pretty straight forward being in the United States Senate I had 7 million Tennesseans in a state that is in the Appalachian spine, the highest burden of disease of any state, these four or five states.

Our education, K through 12 education is the worst in America. We have Appalachian mountains in East Tennessee where the healthcare there and the health services and the burden disease is worse than Bangladesh where I spend time. Is worse than Mozambique and worse than Rwanda.

And my argument goes back a little bit to the reference I made to Martin Luther King. That in truth there is this oneness of humanity that in a moral sense is clear, where every life does matter, every life does have value. In a practical sense that same little virus of HIV AIDS which has killed 23 million people, and by the way when I started it had killed nobody in healthcare.

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When I was a doctor it had killed zero in the United States. But we watched it; I watched it kill a 1,000 people, then 5,000, then a half a million, then a million, then 5 million, then 23 million. That same little virus, or you could say the SARS virus, or you could say infections like malaria, are all over the world.

Those viruses can't be seen, they can't be touched, they can't be felt. We thought we weren't going to have emerging infectious diseases any more. Since 1992, I think the Surgeon General in 1992 said we don't have to worry about infectious disease anymore. Since that time, and he denies he ever said that by the way, but since that time so we thought we had antibiotics and some antiviral agents, but since that time there have been 12 major either pandemics or catastrophes caused by emerging diseases.

So, that's sort of the number two that people understand. So the moral, it's the right thing to do. Number two, viruses know no state borders, they know no

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boundaries and they're going to keep coming with increasing frequency. And number three it comes back to my medicine as a currency for peace.

A simple mantra is you said that I've seen it work. I've seen it work in Iraq, I've seen it, it's going to work in Iran. I've seen it work in the Congo; I've seen it work in the Sudan. We're more secure. When you lift a society out of poverty where there is nothing but lack of hope, nothing to do, no productivity. You look at your spouse or you look at your children and say their life is going to be worse than my life which is a way about a billion people in the world live.

And you can lift them out using, and I write it in the book, healthcare, basic, affects every single body, everybody. Or I would say education, especially for young girls. Very similar overall. You can lift them up. It leads to a civil order, a civil respect that leads to stability, that leads to less terrorism.

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It leads to, instead of somebody going to a terrorist camp, or following the Taliban, all of them say no, I don't need that I can actually provide for my family, give them health and give them security.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And still a hard sell when there are so many competing demands for dollars. I'm wondering, in a final question, I'm wondering if you've had these kinds of conversations yet with any members of the Obama administration.

**BILL FRIST:** Oh yes, ah yes. I kind of slipped in the Millennium Challenge Corporation, but I'm one of the board members of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Secretary Clinton is chairman of that board. I'm one of the private sector members, there are four inside, and there are five or, five inside.

Secretary of Treasury, Secretary of State, Trade Representative USID, and there are four outside board members, and so the answer is yes, and spend a lot of time. Although you're right, it's hard sell.

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If you look at where we started 15 years ago, and I was sort of going around Tennessee saying listen, I'm here to serve you, Knoxville, or person from Soddy-Daisy, the last thing they're going to say, 'go to Africa, go to Bangladesh, go put Vitamin A, go vaccinate kids in Bangladesh.'

They're not going to say that, but where we are today, and I taught at Princeton last year, I'm teaching at Vanderbilt this year, I'm traveling over the country talking about healthcare policy. I think the level of understanding of the power of touching people in an intimate way and bringing security to the world, in addition to the moral thing to do, is exploding.

And lastly, I think and part of that I think is because of the success. Our initiative on HIV AIDS funded a third by the United States of America, and that's the taxpayer, that's everybody listening here

**JACKIE JUDD:** Pepfar

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**BILL FRIST:** Pefar and the Global Fund. We're the number one contributor to we pay for 30 percent of all of the funding for HIV in the world. We have the very best science, the innovation.

Right now for those two programs are 5 million who are alive and who will be alive, 5 million people, because of the United States leadership and there is a certain degree of pride, of understanding. And there will be a lot of campaigns over the next year showing that American solutions working with partnership, country ownership is indeed working in health, in education, and lifting people out of poverty around the world.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Okay. Final word, thank you so much. I appreciate you coming in. The book is called *A Heart to Serve*. Thank you for joining us, I'm Jackie Judd.

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