

Bill Gates PBS Interview: Vaccine Equity, Climate, Epstein Meetings

Bill Gates participated in an interview with PBS. He discussed COVID-19 vaccine boosters and access, his meetings with Jeffrey Epstein, and more.



Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist.

Judy Woodruff: With world leaders visiting New York this week for the United Nations General Assembly, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist Bill Gates is calling on the world's richest nations to take what he says are urgent steps needed to end the crisis phase of this pandemic. We spoke about those steps earlier this afternoon in a wide-ranging discussion. And we should note, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is a funder of the Newshour. Bill Gates, thank you very much for joining us. In the statement you put out today you spoke about that this is a moment of opportunity, a time to look at this pandemic almost from a new perspective, and yet it's also a somber milestone. You wrote, "We are 18 months in, COVID is still on a death march," what gives you hope?

Bill Gates: Well, the vaccines are a miracle, and there's a great story about the scientists who invented those and how quickly that production's been ramped up. Now, with the volumes increasing we have a chance to be equitable. We haven't gotten much out to the poorer countries, and yet variants could come out of those countries, and they need to get their economies back on track. And so the US stepping back in, instead of quitting the WHO and not being willing to get involved. Now the US stepping up and working with other countries, increasing their donations, this is a very positive moment to remember that there are these deep inequities in health, and ending the pandemic should be top of the list for helping all countries.

Judy Woodruff: And I was struck by how you spoke about that. You said, "There has to be a common commitment to equity to understand that what happens in lower-income countries affects higher-income countries." We hear in the United States that we're sending a lot of vaccines around the world. But you're saying not enough's being done?

Bill Gates: No, the need out there is billions, and so far we've gotten tens of millions out. And now that supply is no longer the limiting factor in most rich countries. I mean, the US hasn't gotten up to the level of any other rich countries, but that's not a supply issue. So there is the opportunity for the US and others not only to solve the supply problem, but help these developing countries with the logistics of actually getting out to all their citizens. And so during 2020, Europe and Gates Foundation were having lots of conversations about this. There weren't enough vaccines, they mostly went to the rich countries. The US chose not only not to be involved, but to actually quit the WHO. Now we see a turnaround in terms of vaccine supply and the Biden administration wants to help the world, which of course will benefit the US as well.

Judy Woodruff: And you also have President Biden saying the United States can both deliver boosters to many Americans at the same time the US provides vaccines around the world. But there are public health experts who say that's just not true. You cannot do both. Who's right? How do you see this?

Bill Gates: Well, between now and the end of the year, we are still somewhat supply constrained. So the ideal would be if the rich countries made their booster strategies reasonably targeted. That is people 60, or 65 and older who have medical conditions. That would mean that the diversion in the rich countries would stay quite modest. Ideally, the rich countries, if they are going to do widespread

boosters, would wait and do those early next year where a variety of new vaccines will ramp up their production. Johnson & Johnson, Novavax. And then the booster programs won't compete with getting doses out to low-income countries.

Judy Woodruff: So you're saying it's a mistake to do it now?

Bill Gates: In a broad way. If you want to target people who have immune deficiency, or people above a certain age, the numbers aren't that gigantic. And so very targeted booster programs are going to be okay, it's disappointing where you have a few countries doing super broad booster programs because we still don't have the supply that we'd like to have. So I agree with WHO, we have to balance these needs for the next four to six months.

Judy Woodruff: And have you told President Biden that?

Bill Gates: Well, the Foundation is in contact with all the key people. Obviously there's some people who the booster is helpful to. The broad evidence for most people is actually still pretty weak. And so it was good that the FDA didn't choose to go for all people over 12.

Judy Woodruff: You talked about supply, we need to fix the supply problem, make it more transparent, there needs to be more global cooperation. A lot of people look at this and they think, "We thought that was already being done." But you're saying it's not. Can you just explain in layman's terms in a nutshell, what needs to be done?

Bill Gates: Well, during the key year, 2020, the US not only didn't get involved, they withdrew from the main health organization that the world has. They withdrew from the WHO. And then when the Congress did allocated money to buy vaccines, the Trump administration said, "No, we're going to block that money from being spent." And so this year, as the Biden administration came in they unblocked that money. They did want to make sure the US wasn't supply constrained. So you can argue, should this have been done three or four months ago? But now we see all the rich countries having gotten up to quite high levels. And so yes, it's a bit late, but the benefits are still there and incredible.

Judy Woodruff: One of the other issues you're working on right now of course is climate change. It's before the world leaders right now. Countries are being pressed to come up with commitments that they're going to cut their use of carbon energy.

And yet, I want to ask you about the current situation right here in this country. The President is trying to push legislation that would include a lot of money to address these environmental questions. But you have not just republicans, but democrats like Joe Manchin of West Virginia saying, “No, we need to cut back on efforts to move to cleaner energy.” How do you see what’s going on politically?

Bill Gates: The infrastructure bill has some really great money to advance green technologies, to fund projects. And the reconciliation bill has a lot of key tax credits to drive the demand for green technology. So if both of those pass, the US will accelerate in a very dramatic way its contribution. Not only reducing its emissions, but innovating to drive the price down. Senator Manchin has spoken about the overall price tag and the incentives in the electricity generation sector, and how he might want to see those be different. The ideal thing is even if these bills, if there’s some modest reductions, that they get passed. If we don’t get either of these bills, the US will be really absent in driving the cost of green technologies down, which in terms of creating new industries and the jobs in those industries would be a huge missed opportunity for both the US and the world.

Judy Woodruff: And are you sharing your view with members of Congress as they face some of these votes in the weeks to come?

Bill Gates: Absolutely. I’ve actually got two topics that I’ve been in lots of discussions with members of Congress on. One is funding work to avoid having another pandemic. What is the research and things we need to do there? And the President’s science advisor, Eric Lander put forward a plan that we worked with him on that’s very good there, but it needs to be funded. And then these climate issues, which now is the time to get serious about those things and tap into US innovation power.

Judy Woodruff: I also want to ask you Bill Gates about the future of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. You announced earlier this year from a private announcement that you and your wife Melinda were going to be ending your marriage. But at the same time, the Foundation announced that it was going to use this moment to restructure. What is that going to look like? How is the mission going to change? I’m asking because this is the biggest foundation in the world by far, your assets are in the tens of billions. People have a lot of interest in what the foundation does.

Bill Gates: Yeah, so the announcement relative to the Foundation is we’d be

adding some people at the governance level. I'm incredibly proud of the Foundation, the work it does on vaccines for Malaria, for reproductive health. And the overall priorities of the Foundation are not changing. We picked up 1.8 billion of grants focused on the pandemic, but that doesn't mean ... We're still finishing the Polio ratification. So we'll have some additional advisors at the board level, but the priorities we set going back all the way to 2000, that Melinda and I believe in, global health and education, that'll still be where our work is done. So the only shift in strategy has been to add the pandemic and now use our expertise to help governments fund the tools so that we don't end up with another pandemic like this one.

Judy Woodruff: So mainly the same focus. I also want to ask you about something else in the public arena. It was reported at that time that you had a number of meetings with Jeffrey Epstein, who when you met him 10 years ago he was convicted of soliciting prostitution from minors. What did you know about him when you were meeting with him, as you've said yourself, in the hopes of raising money?

Bill Gates: I had dinners with him. I regret doing that. He had relationships with people he said would give to global health, which is an interest I have. Not nearly enough philanthropy goes in that direction. Those meetings were a mistake, they didn't result in what he purported, and I cut them off. That goes back a long time ago now, so there's nothing new on that.

Judy Woodruff: It was reported that you continued to meet with him over several years and that, in other words, a number of meetings. What did you do when you found out about his background?

Bill Gates: Well, I've said, I regretted having those dinners. There's absolutely nothing new on that.

Judy Woodruff: Is there a lesson for you? For anyone else looking at this?

Bill Gates: Well, he's dead, so in general you always have to be careful. I'm very proud of what we've done in philanthropy, very proud of the work of the Foundation. That's what I get up every day and focus on.

Judy Woodruff: And so for people watching who wonder about the future of the Gates Foundation, what's your message?

Bill Gates: Well, I'm extremely lucky that with the help of Melinda and the incredible generosity of Warren Buffet, we're able to take these important causes and bring innovation to bear. We were funding mRNA vaccines when it was still viewed as something that would never work. Now that's turned into a source of some of the very best vaccines. We have great hopes to use that technology for an HIV vaccine. Our work has reduced childhood death rates quite dramatically over the last 20 years. This is my second career. We've hired great people, we've made some progress. The visibility of the inequity here isn't as high as it should be. Maybe one small benefit of the pandemic is people realize how weak these health systems are and how diseases like Malaria and Polio are still out there and incredible tragedies. So I'm very lucky to be involved in this work, it's gone way better than I expected. This will be the focus for the rest of my life.

Judy Woodruff: Bill Gates, we thank you very much for talking with us.

Bill Gates: Thank you.