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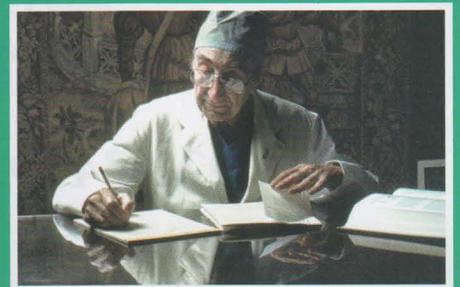
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Supersurgeon, Scholar, Soldier, Statesman

by

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Health care has been declared the most momentous domestic concern of our nation and the most pressing social issue in the campaign for the presidency of the United States. The scholarly editorial here reprinted, "The Role of Government in Healthcare: A Societal Issue" by Dr. Michael E. DeBakey, has been termed "a classic," "a masterful socioeconomic history of medicine," and "a mandatory study," not only because it was comprehensively researched, meticulously organized, cogently presented, and thoroughly documented, but also because its author's credentials are preeminent as an authority on government's role in health care.

*As a leading expert on the history of medicine and surgery, Michael DeBakey has published classical articles that elucidate the evolution of the problems in health care associated with the dramatic medical advances made through biomedical research. His editorial explains the genesis of the current crisis and traces the history of government-sponsored medicine in this country and abroad from its inception to the present, noting its assets and deficiencies and carrying the saga to its current chaotic state of disarray. In the words of the renowned philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."**

**The Life of Reason*, Vol. II, Reason in Common Sense, 1905-06.

The magnitude of Dr. DeBakey's professional activities and contributions attests to his transcendental position in health care. As the pioneer and premier practitioner of cardiovascular surgery for well over a half century, he has acquired several sobriquets, including "the greatest surgeon ever," "the Father of Cardiovascular Surgery," "an undisputed surgical genius," "a veritable Renaissance man," among other venerable appellations. At Baylor College of Medicine, he held simultaneous influential leadership roles as President and Chairman of the Department of Surgery (now named the Michael E. DeBakey Department of Surgery in his honor), as well as Director of the DeBakey Heart Center. Under his visionary stewardship and indefatigability, and in the face of formidable obstacles, he led Baylor College of Medicine from an obscure fledgling medical school to the international acme of academic medical centers, his prowess and prominence attracting students, physicians, and patients from throughout the globe. Under his magnetic influence, the entire Texas Medical Center became an international epicenter for medical education, medical research, and health care.

Michael DeBakey's military service during World War II provided further valuable experience. As a consultant in the Office of the Surgeon General and during assignments abroad, he conceived and helped implement the Mobile Auxiliary Surgical Hospitals (MASH), and later participated in the organization of the Veterans Administration Hospitals and Medical Centers and the establishment of the National Library of Medicine. After military discharge, he was actively engaged in various Councils of the National Institutes of Health, officerships in prestigious medical organizations, and testimony before Congress, capacities in which he consistently promoted excellence in medical education, research, and patient care.

As Chairman of President Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Cancer, Heart Disease and Stroke, he was involved in the launching of Medicare in 1965. With the success of medical research in discovering more sophisticated diagnostic techniques and more effective therapy, longevity has increased, and our national demographics have changed, an ever-expanding aging segment of our society placing stress on Medicare funds. Additional factors contributing to the current health care crisis include escalating costs as a result of

multiple levels of bureaucracy; rising medical litigiousness; burgeoning costs of medications; emergence of (mis)managed care with its massive administrative paperwork, intrusion in medical decision-making, tyrannical restrictions, extravagant compensation for Chief Executive Officers of health maintenance organizations (HMOs), insurance companies, and pharmaceutical firms; drastic reduction in physician, hospital, and medical school reimbursements; and the increasing number of the uninsured.

But it is his multifaceted career that distinguishes him. Dr. DeBakey's prominent roles in administration, research, teaching, patient care, and medical diplomacy have been wide-ranging and prodigious, propelling him to the forefront of health care policy as a member of various presidential commissions and governmental councils and as a frequent testifier before Congress. A leading spokesman for the medical profession and a fervent patient advocate, he has been passionate about educating the public regarding health, so that patients may become informed partners in maintaining their health and in making decisions during illness. He has long urged physicians to become actively engaged in public discourse about the health care crisis, for as daily workers on the front lines, they are far better informed than politicians or self-named press pundits or prophets, who have little first-hand knowledge of the complexities of the health-care system or of solutions for its defects. Educating our government officials and representatives about health care, as well as the public, will ensure more scientifically and economically sound decisions. In this regard, Dr. DeBakey's detailed analysis and recommendations, the product of his cumulative experiences, insights, knowledge, and wisdom, deserve careful consideration.

In addition to his considerable administrative responsibilities, he carried a daunting schedule as a medical educator and medical research innovator and a strenuous surgical schedule (more than 60,000 operations) all while serving as a consultant in health policy to successive United States Presidents and government health agencies and to heads-of-state of developed and undeveloped countries throughout the world. He has operated on potentates, princes, and paupers, devoting the same exceptional skill, knowledge, and attention to all. His experience in operating rooms of numerous foreign countries provides a

unique basis for authentic evaluation and analysis of the widely varying health care systems.

Among his numerous "firsts" is his development, as a medical student in 1932, of the roller pump, which became an essential component of the heart-lung machine that launched open-heart surgery; his early recognition, in 1939, of the association between smoking and cancer, long before the Surgeon General's Report on this subject; the development, in 1953, of Dacron artificial arteries, now used throughout the world for the repair of aneurysms; the first successful endarterectomy in 1953; the first successful coronary artery bypass in 1964; and the first successful implantation of a left ventricular assist device in 1966. In addition, he has devised many surgical instruments that bear his name, and he has notably improved numerous surgical techniques. Add to that his prolific scholarly writing and publishing of medical and lay books and articles (1600), the editorship of top-ranking medical journals, and a formidable international travel schedule as visiting professor and government consultant, and you wonder how many working hours his days must have had. One journalist wrote that "He would run many of the young and athletic members of his staff completely off their feet. ... Nobody really believed that he slept at all. He seemed like a man possessed, and the human cardiovascular system was as familiar to him as African jungle to an explorer." Observers considered Dr. DeBakey's race up and down the hospital stairs to be a graphic metaphor for perpetual "fast forward" motion. Certainly, he extracted maximum productivity from a 24-hour day.

A voracious reader from early childhood, he has devoured tomes of books and articles, not only in biomedicine and surgery, but also in ethics, literature/poetry, history, comparative religion, and philosophy. As a member of the *cognoscenti*, he has a special fondness for classical poetry, which inspired the Michael E. DeBakey Medical Student Poetry Award at Baylor. His extensive reading has imbued him with a penetrating sense and understanding of the exigencies of the human condition, which has driven his compassion, his extensive philanthropy, his relentless pursuit for excellence, and his passion to ameliorate human life. It is these traits and aspirations, instilled in him early by his exceptional parents, that underlie his editorial on health care.

Dr. DeBakey has received more than 50 honorary degrees from distinguished national

and international universities; hundreds of national and international honors and awards, including the prestigious Lasker Clinical Research Award, the most esteemed American medical research honor; the Presidential Medal of Freedom with distinction from President Lyndon Johnson, highest civilian award by a U.S. President; the National Medal of Science from President Ronald Reagan; the U.S. Army Legion of Merit; the Living Legend Award of the Library of Congress; the National Inventors Hall of Fame 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award; the United States Space Foundation Space Technology Hall of Fame; and the Dag Hammarskjöld International Prize. These have all been heartwarming byproducts of his efforts, never a goal. At the time of this writing, both Houses of Congress have approved, and President George W. Bush has signed, a bill to award Dr. DeBakey the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, the highest and most distinguished award by the U.S. Congress. Thus, he has received both of the nation's highest civilian awards.

The diversity of Dr. DeBakey's interest is also evident in the entities that his name graces: the recently renamed Lasker DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award; the Michael E. DeBakey Center for Biomedical Education and Research, the Michael E. DeBakey Visiting Professorship, the Michael E. DeBakey Excellence in Research Award at Baylor; the Methodist-DeBakey Heart Center at Houston's Methodist Hospital where Dr. DeBakey has practiced for some six decades; the Michael E. DeBakey High School for Health Professions; the Michael E. DeBakey Military Surgeon's Award of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences; the Michael E. DeBakey Heart Institutes in Kenosha, Wisconsin and Hays, Kansas; the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Houston; the Michael E. DeBakey International Surgical Society; and the Michael E. DeBakey Aviation Complex in his home town Lake Charles, Louisiana, among others.

The foregoing relates to Dr. Michael E. DeBakey's professional persona. Those who know him best, however, are in awe of the charismatic qualities of his *inner self* — his keen wit and wisdom, his indomitable spirit, his superb vision, beneficence, and his genuine human decency. Perhaps that is why he is called a "titan among men." • DT