

Honoring of Green Revolution's Norman Borlaug ignites ideological skirmishes

Today would have been Norman Borlaug's 100th birthday. It's also the day a statue is being unveiled in his honor today in the U.S. Capitol.

Borlaug is best known as "the father of the Green Revolution," which swept through agriculture in the late 1960s that massively increased food production worldwide. He was an American biologist, humanitarian, and [one of the few people](#) to have won the Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal.

He is credited with saving a billion lives from starvation through his efforts.

You might think the man a hero, but not everyone agrees on his legacy. According to [an article by Ellyn Ferguson at Roll Call](#), the Borlaug statue and accompanying ceremony are just one more salvo "as political and public relations skirmishes between biotech supporters and biotech opponents intensify."

This is in part because, late in his career, Borlaug became a proponent of biotechnology as a tool for agriculture. As such, he's become a figurehead in the ongoing battles over labeling of genetically modified foods, whether genetically modified foods should even be allowed, and what methods the world should pursue to feed its increasing population.

Scott Faber, executive director of Just Label it, told Ferguson: "Clearly, the green revolution helped reduce hunger around the globe. [However], those increased yields come at a steep price for the environment. If we are truly interested in feeding the world as Borlaug sought to do, we would not be diverting 40 percent of our food to fuel, wasting so much of our food in the field and our homes."

Debbie Barker, the international programs director for The Center For Food Safety, takes an even more negative stance on Borlaug's legacy: "The Green Revolution model [that] began primarily in India in the late '60s ... has been replicated throughout developing countries, yet hunger and malnutrition persist. In sum, the model replaces diverse crops with mono crops and requires farmers to purchase commercial seeds, known as high-yielding varieties, and requisite inputs such as pesticides and synthetic nitrogen fertilizer."

Borlaug, as Ferguson notes, was no stranger to criticism and didn't view his efforts as a panacea.

Arguments about Borlaug's legacy have been going on for years. Greg Easterbrook, in [a 1997 Atlantic piece](#), highlights the developing conflict between the "Green Movement" and the Green Revolution. Borlaug, 82 at the time, was not shy about expressing his frustration with environmental lobbies that opposed his efforts to feed the world. He told Easterbrook:

"Some of the environmental lobbyists of the Western nations are the salt of the earth, but many of them are elitists. They've never experienced the physical sensation of hunger. They do their lobbying from comfortable office suites in Washington or Brussels. If they lived just one month amid the misery of the developing world, as I have for fifty years, they'd be crying out for tractors and fertilizer and irrigation

canals and be outraged that fashionable elitists back home were trying to deny them these things.”

Borlaug’s name may now be embroiled in a culture war, but lest we let his legacy become little more than a token on the political chessboard we all — regardless of our stance on biotechnology — should know who he is and [what he did](#).

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Sources:

- “Nobel laureate, former Texas A&M professor Norman Borlaug to be honored with Capitol statue,” Ben Kamisar | Dallas Morning News
- “Unveiling of Borlaug Statue Highlights Fight Over Biotechnology,” Ellyn Ferguson | Roll Call
- “[Forgotten Benefactor of Humanity](#),” Gregg Easterbrook | Atlantic
- [Norman Borlaug](#), Wikipedia

Additional Resources:

- “Putnam: The legacy of Norman Borlaug,” Mark Putnam | Des Moines Register
- “Borlaug: GMO PR falls short: Nobel winner’s granddaughter says modern-ag backers need to do better,” Christopher Doering | Gannett Washington Bureau