

[Edit](#)

PROGRAMS EDUCATION CALENDAR RESOURCES DONATE/JOIN ABOUT

Text Size: A A

BOOKMARK [f](#) [t](#) [e](#)

**Resources****Transcript**

Audio

Video

Ethics &amp; International Affairs Journal (quarterly)

Global Ethics Corner (Weekly Multimedia)

Articles, Papers, and Reports

Carnegie Ethics Online (Monthly Column)

21st Century War and Ethics (Monthly Column)

Resource Picks

Archived Publications

RSS

[Carnegie Council Podcast](#)[Carnegie Council RSS](#)[Follow us on Twitter](#)[Follow us on Facebook](#)[Carnegie Council Channel](#)**eNewsletter Signup**

Please enter your email address to subscribe to the Carnegie Council email newsletter.

email address

SUBMIT

**Most Emailed Pages**

From Resistance to Revolution and Back Again: What Egyptian Youth Can Learn From Otpor When Its Acti

The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas

Whither the Responsibility to Protect? Humanitarian Intervention and the 2005 World Summit [Abstract

United Nations Justice: Legal and Judicial Reform in Governance Operations

The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Pursuit of a New International Politics

The September 11 Effect [Full Text]

Home &gt; Resources &gt; Transcript

## Ethics in Business: Interview with Robert S. Harrison, CEO, Clinton Global Initiative

[Advocates for Ethics in Business \(GPI Interview Series\)](#), [Global Policy Innovations \(GPI\): www.policyinnovations.org](#)  
[Robert S. Harrison](#), [Julia Taylor Kennedy](#)

August 25, 2009

[Robert S. Harrison](#)

**JULIA KENNEDY:**  
**Welcome to the Carnegie Council's Global Ethics Forum. I'm Julia Kennedy.**

**I recently sat down with Bob Harrison, chief executive officer of the Clinton Global Initiative. After a 22-year career on Wall Street that culminated in a position as partner at Goldman Sachs, Harrison retired to pursue public service. He helped manage the finances on General Wesley Clark and Senator John Kerry's presidential campaigns and, in 2005, began work for the William J. Clinton Foundation.**

**In his current role at the Clinton Global Initiative, Harrison spearheads the former president's goals to ensure that globalization acts as a positive**

**force worldwide. He tackles issues like public health and sustainability by bringing together the most forward-thinking leaders across sectors.**

**Harrison began by telling me why he chose to leave the private sector.**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** I had always thought, from the days when I was at school—mainly when I was at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in the late 1970s—that at some point in my career I would get involved in public service or nonprofit work or politics. I didn't know when that would happen, but I knew that at some point I was going to have another career beyond law or finance.

What sparked it, really, were the Democratic presidential primaries in 2003. It was a time when I was thinking about the Bush Administration and how unexcited I was about it. I had been on Wall Street about 22 years at that point. I thought that this might be a good time to move into public service.

I spoke with a number of people who had had jobs in both the public and private sectors. [Jon Corzine](#) was a senator at the time. He had been chairman of Goldman Sachs when I became a partner there. I spoke with him. I spoke with [Strobe Talbott](#). I spoke with [Bill Bradley](#) and a number of others who had left the private sector and gotten involved in the public sector. All of them had the exact same reaction, which was, "You should join one of the presidential campaigns." I think at the time there were eight candidates running, in 2003, for the Democratic nomination.

I met with half a dozen of them and ultimately decided to work with Wes Clark. I had heard great things about him. I didn't know him personally at the time, but I got to know him. I did know a number of people who were quite friendly with him through the Rhodes Scholar network, because Wes had been a Rhodes Scholar as well. Everyone thought he dripped with integrity. The more I got to know him, the more I liked him, and I decided to work for him.

**Related Resources:**

[Ethics in Business: Interview with Robert S. Harrison, CEO, Clinton Global Initiative](#) (Audio)

**Features**

[Policy Innovations Online Magazine](#)



The central address for a fairer globalization.  
[> More](#)

[Global Ethics Corner Videos](#)



Weekly 90-second videos on newsworthy ethical issues.  
[> More](#)

[Ethics & International Affairs](#)



Go to the Journal for articles on ethics and foreign policy.  
[> More](#)

**JULIA KENNEDY: I remember that was actually Bill Clinton's pick for the nomination as well. Is that how you met Bill Clinton? How did you meet the former president?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** No. I actually got involved with the Clinton Foundation completely divorced from anything that had to do with having worked on Wes Clark's campaign and then John Kerry's campaign. After the election—in other words, after George Bush won his second term—I received a call out of nowhere from a man named [Ira Magaziner](#) at the Clinton Foundation, who was heading up the HIV/AIDS initiative. He had been given my name by someone whom I do not even know, but he was referred my name as someone who was interested in getting involved in public service full-time.

He asked if I would meet with him and if I would be interested in considering heading up a small task force. There were about eight of us who would look into access to water and sanitation in the developing world as a potential new initiative for the Clinton Foundation. I told Ira that I knew absolutely nothing about water or sanitation and that, of the top 25 issues that I have ever thought about, those would have been 26 and 27, and so I was definitely the wrong person. He said, "No. In fact, you're exactly the right person. We want somebody with a business background who doesn't come with a preconceived notion of the right answer and will give unvarnished advice to President Clinton."

So I ended up spending the next six or seven months with this group of eight. We talked to everyone who would talk to us about water and sanitation. We met with many academics, think tanks, NGOs [non-governmental organizations], [UNICEF](#), the [World Bank](#). We visited sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia. We went to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Laos. We went to Kenya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Uganda. We visited rural areas. We visited cities. Then we ended up writing a report and making a presentation to President Clinton at the Clinton Foundation.

**JULIA KENNEDY: That's quite a list.**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** So my involvement with the president really began with that project, working for him, to give him advice on access to water and sanitation in the developing world.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Was it a cultural shock at all to move from the private sector to public service?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** Not so much. I think the main difference is the level of resources available, which makes life a lot easier, in the sense of having a lot of support staff, which the Clinton Foundation and other NGOs just can't afford. But aside from that, I wouldn't say there is a shock. I think the kinds of people who are attracted to the Clinton Foundation are extraordinary. It's a magnet for incredibly talented people whose hearts are in the right place and who want to spend some time dealing with some of the great issues of our time. Goldman Sachs is also a world-class organization that sees itself as more than just a money-making opportunity.

**JULIA KENNEDY: That certainly has been the buzz post-crisis, hasn't it, about Goldman Sachs as well?**

**What's it like to work with President Clinton?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** He's tireless and one of the smartest human beings I've ever met. I am constantly amazed at how he's able to maintain the schedule that he maintains, with travel and wall-to-wall meetings day after day. I don't believe he needs much sleep. He certainly can't get it, based on the schedule that I see. He is extraordinarily insightful and attentive. I remember the first time we had the presentation on water and sanitation. It was a 35-slide PowerPoint presentation. I remember, when we got to slide 33, he asked me a question about something that was in conflict with what was on a previous slide. He was absolutely right; there was a conflict between two slides.

So he has a great mind, as I said, completely tireless. I've had meetings with him very, very late into the night and then there was another meeting that he would have immediately after that meeting. I would say that he's an

extraordinary human being to work for.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Tell me a little bit about your mission here at Clinton Global Initiative and how you are trying to tackle these huge, huge problems.**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** President Clinton, for 35 years, had attended conferences and meetings around the world to think about and talk about the great global issues that the world faced. It dawned on him in 2005 that nobody ever asked him to do anything at any of these meetings. They were good opportunities to discuss with important people important issues, but nobody had ever asked him to actually take action.

So he decided to create a forum, called the Clinton Global Initiative, which would be a place where the most influential people in the world—heads of state (we've had over 100 of them in attendance), Nobel laureates (we've had 14 in attendance), chief executives of some of the largest companies in the world, heads of the most effective NGOs, philanthropists, celebrities, athletes who were committed to particular causes—to bring them all together into a room to discuss the most important issues each year in September, at the same time as the UN General Assembly.

The one distinction between this and every other conference is that he requires each member to commit to take action to address one of the great global challenges, whether it's poverty or education or climate change or global health issues. He's indifferent as to what it is that people actually commit to take action on, but he does require that people who attend the meeting make a commitment, or they don't get invited back the next year.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Give me an example of a creative action that someone has taken.**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** I can give you examples at two different ends of the spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is a company like Wal-Mart, which is the largest retailer on the planet. Three years ago, Wal-Mart made the commitment to work with its 60,000 suppliers around the world, which supply the approximately 140,000 products that go into Wal-Mart stores, to work with them over a period of years, and by the year 2013, to reduce the size of their packaging by 5 percent, on average, across the entire supply chain.

The consequence of this, when all of those suppliers have reduced the size of their packaging by 5 percent, will be a reduction in the number of diesel trucks that are needed to actually deliver the supplies to the stores. That amount is, something on the order of 200,000 diesel trucks annually will no longer be on the road in 2013, which will have a dramatic impact on the carbon footprint that Wal-Mart is implementing. In terms of savings for both Wal-Mart and the suppliers and then, presumably, passed along to customers and reflected in the shareholders' stock price, will be \$3.2 billion in savings achieved through this commitment.

So at one end of the spectrum, you have a major company that makes a major change in its business practices, which will have a very positive environmental impact and it will also have a positive economic impact on the company.

There are other types of commitments where an individual will become enthusiastic about a particular NGO that he runs into at the Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting and simply write out a check to support the work of that organization. Or an individual can create a new project.

For example, one of our members, who is a doctor here in New York, committed to find equipment from hospitals and medical conventions and from hospital supply companies, which he would put into a bag that would be shipped over to African countries for use in rural areas. So he is using his effort. He's not actually writing a check out. He's visiting medical conventions and visiting companies who will contribute these medical instruments that will be useful in Africa. He has committed to do, I think, 3,000 of those medical kits over a period of three years.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Can anyone become a member? You can think of**

**certain efforts or NGOs or groups that might turn their noses up at including someone like Wal-Mart, which carries a certain connotation in communities around the U.S.**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** President Clinton's view is that the audience should be populated with the most influential people in the world. In each sector, there are ways of identifying who they are. In terms of corporations, we typically want decision makers at corporations. So we want the chief executive or the president or the chairman of a company. We want large companies there because, like Wal-Mart, they can have a huge impact, if they choose to do something like Wal-Mart decided to do.

At foundations, we typically want the president or the executive director of the foundation, like the Rockefeller Foundation, to be the participant at that meeting. And the larger, the better, in the sense of their having more resources to be able to achieve more impactful results.

We also invite athletes—[Lance Armstrong](#)—celebrities—[Bono](#)—who are committed to particular causes and are able, through their celebrity, to actually make a big impact. [Brad Pitt](#), for example, made a commitment a couple of years ago called [Make It Right](#), which is a commitment to build 150 environmentally friendly homes in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans to repair the devastation in the hardest-hit part of New Orleans that [Katrina](#) brought.

We typically try to identify individuals who, because of either their own resources or the resources of the institution that they head, can have a huge impact on addressing the challenges that we identify as the important ones each year.

**JULIA KENNEDY: What are the important challenges that you have identified for this year?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** They remain poverty alleviation, global health, climate change, and education. But for the first time, we're looking at them in a different way, through lenses that are what we're calling "action areas," which are infrastructure, financing, human capital, and innovation.

**JULIA KENNEDY: When you step back and look at the work that you're doing, especially when it relates to involving companies and corporations in these efforts to make change, what role do you really think the private sector needs to play in addressing these global challenges?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** The private sector historically, I think, has looked at corporate social responsibility as a public-relations aspect of their identity. They have historically, I think, done things to polish their image. I think what's happening now is a genuine realization that the private sector has a huge role to play both in its own shareholder value improvement and addressing some of the great challenges that the world faces, because without the private sector doing that, it can't happen.

Many of these challenges are ones that can't be done by government alone. They can't be done by civil society alone. They require partnerships among civil society, government, and the private sector. I think there is a genuine realization that part of the DNA of the great companies of the 21st century is doing both social good and economic good.

**JULIA KENNEDY: It's interesting to think that the term "corporate social responsibility" has that word, "responsibility," in it. It's easy to kind of lump the three words together. But what is that responsibility piece?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** Partly it's to address some of the perhaps negative impacts of the company doing business in different parts of the world by replacing it with positive activity. Part of it is becoming a good corporate citizen that people, including its own employees, respect and want to work for. So part of it can be viewed as selfish, in the sense that companies would like to have reputations that attract and retain the very best people. One way of doing that is to be viewed as a good corporate citizen.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Why do you think that businesses are finally getting it? Why do you think that's happening now?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** I don't have a great answer as to whether there is a single catalyst for this now, but I do sense that, in general, people, companies, institutions are becoming more concerned about issues like climate change today than they were ten years ago. It is not limited to companies. I think institutions are changing as well, to start thinking about the environmental consequences, the social consequences of their actions. That is reflected also in the way corporations are behaving.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Are you seeing a generational shift at all? You're starting this Clinton Global Initiative university program. What do you hear differently at the university level than what you hear at these annual meetings?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** We don't hear anything differently. We hear it louder, but it's not any different. There's an extraordinary event that we have now had for two years running, called [Clinton Global Initiative University](#) (CGIU). The first one we held in Tulane two years ago. It had about 700 university students, university presidents, and heads of student organizations nationally.

The second one we did was this past year at the University of Texas in Austin. We had about twice the number of students and university presidents and heads of student organizations. We had about 360 institutions represented, all 50 states. We had about 60 foreign countries represented.

They addressed the similar global challenges that we address at the annual meeting, but perhaps the scale is a little bit different. A student might be able to make a commitment to change all of the lights in his or her dorm into environmentally friendly lighting and perhaps get the university to put bike paths in to address some of the climate-change issues that cars and buses bring. So at a smaller scale, we see similar actions to address the great global challenges.

But it is an extraordinary event. We're now looking for our venue for the third CGIU.

**JULIA KENNEDY: What does your day-to-day look like? What are you doing each day?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** Every day is completely different. It is one of the things that's very attractive and interesting about this.

It's really, to some degree, seasonal, in that as we ramp up, as we are right now, for the annual meeting that takes place the third week in September, we become increasingly focused on the program, the people who are going to participate in the program, recruiting people to do that, recruiting sponsors for the event, recruiting members for the event, increasingly dealing with the press as the press covers the event. You may or may not know that last year we attracted 975 members of the press from around the world, and so a large part of the job becomes dealing with the press.

There's also a huge production back office which ramps up from our 50 full-time people today and will ramp up over the next few months to over 500 people at the time we hold the annual meeting, the third week in September. So managing that process is what takes a lot of time during these months.

Once that's over, we then start focusing on the next event, which will be the CGI University event, in the spring of 2010. So there's sort of a rhythm to it.

Last year we held a third event, which we won't be holding this year. That was CGI International. We held an event in Asia—the first time we ever took the show on the road from New York over to a foreign country. We held it in Hong Kong. We had about 400 heads of state and chief executives of Asian companies, heads of Asian-focused NGOs, Asian philanthropists. We focused on issues that were relevant to Asia.

So there was that event that took place last year that will not take place this year. But after Secretary [Clinton](#) is no longer secretary of state, we will

resume the CGI International events, and so that will become part of the seasonal pattern.

**JULIA KENNEDY: As you're organizing these meetings and attending them, is there a certain global challenge that speaks to you personally?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** No. I try to be completely balanced and nonpartisan.

**JULIA KENNEDY: All right. You mentioned working on water and sanitation. I'm interested, coming in not knowing anything about it and then working on it, were you converted? Did you think, "Okay, infrastructure, this is the real key"?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** The six months that I spent working on the project for President Clinton on access to water and sanitation definitely opened my eyes to a world that I hadn't realized existed, at least to the degree that I did come to realize it existed. There was a new interest on my part in many of the infrastructure issues that I hadn't thought about before.

But having said that, the sessions that we have done at CGI on education and on climate change and on poverty alleviation are equally fascinating. So I can't really say that there is one that jumps out that I'm going to view as my favorite.

**JULIA KENNEDY: What does the future hold, do you think, for this concept of corporate social responsibility in general and the Clinton Global Initiative in particular?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** As I said before, I think it's becoming part of the DNA of many, many companies, and I think it's part of what attracts people to certain companies. There are companies that people want to work for because of their being good global citizens. I actually think that this will continue. I think we may see a slight decline in the level of resources that certain companies are able to put into their corporate social responsibility, given the current economic environment. But we don't see companies turning off the spigot completely. It's really just a reduction, to some degree.

So I think that the corporate world generally is going to continue to increase its role as a good set of corporate citizens, and I hope CGI is able to continue to serve as the catalyst, creating a market between companies and governments and NGOs to create commitments that move the ball forward on each of these great global challenges.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Why is it important to bring together all those different sectors?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** The largest problems that we face, which are the ones that President Clinton wants to identify and address each year, are ones that cannot be solved by any one sector individually. It really does require a combined effort.

Water is a good example. One of our members is Procter & Gamble. Procter & Gamble, about three years ago, committed to provide clean, safe drinking water to a million children in Africa over a three-year period. It has a product called [PUR](#), which is a package of chemicals that, when swirled around filthy drinking water, will turn it into completely potable water.

Procter can deliver that packet to Africa, but it needs the assistance of governments to let it in and NGOs to actually distribute it to villages and rural areas around Africa. Through CGI, Procter has connected with 27 NGOs around the world, which distribute PUR, and they are now at something like 880,000 children of the one million who are now receiving drinking water on an ongoing basis.

**JULIA KENNEDY: For you personally, what does it mean when you see something like that happen through CGI?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** All of us at CGI—President Clinton in particular, but all of us—are very proud of the fact that there is a role that we're able to play, not on the ground in Africa or in Asia or in Latin America, but inspiring action of

others to get on the ground and do some good.

**JULIA KENNEDY: We spoke a little bit about the future of CGI. What about for you? Do you think this is your home, this is where you're going to stay forever? Do you want to start your own initiative someday? What does the future hold?**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** I had absolutely no idea when I was at Goldman Sachs that I would work on a project on water and sanitation. After that, I had no idea that my next project would be childhood obesity. After that, I had no idea that my third project would be chief executive of the Clinton Global Initiative. I absolutely have no idea what my next project will be.

**JULIA KENNEDY: Good answer.**

**Bob Harrison, thanks so much for taking the time and sitting down with me today.**

**ROBERT HARRISON:** Thank you very much.

#### Related Resources:

- [Ethics in Business: Interview with Robert S. Harrison, CEO, Clinton Global Initiative](#) (Audio)

**Read More:** [Corporations](#), [Environment](#), [Business](#), [Climate Change](#), [Development](#), [Environment/Sustainable Development](#), [Globalization](#), [Global Public Health](#), [Global](#)

0

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

#### Showing 0 comments

Sort by Oldest first [Subscribe by email](#) [Subscribe by RSS](#)

#### Add New Comment

Type your comment here.

Post as ...

[blog comments powered by DISQUS](#)

Transcripts have been edited for grammar and clarity, and are posted with permission from the speakers.