

FILE NAME: Eternit (ETER)

DATE: 2003

DOC#: ETER015

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Letters to the Editor from English Newspaper

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Good Man, Good Reformer, Is Now Unfairly a Target

In regard to your article "Stephan Schmidheiny: Billionaire Swiss Activist Faces His Own Past on Environment (Dec. 9):

I met Stephan Schmidheiny 15 years ago. I didn't look him up; he knocked on my door. He had read my book "The Other Path," a challenge to Peru's Shining Path terrorist movement, and wanted to know how he could help. I was hard at work trying to bring Peru's poor into the legal system by providing them with such essential tools for development as property and other human rights. I was also trying to extricate Peru coca farmers from the world's drug wars by driving a legal wedge between them and the traffickers and terrorists.

Stephan helped me strategize solutions and organize forums to spread the word about our ideas. He funded my organization's work. He even put together the first group of European multinationals to support the Peruvian government in implementing a coca substitution program (which Peru's president did not follow up on, unfortunately). Those were tough times: the Shining Path shot at us and bombed our headquarters, killing some and maiming others. The drug cartels threatened us continually. The only businessman in the entire world who came to our aid was Stephan Schmidheiny.

Eventually, we contributed significantly to reducing coca production in Peru by more than half; unlike in other countries, our farmers did not become the army for terrorists or drug lords. All along Stephan knew that by becoming our friend he was making some deadly enemies. But he never let those risks get in the way of his original commitment to help those in peril.

I don't know much about the asbestos issue. What I do know a lot about is Stephan Schmidheiny and the compassionate man I have worked with for years is missing from your article. As your reporter confirmed, he was surely way ahead of his peers in Europe in closing down asbestos operations and developing safe substitutes wherever possible. That is the morally responsible businessman I know.

Stephan's main problem is that he is an introvert who moves in a world of extroverts. If he had allowed even a small light to be shined on his past philanthropic work—as I often urged, in vain—he would not be such an easy target today. He has done a lot of good and taken too little credit for it. It would be most unjust if the new and spontaneous global order of international accountability now under way were to punish someone who has fought for reform while rewarding those who did nothing.

Hernando de Soto
Lima, Peru

MONDAY, JANUARY 13, 2003

OPINION

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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