

9/30/06

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Tavis is the C. R. Smith Professor of Finance and the founding director of the Program on Multinational Managers and Developing Country Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. He serves as a faculty fellow of the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies and the Joan Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. With research interests in business planning models and development ethics, his work focuses on the tradeoffs between corporate wealth optimization and the corporate contribution to development. He and his wife Sparky received a Hesburgh Presidential Award in 1984. He has been honored with the University's Faculty Award in 1993 and the 1998 Reinhold Niebuhr award for work in social justice.

Before joining the Notre Dame faculty, Tavis taught finance at the University of Texas at Austin, was the research coordinator for the International Center for the Advancement of Management Education at Stanford University, a naval aviator, and an associate consultant for McKinsey and Company.