

Washington Post

Clinton's Seattle Straddle

By Robert B. Zoellick

Tuesday, December 14, 1999; Page A39

Unlike The Post and others who are grappling with the deeper meaning of the Seattle protests and the World Trade Organization debacle, I think both the message and the results are straightforward: President Clinton, trying again to be all things to all people, is responsible for a failure that has paralyzed further free trade negotiations, whether globally or regionally.

Clinton wanted us to "listen" to the demonstrators. I did. It turns out that the protesters' arguments were contradictory: They wanted both to blow up the WTO and to have the WTO establish a host of global rules to dictate social, economic, political and environmental conditions around the world. They have managed, astonishingly, to combine the aims of unilateralists--who believe the United States can order everyone else in the world to do what we want-- with those of globalists--who believe national governments are illegitimate and must be superseded by "wise" nongovernmental organizations.

Nevertheless, while the protesters' arguments were seriously flawed, their logic of action was clear: If they could overburden the process of negotiating more freedom for trade, the negotiations would break down. Then special interests would be successful in maintaining existing barriers and protections. Inefficient producers can now continue to avoid nasty competition and keep costs higher for consumers and other businesses.

The Post has suggested that "the truth [about Seattle] is more complicated" than critics contend. Apparently, it is not enough that President Clinton has been responsible for the confusion and backsliding in America's trade policy despite these times of extraordinary prosperity. It is not enough that Clinton is the first president in 50 years to fail to ensure that America leads the world trading system toward the liberalization that has created unprecedented world growth, openness, creativity and opportunity. No, according to The Post, Clinton was "right in principle . . . but probably wrong on the tactics."

Since the WTO is supposed to be about trade, it might be useful for The Post to recall what trade is about: Trade enables Americans to buy goods and services from other countries; trade liberalization seeks to remove the taxes and other barriers to this freedom of exchange. By expanding the freedom to buy and sell, trade lowers costs, expands opportunities and creates better-paid work--all adding to prosperity. Prosperity, especially for developing countries, is the key to better conditions for workers and to more resources for, and interest in, a clean environment.

Do fortunate Americans really think that parents in poorer countries prefer to have their children work instead of stay in school? Do they really think poor foreigners want to live in polluted cities? Or might these Americans recognize that the rules that wealthy nations want to impose on poorer nations will be ignored until poor countries have the means to improve their livelihoods?

The WTO is not a global government with the power to order new environmental or labor laws--or, for that matter, better tax regimes, pension plans, health programs, civilian control of militaries or a host of other meritorious outcomes. The WTO is a forum where governments can negotiate to reduce barriers to trade and agree to rules to try to resolve disputes. We cannot make the WTO into the organization that will deal with all the problems that elected, national governments struggle with every day.

Let's be honest: Once again, Clinton straddled and stumbled, and others have gotten hurt. Clinton likes to talk about free trade, because he knows open markets and competition contribute to prosperity. But Clinton also wants everyone to like him, especially if the people are his political constituencies. So he chose to host a major international negotiating meeting on trade without laying the political groundwork globally and without developing a negotiating strategy.

In a negotiation where the United States needed to work with developing countries to open markets for farmers, Clinton scared off the developing world to placate domestic interests. He even sabotaged his own negotiating team by proposing new trade sanctions at a meeting that was supposed to reduce barriers, not

add to them. When asked why, according to The Post, a White House aide said, "He was just talking off the top of his head."

The Post, seeking to be broad-minded, finds the truth to be "complicated." I think the truth is simple: After following through in 1993-94 on a free trade agenda left by his predecessor--an agenda he could not abandon without looking isolationist--Clinton, through his intellectual waffling and lack of commitment, severely set back the cause of free trade.

The writer was involved in the NAFTA and Uruguay Round trade negotiations as an undersecretary of State in the Bush administration.

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