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The president, the billionaire and the war against poverty

By James Vesely

WASHINGTON, D.C. — For a town so bitter and divided, it's strange the pleas for moral clarity came through meeting halls and dining rooms as if propelled by fans rising to do the wave.

Political veterans here say the nation's capital has not been so rancorous and small-minded in their memory. Yet, for President George W. Bush, the issue of the hour was the connection between ending poverty and achieving liberty for the world's hungriest people. Lack of compassion for the world's poor, Bush said, would "dull the conscience of the country." Bush spoke for 30 minutes to an audience that included billionaire philanthropist Ted Turner and CEOs from boardrooms across the globe. "Answer the call of our hearts," Bush said of the need to commit resources to fight HIV/AIDS, starvation and despair. Similar arguments spread across the two-day summit of the Initiative for Global Development, a Seattle-originated idea to bring CEOs to the table to form a social force against poverty. Created by five Seattle founders following Sept. 11, 2001, the initiative now has the stature to bring former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell to the podium, plus academics, bankers, statesmen — and a president.

"The Seattle Initiative," as it was once called, now has members nationally and possesses an urging to do great things. Its notion that American business has been too slow to meet the world's food and medical needs is based on the pragmatism of sound management and giving root to capitalism. "Put the business of business to supporting human capital around the world," said Sally Jewell, CEO of Seattle-based REI.

At times, the talk was so full of compassion, a harp could be heard faintly in the background, but, otherwise, bankers with the practical nature of using pencils down to their nubs spoke of providing simple things like clean water and mosquito netting to tropical Africa. A chemical company has donated 360,000 insecticide-impregnated bed nets to meet the needs of families ravaged by malarial mosquitoes. The nets cost \$5 and last up to five years.

Co-founder and summit moderator William Ruckelshaus spoke in his wry way about the challenges of a wealthy nation like ours trying to understand the utter poverty of a dollar-a-day work force. And for those not earning a dollar a day, there is existence in a cashless economy, open to the worst deprivations of climate and collapsing nations: 1.1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water; every year, 6 million children die of starvation.

In the early years of the initiative in Seattle, the breakfast meetings held at the Rainier Club seemed gauzy in their purpose, with a goal so big it swallowed whole departments of government. This week's sessions in

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Washington sought to clarify an idea into action.

In conversation over the noon hour with PBS anchor Jim Lehrer, former World Bank President James Wolfensohn gave one of the bristliest attacks on current American policies. Once again, a call for moral clarity. "What can we possibly tell our children about how we have managed our times," he said. "What will be our legacy? It is not a matter of return on investment, but how we act in the world."

Widely interpreted in the audience as criticism of the Republican administration, the Wolfensohn message echoed the theme of morning and eventide, that America has somehow lost its way.

But leave it to Ted Turner to phrase it: Turner, whose rambling answers to questions from former Irish President Mary Robinson ranged from sailing to selling CNN, spoke shortly after Bush left the rope line, where people lingered to shake his hand. "Moral leadership is hard to find these days," Turner said. "Look at the president. He was the happiest I have seen him today when he talked about opening our hearts. Then, why did he start the goddamn war?"

The most powerful articulation of what it means to be desperately poor came from Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute of Columbia University. For Sachs, the world's problems are not about trade or capitalist economies or the dilemmas of delivering aid. For him, the simplicity of changing 780 villages in Africa comes to drilling a well, growing food and building a school.

"You want to get 100-percent attendance at a school in rural Africa, offer a midday meal," he said. Grow the food locally, don't ship it in. Ship in the soil nutrients to make the land yield more. Give a cellphone to the village school so it can call out for medical help. "Remove the isolation of the village by connectivity," Sachs said, "and the village will come alive."

Aspirations come in small packages, small as a tiny filter to provide clean water. Aspirations also come from Seattle, where an idea was born that has the feel of a wave.