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Big, helpful ideas from a small town

By David Horsey

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- There's something to be said for a small town with big ideas.

Here's a big idea that a group of Seattle folks have launched onto the international stage: It's time to end extreme poverty on the planet.

And the locals with a grandiose plan are not ponytailed Marxists from some pea patch in Wallingford. They are not members of the local liberal political establishment that has made Seattle notorious as a one-party town. Instead, they are major movers and shakers with strong ties to business and the moderate wing of the Republican Party.

Thursday, here at the Willard InterContinental Hotel, their moving and shaking got the president of the United States to show up and speak at their big debut, the Initiative for Global Development 2006 National Summit. The gathering was chaired by former secretaries of state Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright, but the key organizers all came from the Seattle area.

They include the five co-founders of the Initiative for Global Development: former governor and U.S. Sen. Dan Evans; William H. Gates Sr., head of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and father of you know who; John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; William Ruckelshaus, former chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, and Weyerhaeuser heir Bill Clapp, a business executive and founder of the philanthropic organization Global Partnerships.

The IGD is largely Clapp's brainchild. After a life-altering visit to war-ravaged El Salvador, he and his wife, Paula, formed Global Partnerships in 1994 as a vehicle to make micro loans to impoverished people in Central America. With those small loans -- usually just a couple hundred dollars that are eventually paid back and recycled to other recipients -- small-time entrepreneurs have lifted themselves out of destitution. They've been able to start businesses, send their children to school, gain access to health care and begin to erase the



presumption that poverty is a permanent condition for people in their part of the world.

Clapp proved to himself that great things could be done with comparatively small amounts of money and a lean organization run on sound business principles. After the events of Sept. 11, 2001, it seemed to him even more important to change the conditions in the developing world that breed despair, resentment and violence. He began to wonder: What if the brains and bucks of U.S. businesspeople and governmental leaders all across the country could be marshaled in the anti-poverty cause?

He talked it over with friends, such as Evans, and, in January 2003, gathered 100 of Seattle's top business and civic leaders for sessions with renowned experts to contemplate remedies for the ills of the world. At the end of the day, the group agreed that relieving global poverty would ameliorate a host of the problems facing humankind.

The 100 came up with an audacious idea. They determined to do something that has been only a pipe dream for millennia: End the worst forms of poverty once and for all.

From that vision, the Initiative for Global Development was born. The selling point to corporate leaders is that fighting poverty in the developing world eventually will create new markets and

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increase global trade. The selling point to politicians is that a prime source of international conflict, civil unrest and environmental degradation will disappear if the billions of people who live with the daily plagues of starvation, ignorance and ill health can be shown a path to a better life.

Clapp and company took the show on the road to business leaders in other U.S. cities, aiming to make the IGD a national crusade. Their work has now culminated in the Washington summit.

For a full day, participants discussed ways to achieve three goals: convince U.S. business leaders of the need to address global poverty, improve collaboration between government aid programs and the private sector and enlist business to help push global poverty to the top of the public agenda.

One tangible objective is to get an extra \$20 billion annually in both governmental and private aid directed in smart, businesslike ways to the world's most needy people. At the opening reception Wednesday night, Albright said trying to convince Congress to spend more money on foreign aid has generally been a task as thankless as "selling fleas." But Powell noted that since Sept. 11, support for aid efforts has risen dramatically.

Perhaps the time is right. Eliminating global poverty is the sort of lofty goal with which few politicians, left or right, can argue, especially, as Powell said, if the sell job is coming from business leaders.

President Bush appeared eager to identify himself with this high humanitarianism. Speaking to the group Thursday morning, the president said, "I've come to assure you that the effort to eliminate global poverty is an integral part of our foreign policy."

Fighting poverty serves U.S. economic interests and security interests, Bush said. Weakened, impoverished states become havens for terrorists and young people mired in poverty are susceptible to the lure of radicalism, he said, thus "eradication of poverty must be a key strategy" for the United States.

He made a pitch for lowering trade barriers that block economic development in poorer countries -- an argument he will make at a European Union summit next week. The president also bragged about doubling the foreign assistance budget as well as attaching new requirements to that aid that demand accountability from the recipients.

"We're going to be generous in our contribution and demand results in return," Bush told the group.

Those were sentiments his audience was happy to hear.

The rest of the day was spent discussing how the IGD can take the

next huge step: turning good intentions into good works. Maria Eitel, president of the Nike Foundation, warned against getting lost in a goal too broad and grand and suggested the group "do something quite precise and then nail it."

Ambassador Randall Tobias, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, says a good plan of action would make the difference between lofty but unrealized hopes and real results. "In the end," he said, "implementation is everything."

It would be easy to mock a ballroom full of men and women in business suits who ruminate about extreme poverty while eating tiramisu under crystal chandeliers. But if U.S. business leaders can inspire dramatic, positive change out in the bleak world where so many of the world's people reside, it will be a remarkable accomplishment that could do more to promote world peace than 50 years of protest marches.

Already it seems remarkable that all this began in Seattle. Why in the Emerald City and not in New York or Washington or Houston or Chicago?

Evans said there is a dynamic, can-do spirit loose in the city -- perhaps not in the process-clogged halls of local government but certainly among local entrepreneurs. Still, Seattle is not the only town with innovative business leaders who have an international outlook inspired by heavy investment in world trade.

Los Angeles boasts plenty of smart businesspeople and a local economy tied tightly to world markets. Yet the city is so big and has so many diverse centers of power that a push to form a support group for the IGD there has stalled.

What is different is that, in many ways, Seattle is still a small town.

In Seattle, everybody who is anybody knows everybody else. Evans, Gates and Sally Jewell, CEO of REI, another IGD backer, were all regents at the University of Washington. Evans and Gates were neighbors. Clapp is the cousin of former Gov. Booth Gardner. The long list of Seattle businesspeople who came here for the summit contains few names that cannot be recognized from a hundred different civic improvement campaigns.

Of course, intimate connections between the elite can be found in any little burg. The wonderful thing is that, in Seattle, those people have a philanthropic heart and a penchant for concocting bold ideas. The Gates Foundation's drive to eradicate the worst diseases in the developing world is a prime example. The Initiative for Global Development is another.

End world poverty? In Seattle, it seems, that is not an impossible dream, it's a mere networking challenge. Connect the right people and the job will get done.