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The Opinion Pages

# Foreign Affairs; Senseless in Seattle

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN DEC. 1, 1999

Is there anything more ridiculous in the news today than the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle? I doubt it.

These anti-W.T.O. protesters -- who are a Noah's ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions and yuppies looking for their 1960's fix -- are protesting against the wrong target with the wrong tools. Here's why:

What unites the anti-W.T.O. crowd is their realization that we now live in a world without walls. The cold-war system we just emerged from was built around division and walls; the globalization system that we are now in is built around integration and webs. In this new system, jobs, cultures, environmental problems and labor standards can much more easily flow back and forth.

The ridiculous thing about the protesters is that they find fault with this, and blame the W.T.O. The W.T.O. is not the cause of this world without walls, it's the effect. The more countries trade with one another, the more they need an institution to set the basic rules of trade, and that is all the W.T.O. does. "Rules are a substitute for walls -- when you don't have walls you need more rules," notes the Council on Foreign Relations expert Michael Mandelbaum.

Because some countries try to use their own rules to erect new walls against trade, the W.T.O. adjudicates such cases. For instance, there was the famous "Flipper vs. GATTzilla" dispute. (The W.T.O. used to be known as GATT.) America has rules against catching tuna in nets that might also snare dolphins; other countries don't, and those other countries took the U.S. before a GATT tribunal and charged that our insistence on Flipper-free tuna was a trade barrier. The anti-W.T.O. protesters extrapolate from such narrow cases that the W.T.O. is going to become a Big Brother and tell us how to live generally. Nonsense.

What's crazy is that the protesters want the W.T.O. to become precisely what they accuse it of already being -- a global government. They want it to set more rules -- their rules, which would impose our labor and environmental standards on everyone else. I'm for such higher standards, and over time the W.T.O. may be a vehicle to enforce them, but it's not the main vehicle to achieve them. And they are certainly not going to be achieved by putting up new trade walls.

Every country and company that has improved its labor, legal and environmental standards has done so because of more global trade, more integration, more Internet -- not less. These are the best tools we have for improving global governance.

Who is one of the top environmental advisers to DuPont today? Paul Gilding, the former head of Greenpeace! How could that be? A DuPont official told me that in the old days, if DuPont wanted to put a chemical factory in a city, it knew it just had to persuade the local neighbors. "Now we have six billion neighbors," said the DuPont official -- meaning that DuPont knows that in a world without walls if it wants to put up a chemical plant in a country, every environmentalist is watching. And if that factory makes even a tiny spill those environmentalists will put it on the World Wide Web and soil DuPont's name from one end of the earth to the other.

I recently visited a Victoria's Secret garment factory in Sri Lanka that, in terms of conditions, I would let my own daughters work in. Why does it have such a high standard? Because anti-sweatshop activists have started to mobilize enough consumers to impress Victoria's Secret that if it doesn't get its shop standards up, consumers won't buy its goods. Sri Lanka is about to pass new copyright laws, which

Sri Lankan software writers have been seeking for years to protect their own innovations. Why the new law now? Because Microsoft told Sri Lanka it wouldn't sell its products in a country with such weak intellectual property laws.

Hey, I want to save Flipper too. It's a question of how. If the protesters in Seattle stopped yapping, they would realize that they have been duped by knaves like Pat Buchanan -- duped into thinking that power lies with the W.T.O. It doesn't. There's never going to be a global government to impose the rules the protesters want. But there can be better global governance -- on the environment, intellectual property and labor. You achieve that not by adopting 1960's tactics in a Web-based world -- not by blocking trade, choking globalization or getting the W.T.O. to put up more walls. That's a fool's errand.

You make a difference today by using globalization -- by mobilizing the power of trade, the power of the Internet and the power of consumers to persuade, or embarrass, global corporations and nations to upgrade their standards. You change the world when you get the big players to do the right things for the wrong reasons. But that takes hard work -- coalition-building with companies and consumers, and follow-up. It's not as much fun as a circus in Seattle.

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