



The Education of Paul Wolfowitz

Here in the West, poverty means a bad life. But poverty in the Third World means death.

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March 28 issue - Paul Wolfowitz's appointment might be a very good thing for the World Bank, but for a reason exactly the opposite to the one his supporters believe. The deputy Defense Secretary's champions are certain that he will take over the bank and give it a thorough overhaul. In fact, it might be the bank that will change Mr. Wolfowitz. At least that's the hope.

It is often said in Washington these days that conservatives are full of fresh ideas while liberals defend old orthodoxies. At least in the realm of fighting poverty, the opposite is true. On those few occasions when they think about the subject, conservatives recite a stale catechism of clichés based on virtually no research or experience. You've heard them often: foreign aid is a waste, all of it ends up in Swiss banks; poor countries should just free up their markets and they will grow; Africans don't want to work, etc.

If Wolfowitz is inclined toward these mantras, he should read Jeffrey Sachs's compelling new book, "The End of Poverty." Sachs, a distinguished economist who has spent the last three decades working with governments around the world, explains that none of these conventional wisdoms gets it right. Much foreign aid has been very well spent and led to landmark results.

In 1967, 10 to 15 million people around the globe were struck annually by smallpox. That year, the World Health Organization set up its smallpox-eradication unit. In 13 years it was able to declare the world free of the disease. In 1988, 350,000 people were afflicted by polio when the WHO set up a similar eradication unit. Since then it has spent \$3 billion and received the help of 20 million volunteers from around the world. The result: in 2003 there were only 784 reported cases of polio.

The so-called green revolution, which has made it possible for countries like India and Mexico to feed their people, indeed to become food exporters, is almost entirely a product of foreign aid, provided largely by Western foundations and international organizations. In 1960, India produced 11 million metric tons of wheat. By 1970, it was growing 24 million tons. The reason? New high-yield varieties of staple crops developed by Western donors.

Even economic freedom and property rights, which are the crucial ingredients for growth, are not silver bullets. After all, China has been the fastest-growing economy over the last 30 years, and yet ranks low in measures of economic freedom (such as the Heritage Foundation's index) and has had extremely murky property rights until very recently.

Similarly, political freedom does not always mean growth. An editorial in The Wall Street Journal last week, perfectly expressing the conventional conservative wisdom, declared that Wolfowitz would be ideal for the bank presidency because he understood that "it is the world's dictators who are the chief causes of world poverty." Let's go to the facts. Over the last half century, 90 percent of the reduction in world poverty has taken place in East Asia, rescuing 700 million people from extreme hardship. Almost all of it took place under authoritarian regimes—China, Taiwan, South Korea and Indonesia, among others. (All but China have democratized more recently.)

The point is that there is no single, simple answer to fighting poverty. Jeffrey Sachs began his career as the advocate of "shock therapy," telling countries to move quickly to the market and they would grow. He has come to a more complex view, not because he has lost faith in the market but

because he believes that it can't do everything.

In the West, it is easy to lose sight of the urgency of tackling this problem. Here poverty means a bad life. But poverty in the Third World means death. For the 1 billion people who live on less than \$1 a day, one bad cold, one unlucky fall, one month of poor rainfall, and they or their children—or both—will likely die. For people who live in these circumstances, moving out from under them is their all-consuming struggle, dwarfing everything else. It would be the same for any of us.

Wolfowitz has been criticized for many failings by the bank's staff, European governments and academic experts: lack of expertise, a fondness for American unilateralism, an overly ideological world view. But he has one unusual qualification that could make up for all this. He's a conservative Republican, an icon of the right wing of his party. If he gets this job, he will likely immerse himself in the issues and recognize their urgency and complexities. Inevitably, he will become a voice in the battle against global poverty. And he would be the first powerful voice on the issue from the American right, which is to say from America's ruling class.

Every morning, Sachs points out, newspapers could report, "20,000 people died yesterday of extreme poverty." That would include 8,000 children who died of malaria, and 5,000 adults who died of tuberculosis. Many of these deaths could be prevented. This, the battle against extreme poverty, should be the transcendent struggle of our times. And about it the American right is largely silent. Paul Wolfowitz could change that.

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