

EDITORIAL— The Lost U.N. Summit Meeting

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A once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform and revive the United Nations has been squandered even before the opening gavel comes down this morning for the largest assemblage of world leaders ever brought together in a single location. The responsibility for this failure is widely shared. But the United States, as the host nation and the U.N.'s most indispensable and influential member, bears a disproportionate share.

There are several casualties of this failure of leadership, including the need to reform the United Nations and to strengthen its role as a monitor of human rights. But the most tragic loss is a genuine opportunity to help the one billion people around the world who each live on less than \$1 a day.

Last month, President Bush used a recess appointment to send his notoriously undiplomatic, and Congressionally unacceptable, choice for ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, to New York. He contended that contrary to all appearances and to common sense, Mr. Bolton was just the man to achieve the reforms the United Nations needed. Almost immediately, Mr. Bolton began proving Mr. Bush wrong by insisting on a very long list of unilateral demands. The predictable effect was to transform what had been a painful and difficult search for workable diplomatic compromises into a competitive exercise in political posturing.

With Washington jealously protecting the prerogatives of the Security Council, where it holds a veto, others chose to be equally jealous in protecting the prerogatives of the General Assembly, where the influence of poorer and weaker countries is greatest. And when Washington challenged the right of the secretary general to set specific development goals, others then contested his right to set standards for management or human rights. And so on.

That extinguished the idea that international security issues and international development issues are vitally linked, and can be most effectively tackled in tandem. By the time Washington retreated to a more realistic position, it was too late to retrieve much of the bold original agenda, as set out in earlier United Nations summit meetings on development, in the thoughtful recommendations of several high-level panels and in the constructive proposals of Secretary General Kofi Annan. The failure is even more poignant because the United States is clearly on the right side of some important arguments.

Washington, for example, strongly supported the idea of replacing the discredited United Nations Commission on Human Rights, on which nations like Sudan, Libya and Cuba regularly sit, with a new, reformed body that would exclude such notorious rights violators. The final document dilutes this crucial provision to the point of meaninglessness.

On this and other issues, the document offers little more than a fudge of feel-good phrases and pious wishes for future action that leave everyone off the hook from taking

entirely practical actions that are needed right now.

This week's summit meeting should have strengthened international commitments to reach broadly accepted development benchmarks over the next decade that could avert tens of thousands of needless deaths from extreme poverty. It should have given the secretary general the power to bypass patronage and rely on merit in choosing and retaining senior officials, creating a crucial institutional safeguard against a replay of the oil-for-food fiasco. It should have reinforced vital international commitments and understandings on nuclear nonproliferation, including those that Mr. Bolton, in his previous job, did so much to undercut.

Although the ceremonial speeches by national leaders are just beginning, the serious negotiations over this summit meeting's outcome are now over. Every one of the more than 170 national leaders attending, starting with President Bush, should be embarrassed about letting this rare opportunity slip away.

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