Poverty Somewhere Is Poverty Everywhere

by
James D. Wolfensohn
President
The World Bank Group
New York City, New York, December 5, 2001

Mr. President, Arthur [Ross, Trustee] let me thank you very much indeed for that very generous introduction and let me thank the committee for their generosity in recognizing me for this medal.

You suggested the theme for the evening was reaffirming America and to me that has a very particular meaning, because for someone who has come to live in this country by choice and who has citizenship in this country, I understand well what it stands for in terms of democracy and opportunity. Like many of you, I have cherished very much the position of this country as the leader of the richest countries in the world and as the leader in terms of values and in terms of its economic and political thoughts. But on September 11th, what we here today have known to be true, with its abundance, is that the United States is decidedly living in the privileged world of the 20% of the people who have 80% of the income in the world, but that we are also a fairly big part of the planet of the global society. On September 11th, this global society saw whatever wall there was between the developed and the developing countries come down, and Afghanistan came to Wall Street. We were confronted with the truth that there is poverty somewhere, envy somewhere, political thought somewhere, the violence somewhere, the crime somewhere. The truth is that poverty somewhere is poverty everywhere and that we cannot, as we think about America, think about it as an insulated country but as a leader in the world. We must surely recognize that for the United States and for our America to flourish we have to have a different perspective on the world in which we live a perspective which allows us to be strong enough to recognize that there are other languages than the ones we have. The world of Islam, the world of China, the world of Africa, the world of Central Asia are all parts of our world that we have to know and understand. We will also have to understand that if we take no interest in those places we will be misunderstood at best and at worst despised. We have to recognize for ourselves and for our children that a reaffirmation of America is a reaffirmation on a global level. While many of us in this room might get away with thinking that those walls exist, our children and our grandchildren surely will not.

So for me, the reaffirmation of American is a call to a different America. An America that understands its position, not just for the geographic confines, but within a world which needs outstanding leadership, sensitivity and generosity for a new America. So for me September 11th is a call to reaffirm a different way: An America that will be stronger because it reaches out, an America that will be stronger because it learns to understand essentially to be respectful of views of
others and an America which brings to the world a generosity of spirit and a sense of equity for the world's poor.

I thank you very much.