

Clinton carves out global role

By DeWayne Wickham

NEW YORK — It had the look of a revival meeting. At the closing session of his Global Initiative conference last week, Bill Clinton stood atop a circular stage surrounded by rows of his faithful — people who had come from around the world to pay homage to his notion of the global village. The former president walked about the stage for more than an hour speaking without the aid of notes about the things that should be done to wipe out poverty, end religious conflicts, control climate change and encourage good governance.

It was a mesmerizing performance, one in which Clinton quoted Scripture and called the financial backers of his plan to the stage in much the same way that black preachers usher tithers before their congregations. In all, Clinton raised nearly \$1.3 billion.

Nearly five years after leaving office, and nearly seven years after the U.S. House impeached him for lying about violating his marital vows, Clinton has become a moral force on the world stage.



Reuters

Clinton: Aid conference

“Why are we obligated to help other people?” Clinton asked. “Yes, it’s in our interest, but it’s also morally right,” he said in answer to his question. “It’s the right thing to do.”

I know such a characterization will cause many Clinton bashers to wail inconsolably, but those who do are probably motivated more by their lack of faith in human redemption than

by religious conviction.

“He’s showing that you don’t need formal authority. You can have moral authority and be a player — not positional authority, but moral authority,” said Rodney Slater, who served as secretary of Transportation during Clinton’s presidency. And what about Clinton’s adulterous relationship with Monica Lewinsky, a personal failing that he long ago admitted? “In many ways, it’s a personal crisis like that which drives you to a position of moral authority,” Slater said.

World crusade, shadow government

In fact, Clinton seems to have found a new calling. His work for a better planet is part crusade, part shadow world government. His call for a global initiative — a partnership among politicians, religious leaders, entrepreneurs and activists — to do what the world’s nations haven’t been able to achieve drew an eclectic mix of people to his inaugural global conference.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams were there. So were actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Barbra Streisand; Democrat John Glenn and United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Also Republicans Paul Wolfowitz and Condoleezza Rice; the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Jordanian King Abdullah.

Clinton’s initiative also holds a lot of promise. Getting people to talk across politics, geography and ideology about the problems that plague our world is an impressive undertaking. Getting them to agree to work together, beyond the existing structures of international relations, holds out much hope for the future.

Scant coverage by U.S. journalists

Unfortunately, the gathering was more heavily covered by foreign journalists than the U.S. news media. That’s too bad. The work Clinton pledged to battle the spread of AIDS in Africa, religious conflicts in the Middle East and changing weather patterns brought on by global warming deserves the attention of Americans.

“I’ve reached an age now where it doesn’t matter whatever happens to me. I just don’t want anyone to die before their time,” Clinton said. “I’ve asked you here because I think all of us have an unprecedented power to solve problems, save lives and help people see the future.”

Of course, Clinton isn’t the first former president to carve out a special place for himself. Jimmy Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for his efforts to end conflicts and promote democracy. But he was largely a single actor. Clinton is creating a movement.

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” Clinton said of his determination to solve some of the problems his global initiative is taking on. It was the kind of use of biblical Scripture that would make any evangelist proud.

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