

THE BATTLE IN SEATTLE: THE THIRD WTO MINISTERIAL MEETINGS

CASE INTRODUCTION¹

No matter where one stands on the meaning of the term globalization, the world has indeed become smaller in the sense that international interactions are more frequent, have greater importance for economic prosperity, and link local communities to the broader international environment in ways that previous generations could only begin to imagine. While electronic media and telecommunications have dramatically increased, face-to-face meetings remain an indispensable element in international negotiations. In the fields of trade, economic relations, and business, international meetings remain an essential element in “sealing the deal.”

For international organizations, major meetings become focusing events, providing a goal date by which certain milestones, commitments or accomplishments can be fulfilled. Successful international meetings have become one of the key features of globalization in recent years and a significant aspect of what John Meyer and others call the “world system.”² Thus the Seattle WTO case is an interesting and important case in understanding the changing dynamics of international negotiations in an increasingly interdependent world. The events in Seattle can be seen as an important milestone in the evolution of international meetings. High level negotiations behind closed doors used to make news after the results were announced in a joint communiqué. With the WTO meetings in Seattle, international meetings have become a focal point for protest and direct action for a wide range of grassroots organizations to express dissent. This means that meeting planners need to plan for not only the meetings themselves, but also the direct action in the streets that are likely to take place.

Host cities hope to gain greater international recognition, attract new investors and businesses, and generate short-term income for the local economy. Recent scandals surrounding bids to host the Olympics are just one indicator of the often fierce competition among metropolises around the world to win the right to host a major international event. But important lessons should also be drawn from the 1999 World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. What went wrong, how local officials and community leaders failed not only to anticipate but also to respond to the protests and violence can offer important lessons for other communities seeking to capitalize on the growing demand for international congresses and conferences.

From the perspective of the organization holding the meeting, such as the WTO in this case, the meeting is intended to move ahead with the organization’s agenda. As the

¹Funding for the research and production of this case has been generously provided the International Commercial Diplomacy Project, Inc. (<http://www.commericaldiplomacy.org>). The author wishes to thank Geza Feketekuty, Laura Strohm, John Boerer, and Vicki Golich for their assistance in developing this teaching case.

² John W. Meyer and Michael T. Hannan, eds., *National Development and the World System: Educational, Economic, and Political Change, 1950-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); and Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Third WTO Ministerial demonstrated, a contentious and crowded agenda is all the more easily derailed when protesters manage to cut short the meeting time and contribute a general atmosphere of tension in the streets outside the meeting venue. The sea change in international conference milieu that has occurred since Seattle means that international organizations will have to pay even greater attention to laying the groundwork for agreement before the actual meetings occur.

A failed meeting can have lasting consequences for the organization's agenda. The "Battle in Seattle" immediately focused national and international attention on the WTO. The attentive public now knows *that* the WTO exists. TV coverage showing protesters in armed combat with police are now strongly associated with the organization itself, even if the protests did not accurately reflect the content or intent of the WTO Ministerial Meeting.

In the aftermath of the violence in their city, the local community and the Seattle City Council demanded answers to the critical questions of how this came to pass and who should be held responsible. The costs to Seattle and the region -- both financial and political -- were considerable. As a consequence, several different investigations were conducted and the resulting reports provide a rich source of documentation concerning what happened, when, and who was involved.

The extensive documentation of the Seattle WTO meetings offers students and policy practitioners a rich basis for examining what happened and why. This set of case materials is specifically designed to help draw appropriate lessons from the Seattle WTO. Along with the three-part case study for use in classroom and training settings, we provide an extensive list of references and other sources (Internet, video, books and articles, news media, etc.) so that the teacher can tailor the use of this case for a variety of purposes.

THE WTO

In 1995, the World Trade Organization became the institutional successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) has emerged as the leading forum for negotiating liberalization of the world trading system. The Ministerial Conference which meets at least once every two years is the highest level decision-making body in the WTO and it met for the first time in Singapore in 1996. The first ministerial meeting since the GATT became the WTO was widely considered a success. The government of Singapore receive kudos from several delegations on its smooth handling of all organizational aspects of the meetings.

Not until second Ministerial Conference in Geneva in 1998, did protesters focus on the WTO to voice concerns about the impact of globalization and the unimpeded pursuit of free trade. While there was relatively little international news coverage of the protests in Geneva, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that "thousands of protesters, ranging from farmers to Zapatistas and loosely gathered under the banner of People's Action against the WTO summit, set cars on fire, attacked fast-food restaurants and

sprayed graffiti on bank windows.”³ Their concerns included environmental degradation, human rights, cultural imperialism, the exploitation of workers and the protection of labor rights, to name just a few. But other events of the day -- the imminent nuclear test by Pakistan, Suharto’s crumbling rule in Indonesia -- overshadowed the WTO meetings in the world press.

The Seattle WTO Ministerial meetings were a double failure. Seattle leaders had hoped that the meetings would serve to enhance the region’s reputation as an international crossroads. Instead they were left with a hefty bill and damaged credibility. For the WTO, the meetings did not advance the agenda to strengthen the global trading system and launch a new round of trade liberalization. According to one observer,

For the first time in 57 years of trade liberalisation talks, a ministerial meeting ended without an approved statement by the ministers. A former secretary-general of the Commonwealth called the Seattle meeting the worst organised international conference he had attended in 40 years of public life.⁴

What went wrong? Could the situation that erupted in Seattle have been anticipated? What could and should future meeting planners learn from the Seattle experience? For the U.S. government, what lessons can be learned about the appropriate role of the federal government in helping to organize, finance, and carry out such meetings? For the WTO, what aspects of the conventional meeting support that had served GATT (and subsequently the WTO first and second ministerial meetings) so well in the past were inadequate in Seattle? How much and what kind of support does the WTO provide to host cities? Is this adequate?

ORGANIZATION OF THE CASE

This case has three segments, with two decision nodes for student analysis and recommendations. The first part will address the planning and preparation for the WTO meetings. At the end of the first segment, students will be asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the planning process. What elements have been well-considered? Which aspects required greater attention or a different approach?

The second segment then addresses the period of crisis management during the week of the WTO meetings. This segment allows students to analyze politics of decision-making during a crisis situation where time is of the essence and multiple levels of authority are involved. Students will be asked to devise a plan for dealing with the situation as of midmorning on Tuesday, November 30.

³ Bhushan Bahree, “As WTO Marks 50th Birthday, Event Attracts Opponents to Globalization,” *Wall Street Journal* (May 18, 1998), p. B7A.

⁴ Ravi Kanth, “Why Seattle Talks Failed,” *Business Times (Singapore)* (December 16, 1999), p. 3.

The third segment will present what city officials actually did during the crisis as well as the political fallout from those decisions. This will give students the chance to discuss and debate the alternative approaches that police and city officials might have taken and what the likely consequences of those alternatives would have been. They will also be presented with the actual fallout for analysis and discussion.

Since much of the documentation for this case is available on-line, the teacher's guide includes many electronic sources that can be used to supplement the case materials.

Part 1: Planning and Preparation

This part of the case will include a brief general presentation of how Seattle was selected to host the WTO ministerial meetings. In addition, the goals, interests, and expected costs and benefits to each of the key actors will be presented. The focus will then be on how city officials and others organized the planning process, who was involved, what issues were raised, where they focused their efforts, how much autonomy various key actors (e.g., the assistant police chief in charge, the mayor, etc.) had with respect to key decisions in the planning process.

In particular, this section will require students to assess the planning process and make recommendations about:

- *how* the process unfolded;
- how well key participants sought out and processed relevant information in the planning process;
- the extent to which key planners prepared for various contingencies; and
- the envisioned organization of key members of the event coordination team, including how communications and decisions would be handled both for routine as well as extraordinary developments.

For the first part of the case (discussion and memo), students will be analyzing the effectiveness and appropriateness of what Seattle hosts had in place by September 10. Among the questions they should consider are the following:

- Were these plans workable, as far as could be reasonably foreseen?
- Were there important pieces of information that were either not collected or not adequately taken into consideration?
- What might planners have done differently in anticipation of the potential widespread protest actions outside the convention center?
- Was U.S. federal government support adequate? What is the appropriate role of the federal government in planning, organizing, implementing, and funding international meetings, especially of international intergovernmental bodies such as the WTO?
- What is the appropriate role of the WTO secretariat in the planning and implementation process?

- What questions should cities ask -- of the organization (i.e., in this case the WTO)? of their national government? of other levels of government (here, the State of Washington)? of adjacent communities?
- Should there be Memoranda of Understanding between various entities involved in hosting an international meeting? If so, which ones and with what purpose?

Part 2: Putting the Plan into Action & Crisis Management

Much of the post-hoc criticism of the period immediately preceding and during the actual WTO meetings has focused on the failure of public officials (both law enforcement authorities and political leadership) to recognize and respond appropriately to various signals that trouble was brewing and that the protest actions might indeed overwhelm the resources allocated for crowd control, access to and from the convention center, and delegate security. Furthermore, others suggest, the planning process itself may have contributed to a sense of complacency about warning signs that the protest might become a major disruption. Students may consider not only how failures in the planning process contributed to the chaos, but also how the protests exacerbated the difficulties faced by negotiators inside the conference venue.

This second part of the case can be assessed from several different perspectives. Students asked to advise Mayor Schell in assessing the situation as the opening session of the Third Ministerial is about to be cancelled should consider the following questions.

- Should he also cancel the permit granted to the U.S. labor movement to hold a major march through the downtown area?
- What are his alternatives?
- What are the political costs associated with each of these alternatives?

Students asked to advise Charlene Barshefsky, USTR and chair of the Third Ministerial should respond to the following questions.

- What factors does she need to take into account?
- What are her alternatives and concerns in the face of this disruption of the meetings?
- What are the likely consequences of these alternatives?
- How can the U.S. achieve its trade policy aims given the circumstances?

Students should also reflect on the implications of the situation at that moment for the WTO itself and the broader agenda of furthering a rule-based international trade system.

- What might be done at this point to rescue the Seattle Ministerial negotiations?
- Is there a plausible approach that might allow for the adoption of a joint declaration? What would this require? Suggest a draft statement that might have a chance of adoption.

Part 3: Aftermath & Consequences

In the wake of the WTO meetings, the mayor's political influence and leadership position was adversely affected. The mayor and police chief bore the brunt of the criticism for the crisis. Schell, previously known as the "idea-a-minute" mayor, lost considerable political clout for having presided over the fiasco. Chief of Police Norm Stamper announced his early retirement, and an interim chief was appointed while a large-scale, participatory process to select a successor was launched. The central theme of public debate since the meetings has been on "accountability." New concerns that arise are now funnelled through the "what have we learned" and "how does *this* incident demonstrate a continuation practices that remain unchecked even after the WTO debacle. The epilogue to this case study provides the basis of a discussion and assessment of the consequences of these events both for Seattle and for the WTO.

At the end of the third segment, students should reflect on the lessons that should be learned by cities hosting international meetings where globalization issues are on the agenda based on the Seattle experience. How might the WTO and other international organization and intergovernmental meeting planning groups do a better job of managing the logistics of high profile meetings? What aspects of the Seattle Ministerial would have created difficulties even if there had been no protest and how might these have been better addressed?