African Prophet or American Poodle?

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Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War by Stanley Meisler

The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power by James Traub
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percent and asked that the UN General Assembly set a solid majority and had US, Russia, France and Britain sit as veto-wielding permanent members, and in which Africa and South America remain the only major regions in the world without a permanent seat. Kofi Annan was seen by many in the global South to have sought to use the reform effort in 2005 to repair his damaged relationship with the US, Washington, and there is ample evidence provided in these two books that the reform process and Annan’s 2005 L’Affaire Goran Eklund (drafted largely by two Americans, Bob Orr and Stephen Stedman) were crafted explicitly to gain Washington’s support. Some of Annan’s senior aides complained that, as important as the US was, one could not focus disproportionately on one country to the detriment of the interests of the other 191 states.

During the 2005 reform process, there were disappointments for the global South’s ‘development agenda’, with the acerbic US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton (the only one of America’s permanent representatives with whom Annan had a difficult relationship) seeking to reverse despite Annan’s efforts to tailor the reforms in ways that wide Europe and America (of which there are about 878 seats) were decisive of the US’s earlier commitments on aid and the Millennium Development Goals. The developed Western states also failed to gain support for some of their preferences on terrorism, human rights and non-proliferation. The three issues on which agreement was reached – establishing a Peacebuilding Commission, creating a Human Rights Council and promoting the ‘responsibility to protect’ – have proved to be disappointing so far. The Peacebuilding Commission has failed to mobilise the resources and political support to promote effective peacebuilding in post-conflict societies, amidst bureaucratic turf battles among the UN’s confounding fiefdoms; the Human Rights Council remains as partisan and politicised as its predecessor, the Human Rights Commission; while the enunciation of the ‘responsibility to protect’ has spectacularly failed to have any impact on protecting civilians in Sudan’s Darfur region or China’s Kivu province.

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Kofi Annan’s close relationship with Washington, with the US administration regarding his interventions as an attempt to influence the US election campaign – dominated by the controversial invasion of Iraq – in favour of Democratic candidate, John Kerry. The Falluja letter had been sent two days before the election, and was regarded as a treacherous act by the unforgiving Bush administration.

The ‘Oil-for-Food’ scandal would send Washington, with the US administration, on a crusade to carry out the political crucifixion of Annan. In a programme run by UN officials to provide humanitarian relief to the sanctions-hit regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the head of the programme, Benon Sevan, was accused by an independent investigation of receiving about $15,000,000 from the Iraqi government. Annan was accused of serious management irregularities for not having revealed these financial irregularities to the Security Council and for not implementing a system of effective oversight over the programme. Still, Annan’s chief of staff, was criticised for shedding documents on Iraq after the investigation had started. Like Rwandan...
Srebrenica, though the companies of powerful UN member states like Russia and France benefitted disproportionately from this programme and both the US and Britain were aware of many of the flaws in the programme, the failure of the secretariat to act transparently would again damage Annan politically.

Perhaps most hurtfully, Annan’s son, Kojo, had benefited from payments – to the tune of about $200,000 – from a Swiss firm Cotecna, which had won a contract from the oil-for-food programme, and whose executives Annan had met with three times. Kojo had earlier misled investigators about having severed links with the company before it won the contract, but had continued receiving payments for at least six years. An earlier internal UN investigation into this case had cleared Kofi Annan of any wrongdoing in just one day, again underlining the lack of accountability and the culture of rarely accepting responsibility for failures within the UN secretariat. Annan astonishingly would later seek to blame Kojo’s behaviour not on his own failings as a parent, but on ‘the environment in Lagos’ (where he lived), reinforcing negative stereotypes about Africa.

Conservative US Senators like Norm Coleman and newspaper columnists like William Safire started calling for Annan’s head. Bush refused to offer his support to the beleaguered Secretary-General, and senior officials of the Bush administration refused to meet with Annan on a proposed trip to Washington in December 2004. Karma seemed finally to have caught up with Annan: he almost appeared to be suffering the curse of Africa’s ancestors, having co-operated in the betrayal of the continent’s first Secretary-General and his own boss, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who had promoted him to head of UN peacekeeping. In the midst of his travails, a naïve Annan himself complained about having been betrayed by his former supporters around the world. He literally and figuratively lost his voice. His hands visibly trembled in meetings. He seriously considered resigning and was reportedly on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Annan had become a deer caught in the headlights of an American ‘juggernaut’ that threatened to flatten him. As the battle clarion was sounded, the general lacked the backbone to rally his troops. He lost his nerve, and declared himself a conscientious objector. John Darnforth, the US Ambassador to the UN, was eventually instructed to call off the ‘mad dogs’ that had been unleashed on Annan, belatedly pledging support for the UN Secretary-General. But the damage had already been done, and Annan was rendered a lame duck two years before the end of his second term.

Many of Annan’s staff felt that he was endangering the lives of UN personnel in Iraq by not closing the office there in order to placate Washington. Many UN employees also saw his reform proposals in 2005 as an effort to curry favour with the Bush administration. After Annan’s failure to take action against powerful staff members accused of sexual harassment, nepotism and corruption, a demoralised UN Staff Council – already enraged by the death of twenty-two of their colleagues in a Baghdad bombing in August 2003 – passed an unprecedented vote of no confidence in Annan’s leadership in November 2004.

Annan’s shameful treatment and dismissal of Iqbal Riza and Elizabeth Lindenmeyer – his chef de cabinet and Riza’s deputy respectively – and two of his closest and most loyal lieutenants whom he had known and worked with for over two decades, revealed the shocking sense of panic, desperation and siege that had taken over Turtle Bay. Following a meal with powerful, largely North American friends in Richard Holbrooke’s home in December 2004 – during which Annan had been dutifully taking notes – the Secretary-General effectively followed promptings that he fire some of his lieutenants and appoint as his deputy Mark Malloch-Brown, a South African-British former World Bank official and long-time friend of Annan who was head of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). It is widely said that Malloch-Brown (the current British Minister for Africa) ran the UN for the last two years of Annan’s tenure, and James Traub notes that the Americans reduced Annan to their ‘puppet’ through Malloch-Brown. Annan’s troubled exit from office in 2006 could yet transform him into a prophet without honour, with his final years being embroiled in scandal and having been rendered a lame duck by the US, the country that did the most to anoint him Secretary-General. Annan finally and painfully discovered the ancient wisdom: that one needs a long spoon to sup with the devil.