

Ghana's Kofi Annan was the first black African to serve as Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) – between 1997 and 2006 – and he shared the Nobel Peace Prize with the UN in 2001. During his ten-year tenure, Annan courageously, but perhaps naïvely, championed the cause of 'humanitarian intervention'. After a steep decline in the mid-1990s, peacekeeping increased again by 2005 to around 80,000 troops, with a budget of \$3.2 billion. African countries like Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Ethiopia/Eritrea, and Côte d'Ivoire were the main beneficiaries. Annan also moved the UN bureaucracy from its creative inertia to embrace views and actors from outside the system: mainly civil society and the private sector.

Annan's predecessor as Secretary-General was Egyptian scholar-diplomat, Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992-1996), who fell out with the UN's most powerful member, the United States, and became the first holder of the post to be denied a second term in office. While Kofi Annan was naturally calm and conciliatory, Boutros-Ghali was stubborn and studious; where Annan was a bureaucratic creature of the UN system, having spent thirty years rising up the system and having lived mostly in Western capitals, Boutros-Ghali – a former professor of law and politics – was the most intellectually accomplished Secretary-General in the history of the office. As Egypt's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Boutros-Ghali had an intuitive grasp of Third World politics which Annan lacked, and he was more prepared than Annan to stand up to bullying from powerful Western actors.

These two biographies of Kofi Annan by American journalists, James Traub and Stanley Meisler, are impressive in the tremendous access that they gained to both their subject and his key associates. While Traub appears to have started as an admirer of Kofi Annan and became more critical towards the difficult end of his tenure, Meisler's account sometimes verges on hagiography. Both authors focus on the crucial relationship between the UN and the US. This is particularly important since Annan had studied at American institutions – Macalester College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – and was effectively put in office by the Americans, after their Ambassador at the UN, Madeleine Albright, had waged a poisonous and vindictive campaign to remove the arrogant Boutros-Ghali. Astonishingly, Annan and some of his key supporters within the UN secretly worked with Washington as it plotted the removal of the first African Secretary-General – Boutros-Ghali later talked of betrayal by one's 'closest collaborator'. Annan brought two American officials involved in ousting Boutros-Ghali – Bob Orr and Michael Sheehan – into the UN. Many of the respected intellectuals that Annan relied on – John Ruggie, Michael Doyle and Jeffrey Sachs – were North Americans, and he often sought the advice of American universities rather than Southern ones. He did, however, also have key policy advisers from the global South: Iqbal Riza (Pakistan), Shashi Tharoor (India), Lakhdar Brahimi (Algeria) and Ibrahim Gambari (Nigeria).

Annan's first trip upon assuming office was to Washington D.C. in March 1997. Though this was the start of a bid to collect an American debt of \$1.6 billion to the UN – being withheld in order to secure internal UN management reforms and reduce US contributions to the organization – the symbolism of the visit confirmed to many the great debt that Annan himself owed to the superpower for his election. The

African Prophet or American Poodle?

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Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in A World of War

by Stanley Meisler

John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2007, 372 pp., \$14.78,
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The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power

by James Traub

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, 442 pp., \$26
ISBN: 978-0-374-18220-5

Ghanaian never shook off the image among many Southern diplomats of being an American poodle. Though the US had played a central role in creating the UN in 1945 and the American public largely supported the organisation, powerful interests within the US Congress led by Jesse Helms, the prejudiced, conservative chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the conservative Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich, consistently attacked the UN. The Bill Clinton administration (1993-2000) was unwilling to expend much political capital defending the world body from often outlandish and ill-informed attacks in perverse acts of infanticide. Some Americans complained that black UN helicopters were flying around the country in a bid to create a 'world government', while UN-declared 'World Heritage sites' in America (of which there are about 878 around the world) were seen as a sign of the violation of US sovereignty. The Clinton administration added to these suspicions of the UN by irresponsibly and erroneously blaming the deaths of eighteen American soldiers in Somalia in October 1993 – in a fiasco planned entirely by the Pentagon – on the UN.

The US wielded tremendous influence on Annan, getting him to appoint UN Special Representatives to Afghanistan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Annan did sometimes disagree with Washington – for example travelling to Baghdad to meet with Saddam Hussein in February 1998. He had embarked on this trip against the express wishes of then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was said to have browbeaten Annan and even screamed at him. Albright had done the most to remove Boutros-Ghali and in effect secure Annan's appointment: for her, this was now pay-back time. Annan often stayed close to the US, establishing a particularly close relationship with its dynamic Ambassador to the UN, Richard Holbrooke.

Before becoming UN Secretary-General, Annan had been promoted by Boutros-Ghali to the post of Undersecretary-General for Peacekeeping in 1993. Despite some of the myths around Annan's outstanding performance in this role, this period saw monumental blunders in Bosnia and Rwanda that did great damage to the UN's reputation. Independent reports later commissioned by the UN and released in 1999 criticised Annan and his officials who adopted a bureaucratic posture of undue caution and over-restrictive interpretations of UN mandates, although the Security Council's powerful veto-wielding permanent members (particularly the US, Britain and France) also share a great deal of the blame for these two debacles. About three months before the start of the

Rwandan genocide that killed 800,000 people in 1994, the senior officials in the 2,500-strong UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda had warned Annan's office of the impending genocide. They had received instructions to avoid a Somalia-like UN fiasco and to avoid the use of force at all costs.

In Bosnia, in July 1995, UN peacekeepers who had been warned by Annan's officials against the use of air strikes except if the UN mission was directly threatened – had failed to act as 7,400 Muslims were slaughtered by Serbs in a UN-declared 'safe haven'. In both cases, the responsibility for acting lay largely with the UN's powerful states, but independent inquiries into both incidents noted that Annan's staff did not fulfill their own responsibility by reporting transparently and courageously to the UN Security Council. In the face of mass murder, a pedantic insistence on neutrality had trumped an impartial duty to call murder by its name and to pressure the Security Council to act. As UN Secretary-General at the time, Boutros-Ghali must also share some of the blame for these failures.

After becoming UN Secretary-General, Annan's consistent championing of 'humanitarian intervention' and the 'responsibility to protect' civilians if governments are unwilling or unable to do so, appeared to be contradictory in light of his own timidity in reacting to crises in Rwanda and Bosnia. Perhaps this proselytizing assuaged a sense of guilt: Rwanda, in particular, appears to have personally scarred Annan and continues to dog his historical legacy. Annan added insult to injury when he visited Rwanda as Secretary-General in 1998 and said that he had 'no regrets' and that the violence 'came from within'. Incensed senior officials in Kigali criticized his insensitivity and boycotted a reception in his honour. Another example of a lack of understanding of the nuances of Third World politics was evident after Annan gave a speech championing 'humanitarian intervention' to the 192-member UN General Assembly in 1999. Leader after leader from the global South stood up to criticise what they saw as his naivety in promoting a doctrine that could allow powerful Western states to use this argument to undermine the sovereignty of weaker states. Though some of these autocratic leaders were clearly and hypocritically protecting their own regimes from scrutiny, such fears appeared to have been confirmed by the widely condemned American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was launched without UN Security Council authorization and was justified partly on humanitarian grounds.

Another myth about Kofi Annan was that he was a great reformer. On assuming office in 1997, he sought to reduce staffing by ten

percent and asked that the UN General Assembly (the body where the global South has a solid majority and had US, Russia, China, 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). 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 Washington, and there is ample evidence provided in these two books that the reform process and Annan's 2005 *In Larger Freedom* report (drafted largely by two Americans, Bob Orr and Stephen Stedman) were crafted explicitly to gain Washington's support. Even 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 were acceptable to Washington) many of the US's earlier commitments on aid and the Millennium Development Goals. Powerful American-led 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 feuding fiefdoms; the Human Rights Council remains as partisan and politicized 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 Congo's Kivu province.

Annan eventually fell out with the Bush administration in 2004 over two issues: he had clumsily and belatedly declared the US invasion of Iraq to be 'illegal' during a television interview; and he had written a letter to Bush warning of the negative consequences of attacking the Iraqi city of Falluja. While Annan was correct on the merits of both incidents, the hawkish Bush administration regarded 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 provide Washington with the opportunity 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 having received bonuses of about \$150,000 from the Iraqi government. Annan was accused of serious management failures for not having reported financial irregularities to the Security Council and for not implementing a system of effective oversight over the programme. Iqbal Riza, Annan's chief of staff, was criticised for shredding documents on Iraq after the investigation had started. Like Rwanda and

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.

