

## *The UN: A Situation Report*

### Book Review:

*The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government.* Paul Kennedy. Allen Lane/Penguin; 2006; 290 pages; \$26.95; and  
*The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of US World Power.* James Traub. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2006; 419 pages; \$26.00.

### **Benjamin Zawacki\***

Questions of the United Nations's "relevance" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century officially became fair game during President Bush's September 2002 speech to the body's General Assembly in the contentious run-up to the Iraq War, and grew to a crescendo in 2005 with publication of the organization's plans for reform. Yet, as a new Secretary-General of the United Nations takes the helm following the tumultuous and certainly historic decade of Kofi Annan, these questions—and their answers—have hardly been exhausted, and the successes, failures, and future of the organization remain the subject of animated debate. Two recent books seek to both reflect and contribute to the discussion, and together constitute an authoritative, albeit greatly imbalanced, insight into the UN's standing and status as it enters its 62<sup>nd</sup> year.

Paul Kennedy's *The Parliament of Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government*, is the clear lightweight in both substance and style. A seemingly ambitious work, titled as it is after a line in Alfred Tennyson famous "Locksley Hall" and divided into three parts on the body's origins, evolution, and future, its length is glaringly insufficient, while only its first part, itself a mere 48 pages, stands up to scrutiny. This part is, however, as solid an overview of the UN's intellectual and political origins as one will find, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and including a lucid analysis of how the failure of the League of Nations and the utterly determinative Second World War led to and influenced the UN's formation.

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Indeed, the almost total extent to which the organization's structure and composition, numerous purposes, and—with the benefit of hindsight—inherent limitations were the product of a World War II political and economic paradigm, is a fact that today's pundits and critics would do well to remember.

Not only was the Security Council created by and for its permanent five 'victorious' Allied nations, but the notoriously contentious veto power invested in them was introduced as the only way to keep the US and USSR—defeaters of, in the Charter's words, the "enemy states" of Germany and Japan—on-board. National and economic security were not only paramount concerns (with human rights and development secondary and relegated to the General Assembly), but vote distribution in the IMF and World Bank was heavily weighted in favor of the (capitalist) nations best placed to resurrect global markets in the aftermath of the war. Most UN agencies (UNICEF, the Food and Agricultural Organization, etc), seen in the light of post-war "reconstruction," were not envisaged as having long life-spans. Peacekeeping, probably the issue most often identified with the UN today, was, in the wake of a war fought between rather than within states, not envisaged at all. And who takes the time to consider that, due to firm official acceptance of colonialism in 1945, there were only a wieldy 50 member states in the first General Assembly (compared to the then-inconceivable and often unwieldy 192 by 2006)?

It is when Kennedy, a Professor of History at Yale, moves beyond this historical perspective and into the chapters on various UN operations and initiatives, however, that his work begins to founder. Affording far too little space for this ambitious number of "many UNs," he resorts to descriptions and explanations so brief and/or general as to be either quantitatively inadequate or conclusory. In claiming, for example, that many of the UN's human rights

interventions have been successful, he asks, “Could one conceive of a political settlement in Namibia or Mozambique without the world organization?” Yet his entire previous treatment of the matter (three chapters earlier no less) is simply that “A transition assistance group (UNTAG) successfully supervised Namibia’s move to independence. With internal peace also coming to Mozambique, the Security Council could establish observers there (ONUMOZ) as the democratic process began.”

Moreover, Kennedy compounds the situation by increasingly choosing to ‘cover’ an entire subject area, the UN’s humanitarian and development agendas for example, with one or more case-studies—themselves tending toward brevity and lack of analysis—on an individual agency or operation. He does on occasion draw some interesting insights: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted unanimously in 1948 when nearly three-quarters of the UN’s present members were either non-existent or disenfranchised, and the IMF’s failure in Mexico in 1982 is analogous to Peacekeeping’s failures the following decade in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. Yet, the sum of these parts remains disproportionately small to the scope of these chapters. The last, potentially the book’s most interesting for its focus on the relationship between non-governmental organizations and the UN, also miscarries as the author gets buried in the details of the media’s international networks and the like, while his point, not entirely clear to begin with, gets lost.

The book’s final part on the reform of the UN and its future challenges is particularly disappointing, not least because it signals yet further and untenable “mission creep” in the book’s scope, but also in view of Kennedy’s qualifications to expound upon this subject, having served on an international commission in 1995 designed for the same purpose. Other than taking on an optimistic tone and coming out firmly in the ‘still relevant’ camp in the

debate on the UN's role in international cooperation and trouble-shooting, it is rambling in its speculation and non-committal and cliché-riddled in its conclusions. One almost wonders whether such was drafted by a student assistant, rather than by an author with the experience and expertise at Kennedy's disposal. And even more so than in the book's previous chapters, the prose is often awkwardly unsophisticated: "In all these dimensions of our lives, we must indeed all hang together or, most assuredly, we will hang separately ... Would Russia agree to a Japanese veto? Hmn."

Thus, on its own, *The Parliament of Man*—save for its excellent first part—is at best a weak outline of the UN's past, present, and future. As an opening act, however, which at least identifies most elements and aspects of the UN, it does at least prepare the reader for the more narrowly focused and forcefully written headliner.

James Traub's *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power* assumes a place among the very best of the many books on humanitarianism (broadly defined) that have lined the shelves in recent years, and that it sometimes recalls: William Shawcross's *Deliver Us from Evil*, David Reiff's *A Bed for the Night*, Linda Polman's *We Did Nothing*. Biography of an outgoing Secretary-General, history of modern peacekeeping operations, and analysis of the UN-US relationship in equal and seamlessly woven parts, the book presents a fair and balanced account of the record on these subjects while still managing—nearly always through a dispassionate but deftly sequenced presentation of facts—to pull no punches. Such clearly demands that the author draw upon his professionalism and expertise as a journalist for *The New York Times Magazine*, for as he freely confesses, he "likes" both Annan and the UN. What emerges is less an overall conclusion—the nature of which, beyond a clear echoing (if for different reasons) of Richard

Holbrooke's view that the UN is "flawed but indispensable"—would be difficult to guess, than a series of individual multi-part and/or mixed verdicts. Annan is generally acquitted, though is a much-diminished figure by the book's final pages; peacekeeping is generally convicted; the UN-US relationship is left essentially undecided.

Between summer 2004 and fall 2005, Traub had unprecedented, if not unfettered, access to Annan in New York and in his missions abroad, both as quiet public observer and private conversationalist. Literally and figuratively, they covered a lot of ground. Traub uses the Gulf War of 1991 as his point of departure, expressly to show the favorable context in which Annan's appointment as Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations the following year took place, as the "planets in the UN system were perfectly aligned" for the successful Charter-based intervention in Iraq. Implicitly, Traub book-ends his work with Iraq and paints a contrast between a war in which President George H.W. Bush ardently sought UN support and approval, and the one in 2003 that so divided the UN and the current President Bush.

The rest of the book leaves nothing of any importance from Annan's agendas in Peacekeeping and as Secretary-General unaddressed, and does so through a narrative that is at once chronological, coherent, and creative. It is also riddled—thanks to Traub's privileged perspective—with the sort of anecdotes that allows the book to be a bridge between the strictly academic and the popular; its prose is intellectual and serious but readily accessible. The accounts of Annan's controversial diplomacy with Saddam Hussein in Iraq (bizarre), Senator Jesse Helms' visit to the UN (amusing), the death of 22 UN staff in Baghdad (harrowing), and of the tense all-night negotiations on UN reform (edifying) come to mind. The several chapters on the Oil-for-Food scandal, in addition to containing many useful

anecdotes (relating to Annan's son Kojo, among others), are almost assuredly the most accurate, balanced, and complete retelling of the drama yet, and so constitute, perhaps even more-so than the rest of the book, a unique contribution to the discourse on UN management and reform.

The book—and Annan himself—is at once at its strongest and weakest in the passages on “the responsibility to protect”, a doctrine holding that sovereign states have such a responsibility toward their citizens, and that in the event states refuse or fail to accept it, such shifts to the international community. While Annan expressed almost no public regret over his weak Peacekeeping leadership during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, he began advocating this “responsibility to protect” in a speech in the spring of 1998 in the context of Milosevic's Kosovo, a year before NATO began its bombing campaign there. Two things are clear (and presented as such by Traub): One, that Annan countenanced armed intervention by the international community as an acceptable means of exercising this responsibility, but that, Two, such could only be made legitimate by a Security Council resolution. Also made clear by Traub is that, as the bombing got underway without such a resolution, Annan changed his mind; he supported and even saw as legitimate—pursuant not to the UN Charter but to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the intervention.

However, as Annan again shifted back, finally settling on a circular position of wanting it both ways—the UN's legitimacy resting on the responsibility to protect, with that responsibility's legitimacy resting with the UN—Traub explains this far less than he might, instead asking the reader to connect the dots among various events and developments. Such requires some rereading to do so. Yet, if this section captures Annan in both his inspiring

moral leadership and his characteristic indecision, it is exceptional to Traub's otherwise clear account.

It also serves as an introduction to the chapters on the responsibility to protect's most recent application: Darfur. That genocide in western Sudan was occurring at the time of the book's writing and continues to the present day, gives these chapters an eerie relevance. It also leaves the reader wondering—to no fault of Traub—whether this most important piece of Annan's legacy will be brought to bear in the wake of his departure, and in a context all too reminiscent of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo.

While Traub joins Kennedy in taking the view that the UN remains every bit as relevant today as it was upon its founding, perhaps he would prefer to withhold his final judgment until more time affords both a deeper perspective on Annan's efforts and an end-game in Darfur. What is sure is the relevance—and excellence—of *The Best Intentions*, the second of two unequal parts to a mixed situation report for the UN at the end of the Kofi Annan era.

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