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Kofi Annan's Legacy of Failure

By Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan delivered his swan song today at the Truman Presidential Library in Missouri.¹ It was a thinly veiled parting shot at U.S. foreign policy delivered by an embittered U.N. leader seething with self-righteous indignation and resentment. Annan's Missouri speech will go down in history as one of the most blatant assaults on a U.S. administration by a serving U.N. official.

In his condescending remarks, Annan warned, with Washington clearly in his sights, that "no nation can make itself secure by seeking supremacy over all others." In reference to the U.S.-led war on terror, Annan stated that America's position in the "vanguard of the global human rights movement...can only be maintained if America remains true to its principles, including in the struggle against terrorism. When it appears to abandon its own ideals and objectives, its friends are naturally troubled and confused." In a clear jab at the Iraq war, he warned that "no state can make its own actions legitimate in the eyes of others. When power, especially military force, is used, the world will consider it legitimate only when convinced that it is being used for the right purpose—for broadly shared aims—in accordance with broadly accepted norms."

Annan's speech followed his recent interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation, in which he suggested that Iraqis were worse off today than they were under Saddam Hussein.² The interview sparked outrage in Baghdad, and Annan's comments were condemned by Iraq's National

Security Adviser Mouwaffaq al-Rubaie, who pointedly asked, "Doesn't Kofi Annan differentiate between the mass killing of Iraqis by the security and intelligence apparatus of Saddam Hussein and the present indiscriminate killings of civilians, Iraqi civilians, by the al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq?"³

Annan has a long track record of opposition to the U.S.-led war to remove Saddam Hussein from power, as well as to the wider conduct of the global war on terror. The people of Iraq owe no debt of gratitude to Annan, who consistently ignored their suffering, opposed their liberation, and actively undermined Coalition efforts to establish security and rebuild the country. As Iraq's interim defense minister Hazem Sha'alan remarked, "Where was Kofi Annan when Saddam Hussein was slaughtering the Iraqi people like sheep?"⁴ The Iraq war undermined Annan's own position as a world leader and exposed the U.N.'s growing impotence in the post-9/11 era. It also exposed the huge degree of corruption and mismanagement involving the U.N.'s Oil-for-Food Program, an epic scandal that continues to unfold.

Annan's departure from office has not come soon enough. His 10 years in power have been a monu-

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mental failure, and he leaves behind an institution whose standing could barely be lower and a legacy that is a testament to mismanagement, corruption, and anti-Americanism. Over the past 12 years, the U.N. has been dominated by scandal, division, and failure. From the disaster of the U.N. peacekeeping missions in Rwanda and Bosnia in the mid-1990s to the U.N.'s slow response to the Sudan genocide, its recent track record has been spectacularly unimpressive. His successor will inherit a U.N. whose image has slipped to an all-time low.

The Oil-for-Food and Congo peacekeeping scandals have had a devastating impact on the U.N.'s reputation and have reinforced the view that the world body is riddled with corruption and mismanagement, as well as undisciplined in its peacekeeping operations. The failure of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights—now the U.N. Human Rights Council—which was populated with some of the world's worst human rights violators, has added to the U.N.'s poor image. In addition, the tensions between Washington and Turtle Bay over the war in Iraq have contributed to bringing U.S.–U.N. relations to their lowest point in a generation.

Human Rights Failures

Under Annan the U.N. has shamelessly appeased dictators and tyrants, from Baghdad to Tehran to Khartoum, and has stood weak-kneed in the face of genocide and ethnic cleansing. As head of United Nations peacekeeping operations in the mid-1990s before he rose to Secretary General, Annan never apologized to the victims of the Rwanda genocide, whose slaughter was the consequence of the U.N.'s failure to intervene, or to the families of Muslims massacred at Srebrenica while under the protection of U.N. soldiers. Annan's lack of humility in the face

of great human tragedy has been one of his greatest shortcomings as a U.N. leader. Nor has he ever apologized to the people of Iraq, whose former president he described as “a man I can do business with.”

The U.N.'s new Human Rights Council, touted by Annan as a breakthrough for the U.N., is an unmitigated farce, and the United Nations has largely jettisoned the principles of liberty and freedom. The Council's lack of membership criteria renders it open to participation and manipulation by the world's worst human rights abusers. Tyrannical regimes such as Burma, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Zimbabwe all voted in favor of establishing the Council, in the face of strong U.S. opposition. The brutal North Korean dictatorship also endorsed the Council. When Council elections were held in May, leading human rights abusers Algeria, China, Cuba, Pakistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia were all elected.

Peacekeeping Abuses

A series of peacekeeping scandals, from Bosnia to Burundi to Sierra Leone and Haiti, occurred under Annan's watch. The largest concentration of abuse has taken place in the Congo, the U.N.'s second largest peacekeeping mission, with 16,000 peacekeepers.⁵

In the Congo, acts of barbarism were perpetrated by United Nations peacekeepers and civilian personnel entrusted with protecting some of the weakest and most vulnerable women and children in the world. Personnel from the U.N. Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) stand accused of at least 150 major human rights violations, and the scale of the problem is likely to be far greater.

The crimes involved rape and forced prostitution of women and young girls across the country, including

1. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, Address at the Truman Presidential Museum and Library, Independence, Missouri, December 11, 2006, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6170089.stm>.
2. Kofi Annan interview, *BBC News Online*, December 4, 2006, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6205056.stm>.
3. “Anger at UN Chief's Iraq Comments,” *BBC News Online*, December 4, 2006, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6206480.stm.
4. “Iraqi Minister Berates Annan,” *CNN.com*, November 8, 2004.
5. See Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., “The U.N. Peacekeeping Scandal in the Congo: How Congress Should Respond,” Heritage Lecture #868, March 1, 2005, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/hl868.cfm>.

inside a refugee camp in the town of Bunia in north-eastern Congo. The alleged perpetrators include U.N. military and civilian personnel from Nepal, Morocco, Tunisia, Uruguay, South Africa, Pakistan, and France.

The sexual abuse scandal in the Congo made a mockery of the U.N.'s professed commitment to uphold basic human rights. The exploitation of some of the most vulnerable people in the world—refugees in a war-ravaged country—was a shameful episode and a massive betrayal of trust, as well as an appalling failure of leadership.

Corruption and Mismanagement

The scandal surrounding the U.N.-administered Oil-for-Food Program has also done immense damage to the world organization's already shaky credibility. The Oil-for-Food scandal is undoubtedly the biggest financial scandal in the history of the United Nations and probably the largest fraud of modern times. It shattered the liberal illusion that the U.N. is an arbiter of moral authority in the international sphere.

Established in the mid-1990s as a means of providing humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people, the Oil-for-Food Program was subverted and manipulated by Saddam Hussein's regime, with the complicity of U.N. officials, to help prop up the Iraqi dictator. Saddam's dictatorship siphoned off billions of dollars from the program through oil smuggling and systematic thievery, by demanding illegal payments from companies buying Iraqi oil, and through kickbacks from those selling goods to Iraq—all under the noses of U.N. bureaucrats.

Despite widespread criticism, Kofi Annan has never taken responsibility for a scandal that has irreparably damaged the U.N.'s reputation. A huge cloud remains over the U.N. Secretary General with regard to his meetings with senior officials from the Swiss Oil-for-Food contractor Cotecna, which employed his son Kojo from 1995 to 1997 and continued to pay him through 2004.⁶

Questions also remain regarding Annan's appointment of German activist Achim Steiner as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) just months after Steiner helped award Annan \$500,000.⁷ Steiner, whose four-year term of office began in June 2006, was part of a nine-member jury chaired by a senior U.N. official, which gave a cash gift to Annan last December. Annan's initial decision to accept such a huge prize (eventually given to charity), as well as his subsequent appointment of a man who had played a key role in the award of that money, gave the appearance of a major abuse of power. Both were extraordinary acts of political recklessness by the Secretary General and gave the impression that jobs at the world body may be traded for financial favors.

As an international public servant, the Secretary General should not accept money from a U.N. member state or a private foundation, either as an award or gift. He should also completely disclose his personal finances, as many Western politicians do. He should also abide by the same strict ethics and disclosure rules that apply to political figures in major democracies, such as in the United States and Great Britain. Annan has talked about accountability and transparency and the supposed winds of change sweeping through the U.N., but his own leadership has belied his words. Unfortunately, a secretive culture of impunity still dominates the upper echelons of the U.N. Secretariat.

A Broken Institution

In a recent interview with the London *Daily Telegraph*, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton described the U.N. as hopelessly out of touch and stuck in a Twilight Zone-style "time warp" where "there are practices, attitudes and approaches that were abandoned 30 years ago in much of the rest of the world."⁸ Many Americans would agree with Mr. Bolton. In a March 2006 poll conducted by Gallup in the United States, 64 per-

6. For background, see Nile Gardiner Ph.D., "The Cotecna Memorandum: End of the Road for Kofi Annan?" Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* #765, June 15, 2005, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm765.cfm>.

7. See Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., "Kofi Annan's Conflicts of Interest Must Be Investigated," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* #1067, May 9, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm1067.cfm>.

8. Alec Russell, "UN is Like the Twilight Zone, Says Bolton," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 1, 2006.

cent of respondents said the United Nations was “doing a poor job,” the most negative rating for the U.N. in its history. Just 28 percent had a positive image of the U.N.’s job performance.⁹

Today’s United Nations is a broken institution in fundamental need of wholesale reform. That is Annan’s legacy, and the United States and the world looks forward to new leadership at Turtle Bay—leadership that is untarnished by the taint of scandal and actually lives up to the ideals of the U.N.’s

own Declaration of Human Rights. The U.N. needs a Secretary General who will seek real reform of the U.N. bureaucracy and aggressively stand up for democracy, human rights, and freedom.

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9. “Poll: Most Americans Think U.N. is Doing a Poor Job But Still Want the World Body to Play a Major Role,” *Associated Press*, March 13, 2006.