

# Kofi Annan and the Future of the United Nations

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
on, February 13, 2007 by

**Stanley Meisler**

**Author, *Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War*  
Former Foreign Reporter, *Los Angeles Times***

To start with, I should say I admire Kofi Annan a great deal but any one admiring the seventh secretary-general of the U.N. has to deal with three issues of controversy and I thought I'd start by mentioning them.

The first is, there are critics who insist that before he became secretary-general that he had the blood of Rwanda on his hands—that he is responsible for many thousands of deaths in Rwanda. I spent a good deal of time going into this controversy. It's totally unjustified and his guilt, just as it is, was very minor, but it is something that has dogged him for a long time.

The second controversy that comes up time and again, particularly in the United States, is that American-Jewish organizations feel that he was the secretary-general against Israel. Now, there is no way a secretary-general of the U.N. can ever fully satisfy the government of Israel and supporters of Israel because of the Resolution of the Security Council that opposed the occupation of the Palestinian territories. This is something I discuss in the book. I ought to also point out that he is probably the most pro-Israel secretary-general that the United Nations has ever had. Not very many people realize it but his wife is the niece of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Holocaust. The Annans, both Kofi and his wife, Nan, go to every Holocaust commemoration to which they're invited, and he's done a great deal in this regard at the U.N.

The third controversy is the oil-for-food scandal. What he was responsible for, or guilty of, is that he shares the responsibility of lax management, with the United States and Britain. Lax management of this program did cause problems, it was a scandal, but was wildly exaggerated by people who were not angry over the scandal but who were angry over the fact that he opposed the United States on the invasion of Iraq. On top of this scandal, his son got involved in a rather minor part of it, but it was tawdry, and that was very difficult for Kofi and Nan to deal with—the fact that his son lied to them.

What I attempted in this book was a straight narrative of the life of Kofi from his days in Ghana to his last days as secretary-general. In this regard, I had the privilege of meeting his secondary school headmaster. He went to a school in Ghana and the headmaster now lives in Paris. When I interviewed him he was 95 years old, but remembered Kofi very well, remembered that he was not a very good student. He said that if anyone had ever told him Kofi would become secretary-general of the United Nations he would have said, "Not on your life." He reached the conclusion—and he didn't mean this in a bad way, I think—he reached the conclusion that Kofi made so much out of so little. One of the examples that he gave me was that Kofi did not score

high enough in the examination in the fifth form—that’s sort of like the senior year of high school—to pass into the sixth form which would have entitled him to go on to the liberal arts college in Ghana or, as it was then known, the Gold Coast. Instead he had to enroll at the Institute of Technology and Science in Ghana, which was considered in those days a much lesser school than the liberal arts college.

Now, the idea that he did so much with so little, I think, is a very important concept in understanding him, because he is a man of no pretense who is satisfied with his own limitations, satisfied with himself, and is willing to take advantage of opportunities as they show up. One of the themes that I found interesting was his encounters with the United States. He comes out of this great bubble of interest and enthusiasm and optimism that Americans had about Africa more than 50 years ago. It’s an optimism that people don’t share these days, but in the late 50s and early 60s when Africa was becoming independent everyone was excited about what would happen to Africa. Important African leaders made the covers of magazines in the U.S. The Peace Corps was proud to have sent its first contingent of volunteers to Ghana, and the Kennedys funded what they called the Tom Mboya airlift that brought students from Kenya to United States colleges. Kofi was part of this, because the Ford Foundation was looking for African students to come to the United States and be educated. They found Kofi, who was then vice president of the Ghana Student Union, and they gave him a scholarship to study at Macalester College in Minnesota where he had a lot of problems with the cold weather, but he was an enthusiastic student who embraced the school completely. In fact on his first day he tried out for the Macalester football team, or as a friend put it, he tried to kill himself on his first day at school. He weighed 138 pounds, didn’t make the football team, but he did make the debating team and the track team. He was very popular at school and made many friends during this period who have remained friends throughout his entire life. He has many American friends.

The second American influence on him is very, very important because Annan was an accidental secretary-general. He became Secretary-General at the United Nations mainly because Boutros Boutros-Ghali his predecessor, who was Egyptian, and Madeleine Albright, the United States Ambassador to the UN, could not stand each other. Boutros-Ghali regarded Madeleine as an amateur who took all criticism of American policy personally. She thought of Boutros-Ghali as arrogant and untrustworthy. It was a visceral dislike—they really disliked each other. She launched a campaign against him and he launched a campaign to prevent her from unseating him. In one sense, you might think he won because the Security Council voted 14 to one that he go on to a second term. Unfortunately for him, the one vote against was Madeleine Albright, and the U.S. has a veto in the Security Council, so he did not get a second term. Then the U.S. had the problem of a concept that had arisen that it was Africa’s turn to get a secretary-general and Boutros-Ghali, who was an Egyptian had fulfilled Africa’s turn--and after Africa’s turn it would become Asia’s turn. This was a concept that grew up, I think, after Perez de Cuellar, who was the Latin American who got the job when it was decided that it was Latin America’s turn. It was a very strange idea. John Bolton, for one, thinks it’s a stupid idea and that’s about the only thing that John Bolton and I agree on.

So, the feeling was that Africa had been cheated – that the African candidate had only served one term while usually secretaries-general serve two terms. So they had to go and find an African to succeed Boutros-Ghali to complete the African turn and the African they found was Kofi Annan. Now, Boutros-Ghali and I liked talking about this and he said to me, “I never speak of any of my predecessors or my successor, but he was a traitor. But it’s normal to be betrayed by your closest collaborator.”

In any case, Kofi would have had to be very stupid not to be willing to be secretary-general of the United Nations when it was being handed to him. In fact, the only thing he had to do was prove to the French that he could speak French. The French were upset because Boutros Ghali spoke better French than English, he'd been educated at the Sorbonne and so the French were a bit upset. Annan finally convinced the French that he spoke well enough. In fact, he told one of his British friends, "I now speak English with a French accent."

The final encounter with the U.S. that's important and very critical, of course, is that the United States created the Iraq crises that became a gargantuan problem of this administration, at least of his second five years. Now, there's nothing he or any other secretary-general could have done to stop the invasion. The U.S. had decided it was going to invade and it only came to the UN for validation of its intention. In fact, Annan did slow things up a bit because he persuaded Iraq to allow the inspectors to come back in to look for the weapons of mass destruction. The White House had hoped that Saddam Hussein would refuse to allow the inspectors in, which would give them the excuse that he did not follow UN resolutions and therefore they had a right to invade. So, they had to wait and go through an inspection process, which they didn't like, and that began the White House resentment at Kofi Annan.

Now, at the time of the invasion of Iraq the morale at the United Nations was at the bottom. It was very, very low. After all, Bush said he was invading Iraq because the UN was irrelevant, it wouldn't enforce its resolutions. Richard Perle, who was kind of a guru of neo-conservatism, wrote an op-ed piece for the *Guardian* in Britain that said that with this invasion we'd get rid of two things: we'd get rid of Saddam Hussein and we'd get rid of the United Nations. People were very, very worried, and one of the things that I think Kofi accomplished was to lead the United Nations through this period. He was helped by the fact that the invasion turned out to be such a catastrophe, that the UN's reputation began to ascend somewhat, but in any case he was able to lead the UN and to reach a point of relevance once more.

The speech which he made in Independence, Missouri at the Truman Library, was described in the papers as an attack on the United States. It was to an extent, but what he was basically doing was less attacking the United States than affirming the importance and relevance of the UN, saying, "You can't do it alone any more. You have to go to the UN." In fact, there are many signs that the US now agrees with him. In the North Korean situation the U.S. has gone to the Security Council, it went to the Security Council finally about Lebanon, and it's going to the Security Council about Iran. That's one of the main legacies.

Annan established the principle of right of intervention in a country if the government abuses its people. This is a principle that the UN had never accepted before. The attitude had been that these are sovereign countries and what goes on inside is none of the business of others. The UN no longer passes resolutions along that line and they've even passed resolutions saying they have the right to go into Darfur, but the problem of implementing this principle has been very, very difficult. It was able to implement it in East Timor by constantly talking to the president of Indonesia, persuading him to allow Australian peacekeepers to come in, but has, so far, been unable to do this in Darfur.

I think another legacy is transparency. He always allowed, and wanted everything that went on at the UN to be communicated to the public. He tried not to hide things.

One of the things you see is an incredible waste in his final term. The UN works best when the secretary-general and the United States are in sync and are doing things together, and here you

had what I regarded as the most American of all the secretaries-general—no one had more American friends or had been in the United States longer, or went to undergraduate school in the United States, like Kofi did— but you had an American administration that basically looked upon the United Nations as a threat to American sovereignty. So they didn't work together, and that strikes me as a tremendous waste.

[www.lawac.org](http://www.lawac.org)

**Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content.  
This is a "first draft" transcript. A more fully edited version will be posted  
online around the end of the season (September).**

**The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan  
organization.**