

A Story of Two Speeches:

Kofi Annan and George W. Bush

By Ian Williams | October 3, 2003

Kofi Annan's speech to the United Nations General Assembly was indeed a strong and incisive condemnation of unilateralism—and thus of the current U.S. administration and its hangers on. But in their eagerness to applaud the temerity of the Secretary General in twitching the eagle's tail, some observers may miss the rest of his message: which is that despite its abuse by Bush and Blair, the United Nations Security Council must come to terms with the need for humanitarian intervention, and, moving some small but measured way toward the concerns of countries that feel themselves to be “uniquely vulnerable.”

This invitation to feel the pain of the U.S., not matter how diplomatic it is, was followed by an even less palatable message for the “sovereignists” such as Russia. He warned that the Council “may need to begin a discussion on the criteria for an early authorization of coercive measures to address certain types of threats—for instance, terrorist groups armed with weapons of mass destruction.” But then, reiterating his call at the Millennium Summit three years ago, he added, without the conditional qualifier, that “they still need to engage in serious discussions of the best way to respond to threats of genocide or other comparable massive violations of human rights—an issue which I raised myself from this podium in 1999.” However, he made it clear that if this were to be done, it should be in a multilateral context, using the “unique legitimacy” of the UN, which he also suggested needed boosting with reforms that would guarantee it greater legitimacy through broader representation.

However, it is understandable that people should concentrate on his strong implied rebuke for the neo-conservative-inspired security doctrine now espoused by the United States, and implicitly supported by Tony Blair. Saying the world had “come to a fork in the road,” to what “may be a moment no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the United Nations was founded,” Kofi Annan spelled out explicitly and in the most public way possible the position he has

voiced before, albeit more quietly in off-the-cuff question and answer sessions: the invasion of Iraq was against the UN Charter, and thus in breach of International Law.

Speaking “ex cathedra” in his report to the General Assembly Annan explained,

Until now it has been understood that when States go beyond [self defense], and decide to use force to deal with broader threats to international peace and security, they need the unique legitimacy provided by the United Nations.

Now, some say this understanding is no longer tenable, since an “armed attack” with weapons of mass destruction could be launched at any time, without warning, or by a clandestine group. Rather than wait for that to happen, they argue, States have the right and obligation to use force pre-emptively, even on the territory of other States, and even while weapons systems that might be used to attack them are still being developed.

According to this argument, States are not obliged to wait until there is agreement in the Security Council. Instead, they reserve the right to act unilaterally, or in ad hoc coalitions. This logic represents a fundamental challenge to the principles on which, however imperfectly, world peace and stability have rested for the last fifty-eight years.... If it were to be adopted, it could set precedents that

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resulted in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force, with or without justification.”

Somewhat provocatively, he also suggested that the UN “needs to consider how it will deal with the possibility that individual States may use force ‘pre-emptively’ against perceived threats.” This could be an almost puckish reminder: despite all the sound and fury, the dozens of delegates who stood up and inveighed against the U.S. and British assault on Iraq, there was not one resolution put down, either in the Security Council or the General Assembly to condemn, let alone take any sanctions against the perpetrators.

Of course, this calls into question the unique legitimating function of the United Nations. If some states can take illegitimate action with impunity, then this necessarily detracts from both its prestige and its effectiveness. These are all legitimate questions. Sadly, one cannot see that the answers are apparent, at least without a change of heart—and possibly administration—in Washington.

Security Council Reform

He also called for more active efforts to reform the membership of the Security Council, noting that “as for the composition of the Council, that has been on the agenda of this Assembly for over a decade. Virtually all Member States agree that the Council should be enlarged, but there is no agreement on the details.” However, he then went on to call for willingness to break the logjam in the Security Council that gave the U.S. an excuse to go unilateral.

He instanced Congo and Liberia as crises where the Council had been slow to act, although in the continuing tradition of diplomatic tact, he did not mention Washington’s role delaying those operations. But his criticism was not all for Bush,

It is not enough to denounce unilateralism, unless we also face up squarely to the concerns that make some States feel uniquely vulnerable, since it is those concerns that drive them to take unilateral action. We must show that those concerns can, and will, be addressed effectively through collective action.

Bush’s Words

Although there was sigh of relief that he was not announcing a new crusade the way he did against Iraq from the same podium last year, President George W. Bush’s speech to the General Assembly of the UN was as wooden as we have come to expect, leading to unkind thoughts—wouldn’t it be fun if the teleprompter froze!

Of course, no one was expecting him to apologize for getting it wrong. But you would never guess from his speech that the weapons inspectors he sent to scour Iraq have not found a single working weapon of mass destruction, nor that the Iraqi scientists they have interviewed all concur that the weapons were actually destroyed when Saddam Hussein said they were!

The president did not mention that the war he fought “for the credibility of the United Nations” was opposed by the overwhelming majority of UN members, nor that he has since refused to let the UN’s weapons inspectors actually return to Iraq even though the whole campaign against Iraq a year ago was based on Saddam Hussein’s refusal to let them in.

Instead, the president declared “The regime of Saddam Hussein cultivated ties to terror while it built weapons of mass destruction.” This is, as Churchill said when parliamentary etiquette forbade him to say that a colleague had lied, “a terminological inexactitude.” There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein used terror against his own people on a huge scale—at times with the support of President Bush’s father. There is no evidence whatsoever, as Bush himself admitted a week ago, that Saddam Hussein was behind September 11, even if the administration has somehow persuaded a large majority of the American public that he was. It took the American destruction of the tightly controlled Iraqi police state to make the country a haven for the world’s terrorists.

While invoking “terrorists,” the president introduced a new threat to the world, “proliferators.” While this is less worrying than explicitly naming Cuba, Syria, Iran, and the other countries that have appeared on the administration’s hit list, it appears as yet another open-ended threat to justify military

action against anyone the president and his advisers get upset with.

Ignoring Annan

He also ignored Kofi Annan's speech. Just before Bush spoke, the Secretary General had politely but firmly attacked the administration's doctrine of preemptive and unilateral challenges under which "states are not obliged to wait until there is agreement in the Security Council. Instead, they reserve the right to act unilaterally, or in ad hoc coalitions." Annan declared that if this doctrine "were to be adopted, it could set precedents that resulted in a proliferation of unilateral and lawless use of force, with or without credible justification."

In contrast, President Bush was muted about his own stalled attempt to get a UN resolution calling for countries to send troops to join a multilateral force in Iraq. He certainly made no concessions to those who think the UN should indeed have a more vital role there than persuading the Indians, Turks, and South Koreans to send their troops to join the occupation of Iraq. Indeed, he dismissively relegated the UN to assisting in "developing a constitution, in training civil servants, and conducting elections."

He pointed proudly to representatives of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) sitting in the Iraqi seats in the General Assembly, but forgot to mention that they have been calling for a rapid handover of power to themselves. But then his own administration has been disparaging the IGC as unfit to rule without Paul Bremer's supervision. He should know. He picked them.

In the face of such significant omissions, it is not surprising that the world's leaders sitting in session were a little underwhelmed when the president tried to project compassionate conservatism on a global scale with his call for action against sex-trafficking. Was this addressed to the Soccer Moms, the Bible Belters, and if so, do they listen to UN speeches? Certainly—on the evidence of the president's own speech—he does not listen much to others' speeches. The sound of silence is often deafening when statesmen speak, but in the case of George. W. Bush it is the deafness that is almost as stunning. He neither hears nor mentions disagreement.

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