

## **United It Wobbles**

Should we blame the U.N. for its shortcomings, or the countries that make up the world body?

Reviewed by Samantha Power  
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### *THE BEST INTENTIONS*

*Kofi Annan and the UN In the Era of American World Power*

By James Traub

Farrar Straus Giroux. 442 pp. \$26

### *"COMPLICITY WITH EVIL"*

*The United Nations in the Age Of Modern Genocide*

By Adam LeBor

Yale Univ. 326 pp. \$25

The new year marks the end of two turbulent terms at the United Nations: that of Kofi Annan, who served 10 years as secretary general, and that of John R. Bolton, who lasted just 17 months as the U.S. ambassador there. When Bolton was asked about a December 2006 farewell dinner that President Bush held for Annan, the departing American diplomat sniped, "Nobody sang 'Kumbaya.'" Clearly, Bolton's familiarity with the United Nations had only bred further contempt. When told of Bolton's remark, Annan laughed and said, "Does he know how to sing it?" After nearly a decade of often futile attempts to tame the United States, it was no wonder Annan had come to question whether U.S. diplomats would ever willingly sing from a multilateral hymn book.

Since the United States helped found the United Nations in 1945, American ties with the organization have often been strained. Because the last six decades have coincided with an epoch of U.S. hegemony -- first as the stronger of two superpowers, then as the lone post-Cold War "hyperpower," now as an economic powerhouse that has been politically neutered by the catastrophic invasion of Iraq -- Americans have generally seen the United Nations as a body more likely to curb U.S. power than to enhance it.

But something appears to be changing in the United States. Poll data show that Americans are at last grasping that the major 21st-century threats -- transnational terrorism, nuclear proliferation, global warming, public health calamities, large-

scale refugee flows -- cannot be met by individual nations. For all their frustrations with international organizations, Americans have also come to understand that U.S. policies with international backing are more likely to succeed than those advanced solo.

Because the United States needs help, and because the United Nations is the lone body that gathers all of the world's countries in one place, reflections on the organization -- how to live with it and how to reform it -- seem suddenly urgent. Thus we can welcome the arrival of these new books by two prolific and well-traveled journalists, *The Best Intentions*, by James Traub and "*Complicity with Evil*," by Adam LeBor.

In emphasizing the last decade of U.N. history, the two books cover some similar terrain. But LeBor's focus -- on the U.N. response to genocide in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur -- is narrower than that of Traub, who also chronicles the world body's more successful nation-building experiments in Kosovo and East Timor, as well as the organization's fateful attempts to prevent a meltdown in Iraq. LeBor, who covered the Balkan wars for the Times of London, offers a pithy -- though sometimes simplistic -- outsider's polemic against the United Nations. Traub, a New York Times reporter who spent several years with unparalleled access to Annan and his top advisers, serves up a more nuanced -- and sometimes dense -- insider's account, arguing that the United Nations cannot change until the countries within it change first.

The depth of hostility to the world body often turns on whether one sees the "United Nations" as a mere building where countries gather to do their business or whether one believes the secretary general and his staff are influential actors in their own right. As reflected in the telling titles Traub and LeBor have given their books, the two men bring very different perspectives to this question.

Traub seems to see the United Nations mainly as a building, a forum where its members -- diplomats from 192 sovereign states -- gather to pursue their national priorities. He would thus agree with Richard C. Holbrooke, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, who said memorably that "blaming the U.N. for Rwanda is like blaming Madison Square Garden when the Knicks play badly." Traub laments that the U.N. Secretariat, which is composed of well-meaning diplomats and humanitarians, is unable to circumvent the will of the organization's most powerful member states -- states that are frequently divided, deeply self-interested and too rarely motivated by a concern for the global commons.

In other words, the secretary general of the United Nations is more of a secretary than a general. And the place to lay blame is the U.N. Security Council, the organization's executive branch, where the five veto-wielding permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- have gone from being paralyzed over Iraq in 2003 to being paralyzed over Darfur and Iran in 2007. Traub's view is perhaps best encapsulated by a marvelous anecdote he resurrects from 1965: When Secretary General U Thant tried to open back-channel ties to the North Vietnamese, Secretary of State Dean Rusk called him off by shouting, "Who do you think you are, a country?"

For his part, LeBor sees the United Nations less as a building than as an international actor in its own right. He got his formative introduction to the United Nations during the 1990s in Bosnia, where U.N. peacekeepers tried to maintain the favor of the marauding Bosnian Serbs by downplaying atrocity reports and even shining their spotlights on Bosnian civilians trying to flee the Serb siege of Sarajevo, thereby exposing these desperate people to Serb sniper attacks.

The new secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, and the nearly 4,000 civil servants who work for him in New York are paid to promote the ideals in the U.N. Charter above those in the constitutions in their countries of origin. So, LeBor wonders, if these men and women do not pull out all the stops in pursuit of peace and justice, who else will? LeBor takes direct aim at U.N. civil servants, arguing that, in the face of genocide in the Balkans and Africa, they have not stood up on behalf of the helpless. Describing Annan as "the chief administrative officer" of the United Nations, LeBor writes, is a "vast understatement" that lets him off the hook. The United Nations, he argues, is not "merely a vast human computer waiting to be programmed by its masters in the Security Council."

The trouble with leaning exclusively on either Traub's or LeBor's approach is that the distinctions between the United Nations as a building and the United Nations as an actor are blurry: The United Nations is, of course, both things at once. Although Traub acknowledges this, he sometimes gives U.N. civil servants the very free pass they give themselves, portraying Annan, for example, as "unfairly blamed for failures not of his own doing." In fact, U.N. officials can deserve blame. They raise false hopes of protection that they -- but not the civilians under their watch -- know they will not be able to keep. They self-censor for fear of getting too far out in front of the member states. In so doing, they hoard information to which only they have access and miss important

opportunities to affect the domestic political debates that will ultimately shape the will of the major powers. Instead of taking personal responsibility, many U.N. officials engage in what LeBor rightly condemns as "buck passing." They also too frequently become what the U.N. critic David Rieff has called "cultists of the small victory," losing sight of the burning forest while scurrying around in search of the seed to plant a single tree.

But LeBor neglects to mention that U.N. officials who condemn aggression, corruption or atrocities without the consent of powerful governments do not survive in the U.N. system. Annan himself nearly lost his job. As Traub documents, the Republican campaign to string up the secretary general for his role in the oil-for-food scandal grew virulent only after Annan made the obvious point that, lacking Security Council authorization, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was "illegal." To gauge the relative responsibility of the organization, it might be helpful for U.N. bashers to ask, "But for Kofi Annan or the presence of U.N. peacekeepers, would the response of the countries on the Security Council have been any different in Bosnia, Rwanda or Darfur?" The answer, sadly, is no. (Although it's not credited in LeBor's account, Annan's office has spoken out more about Darfur than almost any government.) And by homing in almost exclusively on the United Nations, as LeBor has done, rather than pinpointing the responsibility of the countries with the armies, the financial leverage and the diplomatic clout to stop these horrors, his book could have the effect -- perhaps unintended -- of absolving those best positioned to make a difference. Governments that claim to be dismayed that the "United Nations" has not halted the rampaging Janjaweed militiamen in Sudan should look less at the world body and more in the mirror.

U.N. member states and U.N. civil servants have grown practiced at pointing fingers at one another. But what both Traub and LeBor show is that meaningful U.N. reform will not happen until both parts of the United Nations -- the U.N. civil servants loyal to the U.N. Charter and the 192 countries within the organization -- look inward and become accountable for their sins. With so many transnational threats looming, such introspection -- and transformation -- is long overdue. ?

*Samantha Power, a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, won a Pulitzer Prize for her book " 'A Problem from Hell': America and the Age of Genocide." She is writing a political biography of Sergio Vieira de Mello, the U.N. representative in Iraq killed by a suicide bomber in August 2003.*