

Kofi Annan's Final Speech

Monday, 11 December 2006

Thank you, Senator [Hagel] for that wonderful introduction. It is a great honour to be introduced by such a distinguished legislator.

And thanks to you, Mr Devine, and all your staff, and to the wonderful UNA chapter of Kansas City, for all you have done to make this occasion possible.

What a pleasure, and a privilege, to be here in Missouri. It is almost a homecoming for me. Nearly half a century ago I was a student about 400 miles north of here, in Minnesota.

I arrived there straight from Africa - and I can tell you, Minnesota soon taught me the value of a thick overcoat, a warm scarf and even ear-muffs!

When you leave one home for another, there are always lessons to be learnt. And I had more to learn when I moved on from Minnesota to the United Nations - the indispensable common house of the entire human family, which has been my main home for the last 44 years.

Today I want to talk particularly about five lessons I have learnt in the last 10 years, during which I have had the difficult but exhilarating role of Secretary General.

I think it is especially fitting that I do that here in the house that honours the legacy of Harry S Truman. If FDR [Franklin D Roosevelt] was the architect of the United Nations, President Truman was the master-builder, and the faithful champion of the Organisation in its first years, when it had to face quite different problems from the ones FDR had expected.

Truman's name will for ever be associated with the memory of far-sighted American leadership in a great global endeavour. And you will see that every one of my five lessons brings me to the conclusion that such leadership is no less sorely needed now than it was 60 years ago.

Collective responsibility

My first lesson is that, in today's world, the security of every one of us is linked to that of everyone else.

That was already true in Truman's time. The man who in 1945 gave the order for nuclear weapons to be used - for the first, and let us hope the only, time in history - understood that security for some could never again be achieved at the price of insecurity for others.

He was determined, as he had told the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco, to "prevent, if human mind, heart, and hope can prevent it, the repetition of the disaster [meaning the world war] from which the entire world will suffer for years to come".

He believed strongly that henceforth security must be collective and indivisible.

That was why, for instance, he insisted, when faced with aggression by North Korea against the South in 1950, on bringing the issue to the United Nations and placing US troops under the UN flag, at the head of a multinational force.

But how much more true it is in our open world today: a world where deadly weapons can be obtained not only by rogue states but by extremist groups; a world where Sars or avian flu can be carried across oceans, let alone national borders, in a matter of hours; a world where failed states in the heart of Asia or Africa can become havens for terrorists; a world where even the climate is changing in ways that will affect the lives of everyone on the planet.

Against such threats as these, no nation can make itself secure by seeking supremacy over all others. We all share responsibility for each other's security, and only by working to make each other secure can we hope to achieve lasting security for ourselves.

And I would add that this responsibility is not simply a matter of states being ready to come to each other's aid when attacked - important though that is.

It also includes our shared responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity - a responsibility solemnly accepted by all nations at last year's UN summit.

That means that respect for national sovereignty can no longer be used as a shield by governments intent on massacring their own people, or as an excuse for the rest of us to do nothing when such heinous crimes are committed.

But, as Truman said, "If we should pay merely lip service to inspiring ideals, and later do violence to simple justice, we would draw down upon us the bitter wrath of generations yet unborn."

And when I look at the murder, rape and starvation to which the people of Darfur are being subjected, I fear that we have not got far beyond "lip service".

The lesson here is that high-sounding doctrines like the "responsibility to protect" will remain pure rhetoric unless and until those with the power to intervene effectively - by exerting political, economic or, in the last resort, military muscle - are prepared to take the lead.

And I believe we have a responsibility not only to our contemporaries but also to future generations - a responsibility to preserve resources that belong to them as well as to us, and without which none of us can survive.

That means we must do much more, and urgently, to prevent or slow down climate change. Every day that we do nothing, or too little, imposes higher costs on our children and our children's children.

Global solidarity

My second lesson is that we are not only all responsible for each other's security. We are also, in some measure, responsible for each other's welfare.

Global solidarity is both necessary and possible. It is necessary because without a measure of solidarity no society can be truly stable, and no one's prosperity truly secure.

That applies to national societies - as all the great industrial democracies learned in the 20th century - but it also applies to the increasingly integrated global market economy we live in today.

It is not realistic to think that some people can go on deriving great benefits from globalization while billions of their fellow human beings are left in abject poverty, or even thrown into it.

We have to give our fellow citizens, not only within each nation but in the global community, at least a chance to share in our prosperity.

That is why, five years ago, the UN Millennium Summit adopted a set of goals - the "Millennium Development Goals" - to be reached by 2015: goals such as halving the proportion of people in the world who do not have clean water to drink; making sure all girls, as well as boys, receive at least primary education; slashing infant and maternal mortality; and stopping the spread of HIV/Aids.

Much of that can only be done by governments and people in the poor countries themselves. But richer countries, too, have a vital role.

Here too, Harry Truman proved himself a pioneer, proposing in his 1949 inaugural address a program of what came to be known as development assistance. And our success in mobilising donor countries to support the Millennium Development Goals, through debt relief and increased foreign aid, convinces me that global solidarity is not only necessary but possible.

Of course, foreign aid by itself is not enough. Today, we realise that market access, fair terms of trade and a non-discriminatory financial system are equally vital to the chances of poor countries.

Even in the next few weeks and months, you Americans can make a crucial difference to many millions of poor people, if you are prepared to save the Doha Round of trade negotiations.

You can do that by putting your broader national interest above that of some powerful sectional lobbies, while challenging Europe and the large developing countries to do the same.

The rule of law

My third lesson is that both security and development ultimately depend on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Although increasingly interdependent, our world continues to be divided - not only by economic differences, but also by religion and culture.

That is not in itself a problem. Throughout history human life has been enriched by diversity, and different communities have learnt from each other.

But if our different communities are to live together in peace we must stress also what unites us: our common humanity, and our shared belief that human dignity and rights should be protected by law.

That is vital for development, too. Both foreign investors and a country's own citizens are more likely to engage in productive activity when their basic rights are protected and they can be confident of fair treatment under the law.

And policies that genuinely favour economic development are much more likely to be adopted if the people most in need of development can make their voice heard.

In short, human rights and the rule of law are vital to global security and prosperity. As Truman said, "We must, once and for all, prove by our acts conclusively that Right Has Might."

That is why this country has historically been in the vanguard of the global human rights movement. But that lead 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 abroad are naturally troubled and confused.

And states need to play by the rules towards each other, as well as towards their own citizens. That can sometimes be inconvenient, but ultimately what matters is not convenience. It is doing the right thing.

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.

No community anywhere suffers from too much rule of law; many do suffer from too little - and the international community is among them. This we must change.

The US has given the world an example of a democracy in which everyone, including the most powerful, is subject to legal restraint. Its current moment of world supremacy gives it a priceless opportunity to entrench the same principles at the global level.

As Harry Truman said, "We all have to recognise, no matter how great our strength, that we must deny ourselves the licence to do always as we please."

Mutual accountability

My fourth lesson - closely related to the last one - is that governments must be accountable for their actions in the international arena, as well as in the domestic one.

Today the actions of one state can often have a decisive effect on the lives of people in other states.

So does it not owe some account to those other states and their citizens, as well as to its own? I believe it does.

As things stand, accountability between states is highly skewed. Poor and weak states are easily held to account, because they need foreign assistance. But large and powerful states, whose actions have the greatest impact on others, can be constrained only by their own people, working through their domestic institutions.

That gives the people and institutions of such powerful states a special responsibility to take account of global views and interests, as well as national ones.

And today they need to take into account also the views of what, in UN jargon, we call "non-state actors". I mean commercial corporations, charities and pressure groups, labour unions, philanthropic foundations, universities and think tanks - all the myriad forms in which people come together voluntarily to think about, or try to change, the world.

None of these should be allowed to substitute itself for the state, or for the democratic process by which citizens choose their governments and decide policy. But they all have the capacity to influence political processes, on the international as well as the national level.

States that try to ignore this are hiding their heads in the sand.

The fact is that states can no longer - if they ever could - confront global challenges alone. Increasingly, we need to enlist the help of these other actors, both in working out global strategies and in putting those strategies into action once agreed.

It has been one of my guiding principles as Secretary General to get them to help achieve UN aims - for instance through the Global Compact with international business, which I initiated in 1999, or in the worldwide fight against polio, which I hope is now in its final chapter, thanks to a wonderful partnership between the UN family, the US Centers for Disease Control and - crucially - Rotary International.

Multilateralism

So that is four lessons. Let me briefly remind you of them: First, we are all responsible for each other's security. Second, we can and must give everyone the chance to benefit from global prosperity. Third, both security and prosperity depend on human rights and the rule of law. Fourth, states must be accountable to each other, and to a broad range of non-state actors, in their international conduct.

My fifth and final lesson derives inescapably from those other four. We can only do all these things by working together through a multilateral system, and by making the best possible use of the unique instrument bequeathed to us by Harry Truman and his contemporaries, namely the United Nations.

In fact, it is only through multilateral institutions that states can hold each other to account. And that makes it very important to organize those institutions in a fair and democratic way, giving the poor and the weak some influence over the actions of the rich and the strong.

That applies particularly to the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Developing countries should have a stronger voice in these bodies, whose decisions can have almost a life-or-death impact on their fate.

And it also applies to the UN Security Council, whose membership still reflects the reality of 1945, not of today's world.

That is why I have continued to press for Security Council reform. But reform involves two separate issues.

One is that new members should be added, on a permanent or long-term basis, to give greater representation to parts of the world which have limited voice today.

The other, perhaps even more important, is that all Council members, and especially the major powers who are permanent members, must accept the special responsibility that comes with their privilege.

The Security Council is not just another stage on which to act out national interests. It is the management committee, if you will, of our fledgling collective security system.

As President Truman said, "The responsibility of the great states is to serve and not dominate the peoples of the world."

He showed what can be achieved when the US assumes that responsibility. And still today, none of our global institutions can accomplish much when the US remains aloof. But when it is fully engaged, the sky is the limit.

These five lessons can be summed up as five principles, which I believe are essential for the future conduct of international relations: collective responsibility, global solidarity, the rule of law, mutual accountability, and multilateralism.

Let me leave them with you, in solemn trust, as I hand over to a new Secretary General in three weeks' time.

My friends, we have achieved much since 1945, when the United Nations was established.

But much remains to be done to put those five principles into practice.

Standing here, I am reminded of Winston Churchill's last visit to the White House, just before Truman left office in 1953. Churchill recalled their only previous meeting, at the Potsdam conference in 1945.

"I must confess, sir," he said boldly, "I held you in very low regard then. I loathed your taking the place of Franklin Roosevelt." Then he paused for a moment, and continued: "I misjudged you badly. Since that time, you more than any other man, have saved Western civilisation."

My friends, our challenge today is not to save Western civilisation - or Eastern, for that matter. All civilisation is at stake, and we can save it only if all peoples join together in the task.

You Americans did so much, in the last century, to build an effective multilateral system, with the United Nations at its heart.

Do you need it less today, and does it need you less, than 60 years ago? Surely not.

More than ever today Americans, like the rest of humanity, need a functioning global system through which the world's peoples can face global challenges together.

And in order to function, the system still cries out for far-sighted American leadership, in the Truman tradition.

I hope and pray that the American leaders of today, and tomorrow, will provide it. Thank you very much.