



## Bush v. Annan: Taming the United Nations

*Martin Walker*

The wretched regime of Saddam Hussein, having inflicted wars on its neighbors and gruesome misrule and chemical weapons on its own citizens, is doing more damage from beyond the grave. The skill of Saddam Hussein's corrupting oil wealth and of his smuggling operations has exposed the administration of the United Nations to its enemies. And in President George W. Bush's America, the United Nations has enemies in abundance, and the complex but scandalous nature of the U.N.'s internal difficulties makes it hard for the U.N.'s friends to defend it. The United Nations now stands at bay in a confrontation that is protean in the way it sets the physical power of the world's only superpower against the moral power of the international body. This battle may yet have some rounds to be fought, but there is no doubting its scale, nor its global news value. Remarkably, not even the awesome devastation of last December's Asian tsunami could quite put the human rivalries over the United Nations into their place; the confrontation spilled over into a diplomatic jostling match to decide who would take responsibility, and possibly credit, for the reconstruction effort.

The struggle set the newly reelected president of the United States against the lame duck secretary general of the United Nations, although it was their surrogates who took up the cudgels. Two of the world's most impressive spin machines then became locked in deadly combat. On the one side was the mob that Hillary Clinton once called "the vast right wing conspiracy," a group of conservative U.S. senators and con-

gressmen, and their intensely ideological staffs, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News television channel and his *New York Post*, the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, the *National Review*, and some other organs of nationalist conservatism, all calling for the head of U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan.

Kofi must go, they thundered, because Saddam Hussein was allowed to steal over \$20 billion in the U.N.'s oil-for-food scandal that happened on Annan's watch. This is a shameless exaggeration, but there were abuses, and the blame spreads around a large number of people and institutions, including the U.S. government bureaucracy as well as the U.N. administration that Annan runs. But what really offends this conservative coalition is Annan's political effrontery during an American presidential election season. Annan twice publicly challenged the Bush administration's foreign policy, first by writing an appeal to halt the attack on Fallujah, and then by calling Bush's Iraq war "illegal." (In fact this was the fault of the BBC, whose reporter badgered poor Annan into using the word. Annan was asked the same question repeatedly until he came up with what he thought was the rather less provocative phrase, "illegal in terms of the U.N. Charter," which he now privately regrets.)

Republican senator Norman Coleman, after a committee investigation claimed to have found evidence that the United Nations had let Saddam get his crooked hands on \$21.3 billion, demanded that Annan resign. This was accompanied by a resolution before both houses of Congress demanding

that Annan leave office, backed up by a bill that would enforce the will of Congress by cutting 10 percent from the U.S. payment next year, 20 percent the year after, and so on, until the United Nations comes to heel. Some of the more outspoken local politicians in New York were even cruder, suggesting that the United Nations should be evicted to Europe. "Let the French deal with all the U.N. diplomats and their unpaid parking tickets," said Brooklyn's state senator Martin J. Golden. "We have a U.N. here that has a tendency to just ignore us, insult us, be a bad neighbor, and not do what it should do. This guy Kofi Annan could have stood with us in Iraq, decided not to. He oversaw \$21 billion being robbed from oil-for-food." This figure is a ridiculous exaggeration, as we shall see.

On the other side is the great amorphous mass of global liberalism, all clucking in unison that Kofi Annan is the best U.N. secretary general since Dag Hammarskjöld (although a list that includes Kurt Waldheim and Boutros Boutros-Ghali is not much competition). Led by British prime minister Tony Blair and the departing U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell, and reinforced by the governments of China, Russia, Germany, and France, the editorial boards of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and the news bulletins of National Public Radio and the BBC, the international establishment has rallied to Annan as the first African to run the world body, and as the first secretary general to bring forward thoughtful and even bold plans for U.N. reform.

Kofi Annan must stay, they all cry, most of them thrilling to the symbolism of a clash between President Bush, who proudly sports a small American flag in his lapel, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Annan, whose equally well-tailored lapel sports a discreet dove, tastefully wrought in white enamel. Annan, who confided to friends last November that it was "a bit like a lynching, actually," was not sure how to respond to

these attacks, or whether this kind of media and congressional assault against the United Nations was just a force of nature that had to be endured. But some of the more thoughtful of Annan's supporters, who want to avoid a lasting breach between the organization and its American host, thought that the best way to defend Annan was to go on the offensive, both in Washington and in New York, against the more vulnerable and unreformed aspects of the world body.

Richard Holbrooke, a former U.S. representative to the United Nations in the Clinton years, organized a meeting at his New York apartment on December 4 between Annan and some of the key figures in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, who had been asked to join a mission to "save Kofi and rescue the U.N." From the Council on Foreign Relations came Holbrooke and the council's former president Leslie Gelb; from the United Nations Foundation came former U.S. senator and under secretary of state Tim Wirth and Kathy Bushkin from Gary Hart's presidential campaign (their presence gilded by the generosity of CNN founder Ted Turner, whose gifts to the United Nations have been channeled through the foundation); and from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard came John G. Ruggie, a former U.N. assistant secretary general for policy coordination and strategic planning. Also present were Robert C. Orr, the current holder of that post, and Nader Mousavizadeh, Rhodes Scholar and a former editor at the *New Republic*, who was Annan's aide for six years before joining the investment firm of Goldman Sachs.

Annan, who was largely silent, heard the group warn that the United Nations was on the losing side of a public relations campaign; that the critique of the oil-for-food affair would soon be followed by allegations of sexual abuse by U.N. peacekeepers in Africa; and that he had to address two serious problems immediately. First, the Republicans who ran the White House and Congress thought Annan had worked for

their electoral defeat, and these were not the sort of opponents who took prisoners. So Annan had to mend fences in Washington and learn to play the lobbying game, with the secretary general becoming a far more visible presence in the city; the United Nations might even need to hire professional lobbying help. Second, even though his reforms of the lumbering U.N. bureaucracy had not gone nearly far enough, Annan had to restore the morale of a wretched and miserable U.N. staff, many of whom had little faith in their seniors. Some were palpably incompetent if not corrupt; others had become painfully controversial within the U.N. family, like the High Commissioner for Refugees (and former Dutch prime minister) Ruud Lubbers, who was accused of sexual harassment at a time when U.N. peacekeepers in the Balkans and Congo faced formal inquiries into allegations of sexual abuse. One key change was already in the works: Annan's longtime chief of staff, Iqbal Riza, was about to be replaced by the dynamic former *Economist* journalist who had made a striking success of running the United Nations Development Program, Mark Malloch Brown.

### *The Oil-for-Food Scandal*

The most dangerous part of the U.N.'s problem was the oil-for-food scandal, a topic of labyrinthine complexity, involving billions of dollars, appalling mismanagement, and possibly some serious fraud. Most ominously, because this is at least one part of the affair that ordinary people could comprehend, Annan's son Kojo had until last year been taking small sums of money, \$2,500 a month in consulting fees, from a Swiss company that was meant to be monitoring the oil-for-food deal. Annan did not know his son was still getting the money until early December, and then admitted to a press conference that this provoked "the perception problem for the U.N., or the perception of conflict of interests and wrongdoing."

All this started 15 years ago, when Saddam Hussein first invaded Kuwait, and the U.N. Security Council imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iraq. After Saddam Hussein's defeat in the first Gulf war, the sanctions were to remain in place until Baghdad satisfied the terms of various U.N. resolutions. These included accounting for the Kuwaitis who had disappeared during the 1990–91 invasion and occupation, restoring the loot taken from Kuwait, and giving international arms inspectors full rein in order to end Iraq's various weapons of mass destruction programs. Saddam Hussein was less than forthcoming. But the sanctions, which were hurting Iraq's civilian population, became politically very difficult to sustain as Saddam Hussein's propaganda machine artfully exploited the heartrending images of starving children and hospitals without drugs.

There need have been no such suffering. Saddam was smuggling at least \$2 billion of oil a year through Jordan, Turkey, and Syria. On the Security Council, the United States and Britain were determined not to open this question, which one British official privately confided to this reporter was "a can of worms." The Turks, a NATO ally who had suffered financially from the closure of the oil pipeline from Iraq, were judged in Washington to deserve compensation. Jordan also suffered from the sanctions, but the Clinton administration judged that its useful role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process deserved some form of reward. So the British and the Americans ignored the smuggling, while the Russians and the French shrugged and acquiesced, possibly with the assurance that this favor would someday be repaid. And then the Clinton administration, focusing intently on the Middle East peace process and Arab opinion, heard from its friends in the Arab world that the sanctions against Iraq were inflicting real hardship on Iraqi civilians. Cunningly exploited by the Saddam Hussein regime, the sanctions were provoking

outrage; Washington accordingly agreed that something had to be done to stop the Iraqi propaganda.

Thus in 1995 an oil-for-food scheme was devised, under which the United Nations would sell Iraq's oil and use the money to buy food and medical supplies that would be handed over to Saddam's government for distribution. The program lasted for eight years, and involved the sale of an average 2 million barrels a day of Iraqi oil, or roughly 5,840 million barrels over eight years. At an average price of \$20 a barrel, the total value of this oil amounted to some \$116.8 billion. This is pretty close to the estimate of \$111 billion reached by the U.N.'s own internal investigation, run by the former head of the U.S. Federal Reserve, Paul Volcker, who was picked by Annan as a man whose integrity would be unquestioned in Washington.

The total sum that went through the United Nations was far less than that, however. Although a firm total is hard to deduce from the tangled calculations of the Volcker report, it seems that the amount was close to \$70 billion. The difference is explained partly by the periodic falls in the oil price, partly by the transport and pipeline and commission fees, and partly by smuggling. Between the end of the Gulf War in 1991 and the start of the oil-for-food program in 1995, the Iraqi regime "earned" over \$10 billion, or more than \$2 billion a year, from smuggling, according to Iraqi defectors and to U.N. estimates. And it may have earned even more after 1995, judging from the anecdotal and visual evidence of the boom in Iraq's Kurdish regions, the route for much of the smuggling trade.

All sorts of figures are being quoted, but many of them are meaningless. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) estimated that Saddam Hussein illegally skimmed \$10.1 billion during the period when the \$70 billion oil-for-food program was in force, and many U.S. congressmen

appear to assume that this figure is reliable. It is not. According to the GAO, more than half of that total—\$5.7 billion—was the result of oil smuggling by Saddam, for which the United Nations was not responsible. But individual members of the U.N. Security Council were very much responsible for this. Reconnaissance satellites and British and American pilots who were enforcing the no-fly zone that had banned the Iraqi air force from flying over northern Iraq could see the convoys of tanker trucks heading for Jordan and Turkey. And reporters for UPI wrote about the way the Kurds in northern Iraq took their share of the smuggling proceeds by charging a fee (usually \$100, but often collected twice at roadblocks set up by both the Talabani and Barzani factions) from every tanker truck heading for Turkey. Iraq's oil smuggling was the most open "secret" in the Middle East.

Senator Coleman's subcommittee hit the headlines by claiming Saddam's real take was \$21.3 billion. But that number included estimates of Saddam's oil proceeds for the five years before the oil-for-food program was started, most of which came from smuggling, which took place with U.S. and British acquiescence. Few critics of the United Nations bothered to cite Iraq Survey Group head Charles Duelfer's modest estimate of Saddam's take from the oil-for-food program of \$1.74 billion, or \$250 million a year. The Iraqi leader's likely take over eight years from the U.N. oil-for-food program thus lies somewhere between Duelfer's \$1.74 billion and the GAO's estimated \$4.4 billion, or somewhere between \$250 million and \$600 million a year—around 3–6 percent of the total sum the United Nations handled.

It was long known that Saddam was trying to skim some money from the oil-for-food system, demanding that tanker owners pay in cash for the right to load the U.N.-sponsored crude oil, and trying to shake down the banks and oil trading companies that were handling the sales for the United

Nations. Saddam could do so because the United Nations had to accept that Iraq was still a sovereign nation and could thus choose to whom it sold the oil and from whom it bought food and drugs. The money was paid into a U.N. escrow account—but there were constant rumors that favored companies had to pay discreet commissions to Saddam. The United Nations itself took a total of \$1.4 billion in administrative fees, and 30 percent of all the money received went to reparations for Kuwaitis and other victims of Iraq, as demanded by the U.N. resolutions.

When Baghdad fell in April 2003, the regime's own paperwork became available and a list emerged of 265 beneficiaries of Saddam Hussein's generosity in handing out oil vouchers to potentially useful friends. These vouchers were legal titles of ownership in barrels of oil, and some of the bundles of vouchers given to favored friends of the regime were worth millions. Among those listed were Indonesia's then president Megawati Sukarnoputri; Russia's Vlad "The Mad" Zhirinovskiy; Charles Pasqua, a former French interior minister; and Benon V. Sevan, a Cypriot who ran the U.N.'s oil-for-food program and is listed as having been granted 13 million barrels of oil. If so, Sevan's share could have been worth around \$250 million. All the above deny any wrongdoing, and these allegations must be treated with great caution. Britain's *Daily Telegraph* lost a libel case to the leftist member of Parliament George Galloway, and had to pay nearly \$400,000 in costs and damages after relying on these questionable Baghdad documents.

Moreover, the list itself and the supporting documentation came from sources close to a man with no reason to like the United Nations—Ahmed Chalabi, once Washington's favorite Iraqi exile and the Bush administration's initial nominee to run Iraq's interim government. Chalabi, who was quick to seize the files of the Mukhabarat secret police and other important govern-

ment agencies after Baghdad fell, called the oil-for-food affair "the biggest political bribery scandal in history." Chalabi and his neoconservative allies in Washington might have a political interest in discrediting the French and Russian politicians who had helped sustain Saddam's regime, and also in undermining the United Nations, which had firmly opposed any gesture of recognition, far less legitimacy, to the interim Iraqi authority of which Chalabi was a key member. Last April, a British financial adviser to Chalabi, Claude Hankes-Drielsma testified to a congressional committee of inquiry in Washington that the U.N.'s oil-for-food program had become Saddam's "convenient vehicle through which he bought support internationally by bribing political parties, companies, journalists and other individuals of influence."

The talk then was of some \$10 billion being siphoned off by Saddam Hussein, and four congressional committees began investigations, which continued throughout last year. In December, the publicity race was won by Senator Coleman, who rushed to judgment by claiming that the staff of his intriguingly named Permanent Sub-Committee on Investigations had established that Saddam Hussein had accumulated at least \$21.3 billion by fooling the U.N. sanctions operation and its oil-for-food program. Senator Coleman accordingly demanded that Kofi Annan resign. The leading Democrat on the same committee, Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, said that wrongdoing had clearly taken place, but he had yet to see evidence that Annan was personally responsible. Indeed, an analysis by Michael Pan, a researcher at the Center for American Progress, notes that all the trades in the oil-for-food program had to be approved by a committee of the U.N. Security Council, known as the 661 Committee, on which U.S., British, French, Russian, and Chinese officials sat. They raised no objections, even when U.N. staff flagged 70 separate transactions as potentially suspicious.

“The United States and Britain, along with the other members of the UN Security Council, designed and oversaw the oil-for-food program,” wrote Harvard’s John G. Ruggie in the *International Herald Tribune* (“What About the Log in Your Eye, Congress?” December 8, 2004). “The United States alone had 60 professionals review each of the 36,000 contracts awarded—more than twice the size of the UN oil-for-food office’s professional staff. America and Britain held up 5,000 contracts, sometimes for months, to ensure that no technology was getting through that Saddam could use for weapons purposes. But they held up none—not a single solitary one—on the grounds of pricing irregularities, even when alerted by UN staff.”

Some of these U.N. alerts became public. The *New York Times* reported Iraqi demands for “kickbacks and illegal contributions” on March 7, 2001, adding that Annan’s office had submitted a report to the U.N. Security Council. In particular, Annan’s staff told the 661 Committee that “prices in a proposed contract between the Al Wasel and Babel General Trading Company and Iraq appeared suspiciously high.” Nonetheless, the contract was unanimously approved by the Security Council. According to a U.N. press office statement dated January 30, 2005, “It was only in April 2004 that the U.S. Treasury Department identified this company as a front for the regime. This example demonstrates that U.N. staff did report suspicious cases and that while they were not mandated or equipped to check the backgrounds of all suppliers, even those who could, such as the U.S. Government, did not have all of this information until after the Oil-for-Food program ceased to operate.”

#### *Turning a Blind Eye to “Irregularities”*

U.N. officials, speaking off the record because there are risks in leveling accusations at powerful members of the Security Council, suggest that the U.S. and British gov-

ernments turned a blind eye to “pricing irregularities” that benefited French and Russian banks, companies, and individuals. It was important to keep France and Russia on the side of the increasingly unpopular sanctions regime against Iraq. If the price was a certain laxity in standards, or a deliberately relaxed oversight when a French bank or Russian politician seemed to be doing rather well out of the system, then so be it. This may be squalid, but the squalor is not the fault of Kofi Annan or the United Nations. And if U.S. congressional investigators seek a focus for their outrage, they might inquire into the way some \$8 billion was taken from the U.N.’s remaining escrow accounts for the “Iraq Development Fund” run by the U.S. pro-consul in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer. American promises (to the Security Council) that the fund would be independently audited have yet to be fulfilled, and U.N. sources suspect that much of the money went to Halliburton on noncompetitive contracts. Indeed, broad hints have been dropped in the corridors of the Security Council that if the U.S. congressional inquiries start pursuing the French bank Paribas, French and German authorities will have their own inquiries to pursue into the degree to which Halliburton’s subsidiaries in Europe ignored U.N. sanctions while Saddam Hussein was still in power.

These concerns were being voiced somewhere above the competence of Senator Coleman who thought it a good idea to demand Kofi Annan’s head. “Good old Norm—it appears there’s nothing he won’t do for a headline,” commented Senator Coleman’s hometown newspaper. The paper had a point. Senator Coleman is “outraged” that the United Nations would not hand over all the evidence that its own internal inquiry into the matter had uncovered, and would not make its staff available for the U.S. Senate committee to interrogate, despite the convention that U.N. officials have diplomatic immunity. But the Americans

are equally guilty. The man assigned by Kofi Annan to run the U.N.'s own inquiry, Paul Volcker, complains that the U.S. government is not helping him in his inquiries. Volcker's final report is expected in July, but in January he published an interim report, based on some 50 internal U.N. audits, which found that in the first batch of oil-for-food contracts in 1996 "in each case, the procurement process was tainted, failed to follow established rules designed to ensure fairness and accountability...and political considerations intruded."

Volcker's report found considerable mismanagement by the United Nations, an extraordinary lack of oversight by the U.N.'s Benon Sevan, and a number of questions that Sevan must answer. His current explanation, that his wealth comes from the generosity of an aunt in Cyprus, a woman of visibly modest means, is less than satisfactory. "The evidence is conclusive that Mr. Sevan, in effectively participating in the selection of purchasers of oil under the Program, placed himself in an irreconcilable conflict of interest," Volcker concluded.

Perhaps even more serious is the question Volcker has raised over the involvement of Annan's predecessor as U.N. secretary general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a French-speaking Egyptian Copt whose reappointment the Clinton administration vetoed in the belief that he was anti-American and had been demonstrably incompetent in Bosnia. The oil-for-food program was launched during Boutros-Ghali's term, and he appears to have been instrumental in placing France's BNP (Banque Nationale de Paris) on the U.N.'s approved list to handle oil-for-food transactions, after he made what the Volcker report called "a confidential approach" to the French ambassador to the United Nations. Moreover, the Volcker inquiry suggests that Benon Sevan assigned contracts to a Swiss-based company, African Middle East Petroleum, which is run by Fakhri Abdelnour, Boutros-Ghali's cousin. Telephone logs suggest that Abdelnour and

Sevan had a go-between, Fred Nadler, whose sister Leia is Boutros-Ghali's wife.

This line of inquiry is potentially devastating for the United Nations, in suggesting that the mud from this scandal is already splashing into the office of not just one but two secretaries general. Volcker has already pledged to pursue the Boutros-Ghali matter "as far as the documents take us" and also to give a full accounting of the role of Kofi Annan's son in helping to secure other contracts. One corrupt secretary general can be explained as a bad apple; two would be a systematic problem. Three—let us not forget the earlier scandal over the wartime record of Kurt Waldheim in Adolf Hitler's Wehrmacht—is an institutional disaster. And it does not much matter that the sums from the pillaging of the oil-for-food contracts were peanuts in comparison with the billions each year that came from Iraq's permitted smuggling operations to Turkey and Jordan.

The Volcker inquiry has also revealed two glaring U.N. administrative problems that had nothing to do with Saddam Hussein. The first was serious mismanagement of humanitarian programs in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, and the second was more than \$5 billion in overpayments by the U.N. Compensation Commission, a separate body from the oil-for-food program, which hands out compensation for Iraqi depredations in the 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The audit also suggests that Saybolt International BV, a Dutch company engaged to monitor Iraqi oil exports, overcharged the United Nations by inflating invoices, billing for accommodation of workers provided by the Iraqi government and exaggerating staffing and other expenses. The chairman of the International Relations Committee of the House of Representatives, Henry Hyde, an Illinois Republican, correctly said the audits appear to "show a systemic failure on the part of the U.N. to responsibly administer the oil-for-food program." But this was not the proof of con-

nivance in Saddam's loot that the U.N.'s foes had expected.

*A Visibly Weakened U.N.*

But this whole affair is not entirely about getting the facts, nor even about Kofi Annan or Boutros Boutros-Ghali. For some American nationalists, it is about taming the United Nations as the only international institution with even the moral authority to make the United States pay a price for unilateral decisions like going to war against Iraq. For the internationalists and the international establishment, it is about restraining the White House and promoting the one institution with the prestige to do it—witness the way that Bush's usually reliable Tony Blair rushed to Annan's defense. Senator Coleman's *Minneapolis Star Tribune* put it succinctly: "For months before the election, the right-wing constellation of blogs and talk radio was alive with incendiary rhetoric about Annan and the oil-for-food scandal.... This is really all about Annan's refusal to toe the Bush line on Iraq and the administration's generally unilateral approach to foreign affairs. The right-wingers hate Annan and saw in the food-for-oil program a possible chink in his armor. They went after it with a venomous fury."

Not all did so. President Bush himself remained carefully above the fray, saying in public only that the United Nations must "get to the bottom of the matter." In effect, the president was content for Annan to twist slowly in the wind while the conservative attack went on. There was little point in Bush wasting political capital in demanding the resignation of a secretary general with just two years left of his term when the rest of the Security Council (and at least the 53 African member states) was likely to fight to keep him. But a Kofi Annan thus savaged with accusations of corruption, fraud, and mismanagement was a United Nations visibly weakened. Still, the outspoken support of Annan by over 120 of the 191 member states, including published let-

ters from Blair, France's president Jacques Chirac, and Russia's president Vladimir Putin, and the standing ovation Annan received from the General Assembly in the first week of December inspired a graceless American gesture. While President Bush kept his silence, his representative to the United Nations, former U.S. senator John Danforth, told reporters he was speaking for the president when he declared: "We are expressing confidence in the secretary general and his continuing in office. Our view of the performance of the secretary general is that he has done a good job, that he is doing a good job."

But the White House's lack of confidence in Annan and the United Nations was evident when the tsunami hit the shorelines of the Indian Ocean on December 26. President Bush's first public reaction to the disaster was to announce the creation of a "humanitarian coalition" to coordinate relief to the stricken area. What he called the "core group," consisted of the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, although the president invited other nations to join, under the leadership of a U.S. official, Under Secretary of State Mark Grossman. Suspicions at the United Nations were so sharp that this was immediately seen as an attempt by the Bush administration to dominate global relief in the biggest natural disaster in memory, thus marginalizing the United Nations in one of its major roles of coordinating international aid.

There was some logic to the president's move. Only the United States had the aircraft carriers and the instantly available military logistics and communications systems that would prove crucial to the relief effort. But then Norwegian diplomat Jan Egeland reminded the world of the "stingy" lack of generosity of many richer nations, provoking an egregiously harsh reaction from the Bush administration. And Secretary of State Colin Powell was perhaps making the religious politics of American aid rather too obvious when he said at a press conference



with the president of Indonesia: “I think it does give to the Muslim world and the rest of the world an opportunity to see American generosity, American values in action.”

If the Bush administration had sought to seize the leadership of the aid effort, it failed. After several days of canvassing by Secretary Powell and other administration officials only two other countries had come on board—New Zealand and Canada. When the Bush administration approached Britain and Italy—whose leaders Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi are both staunch Bush allies—they replied that the U.S. plan was widely seen as “divisive” at a time when the entire world wanted to display a united front. Accordingly, at the tsunami disaster donors’ conference in Jakarta in January, Colin Powell announced that the U.S.-led coalition had been disbanded, and relief would be supervised solely by the United Nations. This announcement was greeted with cheers, and was seen by many as a moral victory for Kofi Annan, who responded gracefully, saying, “We have seen the world come together. We have witnessed a response founded not on differences, but on that which unites us.”

So is it now over, and has Annan won? Possibly; the irony is that Kofi Annan was installed at the United Nations by the Americans as their trusty when the Clinton administration determined to ditch Boutros Boutros-Ghali. On the whole, Annan has performed to American satisfaction, getting some initial financial reforms through the United Nations and ditching 350 years of international law on national sovereignty to assert that genocide or extreme wickedness toward one’s own people can on occasion justify international intervention. At the end of last year, Annan issued a historic report of a group of “wise men” which retrospectively endorsed the Bush’s administration’s principal argument—that the combination of rogue states, superterrorists, and nuclear weapons is so new and so dangerous that preemptive military strikes

might be needed and justified under international law.

But Annan and the wise men insisted that some fig leaf of a U.N. mandate from the Security Council must first be obtained—which famously did not happen over Iraq. (But note that Annan, in an earlier attempt to accommodate the realities of American policy and its whims, went along with the 1999 Kosovo war, which had only a NATO mandate, when it became clear that Russia would use its veto to block a U.N. mandate for an attack on Serbia.) American nationalists reject this as giving France, Russia, and China a veto over America’s right to defend itself and its allies against nuclear 9/11s. That is the core of the problem, not Saddam’s looted billions, and that is why there is no guarantee that Annan will serve out the remaining two years of his term of office, or that his successor will not come under similar American pressure, or that the United Nations, as the custodian of the multilateral principle, will ever be entirely at ease with an impatient American superpower that can be so easily tempted to operate unilaterally.

At least Annan still has a sense of humor. At a gala evening for the U.N. Correspondents Association at the height of the stormy demands in the U.S. Congress for his head, Annan began his speech by saying, “I have resigned.” A stunned silence fell over the assembly. Then Annan grinned and continued, “resigned myself to having a good time this evening.” This was greeted by cheers and cries of relief, and lots of suddenly gripped cell phones were slipped unobtrusively back into pockets by the assembled correspondents. But it may be Annan’s last agreeable evening for quite some time; Volcker’s final report is not expected until June or July, and the moral authority of Annan and the United Nations will be at best clouded until then. And for the next six months, which could see some momentous decisions by the Bush administration on the nuclear weapons programs of Iran and

North Korea, and on the nuisance value of Syria in the Middle East, Kofi Annan will not be strongly placed to warn, to mobilize or even to comment. This is quite sufficient for the American nationalists and unilateralists. Even when they fail to take down their chosen target, Annan's critics are deter-

mined to wound the institution and weaken its ability to affect U.S. policy. For the moment, the U.N. secretary general's office and the broader administration is scrambling to defend itself, and the United Nations as a whole is effectively neutralized. ●