

The Women's Foreign Policy Group Presents

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Communicating the Challenge and the Hope

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Maxine Isaacs: Our next speaker and our last speaker for this morning is Edward Mortimer. Mr. Mortimer has worked in the Executive Office of the Secretary General since 1998, is head of the speech-writing unit and, since 2001, is Director of Communications. He is a former Foreign Affairs writer and commentator, the author of several books and this morning, his topic is "Communicating the Challenge and the Hope."

Edward Mortimer: Thank you very much indeed. Welcome all of you to the United Nations. I see you have a star-studded program and I'm honored to be part of it. I think I should thank Dawn Calabia for devising this title which reflects her experience working with us as she did for quite a few years along with Katherine in the UN Information Center in Washington. I think it captures extremely well the duality of communicating.

Like any other political endeavor, the United Nations is as much as anything else, an exercise in communication. You are, if you are Secretary General of the United Nations, or if you work for the Secretary General of the United Nations, perpetually walking on a tightrope having to face both ways and preserve your balance. One way to think about that is the balance between different parts of the world. I suppose, back in the days of the Cold War it was between Washington and Moscow, west and east. Now it's mainly between north and south. You've probably already heard of it this morning, about the divisions that have been there for a long time among the membership of the United Nations and about how it boiled over in quite an unpleasant way last Friday over the issue of management reform.

A proposal was put forward by the Secretary General, which he sees as being very much in the interest of the whole membership of the UN to make it more efficient and effective in providing services for people around the world. Most of the people to whom it provides services are in fact in poor developing countries. None the less, this proposal of management reform became a bone of contention essentially between the rich countries, who pay most of the bills, and the poor countries who feel that fact is being used to take

ownership of the organization away from them. That's a set of considerations that you have to balance between.

Another is, in the challenge and the hope, you have to be simultaneously making people aware of the problems, the global problems and threats that we face around the world. [These problems] make it necessary to have a common endeavor and have some sort of organization in which people can come together to work out a common response, because these are challenges that face the whole of humanity. You can list them running across from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction at one end of the spectrum to poverty, malnutrition, HIV-AIDS, desertification, climate change all those things at the other end of the spectrum, with, somewhere in between, genocide, collapse of states with anarchy, civil war and various types of crime and so on. Increasingly, the realization [is] that these things are all interconnected.

If you don't talk about those things then people will not feel it necessary to make an effort and they will not understand why you need a United Nations. On the other hand, if you only talk about that, you can very quickly demobilize and demoralize people and they just feel it's all too much, it's all hopeless. How can we, with a sort of frail structure of governments — many of whom we don't agree with or don't like each other anyway — how are we going to get anywhere? Why don't we just go ahead and do our own thing or maybe form a coalition of the willing when necessary? Why bother with this bureaucratic talking-shop? We've heard a certain amount about it in the past few years some of the things that can go wrong in the UN. Someone has to explain why things go wrong, why this institution is not perfect, but why it is still essential and it can actually achieve things.

I notice you had earlier this morning a talk from Oliver Ulich about Darfur, and maybe that's a good illustration of the kind of dilemma that you face. On the one hand, Kofi Annan has done a great deal to ratchet up international expectations about dealing with genocide, ethnic cleansing and other appalling crimes. I think he has helped to instill the idea that we need a world collective conscience when these things happen. We need to be prepared. Of course it should be the responsibility of every government to see that these things don't happen, but we need to look beyond national frontiers and be prepared to take responsibility to what happens to our fellow men and women in any part of the world and take appropriate action when extreme things are happening.

On the other hand, you have the very complicated reality on the ground in Sudan. It is a relatively impoverished and conflict-ridden part of Africa, [there are] a lot of conflicts already going on in the world, [and there are] very few, if any, governments having an appetite for military intervention in another Arab-Muslim country. We all have the difficulties in Iraq very much present to our minds. The reality is that what everyone's hoping is that we'll get some sort of political agreement coming out of the talks in Abuja in the next day or two, and that it will be possible to build on and strengthen the existing African Union force in Darfur and turn it into a United Nations peacekeeping force. [It will be a] robust peacekeeping force, one that has considerable equipment, capable of stamping on isolated outbreaks of violence and people who are trying to spoil the agreement, but not an invasion force. Not a force that is going to say, "You, Sudan are

brutalizing your own people and we the international community are going to come in whether you like it or not and take over that bit of your country and make sure that it's governed better.”

There is a disconnect: on the one hand the discourse about responsibility to protect and about the conscience of human kind,[as seen in] the kind of wonderful demonstration that you saw in Washington last Sunday, which I think you really ought to be seeing in many other places, and I would like to see it in the capitals of African and Muslim countries. At the same time, this messy reality and the fear of making things even worse, particularly if you had a mainly Western force coming in, casting itself as the protector of a group of African Muslims against another group of African Muslims.

The hope is that the UN will be able to do something, will be a useful instrument for its member states to do something to deal with that kind of situation. The challenge is to apply it to the actual politics on the ground; not only the politics of Sudan, not only the politics of East Africa, but also the politics of the countries that might do the intervening.

It's one thing to march on the mall. It's another thing to be the planner in the Pentagon; you know where your troops are and what you need them for and along comes somebody from the State Department and says, well actually we need more troops in Sudan. I don't think you will find many people in the Pentagon who are falling over themselves to send troops here and I'm not sure that American troops would be the best part of the solution.

I say that to illustrate that there are political issues not simply about getting support and acceptance about what you want to do in Africa, but also about generating an effective kind of action from the states that have military power. How do we deal with that? It's a work in progress. We're fine-tuning and redrafting, repositioning all the time.

One moment the Secretary General may be on the phone to an African president, trying to reassure them that this is not an invasion. We want to do this as we're already doing in the south of Sudan where there was already an agreement negotiated, where the UN has come in to help the parties implement it. That's what we want to be doing in Darfur; we're not hostile we're not threatening. At the same time tomorrow, he's going to Washington and he will be at the American Jewish Centennial Dinner where I understand President Bush is going to make a strong speech that will include an element about Darfur, and then he's going to speak at the George Washington University on Friday and then clearly he has to respond, he has to identify himself and the United Nations as being on the side of those who want see something effective done.

That's just one problem, but I think it's a problem that's on many, many people's minds at the moment. I'm sharing it with you just to illustrate how all the time we're...having to face two ways and try and reconcile what may seem like irreconcilable imperatives and yet I don't think that in the last resort there is any choice but to do that. Because I think a world in which you didn't have an organization where people, different regions different opinions, different philosophies, different cultures could come together and try and forge a

common response to common problems would be an even more dangerous and uncertain world than the one we already live in.

Let me try and answer any questions that you have, please also give your own opinions because we're very much in the business of trying to listen and absorb and build on other people's views; we don't think we have the answers.

Patricia Ellis: Earlier today, Gillian Sorensen talked a bit about UN bashing and the whole issue of the UN's image which has been problematic in recent years. I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the challenges in dealing with that and the efforts to counter this and to improve the UN's image? Some of us come from Washington DC so we hear this quite a bit.

Mr. Mortimer: Needless to say that is something I've had to give a lot of thought to in my present job, but most of my life I was a journalist and on the whole, you're resistant to all this talk about image because you think you can see through what the public relations people do.

I think it's also a saying in the advertising industry that no amount of advertising can sell a bad product and there's another even older saying that good wine needs no bush, and a bush I think in medieval times is what you put outside your wine shop to advertise the wine. But generally, if something is worthwhile, people will find it out. I think that obviously we have to answer criticisms and accusations. If there are clear misstatements of fact, we have to do our best to correct them.

But I'm not sure that we should allow ourselves to be obsessed by that. I think that we should accept that some criticisms are justified and indeed necessary; that the UN is a work in progress and we do, all the time, need to be trying to improve it in light of the problems. Sometimes it is the media that has to bring [these problems] to our attention. Obviously we prefer if we find them out for ourselves first, but I think there is always an important interaction between any kind of institution and the media. Certainly in the specific case of Oil for Food, I think part of the drive for reform, which has come now to such a contentious point among the member states of the organization, does indeed come from these discoveries and criticism about the way that the Oil for Food program was managed and the realization that we have to do better than that. I certainly have my differences with some of the journalists and some of the things that have been written and said about the UN and about the Secretary General over the past couple of years, but I think overall we should say it's healthy that there is such scrutiny of the UN, and we must try to make the best use of it.

QUESTION: Obviously you face new leadership that will be coming in very soon. What are the strategies and tactics that you would envision embracing once you have new leadership? What would be your recommendation for a strategic plan and communications that would begin to frankly put behind you as a pretty damaging few years and what's the new vision that you would want to sit down and talk day one with your new leader about?

Mr. Mortimer: I suppose I'm probably the wrong person to ask that question, because I have to start thinking of myself as part of the *ancien regime*. I came here in 1998 to help Kofi Annan, who was still a very new Secretary General at that point, and I actually thought of it as being an interesting interlude in my journalistic career of maybe a year or two. It perhaps tells you something about both him and the work that we do here that I've been gripped by it and stayed up to now, but I've actually now reached the retiring age of the organization, and I don't intend to stick around. I intend to go back to the position of being an independent commentator.

Yes, we have had to deal with accusations and allegations about Oil for Food and about other issues, but we've also put on the table last year a major program of change. In a way the word reform doesn't do justice to it. Yes there is an element of reforming the machinery, the institution, but what really the Secretary General was doing in his report "In Larger Freedom" which came out a little over a year ago, was to invite the world as a whole to rethink its approach to crucial issues that face us in this century. Of course he's presenting the United Nations as a forum and an instrument for doing that.

A large part of it is about development. If you talk to people from most parts of the world, that is the number one problem on the agenda. The fact that billions of people live their whole lives without having enough to eat, without having the opportunity really to improve their lot, without children getting a decent education, is what the Millennium Development Goals are all about, so that is the number one order of business. The UN isn't going to solve that. That is going to be solved by people, mainly in the countries concerned, working together to improve governance, to allow the market to do its work, to stimulate and encourage investment, to provide the necessary infrastructure, but they will need some help. They need a level playing field for trade so that their products don't have to compete with subsidized products from much richer countries in the world market as is presently the case especially with agricultural products. They have to have access to the markets of the north and many of them do need assistance in building up the infrastructure to the point at which they can actually benefit from trading opportunities. I think Aid for Trade is one of the big issues of our time.

Now these issues, mostly, are not going to be done by the UN. They're going to be done by governments changing their policies, increasing the amount that they are prepared to devote to international assistance and so on, and you come to peace and security and the point there is to understand the link. It's not a straightforward and simple thing that anywhere that's poor, there's conflict. This was something that was clearly understood by the founders of the United Nations, the people that emerged from World War II, its down there in the preamble to the charter, they, FDR and the people like him who founded this organization, believed profoundly that there was a connection between the economic inequalities and imperfections in the world and the security risks. If you don't deal with economic problems by an open system of cooperation and exchange, you get into a channel of protectionism, of beggar my neighbor policies, attempts at autarky; this leads in time to conflict.

Then the third dimension, which I think has been too much lost sight of in recent years but which is also there in the charter. People understood during World War II that what you were up against was bestial regimes and there was a connection between their internal and their external behavior. Hitler and the Japanese fascists were extremely aggressive people, they were aggressive towards their own people as well as towards outsiders, and they committed some of the worst atrocities in history. Therefore the new organization had to stand up for not only peace within states, but also for fundamental human rights.

There again, if you read the report "In Larger Freedom," you will see that this connection is made very clearly and essentially. What the Secretary General is saying is, unless people's rights and dignity are respected there won't be development and there won't be security; so these three things are intimately connected and it's only when you understand that and decided to fight the battle on all those three fronts that you can then see when an institution like the United Nations may be helpful to you in doing that and in what ways you need to improve it in order to make it more useful in that battle. I would say that that is the conversation that the Secretary General has really been urging on the world community, particularly since the Iraq war. It really began with his speech to the General Assembly in September 2003 when he said we've reached a fork in the road.

We need to think out what kind of world we want to live in this century, and how we're going to cope with our problems. Let's not say that has meant that people have stopped caring about Oil for Food or that they should have done so, but I think we managed to get through to a big number of people that there are bigger issues than that, and those issues are why it matters to reform the United Nations and why it matters to have it more transparent to do away with such corruption and the considerable inefficiencies that are in it and redesign some parts of it are so that humanity can find a collective response to those major collective challenges.