

Review of “We the Peoples: A UN for the 21st Century”

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Kofi Annan (author) and Edward Mortimer (editor), *We the Peoples: A UN for the 21st Century* (Boulder: Routledge, 2014), pp. 257.

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The principal author of this book, Kofi Annan, does not need an introduction. He was the 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN). He served in that capacity in the years 1997-2006. Lots of things happened in this period. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened militarily in Kosovo, without the approval of the UN Security Council (1999); the Millennium Development Goals were adopted by the General Assembly of the UN at its historic Millennium Summit (2000); the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Annan and the UN (2001); the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York happened, immediately followed by the exercise of collective self-defence by the United States (US) and its allies against Al Qaeda and the Taleban regime in Afghanistan (2001); and the US and its allies invaded Iraq, once again without UN Security Council approval (2003). All these events – and the role of the UN, or the lack thereof – have shaped Annan’s thinking, and the excerpts of the speeches and reports that are included in this book reflect this.



This is an unusual book, in the sense that it does not contain any new material. It is a carefully selected compilation of the many speeches that Annan delivered during his time as the UN Secretary-General. All these speeches are freely available online. Thus, the added value of the book is in the selection of the excerpts, and in the way they are categorized, introduced, provided with context, and linked to each other. This process was done by Edward Mortimer, who was a journalist for the *London Times* and *Financial Times*, before joining the UN as the chief speechwriter for Annan.

This book complements Annan’s memoirs of 400 pages, entitled *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace*, published in September of 2012. And then there is the excellent *Collected Papers of Kofi Annan: UN Secretary-General, 1997-2006*, edited by Jean E. Krasno, a massive collection of 4,530 pages of Annan’s papers and reports, brought together in five bulky volumes. This collection was also published in 2012.

We the Peoples begins with an introduction, written by Annan himself. This is one of the most interesting parts of the book for at least two reasons. First, it is a text that has not been published elsewhere before. Second, it is a text written by Annan seven years after he left the office. There has thus been plenty of time for reflection. The introduction explores the Secretary-General’s role as a public figure. Annan tells us that whenever something bad happened in the world, people turned

to him and asked: “what does the UN think about this? What will the UN do about this?” Annan explains that he always felt it was his responsibility to take a position and express it publicly. Because doing or saying nothing would also be perceived, in the eyes of the global public, as a political act. And so he had to speak up. He felt he could not speak using meaningless clichés. At the same time, his opinion had to reflect that of the entire UN membership. This membership is composed of all of the States in the world, which is, of course, a hopelessly divided group. That division makes it almost impossible to be the spokesperson of the UN on sensitive political issues. Yet, speaking on behalf of the UN ensured the relevance of the Organization, not so much in the eyes of the States, but in the eyes of the international community as a whole.

Besides the introduction, the book consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 is a collection of Annan’s speeches about the UN itself. One might have expected speeches with innovative ideas proposing UN reforms; Annan has spoken on this topic many times. But the chapter actually contains a mishmash of topics that have something to do with the UN, but could not be included in any of the other chapters. Annan’s fascination with Dag Hammarskjöld is such a topic; his admiration of and gratitude towards Sérgio Vieira de Mello – who Annan sent to Iraq, where he died – is another; and so is Annan’s complicated relationship with the US. It appears as though all of the UN Secretaries-General had a complicated relationship with the US. One need only think of Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s memoirs entitled *Unvanquished: A US – UN Saga*, published in 1999.

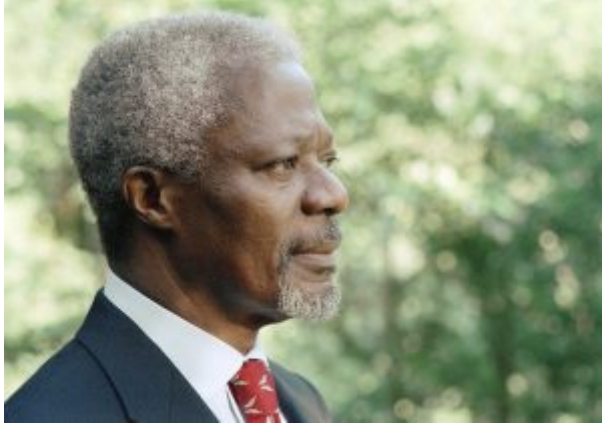
Chapter 2 is on development and non-State actors. Since these are two quite distinct topics, it is not immediately clear what the added benefit is of treating them together. And indeed, most of the speeches are not about development, rather they are discussing the UN’s relations with non-State actors, in particular with corporations. The few speeches on development that are included in the book emphasize the responsibility of the developing world. This perspective is useful, considering that such remarks are coming from a man born in that part of the world himself (Annan was born in Ghana). On non-State actors, one would perhaps have expected a couple of speeches referring to the report published in 2004 by the Panel of Eminent Persons on UN-Civil Society Relations (“Cardoso Report”). Annan was very critical of this report, and published his own response soon after the report was circulated. This debate could have been discussed in more detail in the book.

Chapter 3 is on peace and security. The speeches in this chapter are interesting, because the UN is constantly being ignored by the big players. It was Annan’s task to ensure the relevance of the organization. This was particularly urgent in the case of NATO’s military campaign in Kosovo (1999), the war on terrorism (2001), and the war in Iraq (2003). The military campaigns in Kosovo and Iraq were carried out without a UN mandate, and the war on terrorism was initially approached as an exercise of collective self-defence, with at best, a modest role for the UN. The speeches convincingly show how Annan criticized the unilateral use of force, and tried to claim a role for the UN. The motto “you break it, you own it” did not apply to Kosovo and Iraq. The US might have broken it, but the UN came in to pick up the pieces.

Chapter 4 is on human rights and Chapter 5 includes two speeches on peacekeeping. One might wonder why these two speeches were not included in Chapter 3, on peace and security. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with particularly troubled regions: Africa and the Middle East. And Chapter 8 is about the prevention of genocide and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Again, one wonders why the R2P is not included in the chapter on peace and security. Annan feels that R2P is the issue with which he is probably most closely associated in the eyes of the public at large. That might very well prove to be correct. He did indeed play a big role in the introduction of the R2P doctrine into the UN parlance.

Chapter 9, on celebrating the world’s diversity and differences, mainly serves to finish the book on a happy note. It does so very convincingly.

The book is not without some flaws. Many documents, that have proved to be Annan’s most influential writings, are not included in this book, because they were not speeches, but official UN Secretary-General reports. This gives the reader the feeling that something is missing, that the book is not providing the full picture. And that is unfortunate.



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When you read all these speeches one after the other, you notice certain commonalities. The most striking perhaps is that Annan often structures his speeches with the help of enumerated lists. A list of five lessons learned, of three applicable principles, of eight goals, of six values, of three pillars, and so on. Although these lists differ from speech to speech, they are quite similar. For example, Annan enumerated certain key principles he derived from the work of Dag Hammarskjöld. He also came up with five lessons he learned during his time as Secretary-General, and provided us with a list of practical ways in which corporations can interact with the

UN. He identified the three global issues of our time: freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the freedom of future generations to sustain their lives on this planet. One also notices certain other rhetorical tricks that are used frequently in his speeches. For example, Annan often starts small, focussing on the plight of a single human being, then turns to the big global issue, and at the end of the speech he returns to the individual.

Read in this way, the book can also be used in any speechwriting course. But it is mainly another testimony of Annan’s important contribution to the evolution of UN’s ideas.