



Tidings from Utopia: The United Nations, the Millennium, 2000

By Newton Bowles

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I will begin with the usual cliché, you know, how happy I am to be here among friends, to have a little relief from the frenzy of the UN and New York, in this backwoods puddle of Bytown. Remembering the smoke stacks that used to enrich the Ottawa air, instead of puddle I might have called up an image of the Ottawa eddy.

Now, before going on to the United Nations, I have to ask you to do me a favour: please listen carefully. After I have stopped talking, please do not congratulate me. And I'll tell you why. I have just been reading the memoirs of that brilliant scholar-statesman, Conor Cruise O'Brien. Along the way, Conor was a member of the first Irish delegation to the UN. During the General Assembly, he found himself seated between Israel and Iraq. Some contentious issue came up about getting refugees from Iraq back into Israel, and Conor improvised his first UN speech, offering what he thought was a common sense solution. After the meeting adjourned, he encountered a veteran UN journalist, a woman he had known for some time, and told her that both Israel and Iraq had congratulated him. "Jesus," she said, "was it that bad?"

As you know, this year I am not doing my annual report on the UN. Instead I am trying my hand at a sort of *analytic history of the UN* since the Cold War, the UN of the last decade, *leading up to the Millennium Summit*. I am a little past the half-way mark in my writing, and I hope that the little book will be out before the end of the year. It has been difficult for me to keep in touch with current events at the UN while working up this history. Nevertheless, I have my impressions, and I will share with you a few thoughts on what has been happening.

First, the Millennium Summit, 147 heads of State at the UN for three days last September. Someone has remarked that all international meetings are a success even before they happen; and since we learn through failure, that can be true. But it is hard to hold on to the illusion that the sun always shines at the summit. At a Caribbean summit last April, the new President of Venezuela, *Hugo Chavez*, closed the meeting by saying that, in his first 73 days in office, he had already attended six summits of heads of state. "We go from summit to summit," he said, "and our people go from abyss to abyss"--from depth to depth.

What about the *big Millennium show*, the biggest ever gathering of the high and mighty? An irreverent journalist for the magazine Rolling Stone, looking at the fleets of black limousines and the police barricades that choked New York City, summed up his impressions in a headline: United We Suck! He might have gone on to a serious analysis of the gap between United Nations ideals and political realities, but instead he delivered a half-baked basket of superficial impressions, like a tourist who has had a bad night in a cheap hotel.

There are plenty of bad nights at the UN, but this is definitely not a cheap hotel. It is a ship of states with 189 staterooms, 147 of them housing their landlords at the Summit. *Why a Millennium Summit* and what could possibly come of it?

Kofi Annan is both intelligent and wise. He understands *the power of symbols*. On the common international calendar, moving from 1999 to 2000 was a powerful symbolic event, a sort of universal springtime, a time for renewal, a time for hope. The Millennium Summit was arranged for the UN to capture some of that springtime spirit.

Speaking of success through failure, Kofi Annan was well aware of what had happened only five years earlier, *when the UN turned fifty*. At that birthday party, leaders were presented with a pre-cooked script. They signed and went home. Hardly a ripple for the tourboats gliding by on the East River. This time, a big effort went into bringing everyone into planning the event. For governments, *five regional warm-up sessions* were held. For the friends, in the three months before the formal, there were *global celebrations by citizens, NGO's, Parliamentarians, and religious leaders*.

Kofi Annan's challenge for the Millennium, his Millennium Report, was launched a good five months before the Summit. His challenge has a clear historical perspective, it reaches out to all people, it is ambitious and pragmatic. Something solid to get your teeth into.

Pulling off this Summit was quite a stunt, 147 big egos together for three days, each allowed only a few minutes to speak, all seated informally at four round tables, an arrangement that loosened things up remarkably well. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela chaired one of these groups and announced that all had agreed on the need to bring the UN up to date to face the challenges of this new century. Jean Chrétien said the UN is indispensable and that Canada will do all it can to help strengthen the organization. Ireland still sits between Israel and Iraq. The whole show went off in good spirit. So far so good.

The challenge to this Summit was to set *guidelines* for the United Nations in the twenty-first century. In fact, *the Summit Declaration* is a sort of road map for the UN. Since the Declaration is intended to map the way for the whole UN system, it had to be comprehensive. It begins with *values and principles*, and goes on to deal specifically with major UN concerns. There had to be some of the standard boiler-plate about national sovereignty and all that, but this Declaration has significant new elements. For example, *values and principles* includes the statement that leaders "have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As

leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs." Here we find also that **globalization** is identified as "the central challenge" to serving the poor, those left out.

Fundamental values identified include: **freedom, equality** of all, including women and men, **solidarity** (meaning social justice), **tolerance, respect for nature** and **shared responsibility**. These go well beyond the general principles in the 1945 Charter.

General principles. So far we have had no great success with our cynical reporter who shouts "United we suck" as he jumps in his car and drives off to some suburban wasteland. He has missed the **nuggets of truth, of realism and of compassion** that we see as the Declaration moves on. **Moving from principles to action, the Declaration sets specific goals for the United Nations family**. The most ambitious and inclusive goal is a massive attack on poverty, to cut in half by the year 2015 the one billion now existing on something like one dollar a day. This is not represented as a naked goal, but something that requires good governance at home, and specific support from abroad: for poor countries, access to rich markets, debt relief and more development aid. (Here I must say that **Canada does not look good**. While we have done well in debt relief, our development assistance is a disgrace. Canada has never come near the UN norm for development assistance, which is 0.7 percent of GNP. It is a level that Canada could well afford. Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands give more than that. Did you know that this UN goal came out of the Pearson Commission, our Lester B. Pearson, in 1969?)

For the rest, the Millennium Declaration is studded with **development goals, some very specific, others very broad**. Among specific goals are several initiated by UNICEF; and these include, by the year 2015:

- Providing full primary education to all girls and all boys everywhere
- Reducing maternal deaths by three-quarters
- Reducing under-five deaths by two-thirds
- Reducing by one-half those without safe water

Other goals which grew out of long-standing collaboration between UNICEF and WHO include, by the year 2015, stopping the spread of major diseases like **HIV/AIDS and malaria**; and getting **essential drugs** at decent prices out of the drug companies.

The Declaration goes on to capture the overarching goals that came out of those remarkable **UN Conferences in the 1990's** --conferences on the environment, on human rights, on population, on children, on women, on slums. These Conferences became the UN Agenda for Development, and that is what you find in the Millennium Declaration. In that sense, it took ten years to reach the international consensus that culminates in this Declaration.

What about *peace and security*? What about *disarmament, small arms, the big bomb*? In fact, these issues are addressed up front in the Declaration, right after the opening proclamation of Values and Principles. Regarding *peacekeeping and peacebuilding*, the Declaration says the summiteers will give the UN the resources needed to do the job. But as for the Brahimi report with its detailed recommendations, the Declaration says only that the General Assembly, not the Security Council, should consider it promptly. No big commitment there.

On *mass weapons*, the Declaration says we should try to eliminate them; and that we should keep an open mind to Kofi Annan's proposal to convene an international conference on the nuclear threat.

And then, it says, we must stop the black-market in *small arms*, we should be more careful in our use of *sanctions*, and everyone should join the *International Criminal Court*.

There is a lot more in the Declaration, of course, but for me those are the highlights. About as good *a work plan* as you could expect, and certainly much better in specificity and feasibility than anything before. But *who is responsible* to make it happen? It has to be the States, members of the UN who sign on. But if you spread responsibility over 189, it means no one is responsible, yes? That makes it easy to sign. The real test lies with a handful of governments, especially the big powers, in the next year or two.

Despite the Summit Declaration, the future of the whole *multilateral* system is *far from secure*. The UN itself has a serious structural weakness, the intractable problem of updating the *Security Council* and reorganizing the unwieldy *General Assembly*. Stuck with such creaky old machinery, it is a wonder that the UN is able to do anything.

But the machinery didn't create itself so we are back to governments and politics and power and money. One label for all this is *National Sovereignty*. And while *globalization*, the giant corporations, the free flow of currency, transcend national governments, we have not found a way to institutionalize that diffusion and concentration of power. I guess this is one reason for sustaining *the illusion and the reality of military power*, at least in part a frustrated response to the attrition of traditional sovereignty. If you don't know what it is, kill it.

So back at the UN, there are *two critical issues* not addressed at the Summit: *one is the Security Council*, and *the other is Human Rights Intervention*, sometimes called Humanitarian Intervention. There are *four aspects to the Security Council problem*. *One* is how to bring in *more members* to make it more representative of today's enlarged UN. If you bring in all worthy contenders--e.g., Japan, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, India and Indonesia--you would have a Council so big that it could never do anything much, especially in an emergency. It is hard enough to get agreement in the Council as it is today. If you don't let all worthy contenders in, then regions have to decide who is their candidate, and this they have been unable to do. So that is one stalemate.

Aspect number two is making the Council less secretive, *more open*, more consultation with troop contributors, or any country on the Council's agenda. Here the Council has made a lot of progress, and Canada can take credit for having worked on that during its membership in 1999 and 2000.

A third aspect is the scope of Council responsibility, which events in recent years have extended from peacekeeping as buffer to peacemaking, humanitarian advocacy and protection, human rights and nation building. All of this has grown out of the radical changes in the nature of war from inter to intra-state. You know all about that. It has extended Security Council concerns far beyond the original Charter idea; and takes the Council into functions normally belonging in the General Assembly. There is no way that in practice the GA could take this on, but the situation exacerbates the existing tensions between the Council and the Assembly.

The fourth aspect is capacity, the ability to analyze, plan and execute; all clearly set out in the Brahimi report. Brahimi identifies two main reasons for UN fumbling. One is fuzzy decisions by a politically confused Security Council. The other is the pathetically understaffed UN Peacekeeping Department, starved by donor governments.

The *Brahimi* recommendations have already been put to the test. The assembled governments that issued the Millennium Declaration have agreed to about one-half of what Brahimi says is needed.

So much for the Security Council. *What about the right to intervene*, human rights intervention? You will recall that, in the wake of NATO bombing over Kosovo, Kofi Annan put this intervention issue to the General Assembly. That was in September 1998. He said that the UN must act when there is gross violation of human rights in any state or nation. After persuasion and sanctions fail, force must be used. What to do if, as in the Kosovo case, the Security Council is stuck over the principle of national sovereignty? Can we agree in advance on the conditions for forceful intervention? This is a profoundly divisive issue on which there has been no progress whatsoever. Despite Canada's initiative in commissioning big brains to work on it, I very much doubt that the problem will be solved head-on. The Security Council will probably muddle along on a case-by-case basis which may in time become common law.

I have left to the last the hottest topic, *the U.S. colossus and money*. In the immediate, the money crisis is over, or at least postponed. The U.S. share of the UN regular budget is down from 25% to 22% and that money will be coming in. An elaborate formula is in the works to reduce the U.S. share of the peacekeeping budget from 33% down to 25% over the course of four years. Still in contention is how much of U.S. arrears will come through. It is probable that the U.S. will no longer insist on zero growth in the UN budget.

As for *U.S. participation in the multilateral system*, Kofi Annan says he has good rapport with *George W's* foreign policy team, especially *Colin Powell* with whom he has collaborated over the years. In January at his confirmation hearings as Secretary of State,

Powell said to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

"I have seen what the UN can do, over the years. It's a great organization. It is deserving of our support. It has represented our interests and the interests of freedom-loving people around the world, and I look forward to an early meeting with Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to let him know of our desire to work very closely with the United Nations."

But the U.S. stubborn commitment to *Missile Defense* and its blundering on in bombing the outskirts of *Baghdad* don't look good. What a way to prepare Powell's first visit to the Middle East. Everyone knows that Missile Defense won't work. The real danger is that this could be the first phase for putting weapons in space. The U.S. can't bring itself to ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, let alone the International Criminal Court. Still, the UN could not survive without the U.S. Big Brother is still with us. It is something of a miracle that the UN exists at all. Use it or lose it.