



Challenges for the next U.S. president

Hopes and Realities

Center for International Relations, International Affairs Forum

Obama and the United Nations

By Stanley Meisler *Author of 'The United Nations: The First Fifty Years'*

Relations between the George W. Bush administration and the United Nations dropped so far into the lower depths that it does not take much of a prophet to predict that all will improve under President Barack Obama. Unlike John Bolton, the new president's ambassador, Susan Rice, will not show up in New York determined to humiliate and decimate the U.N. Nor is Obama likely to start a war in defiance of his allies and the Security Council.

Vice President Dick Cheney and the neo-conservatives who dominated President Bush looked on the U.N. as a threat to U.S. sovereignty and on Secretary General Kofi Annan as an affront to American interests. They were elated when Bush pushed the U.N. aside and invaded Iraq in March 2003. Richard A. Perle, a guru of neo-conservatism, wrote an exuberant commentary for Britain's *The Guardian*. "Saddam Hussein's reign of terror is about to end," Perle said. "He will go quickly, but not alone. In a parting irony, he will take the U.N. down with him."

The U.N. did not go down. Even the

Bush Administration, which wanted to regard the U.N. as irrelevant, found that it had to call on the U.N. for help in setting up a provisional government in Iraq and preparing for parliamentary elections there. Nevertheless, the Americans treated the U.N. with more hostility and contempt during the Bush administration than in any other time in history.

President-elect Obama has promised a new era of good feelings. While introducing his foreign policy and national defense team on December 1, he said "the time has come for a new beginning, a new dawn of American leadership..." Instead of Bush bullying and go-it-alone adventures, he pledged, "We will renew old alliances and forge new and enduring partnerships."

Instead of facing the world with military power alone, he envisioned an America displaying a host of strengths, including its diplomacy and "the power of our moral example."

Susan Rice, Obama's ambassador, is African-American, only 44 years old, and

close to him. She has advised the new president on foreign affairs for more than two years and is the only member of the foreign policy team who worked with him during the campaign. She is a former assistant secretary of state for African affairs and understands the developing world well. She has all the qualifications for a first-rate U.N. ambassador.

But it would be foolish to feel euphoric about the future. A Democratic regime does not insure idyllic U.S.-U.N. relations. The mood was bitter and feelings were frayed when Bill Clinton was president. His administration blamed the U.N. for the debacle in Somalia even though that peacekeeping operation was under control of the U.S. Washington belittled the U.N. operations in Bosnia so much that Richard Holbrooke refused to allow the U.N. any meaningful role in the Dayton accords that ended the war. Madeleine Albright, when she was U.N. ambassador, feuded continually with Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and vetoed his bid for a second term even though all the fourteen other members of the Security Council supported him.

It was a little disappointing, in fact, to hear Obama, when introducing Rice, tell us, “She shares my belief that the U.N. is an indispensable and imperfect forum. She will carry the message that our commitment to multi-lateral action must be coupled with a commitment to

[I]t would be foolish to feel euphoric about the future. A Democratic regime does not insure idyllic U.S.-U.N. relations.

reform.” Obama’s words were tinged with some cliched hokum. There is no doubt that the U.N., like many other institutions, including the U.S. Congress and the American electoral system, needs reform. But the cries for reform from U.N. bashers are so shrill and incessant that they are suspicious. No amount of reform short of emasculation will ever satisfy many U.N. critics. But their noise is so loud that U.N. defenders join the cries for reform to prove they are tough about the U.N. and not soft-headed bleeding hearts.

Nevertheless, no matter how much toughness the Obama team wants to show off, the members of the Obama team believe in the usefulness of the U.N., and that puts them on a different plane than the contemptuous Bush-Cheney-Bolton crowd. The U.N. should benefit from that.

The new team needs to clear away three issues before it can help make the U.N. an effective instrument of multi-lateralism once again. The first and most important

is out of Susan Rice's hands. Obama and his team must reach some understanding with Russia. The present tension, an echo of the cold war, paralyzes the Security Council. Nothing can be done there when the U.S. and Russia are in perpetual opposition.

Second, Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary General, must be encouraged, with the promise of enthusiastic American support, to speak out on matters that trouble him. The South Korean diplomat was picked for the job because the Bush Administration wanted someone who shunned controversy and kept quiet. They did not want another Kofi Annan. So Ban Ki-moon has kept in the shadows. But the vast majority of the nations of the U.N., who usually lack a voice on the Security Council, need an active Secretary General who reflects moral force and seems to speak for them. The Obama team should unshackle him.

Finally, Susan Rice should not take her cabinet rank too seriously. Obama restored her post to the cabinet as a way of showing the U.N. that it is now relevant. But U.N. diplomats and civil servants do not care about such symbolism. Their favorite American ambassador—Tom Pickering during the administration of the elder President Bush—did not have cabinet rank. Madeleine Albright, the ambassador during Clinton's first term, irritated and

alienated many U.N. ambassadors with her absences. As a member of the cabinet, she shuttled to Washington continually for meetings of the national security principals—the group that includes the secretaries of state and defense and the national security advisor. The job in New York has become too consuming and delicate for the U.S. to have a distracted ambassador.

In the new era promised by Obama and his team, these issues should not prove too difficult to handle.



Stanley Meisler is the author of 'Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War' and 'The United Nations : The First Fifty Years.' He was a Los Angeles Times foreign and diplomatic correspondent for thirty years, and assigned to Nairobi, Mexico City, Madrid, Toronto, Paris, Barcelona, the United Nations and Washington.