

The Women's Foreign Policy Group Presents

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The UN Today : Expectations and Reality

May 3, 2006
Inside the United Nations
UN Headquarters
New York City

Maxine Isaacs: My name is Maxine Isaacs, I want to welcome all of you. We're delighted that you can be here; we're delighted that *we* can be here. I'm going to be the MC and the moderator today; I'm also the Chair of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. This is going to be a great day.

It's going to feel like we're sort of trotting through the schedule because we have so much on the agenda, but we did want to cover a lot of subjects and hope that all these things lead to further discussions and we can continue this discussion at our future meetings both in Washington and New York. We're going to have a number of very exciting, top-notch UN officials here today.

The Women's Foreign Policy Group is organized to promote women's leadership and women's voices in international affairs, something that we're very proud of doing and we're glad to have your support. Five of our eight speakers today are women, and I will begin by introducing the Women's Foreign Policy Group founder and executive director Patricia Ellis, whom I believe many of you know. Also, the Women's Foreign Policy Group members who are here today: Dawn Calabria, Gail Kitch, Ponchitta Pierce, Susan Rappaport and Gillian Sorensen, our speaker this morning.

I want to thank especially Gillian and Dawn for their hard work in putting this program together. We've all been working hard on it for months and they have been working on it especially hard. I want to thank Kathy Bushkin who's a board member who can't be here today, and the UN foundation for their generous financial support for today's meeting.

The bios are in your program for our various speakers, so I won't be detailed in my introductions, but it is my pleasure now to introduce our speaker Gillian Sorensen, as I mentioned, a Women's Foreign Policy Group Board member. Gillian is a Senior Adviser to the UN foundation and she previously served as Special Adviser for Public Policy for Secretary General Boutros-Ghali and as Assistant Secretary General for External Affairs for Secretary General Kofi Annan. Gillian will begin our study visit here today with an

overview. Her talk is called, “The UN Today: Expectations and Reality.” So, please join me in welcoming Gillian Sorenson.

Gillian Sorenson: Thank you Maxine and good morning everyone. Let me welcome everybody to the United Nations, we’re very glad you’re here. This is a special day for us, and I really want us to thank Pat Ellis, the leader and founder of this feast for her dedication and leadership and determination to do this special meeting; and Maxine Isaacs for her leadership and my friend Dawn Calabria for helping and putting together the program for today. It is, as Maxine says, a very dense program. You’re going to have a lot of information, but we’re also doing our best to make time for a Q&A and to make dialogue for the rest of the day as well.

As Maxine said, the title of my opening presentation is “Expectations and Reality.” The other night at the White House correspondents Association Dinner, Stephen Colbert had a somewhat humorous exchange with the President in which he referred to reality and said, “the President says reality has a liberal bias.” Well, I hope that my words will not have any particular bias. I will try not to have bias except to tell you that I am a UN partisan and a UN professional for many years. That’s my bias and my perspective, and I’ll share the reality as I know it and see it from here.

One reality is that you come to the UN at an historic moment. It is a time of historic change, of renewal, of some turmoil and it is a time of profound difficulty in certain ways. The UN, of course, is over 60 years old; 61 this year. There have been ups and downs in the US-UN relationship over all of these years, but this particular moment is especially difficult, and I’ll talk about that in a few minutes. That’s one reality that’s right in front of it. The other reality is that reform is happening right as we speak. Fundamental changes — not superficial or cosmetic changes — but some internal changes that are very important and that I do believe will bring about a UN that is leaner and more effective and braced for the 21st century. This difficult time that I referred to has created, as you probably know, a rift, a distance between the US and the UN. Although over the years there have been the usual ups and downs, this one is more complicated than before. It’s inevitable that there will be differences of view, but it is unacceptable that that rift, that distance, be long-lasting or permanent. One of our challenges is to repair that breach and to remind ourselves again of the common cause that we share in so many ways.

One of the realities as we look at this moment is to remind ourselves that, whatever the controversies, the UN is a unique and invaluable instrument for this country. I’m speaking as an American to Americans. We may have differences of view, but there are countless ways that it has served our national interest as well as our global interest. It has set norms and standards, it has changed lives and saved lives, it has furthered democracy, it has averted war and so on and so on. I’ll share with you just a brief litany of these realities on the ground, because it’s easy to forget them as the crises or disputes take the headlines.

One is that the UN today is sheltering 20 million refugees around the world. Consider those numbers: 20 million. The UN is feeding the famished, the UN is preparing and

monitoring free elections in 40 countries, the UN is rescuing the victims of natural disasters, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and, of course, leading the humanitarian response to the Tsunami and the terrible earthquake in Pakistan. The UN is leading the world in global public health, in AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. On the response to Avian flu and SARS and within two years you will see the elimination of Polio from the face of the earth. The UN, in partnership with Rotary, has been the lead in this remarkable achievement. The UN is promoting the health and the safety of children through UNICEF, of course, and promoting the rights and health and opportunity for women through UNIFEM and the UN fund for population. The UN is lifting the misery of the poorest of the poor through our work on development and the Millennium Development Goals which you will hear more about later. The UN is addressing terrorism and the trafficking of drugs and arms, and the environmental degradation that obviously crosses borders.

All of these are issues that I sometimes call ‘global crises,’ and that require global responses. Where else are you going to go? There are regional groups; they have a purpose. We can do certain things alone and indeed we do. But on all of these matters, it is self-evident that you have to come at these as a human community. The UN in many ways has contained conflict, averted strife, ended wars, through Security Council negotiations, mediation, sanctions, quiet diplomacy and of course, UN peacekeeping. Our peacekeepers are out on 17 UN peacekeeping missions right now; 80,000 peacekeepers wearing the blue helmets and the blue berets. I should mention that not one of those is an American soldier. Those are all military contributed or volunteered, if that’s the word for it, to make our peacekeeping forces, and we’re very proud of that. We think they do, in most cases, an excellent job under difficult circumstances.

I would just mention another reality and that is, that every day of the week, whatever the other issues may be, this place gives the United States a venue to build partnerships, nurture coalitions, find friendships, even among diplomats with whom we have other political differences. It is the place where everybody, 191 countries, are present. 191: that represents, today, the entire globe. We refer to that as “universal representation,” and that comes, of course, from the original 51 countries that have now...7 times the size of the original number. Of course, the reality is that gives us every day a precious opportunity to lead, to debate, to discuss, to win friends and to influence people as they used to say, “when we do it well.” That’s where skillful diplomacy is critical. I have often been aware of the power of personal diplomacy, because this is, all told, a small place. Diplomats see each other coming and going, in meetings, in halls, over meals; and the ability of an individual ambassador, even when from a small country is very great. When they do it well, when they listen well, when they are — it goes without saying — well prepared, and committed and constructive and articulate, they have an opportunity for the leadership role of that particular country to become larger than life. Singapore is an example of that, the Netherlands is an example. Because they do it so well, they exercise a remarkable influence in the positive here in this building. Likewise, for the superpower. The impact of the ambassador is extremely important. I remember very well Madeline Albright saying, “even superpowers need friends.” How true that is. And in this place you have, day by day, the opportunity to build those friends.

Well, some other realities. Two minutes on reform. It is moving apace and it is happening. The Secretary General has put his full authority behind it, and done all that he can under his authority. The rest resides with the General Assembly. You should know that we have a new Peacebuilding Commission that moves in as conflict ends to shore up fragile democracies. We have the new Democracy Fund, to assist in special ways, these young democracies to make sure that they survive those early years and they move past their first free and fair elections to another and another. There are some profound changes on internal management, I won't bore you with that but hiring, transparency, accountability, all of those important things [that are] givens in the business world, but not necessarily in the UN world. This is important and healthy and is making significant changes.

I especially want to refer to the new Human Rights Council, the much-improved Human Rights Commission of the past. It is in place, it is going to happen it is up and running. The human rights effort has had its budget doubled, but I do need to remind you that the United States has not signed on in support of the new Human Rights Council, one of only two countries not to do so, and I regret that profoundly. On the reform effort we do have at least a temporary delay because it is perceived by some, maybe you would say many because the numbers are large, in the group of 77 representing the developing world. They are concerned that reform means reform to the advantage of the rich and powerful. And they have put a hold, at least for a time, because they want more analysis of what this means for the poorest, for the developing world which number actually 133 countries. Collectively speaking, they do have clout and they do have the capacity to at least put a delay on some of this and ask some more questions: how does this affect us? Are we being moved out? Is our portion of authority and decision-making being reduced or diminished or pulled away from us because the rich countries, the developed countries, are pushing so hard and so fast on this? I do believe that reform is still going to happen, but we'll have a few months delay while this deeper analysis is done. I hope to the satisfaction of the developing world. They have to buy into it, they have to feel that reform is in the interest of the organization as a whole. We'll see how that comes. It's right in progress these days, and I am still very optimistic about the outcome.

Another reality, lets come back to the United States. Even my best friends in the UN tell me sometimes, "Gillian, it is difficult to be a friend of the United States. You all make it so hard." I remind them that I'm not with a US mission, that I'm with the UN itself. I try to explain that I can't always defend, because these have been some very difficult years. They are perfectly aware, they hear the UN bashing. Not just by talk radio, not just by hard right media types like Fox News, but they hear it from a handful of members of Congress who should know better, and who take pride in bashing the UN and dismissing it and demeaning the people who work here as if it has nothing to do with the interests of this country.

UN bashing has been painful and damaging, I wish it would stop. The sense is that the US often moves in ways that are just arrogant and self-serving and that the US is unwilling to compromise or cooperate. It is the Goliath, the Behemoth, the Juggernaut if

you will. They wish that the US could listen a little better, and could, if this is not too much to ask, act with a touch of humility. We are so powerful, so big, nobody doubts that. We are so big we could well afford, and it would serve us well, to speak with a little softer voice.

Well this comes home because as you know we have been unwilling to sign on a particular point in the Millennium Development Goals, the 0.7% of development assistance. We've been unwilling to sign on to the International Criminal Court, we have in some ways dismissed the Geneva Convention. It was referred to by our Attorney General as "naive." We have been unwilling to pay our voluntary contribution to the UN Population Fund for family planning, safe birth, safe maternity. We women know how important that is. It's more than just the dollars, it's a symbolic commitment to this critical effort. We've been unwilling to sign treaties, let me in 30 seconds name a few.

We've not signed the Treaty Against Landmines, The Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women, The Convention on the Rights of Children, The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to reduce nuclear arms, the Law of Sea Treaty to protect the vast resources beneath the ocean. The Kyoto Treaty on climate change. All of those are treaties we joined in drafting, but have not chosen to sign or to ratify. Then finally, we've sent John Bolton as our ambassador. Let me say that he's a highly intelligent and articulate man. He works unbelievably hard, I hear he's in his office by 6am, that's daunting. But you and I know that he made clear before he came, and this is a quote, he did not believe in the concept of the United Nations. When he addresses the reform issue — it's mantra, he says the word all the time — it is often heard as reform meaning bending the UN to their knees, to the will of the United States of America. That's not what most of the others understand as reform, and this creates a real problem.

I'll close by saying, I hope that we can recapture the vision and the confidence and the optimism that surrounded the creation of this organization, that empowered it from the very beginning, that Roosevelt articulated from the very beginning and that presidents Republican and Democrat over the decades have shared, that we remember that this is an imperfect but indispensable institution and our challenge is to use it well and wisely. If we do that, we can recapture the vision of the founders and can put to work the leadership of the United States in the most effective, possible way. What could be more important? Thanks.

Ms. Isaacs: Thank you Gillian for that characteristically intelligent and frank discussion, we really appreciate it. Gillian has given us a lot to talk about and we have about 15 minutes for questions, so anyone who wants to kick off. Pat?

Patricia Ellis: I'd like to turn to the issue of Iran, which is very much on peoples minds. It's, I think, a tough one for everyone and it's tough in terms of the UN since the latest is that in the Security Council Russia and China are not willing, at least at this point, to go along with a resolution against Iran. I'm wondering if you could just address what the UN might be able to do under these circumstances. Just one more question. I think since

there are probably quite a number of women here, I think they might be interested in the prospects for a future woman Secretary General.

Ms. Sorensen: Two good questions. Iran, of course, is on everyone's mind along with Sudan and reform, those are the three issues right front and center. Iran, as we all know, is a highly delicate, indeed dangerous situation that needs to be handled with extreme care and skill. The notion of going to war with Iran is, in my view, unthinkable. It would be Iraq times ten. It is highly possible that Iran has nuclear arms, we do not know that, but they have the material to move that direction. They have a leader who is very outspoken, provocative to say the least, but they have a population, a very large population in which there is a sizable contingent of moderates — educated Iranians who have exposure and experience and education in the outside world.

Our task, I think, is to handle this with enough skill that we can move forward, can understand what they do have, can encourage them not to proceed with the development of nuclear arms. It's much more difficult to curtail development of nuclear energy for other peaceful uses and if we're not there it's difficult to monitor what uses that's being put to. IAEA will have capacity to go there and to meet and to visit. We hope that that access is offered. What I most certainly hope will happen is direct talks. The US is resisting that at the moment, but if you can't talk with the enemy, or the adversary should I say, who are you going to talk to? What do we have to lose by that? If we send our best people who can really engage this discussion and we convey a measure of respect. We won't get into that discussion by belittling or bashing Iran or insulting their leader — he was their elected leader, that's a fact — and if we talk about regime change in Iran, you're not going to encourage a dialogue with their leader. So language is very important. The language is loaded on both sides and we need to be careful how this is said. Pat is right, it is before the Security Council to take a resolution to move this forwards. Russia and China see it differently. The US the UK and France are joined, but unless you have the permanent five together, you're not going to get this resolution. That still leaves a lot that can be done outside, independently in the margins or directly and that can proceed apace. But I do hope that the US will work diligently and with commitment to try to move this through the Security Council. We live with the consequences of the recent Iraq war, not the Persian Gulf War but the current Iraq war, of dismissing the Security Council and going outside and undertaking a preemptive strike on our own that left all those consequences on the United States. This time we should make every effort and mean it and not predetermine what's going to happen, or what we're going to do but we act to what the actual discussion brings to us. So, it's a sensitive moment and the Security Council has an important role to play.

On the other question, I won't say a lighter question, but also provocative. As you know, the Secretary General's term ends this year. He will have completed two, five-year terms it's not limited, but no SG has served more than ten. I fully understand why because the weight and the demands of that job are huge. So he will step down and the search is on for a new Secretary General. If it follows the historic pattern, moving region to region over time, it will be an Asian. You may recall that the last Asian was U Thant from Burma in the early 60s and, of course, Asia is vast and surely has some highly qualified

people. We've made efforts with diplomats and outsiders to see if we can deepen the pool of applicants, make certain that there are women among them, and (this is new), if we can actually devise a job description. There is none such. Thinking about the qualities that are needed, which are highly demanding. You need your top experienced diplomat, you need a master administrator and manager, you need a charismatic presence and presenter and speaker, an executive presence if you could call it that, you need a demonstrated commitment to peace, justice, development, human rights, and finally you need someone who has already demonstrated exceptional skill in public life, presumably diplomacy or politics. So if this saint exists on earth, I hope he or she will come forward because that's a lot to ask.

This time the one difference is that we will have a deputy Secretary General who will be assigned by the Secretary General, certain duties presumably focused on management, and that will lighten the burden to some degree. The search is on and we hope to know in June at least several of the names, some are floating already, but several who are serious candidates that will move through the Security Council to the General Assembly in September and hopefully will be decided by October to allow a transition period before the new SG takes office on the first of January. Keep an eye out it's a critical choice.

QUESTION: Louise Frechette, who recently finished as the first Deputy Secretary General kept saying that her job was not the Chief Operating Officer and I would welcome some clarification on that. I presume she meant that she wasn't given the authorities and yet you've now mentioned that there will be a deputy, and how does one divvy up all the management tasks here? I was curious of whether she was explaining why she hadn't had more impact or whether that was just a factual statement that she was not the Chief Operating Officer. Secondly, I wonder if you could just flesh out for us a little bit more why the developing countries are having trouble with reform. I would say the sort of media take that one gets is that they're fretting about the spoils of the perks here in New York, that they're fretting about the distribution of jobs and if it were a more meritocracy that maybe they wouldn't have as many positions as they currently enjoy. It can't possibly be that they think that if a more effective UN would not help the developing world. So I'm struggling a bit with what the base of their argument is. I'm not persuaded that it is out of concern for the poorest of the world.

Ms. Sorensen: First on Louise Frechette, who was a Canadian who was our first Deputy Secretary General ever, there had never been one before, and it was already almost two and a half years into Kofi Annan's term before she was named. You put your finger on it. As it was the first, he defined or agreed between the two of them, what the responsibilities would be. But as it played out, she did have more responsibility than she did authority. That's something that will be corrected this next time around, because that puts you in a real bind, especially when crucial issues come forward and she was caught in the middle on a couple of those. She did, I think, a good job under difficult circumstances, she was a very competent diplomat, she had been Canadian Ambassador during Argentina, and Canadian Ambassador to the UN and was deputy secretary of defense in Canada, so she was very well qualified for this. But through that experimental phase, we've learned and it will be different, I think the authority will be much more clearly defined it is essential.

The general assembly is watching this carefully though. They want to make sure that this definition of the new number two spot is acceptable to them, so there will be a back and forth to do that. I think it will redound to the benefit of both the new SG and the new DSG. There was talk momentarily of whether a Secretary General might move in on a ticket the way we have a president and vice president, but I think that will not happen. It will be a choice a designation made after the SG takes office.

On the resistance of the developing world to reform: in the early months they were fully engaged and fully supported. The sticking point comes in the famous Fifth Committee, which is the budget committee, which has worked as a whole. That means that 191 members on the committee, and imagine how difficult it is to get consensus with a committee that size. One of the proposals in reform is to have much smaller committees, maybe 20, to take budget decisions. Of course budget has impact on action and it represents the necessary resources both financial and human that will make things happen so it's a crucial committee, and over time, the group of 77 has had a large influence on budget decisions, but it is cumbersome. They see themselves as getting squeezed out of that decision-making responsibility. To my surprise the South African ambassador, who is a very experienced diplomat has taken the lead. I'm not sure if he personally agrees with all this, but the group is pressing him as their leader at the moment to raise these issues. I don't believe that fundamentally they disagree with the larger notion of reform. The argument is compelling. It is in the interest of the organization. They don't want to see themselves pushed off the edge of the table in decision-making power, and that includes, yes, some financial decision making and yes, some senior jobs. In this place, you will see that there is a very rough geographic distribution of jobs, bigger countries have more representation, that's more or less fair, and there are some from the developing world in the senior ranks, but if you add together the population of the developing world it is enormous, it is in the billions, they are clearly under-represented in the senior ranks. They want something more than they have. You may call it perks, they see it as a rightful presence among the other leaders and this is the moment, before that door closes on them, when they want to make that clear. They do have clout because they're speaking in the collective 131 and that includes China, because China includes in the group of 77, so you're talking about billions of people. I think it will work its way through but it is important to listen and if it delays this another three months, four months, that's ok.

What I'm worried about is that Washington is saying reform has to happen by June. And if this discussion is still moving forward throughout the summer, the hard line anti-UN types in Washington will say "alright, we rescind the second half of this year's dues." That is tightening the screws in a very brutal way. It is not helpful to do that. I hope it won't happen. This is an ongoing process. Dues are both a legal and a moral commitment, and we shouldn't do it that way. We should be using powers of persuasion and example, moral authority such as we have and so forth to work with the others in the developing world. So it's a challenging diplomatic back-and-forth right now and that's where committed and skillful diplomats can make all the difference.

Ms. Isaacs: Thank you very much Gillian, it's been wonderful.

Ms. Sorensen: It will be interesting to see in the course of the day if the other speakers agree or disagree with my points, but I hope you understand that at this point I am now based in the United Nations Foundation so I am outside the UN and therefore can speak with a certain liberty, or freedom, that I can take advantage of.