

MANAGEMENT REFORM

Introductory quote

"The issue of 'deadwood and mediocrity':

Constant talk about 'deadwood', 'mediocrity', 'bloated bureaucracy,' etc., does not promote optimism about any significant improvement. What is desperately needed is serious work on the problems. The General Assembly should request the Secretary-General to organize an independent commission of internationally respected civil-service and recruitment specialists. It must be so composed as to enjoy the trust and cooperation of staff associations as well as of the member-governments. It should carry out a thorough screening of the actual competence for their designated posts of officials at mid-professional and above grades. Such a process alone would reliably establish how many existing staff actually have a useful function in UN service. Responsibility for the costs of the termination of those who do not must be shared by member-governments.

Sweeping talk of 'mediocrity' is unprofessional and misleading. The potential of a significant number of staff is simply not known because of poor job assignment, indifferent supervisors (themselves inadequately supervised by poorly chosen department heads), and the lamentable paucity of in-service training and retraining. The real extent of irredeemable 'mediocrity' can only be identified by proper, independent screening."

Erskine Childers, with Brian Urquhart, in Chapter X, "The international civil service", in "Renewing the United Nations System", Development Dialogue, 1994:1, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden, **1994**, p. 165.

Note: this fundamental proposal, of course, has never been seriously considered by anyone in the UN, although the Secretariat does now at least offer minimal management training to untrained new managers.]

[Note: see also the chronological listing of UN management systems efforts from the 1950s on through the mid-1990s (which of course also involves efforts to reform them), which is the introductory quote to the preceding subsection on Management Systems.]

Chronological quotes

"We trained hard ... but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up in teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by

reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization -- Gaius Petronius, A.D. 65.

As quoted in Lowell Flanders, "A.D. 65", Secretariat News (New York), **December, 1984**, pp. 10-11.

"Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar summed up his 10 years ... as 'a most productive decade.' The UN had ... 'moved from the periphery to near the centre of international relations'.

'... a slow but meticulous process of institutional self-analysis, combined with efforts to 'streamline' the Secretariat, had resulted in a rejuvenated UN,' he stated.

Activity, not argument, had thus answered ... questions about the UN that had 'troubled the public through much of its existence' ... he continued. ... 'The effectiveness of the United Nations can no longer be in doubt.'"

"Goodbye to Pérez de Cuéllar: A 'most productive decade at the UN," UN Chronicle, **March 1992**, pp. 6-8.

[see next item of the same date from the same publication.]

"With a new Secretary-General, reform of the United Nations is in the air at ... [UN] Headquarters.

Since September, intensive discussions have taken place on reforming the work and structure of the world body. Under scrutiny was a plan worked out by 22 industrial and developing countries, including the five permanent Security Council members, intended to strengthen the Secretariat and increase the Secretary-General's authority.

The new plan disapproves of ... the Organization's 'top-heavy' administration, under which 30 to 40 high-ranking officials report directly to the Secretary General. That structure grew over the years in a series of 'ad hoc responses to specific problems.'

The plan speaks of 'a widespread consensus' that the UN must be restructured ..."

"Reform proposals circulate during 46th Assembly: UN faces 'dangerously precarious' financial situation," UN Chronicle, **March 1992**, pp. 9-10.

[see preceding item of the same date from the same publication.]

"For all the champagne and fine words, it should be obvious to friends and foes alike that the United Nations is in trouble and has fallen far short of what its founders dreamed of 40 years ago.

For its friends, of which we are two, the problem is not so much that the United Nations fails to meet grandiose expectations of a 'world government', but that it is not particularly effective in averting conflict or fighting poverty.

The [UN presently] is clearly not up to the task of reversing these trends, let alone its own genteel deterioration. Officials carry on with their routine business ever more removed from the politics of the real world. What the United Nations suffers from is the dangerous presumption that it will outlive its critics.

The entire structure should be rationalized. Its current organizational shape includes the accumulated whims and false starts of 40 years. Many programs that have run out of steam linger on. Sometimes their budgets are consumed by staff costs, leaving them no funds to work with. the United Nations should not try to do everything, only what it can do well."

Sadrudin Aga Khan and Maurice F. Strong, "Proposals to reform the U.N., 'limping' in its 40th year," New York Times, **October 8, 1985**.

"The call for U.N. reform

U. S. taxpayers always have borne the lion's share of the U.N.'s assessed and voluntary contributions, pouring more than \$15 billion into the organization since the first General Assembly

in 1946. Then, the U.N. staff numbered 1,500; last year it was over 11,000. Meanwhile, the budget of the entire U.N. system has grown five times faster than the inflation rate.

There seems to be a near consensus within the U.N. that management has not kept pace with this dizzying growth. Throughout almost every level of the U.N., financial, administrative, and personnel controls have been either nonexistent or broken."

Any serious U.N. reforms must give major contributors a larger say in the U.N. budget process.

Congress and the Administration should insist that the Secretary-General become more involved in the U.N.'s financial management. His aloofness thus far, compounded by the various U.N. bodies' inability to take reform seriously, casts a pall over the promise of U.N. reform.

Until significant reforms are adopted and executed, the U.S. must maintain its pressure on the U.N. Restoring the full U.S. contribution [prematurely] would accomplish little but provide a disincentive for the desired reform."

"The United Nations continues to duck needed reforms", The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder, No. 593, Washington, D.C., **July 9, 1987**, pp. 2, 8.

" the U.N. serves neither its original purposes nor ours. We should leave and devote the money instead to worthy, non-politicized U.N.-affiliated organizations (such as the World Health Organization) and to bilateral aid, which the United States, not a bloc of hostile countries, will control.

The United States stays in the U.N. for a variety of bad reasons: sentimental attachment to the hopes of 40 years ago, guilt over the fate of the League of Nations, inertia. One can respect the one-world idealism that attended the founding of the U.N. and still face the facts of today. The U.N. is more than just a failed instrument. It is a bad instrument."

Charles Krauthammer, "Let it sink: Why the U.S. should bail out of the U.N.", The New Republic, **August 24, 1987**, pp. 18-23 [22-23].

"When Kurt Waldheim [took office in 1972] the condition of the United Nations system was one of undisciplined expansion confusedly related to outdated concepts of global trends and inhibited at every turn by an impenetrable bureaucracy. U.N. operations, at headquarters as in the field, were beset by a lack of coherent purpose; by destructive rivalries among proliferating branches and drastic deficiencies of ability within the inflated senior ranks; and by a [demoralized] staff body enfeebled by the almost complete absence of a merit system.

In the closing years of U Thant's tenure [the late 1960s], the deterioration of the U.N. system had given rise to numerous internal studies, increasingly candid in content and urgent in tone, and in several instances drawn up by outside bodies at the request of the governing bodies.

....

The findings of these and other such studies were overwhelmingly adverse; their compilers emphatically urged immediate and radical reforms. Findings and recommendations alike would be disregarded by the governmental and bureaucratic leaders ..."

Shirley Hazzard, "Breaking faith - Part I", The New Yorker, **September 25th, 1989**, pp. 63-99, [94-96].

[Note: Ms. Hazzard worked at the UN for ten years, resigning in 1962 to become a [very successful] full-time author.]

"The crude truth about many of the UN agencies is that they don't know what they are trying to achieve; and that cronyism, sloth and incompetence would ensure they could not achieve it even if they did. The obstacles to reform are huge, the courage to tackle them nowhere visible. Still, [there are elementary common sense] suggestions

One might innocently think they would be judged as such by the third world, which suffers

most from the failures of the UN agencies. But in practice third-world governments have been the fiercest opponents of reform. There is little hope for even minimal change unless the countries that pick up the bills take the task of reform seriously."

"The United Nations agencies: A case for emergency treatment", The Economist, **December 2, 1989**, pp. 27-28, 30 [30].

"The UN's prestige as an international peacekeeper has never stood so high. But neither has the organization ever been so broke or so badly in need of an overhaul. [It cannot] live up to [the hopes for it] unless it puts itself in order first. Through grubby and unglamorous, this repair job is the new secretary-general's most pressing task.

More than 30 top officials report directly to the secretary-general. A pen factory could not work this way. Over the years the top posts have been shared out more to satisfy regional and national demands than because they or their occupants were needed.

An idea gaining ground would be to cut back these offices and appoint instead four deputy-secretaries to oversee peacekeeping and diplomacy; humanitarian relief (including refugees); and economic and environmental matters. The fourth would be a manager with a proven record in business or government, to make sure the machine works.

Doubters wonder if Mr. Butros Ghali is the sort to decide large issues like this for himself and then argue for his view, if he has to, over the heads of governments. He has five years to prove them wrong."

"Quickly, quickly: The new boss of the United Nations can dispel doubts by making some swift reforms", The Economist, **November 30, 1991**, p. 17.

"The most egregious example of organizational bloat [in the United Nations system] is the one closest to home for Mr. Butros-Ghali: the U.N. Secretariat. the top echelon of the Secretariat originally consisted of eight assistant secretaries. Now it has 20 assistant secretaries, a new super-layer of 27 under secretaries and a director-general -- plus 21 more top-level officers who are not on the regular budget, for a total of 69.

Reformers urge clearing out the deadwood and bringing in officials chosen on merit who can provide the Secretary-General with background reports, analyses of complex situations, options for decisions and ideas for future missions."

Bonnie Angelo, "United Nations: Challenges for the new boss," Time, **February 3, 1992**, pp. 40-41 [41].

"When he took office nearly three years ago, Secretary-General Butros Butros-Ghali promised comprehensive reform. But today, although there has been some progress, the United Nations remains a slow-motion bureaucracy struggling to adapt to a real-time world.

Reform has been hampered by a lack of consistent support from Mr. Butros-Ghali [who had pledged if chosen] not to seek a second term so he would be free to make radical changes in the way the UN is run.

His [consolidation] measures generated suspicion among many Third World nations, which feared that traditional development programs designed to serve poor countries -- and in which many Third World nationals hold jobs -- would be downgraded.

The Secretary-General now thinks that 'The problem is not to streamline,' [but] 'to add new personnel because of the new demands. We are overloaded with demands.'

[His] energies have also been consumed in pleading and panhandling to cope with a financial crisis caused by the failure of most governments, including the United States, to pay their UN bills on time. At the end of November, the United Nations was owed \$2 billion by its members, a cash shortfall that nearly paralyzed the organization."

Julia Preston, "A world-class challenge: Upgrading UN's creaking bureaucracy",

International Herald Tribune, January 4, 1995.

"It is also worth noting that a major factor generally untouched by those working at UN reform is the need for a new political consensus to underpin the Organization. Without such a consensus all the changes now being considered -- while entirely necessary -- have little chance of improving the effectiveness of the UN. A new consensus might not be possible in the present turbulent period of post Cold War adjustments, but the need for it has to be kept fully in view, not least to underline how the lack of one contributes to the intractability of many issues facing the Organization."

"Joint Inspection Unit, only system-wide oversight body, raps knuckles all around -- even its own," International Documents Review (New York), **11 December 1995**, p. 3.

"Although the United Nations is essentially an enormous information processing and sharing machine, it ... almost never addresses frontally the quality of [its] data, the value added ... and the cost-effectiveness

A report on ['Restructuring and revitalization ' (A-50-697) hides] these key questions under layers of esoteric bureaucratese. ... A section entitled 'Documentation' [says] 'the documentation crisis in the United Nations is not a new phenomenon'. ... 'despite repeated analyses and discussions, the crisis continues and indeed, may have grown more acute. It seriously impacts the ability of intergovernmental bodies to perform their mandated functions ... Although member states have complained insistently, ... the Secretariat [also] can have no interest in bringing out a document long after the due date.

"The roots of the documentation crisis are systemic. ... Without a cultural change in the way business is done in the economic, social, and related sectors, where the tendency has been to increase the number of bodies as well as the frequency with which they meet, it is unlikely that the documentation crisis will abate."

"UN economic & social sector reform ignores critical issues of information flow and use", International Documents Review (New York), **November 27, 1995**, pp. 4-5.

" Improving the crucial relationship between member states and the Secretariat [is an important aspect of] genuine reform.

Sins of member states

Secretariat staff resent what they see as member state interference in much of their daily work. They are frustrated by the degree to which member states micromanage the hiring and promotion of Secretariat personnel.

Member states also micromanage Secretariat budgeting, seeking to control the minor details of spending allocations.

Secretariat staff members are also frustrated by lack of clear direction from intergovernmental bodies. Too often member states fail to agree on how best to confront global problems Moreover, mandates are frequently assigned to the Secretariat with little thought as to the resources needed for their implementation.

Sins of the Secretariat

.... Member states contend that ineffective -- some would say nonexistent -- managerial practices throughout the Secretariat have led to inefficient use of the United Nations' precious human and financial resources; a staff unaccountable for its actions and prone to delegate upwards; insufficient program coordination; and wasteful duplication of efforts. In the opinion of one participant, 'The horror stories are true.'

"Making UN reform work: Improving member state-Secretariat relations",

Report of the twenty-eighth United Nations issues conference, The Stanley Foundation, **February 21-23, 1997**, pp. 14-16.

"The United Nations and its sister institutions will face a period of harsh reform. Most of the global organizations set up at the end of the second world war are held in low esteem

This is odd. The end of the cold war has accentuated the need for global institutions.

....

Unfortunately, global institutions have not risen to the task.

If the UN were to ask what it exactly it does that nobody else can, it would discover an interesting list of 'core competencies.' drugs and the environmentrefugees and human rightsa small standing army.

This narrower, deeper UN would not need much of the fluff that it has accumulated. Each part should be forced to justify its existence at least twice a decade.

This sort of thinking is considered dangerous by many. But the current alternative, of slowly withering on the vine as its richer backers get ever less impressed by its inefficiencies, is not an attractive one.

.... The UN and the IMF are both trying to do too much; both need to be more precise as well as more modern. "

John Micklethwait, "The multilateral muddle", in "The world in 1999", The Economist, **January 1999**, p. 73.

"How Not to

Although 'reform' has been with us for ages nowit cannot exactly be considered a success. Which comes as no surprise to the average U.N. staff member who, from the 'vantage' point of the inside view, has seen a succession of bad answers being administered to the wrong questions.

Of course success is in the eye of the administrator. [Some of them actually] come to believe, in a truly Orwellian nightmare perspective, that 'good is bad' and 'black is white'.

EU Commissioner Neil Kinnock seems to be one of the outsiders done in by the deceptive legwork of our 'reformers.' [Seeking] working models for reform of [EU] institutions, Mr. Kinnock finds his inspiration in the 'successful internal overhauls of the U.N.' This snake oil is deemed to be effective in eliminating the 'problems of poor morale, slow promotion and mismanagement.' Wish it were true. The only amazing accomplishment [his] illusions illustrate is the remarkable success of the U.N. policy of muzzling the staff to the point where, almost fifty-five years later, high officials of non-U.N. organizations can still be led to believe that sound management is the rule here."

Eric Blair, "Miscellany: From our man in Absurdistan", UN Special (Geneva), **March 2000**, p. 31.

"I've met with the heads of other agencies, and I understand how difficult these institutions are to manage. The institutions cannot reform themselves ...

I would like to suggest one concrete step toward reform. It's time for a small group of national leaders to take on the challenge of reforming and rebuilding global governance. They should build this effort around the issue of the democratic deficit in multilateral institutions. This leadership must come from the top. That may sound undemocratic and elitist, but success is only possible if serious leaders grasp the challenge. Otherwise, needless seminars and conferences will inevitable bog down the process in the name of consensus, and good ideas will become hostage to narrow ambitions."

Mike Moore, "Multilateral meltdown", Foreign Policy, **March/April 2003**, p. 75.

[Note: Mr. Moore was the Director General of the World Trade Organization from 1999 to 2002 and is a former Prime Minister of New Zealand. He is the author of A world without walls: Freedom, development, free trade, and global governance, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK, 2003.]

"Saying that the United Nations had come to a 'fork in the road', Secretary-General Kofi Annan argued Tuesday that fundamental weaknesses in the architecture of the institution must be remedied for it to retain any effectiveness in combating genocide, terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

He was stern and passionate Tuesday as he lectured the assembled delegates from 191 nations, saying that the institution and its more than 9,000 employees belong to them, and they must do a better job of protecting them.

But the overarching theme of the speech was that the need to change the institution is urgent.

Central to any change, he said, was reforming the Security Council.

He chastised his audience for debating this issue for more than a decade without taking action.

He added: 'history is a harsh judge; it will not forget us if we let this moment pass.'

He then said that he intended to set up a panel of 'eminent personalities' to assess the current security threats and the best use of collection action to respond to them. This group, he proposed, could also recommend changes in the institution and processes of the United Nations."

Felicity Barringer, "Annan puts urgency in his call for UN reform", International Herald Tribune, **September 24, 2003**.

"Why GAO did this study

The U.N. Secretary General launched two reform agendas, in 1997 and 2002, to address the U.N.'s core management challenges -- poor leadership of the Secretariat, duplication among its many offices and programs, and the lack of accountability for staff performance. ... In 2000, GAO reported that the reforms were not yet complete.

What GAO found

... First, the Secretariat has taken positive steps to strengthen its human capital management, but reforms in this area are ongoing and additional challenges remain. Second, the U.N. has begun to adopt results-oriented budgeting, but its monitoring and evaluation system does not measure program impact. ...

UN reform faces several challenges. For example, the Secretariat does not conduct comprehensive assessments of the status and impact of U.N. reforms. In addition, the reform agendas lack clearly stated priorities, interim goals, and target dates for overall completion. Other challenges include resistance to change from program managers and possible resource constraints.

What GAO recommends

... the [US] Secretary of State and [US Mission to the UN] should work with other member states to encourage the Secretary-General to (1) report regularly on the status and impact of reforms; (2) identify short- and long-term goals and establish target end dates for remaining reforms; and conduct assessments of the resulting resource implications."

U.S. General Accounting Office, United Nations: Reforms progressing, but comprehensive assessments needed to measure impact, GAO 04-339, **February 2004**, "Highlights" page. [emphasis added.]

[Note: the complete report is available at www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-339 .]

“ ... The United Nations' 60-year old machinery has never seemed so ill-equipped for its work, and its credibility has plummeted. ...

Regrettably, most [UN groups] ... have an interest in resisting reform. None of the permanent Security Council members wants to give up its veto; smaller powers delight in their General Assembly votes, which count as much as those of the major powers; repressive regimes cherish participation in United Nations' human rights bodies, where they can scuttle embarrassing resolutions; and the Western powers whose troops and treasure are needed to strengthen U.N. peacekeeping have other priorities. Even within the U.N. bureaucracy, many veterans shy away from dramatic reform – it has taken them decades to become masters of the old procedures, and change is risky. And while U.N. officials, including the secretary-general, are quick (and correct) to blame the member states for the constraints they face, they too rarely find the courage to spotlight those specific states whose obstinacy, stinginess, and abuses undermine the principles behind the U.N. Charter.”

... [Three highly visible UN components] ... the Security Council, the Commission on Human Rights, and the peacekeepers in the field ... [are] in dire need of reform and rescue.”

Samantha Power, “The world's most dangerous ideas: Business as usual at the U.N.,” Foreign Policy, **September/October 2004**, pp. 38-39.

Samantha Power is also the author of A problem from hell: America and the age of genocide, Basic Books, New York, 2002.

[Note: A much more detailed discussion of UN management reform problems and failed reform efforts of the past 15 years, i.e. from the late 1980s to the present, is contained in the UN Management Accountability Struggles section, especially in the subsections on 1993 Management Accountability Attempt and The UN old boys' last hurrah? .]

Useful Sources

(Note: informally assembled by IO Watch, roughly ranked from "most useful" on down, and subject to change as new sources are added)

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[Note: This book is a collection of articles, and a bibliography and items on UN efficiency, financial crisis, and reform processes partly in German and partly in English, pp. 130-132.]