

Michael Fullilove

Moment of truth as UN chief confronts his fiercest rival

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Kofi Annan is due to address the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington today. It promises to be a fighting speech, in which he articulates the value of the United Nations to the United States and the world and sets out an ambitious reform agenda.

December has been a *mensis horribilis* for the Secretary-General and the organisation he leads. The scandal surrounding the flawed oil-for-food program has been personalised by the purported business dealings of his son, Kojo. The affair culminated in calls for Annan's resignation by Senator Norm Coleman on December 1 and five other Republican congressmen shortly thereafter.

However, the provisional wing of the Republican Party did Annan two great favours. It jumped the gun, pre-empting an independent inquiry into the matter which is being chaired by the unimpeachable Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the US Federal Reserve. And it overreached.

There is plenty of blame to slosh around, but by no means all of it will stick to the UN secretariat. The oil-for-food program was designed and partially overseen by the Security Council, of which the US is a permanent member and first among equals. Responsibility for checking unauthorised oil sales fell to UN member states, with the Americans again taking a lead.

Since the precipitous calls for Annan's resignation, most of the world has fallen into line behind him. A procession of leaders, including Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, issued statements of support and called for him to complete his final two years in office. He received a rare standing ovation in the General Assembly. Finally the Bush Administration expressed its confidence in his leadership. For the moment at least, a corner has been turned.

It will be fortunate if this proves to be the case, because Annan will need every ounce of his prestige to fight for passage of the report of his High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, released within a day of the Coleman statement.

The report is an impressive attempt to grapple with the security threats facing the world, and contains elements that are disturbing to both UN haters and UN groupies.

Some commentators have dismissed the report on the ground of irrelevance. They suggest the UN is decorative not structural — rather like Victorian lacework on a Paddington terrace. International relations consists purely of power politics, they argue, and in particular US power politics.

True, America is the prime mover in the international system, but although its power is great, it is not without limits. The Iraq imbroglio shows the outer boundaries of unilateralism; George Bush badly underestimated the value that international cover and assistance would bring. The UN cannot wield power, but it can confer and deny international legitimacy. No doubt this tastes as bitter as hemlock to neoconservatives, but they can hardly deny it.

Most of the media attention on the report has focused on the issue of Security Council reform. Both of the alternative proposals put forward by the panel would improve the council's representativeness and are worthy of close consideration.

But although the changes would alter the mathematics of council politics, it is harder to calculate their effect on the body's effectiveness. Nor is it immediately apparent that either proposal will find its way through the jungle of competing national interests to win agreement.

But changes to the council's composition are not the be-all and end-all of UN reform. It may be that other recommendations have a higher chance of success. There are 101 in total but it suffices to mention four.

First, the panel proposes "criteria of legitimacy" that the council should consider before authorising the use of force. These would be declaratory rather than binding, but they would help to introduce some much-needed rigour to council decision-making.

Second, the panel exhorts the UN to strengthen its role in combating terrorism, including by stating clearly that terrorism is "never an acceptable tactic, even for the most defensible of causes". Terrorism is antithetical to the values in the UN Charter. The UN, as well as many of its member states, has suffered at the hands of terrorists. But for too long UN discourse, particularly in the General Assembly, has failed to differentiate between the wolves and the sheep.

Third, the report contains useful recommendations for dealing with a key 21st-century security challenge, the phenomenon of state failure. A new peace-building commission could, if properly resourced, play a part in helping to pull weak states back from the precipice, and rehabilitate those which have fallen over. The panel's suggestions for strengthening the capacities of regional organisations could also help in this regard.

Finally, the suggestion that the regional groupings for elections to the council be revised is very welcome. The arrangements do not reflect geopolitical realities and have the added, less high-minded disadvantage of making it extremely difficult for Australia — lumped in with "West Europe and Others" — to win UN elections.

Australia played a leading role at the conference in 1945 in San Francisco that led to the establishment of the world body. Our interests are no less engaged in its success today.

Multilateralism is not a substitute for our alliance with the US or our relations within the region, but it is a vital accompaniment, one deserving Australia's best efforts.

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