Kofi Annan’s Public Diplomacy

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Kofi Annan had the good fortune to become Secretary-General at an unusual moment in the UN’s history. The Cold War had ended, and US hegemony was not yet seriously contested by other world powers. This made it easier for the Security Council to reach decisions, and gave Annan greater freedom of maneuver than most of his predecessors.

But the 1990s was also a unique moment in another respect, which with hindsight can be seen as even more important: the moment when globalization became an inescapable reality, directly affecting almost everyone in the world.

Globalization had two main aspects. One, partly though not wholly related to the end of the Cold War, was the removal of barriers to international exchange of goods and services, and to some extent also to the movement of people. The other, which occurred independently but pushed the world in the same direction, was the information revolution. For the first time, it became possible for people in almost any part of the world to communicate directly, and instantaneously, with those in any other.

This had economic effects, notably on the speed at which money could be moved around the world, but also profound political and social ones. The full extent of these would not become apparent until after Annan left office—indeed, we are still discovering it now. But his mandate coincided with what can now be seen as an extraordinary transition—from a world in which the production and distribution of information was relatively centralized and controlled, to one in which it is happening everywhere, all the time.

Annan sensed intuitively that this created, for the first time, a global space of communication in which, potentially at least, masses of people in different parts of the world were reacting to each other’s statements and actions, and exchanging information and ideas. In short, it was a world where there could be such a thing as global public opinion, and where a person in the right place, and with the right skills, could help form that opinion by speaking directly to people in different countries. The UN, for the first time, could be something more than an association of sovereign states (though it was still that), and begin to live up to the opening words of its Charter, “We the peoples ...”
Few people expected Annan to be the man who would grasp this opportunity because, until he became Secretary-General, he was largely unknown outside the relatively small and specialized world of multilateral diplomacy. But his horizons were never confined to that world. He had a wide circle of friends and contacts and, once he became Secretary-General, he turned to them for ideas and advice. A key decision, made in the very first days of his mandate, was to recruit John Ruggie, then dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, to fill the new post of assistant secretary-general for strategic planning—in effect, his main strategic adviser.

Working with Ruggie, Annan realized that the turn of the millennium, which would happen on his watch, offered the UN a unique opportunity. He persuaded the General Assembly to convene a special session in the year 2000 at the head of state and government level (officially called the Millennium Assembly, but soon universally known as the Millennium Summit), and to commission him to write a report that would serve as the agenda for that meeting. And the title he chose for that report was *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*.1

Normally such a report, being an official UN document, would have been produced in-house, according to a set format that was hardly designed to attract attention. But for this one Ruggie was allowed, going well beyond the regular Department of Public Information budget, to have a glossy edition prepared by a commercial publisher, with a gold cover and eye-catching layout.

The message was clear: this report, even though submitted “respectfully ... to Member States to facilitate their preparations for the Summit and to stimulate their subsequent deliberations at the Summit,”2 was aimed at a much wider audience. The key sentence in the introduction—reproduced in larger type in the margin to make sure no one missed it—was: “No shift in the way we think or act can be more critical than this: we must put people at the centre of everything we do.”3

Annan thus implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledged that until then the UN had failed to do this and that, if it were to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, it must be seen and heard by *people* (civil society)—not only by governments—and must make a real difference in their lives.

Annan did not see this public diplomacy as an alternative to the private diplomacy associated with his more traditional “good offices” role, but rather as complementing it. At times he was able to combine the two—for instance, in

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1 Annan 2000.
2 Annan 2000, 6.
3 Annan 2000, 7.