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Kofi Annan:
Reflections on his life

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As a young man, Kofi Annan had once projected how he envisioned his life down the road. He predicted that he would retire as a farmer at 60 and die peacefully in bed at 80. Kofi later stated, "Our most intricate plans don't always turn out as we expected."¹ Although he did not retire as a farmer, on August 18, 2018, Kofi Annan passed away at the age of 80, surrounded by his loved ones. Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1997-2006 and Nobel Prize Laureate, Kofi Annan had an extensive career with the latter part of his life dedicated to the up-building of the Kofi Annan Foundation. This paper will examine aspects of the life and legacy of Kofi Annan. A career diplomat who devoted four decades to the United Nations, Annan is remembered for his assiduous efforts to combat poverty and HIV/AIDS and fight for the maintenance of human rights. During his second term as Secretary-General, Annan witnessed major changes on the international stage. His last term was rife with conflict and international turmoil with the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent U.S led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Annan was certainly a visionary and a man who spoke with conviction. An erudite and skilled negotiator, he will also be remembered for his sense of humour, as evidenced by his appearance on the popular American children's program *Sesame Street* where he endeavoured to mediate a puppet conflict.

Early Years

Annan was born in the small village of Kumasi in Ghana on April 8, 1938. He had three siblings, including a twin by the name of Efua Atta. Annan had a close bond with his twin sister and was deeply affected by her death in 1991. As a boy, Annan started to exhibit his leadership skills while at a boarding school where he organized a hunger strike for better food. His efforts to mobilize his fellow classmates bore positive fruit. Annan's continued zeal manifested when he was elected President of the Student Council as an undergraduate student at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. In conjunction with his duties as President of the Student Council, he attended a conference in Sierra Leone. A Ford Foundation delegation sent to the conference with the mandate of scouting out talent took note of Annan. It was not long before the Foundation offered Annan a scholarship for Macalester College located in St. Paul Minnesota. This coincided with a historic event for Annan's country as Ghana gained independence in 1957. Annan departed for the United States in 1958. He often commented on the frigid winters in Minnesota as this climate was completely foreign to the young Ghanaian who was accustomed to two seasons: wet and dry. Initially resistant to wearing earmuffs because they were "inelegant and ugly"², Annan soon learned that in order to survive the sub-zero temperatures and the beating arctic wind, he would have to invest in the largest pair of earmuffs that he could find. His exposure to this climate taught him one of the most applicable lessons that he would carry with him throughout his career, as he commented "...I learned a very



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important lesson. You never walk into a situation and believe that you know better than the natives. You have to listen and look around. Otherwise you can make some very serious mistakes.”³

He was soon thriving in the new conditions. Annan joined the track team and claimed the school record in the 60-yard dash. His extracurricular activities did not stop there as he joined the debate team and became President of the Cosmopolitan Club, a group that fostered collaboration between international students and Americans.

After completing his Bachelor's degree in economics in 1961, Annan went to the Graduate Institute in Geneva, Switzerland and pursued post-graduate studies in international affairs with the aid of a Carnegie scholarship. Annan was a veritable polyglot. While in Geneva, he was able to further perfect his French language skills. In 1962, Annan obtained his first position as a Budget Officer with the World Health Organization (WHO). After three years at the WHO, Annan was promoted to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He was involved with the portfolio that focused on identifying projects that would improve social and economic issues in Africa. His exposure to the inner-workings of aspects of the United Nations fueled his desire to pursue further studies. Annan took a brief hiatus from the United Nations in 1971 when returned to the United States to pursue a Master of Science Degree in Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Annan's Career at the UNO

After receiving his degree, Annan was faced with a pivotal decision. Should he return to Ghana or resume his career with the United Nations? He decided that this was the opportune moment for him to apply what he had learned during his years at the United Nations and his studies to “improve the living conditions in his homeland.” Annan decided to return to Ghana where he worked as Director of Tourism from 1974 to 1976. However, the situation did not pan out as he envisioned. Ghana was still grappling with its status as a newly independent country and was undergoing a period of immense political volatility. The military council had forced Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah out of office in 1966. Annan often reflected on this period of his life as he stated, “I wanted to make a contribution to Ghana but I found myself constantly fighting the military, so I went back to the UN.”⁴ He was able to reintegrate into the UN with ease as he was offered yet another position at the UN headquarters in New York. This marked the beginning of Annan's gradual ascent in different postings in the United Nations as depicted by the following chart:



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Annan's UN Postings:

1962- 1965	World Health Organization- Budget Officer
1976- 1980	United Nations Office of Personnel Services, New York, NY, deputy chief of staff services
1980- 1983	UN High Commissioner for Refugees- Head of Personnel for the Office
1984- 1987	UN Nations Office of Finance- Director of Administrative Management Services
1987- 1990	UN Office of Human Resources Management, assistant secretary general
1990- 1992	UN Assistant Secretary-General for Program Planning, Budget and Finance, and Control
1992- 1996	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations - Under Secretary-General

His years of dedicated service to the United Nations culminated in his appointment as Director of Administration and Head of Personnel in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1980. The crisis in Afghanistan was one of the biggest mandates for him while he was in this post. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 resulted in a widespread humanitarian crisis as numerous Afghans were displaced. Five million refugees fled the country with an additional two million displaced internally. The UNHCR established numerous refugee camps in Pakistan. The UNHCR was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1981 in recognition of the work accomplished by the commission. Although he was stationed in the headquarters of the organization, Annan often visited the refugee camps in Thailand, Pakistan and other sites. In lieu of making decisions from the comfort and safety of his office, Annan was determined to assess the situation on the ground through his own lens.

His aptitude and ease with traveling to the field was particularly useful during his posting as UN Assistant Secretary-General for Program Planning, Budget and Finance, and Control. He was personally approached by Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to deal with the issue of the UN staff members that had become stranded in Iraq and Kuwait in 1990. He set off for Baghdad determined to successfully negotiate the safe return of the stranded international staff. When questioned by one of his aides about the possibility of failure, Annan responded "Don't ever speak to me negatively when I'm about to negotiate. We'll make it- and I don't want to hear that we may not make it."⁵ Annan's resolve and skillful negotiation resulted in the successful release of UN officials from Baghdad. It was at this juncture that Annan became very



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visible to the senior leaders of the UN. On February 1, 1992, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali appointed Annan as Deputy Chief of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

It was a challenging period to be at the helm of UN peacekeeping operations. The number of peacekeeping operations grew considerably in the post-Cold War era. In 1992, 11,500 UN peacekeepers were deployed throughout the world. A mere two years later, this number increased to 73,200. The mandates of the peacekeeping missions were also rapidly expanding to include overseeing elections, creation or strengthening of political institutions, the rapid supply of emergency relief and a host of other tasks. During the United Nations Operation in Somalia II in June 1993, images of U.S. soldiers being dragged through the streets compounded with the death of 25 UN peacekeepers highlighted the precarious and deadly nature of the missions. Annan faced one of the most trying moments of his career in 1994. While acting as Under Secretary General for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Annan received a series of cables from the U.N Peacekeeping force in Rwanda with respect to the escalating threat that radical Hutus were posing to the Tutsis in Rwanda. The force led by Canadian Lt. General Roméo Dallaire sought consent to raid the illegal arms caches. In spite of the warnings, Dallaire did not receive consent and was told to pull out the peacekeeping troops. Shortly thereafter, 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis were slaughtered. A subsequent crisis unfolded a year later with the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the mass killing of 7000 Muslims in Srebrenica. In interviews in the past few years, Annan often reflected upon the more proactive role that the UN could have taken to prevent the mass slaughter of the 800,000 Rwandans.

Annan Elected as Secretary-General

On December 17, 1996 Annan was elected Secretary-General of the United Nations. It is interesting to note that he was the first Secretary-General to be elected internally from the United Nations. According to Chapter XV of the UN Charter, the Secretary General is the "Chief Administrative Officer of the Organization." The role of Secretary-General has been characterized as a job fraught with many frustrations, as it is defined as, "Equal parts diplomat and activist ... the Secretary-General stands before the world community as the very emblem of the United Nations."⁶ Although the expectations for the Secretary-Generals are high, they are bound by the wills of the Member states. As former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once said, "I can do nothing. I have no army. I have no money. I have no experts. I am borrowing everything. If the member states don't want [to do something], what can I do?"

The conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia resulted in significant disillusionment with UN peacekeeping operations. Due to Annan's extensive knowledge of the inner workings of peacekeeping operations and the *modus operandi* of the United Nations, he had a specific vision of how to improve the international organization. He did not shy away from addressing his shortcomings or those of the United Nations. During a speech in 1998, Annan stated "We must and we do acknowledge that the world failed Rwanda at that time of evil... The international community and the United Nations could not muster the political will to confront it. The world must deeply repent this failure."⁷ Over the subsequent few years, a vigorous process ensued to reconcile the notion of state sovereignty with those of individual rights. These discussions culminated with the UN Security Council's endorsement of the *Responsibility to Protect* in 2006. The document enshrined three principle responsibilities: to prevent, react and rebuild. In spite of these principles, Annan often struggled with the precarious balance between the UN's moral obligation to intervene and the way in which this translated into concrete action. In this regard, he asked, "Can the international community spill blood to save lives and itself remain spotless? Can



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humanitarian objectives be fulfilled at the point of a gun? Can they be fulfilled at all if the guns are instead pointed at the humanitarians?"⁸

HIV/AIDS and Combatting Poverty

Annan was fiercely committed to the fight against HIV/AIDS and used his platform as Secretary General to make it his "personal priority". During the opening remarks of the African Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Infectious Diseases in 2001 Annan stated, "HIV/AIDS is not only an African problem. It is global and must be recognized as such. But within that international obligation, the fight against AIDS in Africa is an immediate priority, which must be part and parcel of our work for peace and security in that continent". Annan spoke with conviction and purpose as he stated "AIDS has become not only the primary cause of death on this continent, but our biggest development challenge."⁹ He presented his vision and plan to combat HIV/AIDS as he identified five areas of importance that were crucial in launching the global campaign. He was not just urging for the mobilization of resources, but the widespread mobilization of the political will of leaders. He was also bold in his approach as he wanted to deal with the systemic causes of the pandemic, remove taboo and shame from the topic, thereby encouraging the opening of channels for constructive dialogue. This propelled the UN into action rather speedily. In June 2001 during a Special Session of the UN General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, the member states unanimously adopted a declaration to "support the establishment, on an urgent basis, of a global HIV/AIDS and health fund to finance an urgent and expanded response to the epidemic."¹⁰ This action plan was followed by the establishment of the Global Fund in 2002. This was a concrete materialization of the fruits of Annan's labor as he had proposed the "creation of a Global Fund, dedicated to the battle against HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases." The Global Fund has a mission to "investing the world's money to save lives" to create "a world free from the burden of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria" and is now considered the world's leading organization to date.

Final Reflections on the Annan's Life

After stepping down as Secretary-General, Annan remained active in promoting peace and human rights. Annan worked sedulously to build the Kofi Annan Foundation. The Kofi Annan Foundation was a concrete materialization of Annan's desire and will to improve the world. Its principle mandate was to "mobilize political will to overcome threats to peace, development and human rights."¹¹ In order to bring this to fruition, the Foundation sought to address the root causes such as poverty, armed conflict and poor governance.

In tandem, Annan joined the Foundation of the Elders in 2007, an organization that was established in July 2007 by Nelson Mandela with the mandate to bring leaders together who were committed to human rights, peace and justice. The primary mandate of this organization was to tackle global issues such as sustainable development and peace-building. In one of his final endeavours, Annan traveled to Zimbabwe with the Elders before the June 30, 2018 elections. This was a high-profile mission as Annan was accompanied by Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as Lakhdar Brahimi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria and UN Diplomat. The Elders met with President Emmerson Mnangagwa to ensure that the elections would be free, fair and transparent. As with all of Annan's other involvements, he took this mission very seriously. During a speech at the Citizen's Manifesto



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Forum in Harare, Zimbabwe on July 20, 2018, he spoke with utmost conviction as he reminded Zimbabweans that, "Tweeting and posting are not enough: you have to go vote!"¹²

Although Annan was not a farmer post-retirement, his vision of how his life would pan out was not far from the truth. He planted visions on strengthening the machinery of the United Nations, combatting HIV/AIDS, he fertilized and watered the visions, and the abundant crop will continue to grow for years to come.

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¹ Rachel . Koestler-Grack, *Modern Peacemakers- Kofi Annan: Guiding the United Nations* (Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 23.

² The Brookings Institution, *A Life in War and Peace: A Statesman's Forum with Former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan* (Washington DC: 2012), 5

³ Ibid, 6.

⁴ Rachel . Koestler-Grack, *op cit.*, 28

⁵ James Traub, *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 30.

⁶ United Nations, Chapter XV of the UN Charter, available at <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-xv/index.html>, last accessed on September 28, 2018

⁷ F. Ugboaja Ohagbulam, *U.S. Policy in Postcolonial Africa, Four Case Studies in Conflict Resolution* (Peter Lang: New York: 2004), 220

⁸ Ed. Jonathan Moore, *Hard Choices, Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 1998), 66.

⁹ United Nations, "Secretary-General Proposes Global Fund for Fight Against HIV/AIDS and other Infectious Diseases at African Leaders Summit," April 26, 2001, available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2001/SGSM7779R1.doc.htm>, last accessed September 28, 2018

¹⁰ United Nations, "General Assembly Adopts Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS", June 25-27, 2001, available at <https://www.un.org/ga/aids/coverage/index.html>, last accessed, September 28, 2018

¹¹ Kofi Annan Foundation, <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/our-work/>, available at <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/our-work/>, last accessed on September 28, 2018

¹² Kofi Annan Foundation, "Time for Zimbabwe's Third Wave- Kofi Annan," July 23, 2018, available at <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/supporting-democracy-and-elections-with-integrity/zimbabwe-third-wave-kofi-annan/>, last accessed on September 28, 2018