**A belated obituary for the world’s conscience**

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If personal dignity and good intentions are enough to justify a long career, then Kofi Annan deserves all of the plaudits that he’s received in the wake of his death at the age of 80. A Ghanaian diplomat, Annan rose within the bureaucracy of the United Nations by dint of hard work and charm to become the head of its peacekeeping operations and then its seventh secretary-general.

The symbolism of being the first sub-Saharan African to hold that post ensured that he would be remembered. That Annan always emanated the sort of gravitas and patrician style that many of us would like to think world leaders should project also ensured that the international community and the press would praise him. That he was also not generally associated with the demonization of Israel that characterized much of the doings at the world body is why even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu joined in the general accolades for Annan after his death this past weekend, praising him as “someone who fought anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.”

There’s an argument to be made to just stop here and leave Annan to the mercy of historians. But the first line of The New York Times’ lengthy and generally laudatory obituary, in which the paper noted that he “projected himself and his organization as the world’s conscience and moral arbiter despite bloody debacles that stained his record as a peacekeeper,” requires a response. The fact that Annan was far from the worst example of those who populated that moral cesspool makes his death an appropriate moment to evaluate the awful failures over which he presided. More than that, a serious discussion of what happened on his watch explains why the entire idea of global institutions has become discredited, despite the continued support it receives from much of the foreign-policy establishment and those associated with the Obama administration.

Annan believed that his crowning achievement—and something that might perhaps justify the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize he shared with the United Nations as a whole—was a 2005 unanimous U.N. vote to accept the concept of “the responsibility to protect.” The concept enshrined the notion that sovereign borders should not prevent the international community from intervening to stop genocide. It was particularly ironic for Annan because it was during his time as the head of U.N. peacekeeping operations that genocides were allowed to happen without the world body or even Western governments that purport to care about the issue lifting a finger to help.

In Rwanda and then Bosnia, mass murders occurred in the presence of U.N. personnel who were under Annan’s authority, without them doing a thing about it.

Annan also was the man who presided over the “oil for food” scandal—a shocking scam pulled off by his son, Kojo, who traded on his father’s prestige in order to profit from crooked deals linked to humanitarian efforts to alleviate the suffering of those who lived in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq when it was being sanctioned by the international community for the regime’s crimes. As The New York Sun notes in an insightful piece, Annan bitterly denounced the press for holding the U.N. accountable.

The same piece points out that Annan also believed he had reformed the United Nations by replacing the corrupt and blatantly anti-Semitic Commission on Human Rights with a new Human Rights Council. The fact that the council turned out to be every bit as bad (if not worse) as the commission it replaced may not be Annan’s fault. But it does speak volumes about the illusions that the foreign-policy establishment continues to hold about international institutions of this sort.

That’s the worst thing about the plaudits for Annan. Both the U.N. bureaucracy and most of those who claim to be experts on foreign policy tend to confuse their endlessly expressed good intentions about making the world a better or more peaceful place for actually doing things to effectuate those goals.

Annan thought it mattered that the United Nations voted to endorse the idea of responsibility to protect. So did people like President Barack Obama and his U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power, who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the failure to prevent genocides in the 1990s, but then did nothing when another mass slaughter erupted in Syria, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and causing millions to become refugees.

That came after Annan left his office, but the futility of his efforts as a special envoy to broker peace in Syria, like his peacekeeping failures, told us more about what is wrong with the United Nations than any of the things that earned him the praise of the powerful, let alone his membership in the club of undeserving Nobel Peace Prize winners.

This is important because while Annan charmed the world and hobnobbed with celebrity philanthropists, who showered him and other powerful people like Bill and Hillary Clinton with praise, the U.N. bureaucracy remained a place that was helpless to stop mass murder. Equally disgraceful was that it also often served to legitimize the tyrants and psychopaths who preside over so many countries while routinely singling out the one Jewish state on the planet for unfair treatment. What this means is that if—for all of his elegance and projection of goodwill—Annan and the United Nations were the “world’s conscience,” then for all intents and purposes, the world has no conscience and no one should pretend otherwise.

Annan and his admirers have always chafed against those American representatives—like the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, current National Security Advisor John Bolton or current US. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley—who pushed back at the false consensus about the inherent goodness of the world body accepted by Obama and Power, and instead focused on hammering away at its hypocrisy and malfeasance. Perhaps historians will be kind to Kofi Annan. But his personal appeal notwithstanding, the inability of even someone believed to be a good guy to change this institution for the better explains why Haley’s attitude towards the United Nations is the right way to go.