

If president George W Bush would only live up to his own words at the UN and commit the US to fighting poverty, disaster and disease, says **Jeffrey Sachs**, he could mobilize billions of people in the war on terror and make the world a much safer place

The great leaders of the World War II alliance, president Franklin Roosevelt and prime minister Winston Churchill, understood the twin sides of destruction and salvation. The war aims were not only to defeat fascism but to create a world of shared prosperity. Roosevelt talked about “freedom from fear”, but also about “freedom from want”.

One of the reasons why George W Bush’s administration is losing the battle for the world’s hearts and minds is precisely that it is fighting only the war on terror, while turning a cold and steely eye away from the millions dying of hunger and disease.

If Bush spent more time and money on mobilizing weapons of mass salvation in addition to combating weapons of mass destruction, we might get somewhere in making this planet a safer and more hospitable home.

Weapons of mass destruction can kill millions of people. Their spread into dangerous hands needs resolute opposition. Weapons of mass salvation, by contrast, are the life-saving vaccines, medicines and health interventions, emergency food aid and farming technologies that could avert millions of deaths each year in the wars against epidemic disease, drought and famine.

Yet while the Bush administration is prepared to spend \$100 billion to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, it has been unwilling to spend more than 0.2% of that sum (\$200 million) in the past year on the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

When Bush made a speech to the UN General Assembly in September calling for action against Iraq, he challenged the international community to live up to its own words.

“We want the United Nations to be effective and respectful and successful,” he declared. “We want the resolutions of the world’s most important multilateral body to be enforced.”

He asked whether “the United Nations will serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?” The idea that UN commitments should be followed by action is indeed a radical one, especially for the US, for which wilful neglect of its own commitments is the rule.

Just a week before the president’s UN speech, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the rich countries of

the world promised to put real resources behind the Millennium Development Goals of cutting poverty, disease and environmental degradation. They agreed (the US included) to “urge the developed countries that have not done so to make concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7% of GNP as ODA [official development assistance] to developing countries”.

The US falls \$60 billion a year short of that target – a seemingly unbridgeable gap until one realizes that annual US military spending has risen by about that amount since Bush entered the White House.

The US spends just 0.1% of GNP on foreign assistance. It is firmly in last place among the 22 donor countries of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee in terms of aid as a share of income, a position it will continue to hold even after the small increases that the administration announced in 2002.

If we were to send teams of UN “development inspectors” into the US, the results would not be pretty. First, they would discover a nearly total disparity between global commitments and domestic politics. Bush has not discussed his country’s Johannesburg commitments with the American people (and perhaps his aides have not even discussed them with the president).

Second, they would find complete disarray with regard to the organization, budgeting and staffing necessary to fulfil those commitments. The efforts of White House and State Department foreign policy experts are overwhelmingly directed towards military and diplomatic issues, not development issues. Senior development specialists in the Treasury can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The US government is not even aware of the gap between its commitments and actions because almost nobody in authority appreciates the kind of actions that would be needed to fulfil the commitments. There is no serious work in hand within government to link annual budgetary allocations with the international development goals endorsed by the US. For example, the Bush administration has not produced one credible document spelling out the US role in a global war against AIDS.

The planned US financial contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is about a sixth of what is needed in 2003, according to the fund itself. The evidence shows that \$25 billion a year from donors can avert about eight million deaths a year. The

Who will lead the



"US politicians who ridicule multilateral institutions do not have to battle issues like the loss of fisheries on Tonle Sap lake in Cambodia"

war on want?

expected \$100 billion price tag of a war against Iraq would therefore be enough to avert about 30 million premature deaths from disease if channelled into a sustained and organized partnership with the poor countries.

There is a way out. It is to empower the UN to do what it truly can do. That is to organize a global response to the challenges of disease control, hunger, lack of schooling and environmental destruction – an effort in which the US would be a major participant and financier, in exactly the manner that it has repeatedly pledged.

Don't underestimate the UN

The idea that the UN system could provide real leadership on the great development challenges will strain credulity in some quarters. A steady drumbeat of criticism of the UN agencies during the 1990s, led by right-wing US congressional leaders, has left the impression of nearly moribund institutions busy securing patronage slots for friends and relatives and disconnected from the rapid advances we have seen in technology, finance and globalization.

When I began my own intensive work with the UN agencies three years ago – as chairman of a commission for the World Health Organization (WHO), and then more recently as a special adviser to the UN secretary general for the Millennium Development Goals – I was not quite sure what I would find. The truth is almost the opposite of the views propagated by the UN-bashers. Despite a decade of criticism and budget cuts, the UN's specialized agencies have far more expertise and hands-on experience than any other organization in the world.

Even the World Bank, with its knowledge base and ability to disburse and monitor funds in some of the most difficult settings in the world, can address problems of health or the environment or other specialized concerns only in partnership with the UN agencies with responsibility in those specific areas.

No bilateral donor agency can substitute for the scale of UN expertise and engagement, although these agencies can be important partners in a global effort.

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South African demonstrators demand free anti-retroviral drugs for pregnant women

This underappreciated capacity is why the UN system has vastly outperformed expectations in Kosovo, East Timor and other tough assignments in recent years. An agency such as the WHO has a unique mix of technical expertise, legitimacy in all corners of the world and especially an operational presence on the ground in dozens of the world's poorest and neediest countries.

Agencies such as the Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome have been objects of merriment and ridicule among right-wing US senators and congressmen in recent years. But, of course, the constituents of those senators and congressmen have never had to battle against the loss of fisheries in Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia or against drought in AIDS-ravaged southern Africa, as the FAO does each day.

The UN, in conjunction with the World Bank, should be asked to take the lead in establishing Global Frameworks for Action surrounding each of the major development goals. These frameworks would outline, in broad terms but with budgetary guidelines and timetables attached, the specific ways in which the governments of rich and poor countries, the private sector, philanthropists and civil society could get organized to win the fight against poverty and disease.

Realistic plans would be based on four Ss – *scale, science, specificity* and *selectivity*. First, the UN plans should address each issue on a *scale* that counts. Just as there can be no hurrahs for weapons inspectors who visit only a small fraction of possible weapons sites, there must be no faking it with small-scale AIDS projects that might save one village while leaving whole nations to die. But true scale will cost money, and especially more money from the US.

Second, the UN should mobilize the best *science* available, as it has done with climate change and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or with health and the WHO and UNAIDS. This means an open, inclusive and consultative process in each area of con-

cern, drawing on national and international scientific academies, public and private research centres and academia.

Third, any plan of action must recognize the *specificity* of conditions on the ground. There is no single strategy for fighting AIDS, preserving forests or combating malaria. Everything depends on physical geography, culture, history and other very local factors. The best way by far of bringing global science to bear on local conditions is to invite national governments and civil society in each country to prepare their own plans of action, with the understanding that programmes of merit will be funded at the international level.

That is the strategy of the Global Environment Facility and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It should also be the strategy behind similar efforts to expand primary education or provide water and sanitation to impoverished regions.

Fourth, any plan of action must be *selective*, directing donor assistance only towards regions that will use it well, and taking a hard-headed approach when corrupt governments are likely to squander the help.

Here the US has it just right in demanding the linkage of aid to good governance and reasonable economic policies. The fallacy in the US approach has been that even well-behaved governments receive only a tiny fraction of the financial help they need.

Our interconnectedness on the planet is the dominating truth of the 21st century. One stark result is that the world's poor live – and especially die – with the awareness that the US is doing little to mobilize the weapons of mass salvation that could offer them survival, dignity and eventually an escape from poverty.

It is time for Bush to take seriously his own statement at the UN that “our commitment to human dignity is challenged by persistent poverty and raging disease”. If he would only lead his country to that end, he would mobilize billions of people in the fight against terrorism and he would fulfil his own call upon the world to “show that the promise of the United Nations can be fulfilled in our time”. **GA**



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