On March 3, 2007, former United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Mark Malloch Brown, who is currently working on his new book as a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, sat down with YIJA Senior Editor Marc Ozawa to discuss pressing international affairs issues currently facing the UN. In the course of the interview, Mr. Malloch Brown elaborated on his experiences heading the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and lessons learned from an extensive career in development and diplomacy.

Over the past five years, it’s probably an accurate statement to make that the United States’ image has suffered in the rest of the world. In your opinion is reconciliation possible and if so, what steps can the United States take to improve its relations?

Well look, I’m old enough to remember that estrangement between the United States and other parts of the world isn’t new; it’s happened before. When Daniel Patrick Moynihan was U.S. ambassador to the UN, he had to combat an almost equally strident anti-Americanism as John Bolton last year. Having said that, I think there are very particular dimensions to this crisis that have to be recognized before they can be solved. The United States, by what it did in Iraq, really broke with the great body of international opinion, not just in the Islamic world but in general, and in so doing kind of evoked an apparent attitude of willful disdain for the views of the rest of the world, which in this era of globalization has been deeply unsettling and frightening to many people. Hence on the face of it, extraordinary polling results in some parts of the world where George Bush is seen as being a greater threat to world peace than Osama Bin Laden. So we have got a situation where a large part of global public opinion has regretfully come to see America, the fountain of so much of the post-World War order, as in need of repair. But
the fact that America has been somewhat at odds with the world before and has come back in from the cold shows that this is not a problem without a solution. This can be repaired.

In five years, do you think the number of democratic states in the world will have increased or decreased? This question was inspired by current discourse in some theoretical circles concerning the perceived tradeoffs sometimes required of newly democratizing states. With examples such as Russian president, Vladimir Putin, who enjoys overwhelming popular support among voters, what are your thoughts concerning potential tradeoffs to maintain stability in new democracies?

Mine is a practitioner’s and not a political scientist’s answer, and it is that the need for democracy is not a question of “if” but rather “when.” After thirty years in the trenches working on development and democratization, I have not yet seen a country which can sustain an unbroken path of development if it seeks to forego democratization for too long. I was there as an adviser when the referendum against General Pinochet in Chile took place. Chile’s economic success, if it was to be sustained, had to be integrated into the world economy. It couldn’t do that while it had an authoritarian running the country and that fact persuaded great swathes of the middle class and business community’s opinion that had not previously been necessarily supportive of democratic transitions, to come in and support it for economic reasons. I’ve seen other countries where they are sort of brought to their knees by political conflict that undoes development, and the only solution is to get that conflict into a peaceful competitive channel, through democracy. And I’ve also seen countries that have postponed partially democratic reckoning, countries such as China or now Russia. But I see it only as a postponement. They will eventually come to it. Now that’s one half of the answer.

I have to say that there is a second half of the answer and that is to say that even countries that have gone democratic, among these countries the democratic dividend has sometimes been disappointing. As head of the UNDP, I supported very interesting work in Latin America. There you saw people beginning to show a sentimental harking back to the times of dictatorship because those regimes made the proverbial “trains run on time.” In other words, the systems, at least as many people remembered them, seemed to work better. And so, while I think democratic transitions are inevitable as a release to the pressure cooker of political conflict, they’re certainly not irreversible. And today, I think we’re facing a challenging moment when for various reasons in our world economy, democracy is not delivering the goods
to people. Therefore, while I expect that we’ll gain a number of democracies in the next five years, I also suspect that we’ll lose some.

■ How would you define terrorism and what do you believe are its causes?

Terrorism is political violence. It’s illegal political violence, like all violence I suppose that is not sanctioned as the right of states. That is war. There is no doubt that the international community has to remain firm and tough on terrorism when it breaks out. It is a challenge to civilized life. However, any successful strategy of containing and limiting terrorism must contain a political dimension, which seeks at the very least to separate terrorists from, if you like, their soft support base. This means expanding the political realm to include as many dissident elements in a society as possible, in order marginalize and minimize the hardcore terrorists. And I think the response to terrorism since September 11 has been in too many cases all about a military solution and not enough about the politics of inclusion.

■ Last year, you in particular were singled out in the media as being somewhat critical of the U.S. media for its portrayal of the UN to the American public, which underscores a possible communications issue with the UN. Moving forward, what steps, if any, do you think the UN should take to better inform the publics of its member states on the UN’s missions, activities, and purpose?

Well look, I don’t know an institution and a leadership of an institution—from a president in the White House to a prime minister in Britain to a secretary-general or in this case a deputy secretary-general of the UN—who when they’re in political trouble, don’t blame the media claiming, “if only we were better understood, if only they would tell our story more fairly.” And I’m very conscious of that. So my complaint is both a little wider and a little narrower than your question implies, wider in the sense that my comments were aimed more at the American political leadership than it was directly at the American media because for the media report a story, someone has to make the story. In this case, the story that I think has been unmade in modern American political life is that the United States needs the UN because it needs a multilateral political tool in order to achieve its foreign policy political objectives in the world. We’ve entered an era when you can’t do it alone. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, who in 1945 and 1946 presided over a country which controlled a greater share of global economic and military resources than today’s United States, had the vision to educate the American public on the need to create a system of multilateral
institutions where America traded some unilateral decision-making capacity for the huge leveraging value of being able to concert an international response to issues that it could not address alone. And my complaint is that modern American presidents have failed to get out there and make the same case. So in that sense, the media is a follower.

I have a second complaint which is targeted at a much narrower subset of the media. Going back a couple of years the media, including a small part of the press corps at the UN but more generally the right-wing media in the United States, the United Kingdom, and to some extent in other countries as well, smelled blood. They hated the UN, they hated its chief Kofi Annan who had, in their eyes, outrageously set himself up as some kind of a secular saint and had won the Nobel Peace Prize. This person, Kofi Annan, was bringing the UN into peoples’ living rooms because he was such a media-friendly figure. The UN was no longer being perceived as it had in the past as a place where they fly black helicopters covertly around America. That had been a favorite conspiracy in the time of Annan’s predecessor. So, Kofi Annan was humanizing the UN. He became the victim of a lynch mob campaign after he opposed the invasion of Iraq. His critics saw in the Oil-for-Food scandal a means to bring him down. And this group just willfully trampled on facts. They were uninterested in balanced and meticulous reporting because they sought a political objective of bringing him and the UN down. And so Kofi Annan was the victim of, I felt, a violent and unfair media attack. Unlike so many of the other political scandals, I felt there was no respect for the fact that we had, in a sense, learned what a lot of national leaders often seem not to have learned, which is that the only way to address these things is to get the facts and the truth out because it’s usually the cover-up and not what originally happened that brings leaders down. Kofi Annan set Paul Volcker, a hugely reputable former head of the Federal Reserve, loose with a budget of almost 40 million dollars and 60 crack investigators to get to the bottom of the scandal—which eventually he did, and there was nothing in it to bring Kofi Annan down. There were mistakes by the UN and, sadly, corruption by even one or two officials, but we got to the bottom of it. That story was never told.

Any successful strategy of containing and limiting terrorism must contain a political dimension.

What grade would you give the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) at this point based on your observations?

Well, it’s really a mixed grade in the sense that when the Millennium Devel-
opment Goals were adopted, the presumption maybe was that they were aspirational only, or to use the language of the UN, “normative.” And people didn’t realize that they were actually grounded in some fairly practical possibility. Halving poverty by 2015 using the benchmark of 1990 is likely to happen largely because of huge successes of poverty reduction in Asia, particularly East Asia, and because two-thirds of the world’s poor live in that region, we’ll get there in terms of the global numbers. There will be trouble spots, which will be unlikely to make the same degree of progress, of which sadly Africa is the most noticeable and dominant in our minds. And if you look at the other goals, they are stretch targets but not impossible. So where have we got to since we adopted the goals in 2000? First, they are the centerpiece of the development discourse not just in international conferences, but also at the country level. Presidents in developing countries increasingly campaign around their performance on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). A Kenyan president got elected partially because he promised universal, free, primary education à la MDG. Lula da Silva in Brazil, when he was reelected, had a very MDG type of campaign targeting poverty issues. So I think it’s created a dramatic global policy alignment, and that means a financial alignment between domestic priorities in developing countries and the support they receive internationally.

Having said all that, here we have the good news. The bad news is the following. There is typical, and I guess predictable, drifting backwards, particularly by the donor countries that are already falling short of the pledges they made at the Gleneagles G8 conference and at a parallel European community meeting at the time. The OECD has just reported that they are way off target. Secondly, even in Asia, looking at the success story, you can already see the stress points that could undo the progress. First, a rising rate of environmental catastrophes which has the real potential to undo the progress on incomes. For example, if forest cover is lost, then livelihood in the agricultural sector is lost. If climate change that is affecting significant parts of east Asia continues, it will also have huge economic impacts. Another strain is that girls’ education is not keeping up in Asia, or in significant parts of Asia. So, it’s not a moment to seem complacent, and as someone who was there at the time when these goals were designed and as someone who was deeply involved in their promotion, I’m hopping a little on the sideline now, because I’m a bit alarmed and worried as to what we can do to keep the momentum going including the political will and the financial resources in order to achieve these goals.

You are credited with quite a successful track record implementing reforms during your tenure with the United National Development Program (UNDP). Are there any lessons learned from this experience that might be successfully
The first thing that I have to do is credit the legacy of a good Yale man who is my predecessor as administrator, James Gustave Speth, the Dean of the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. I built on what he had begun in terms of fundamental reform. Secondly, I was lucky enough to take over at a time when the climate for financing development was going through a huge upswing after years of decline when people were cutting development budgets due to the end of the Cold War. In this case, I inherited an easier environment. We did double the resources while I was at the UNDP to over $4 billion a year, and it came out of donors and recipient countries buying into our vision which was all about democracy, the environment, focusing not just on the macroeconomics but also on targeted microeconomic interventions to reduce poverty and on support to failed and failing states. Because it was all packaged within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals it started to generate a type of buzz. UNDP became the place to be for development reform. I think that, in some ways, leading a big public organization is not that different from leading a big corporation or a non-governmental organization. You’ve got to build a focus, and around that focus, you have to build a sense of excitement. Then you’ve got to build a first-class team to deliver. And I think we were lucky enough to be able to do these things.

When I moved from the UNDP to the UN proper, I found that there were some handicaps that I had not had at the UNDP. First we were out of the political limelight at the UNDP and allowed to get on with our business. In this sense, I was a real chief executive. Kofi Annan, on the other hand, at the UN was sort of bound down almost like Gulliver by the Lilliputians, with a thousand little strings, attachments, and ropes that member states put on him. They micromanaged his budget, staffing, programs, etc. Therefore, he didn’t have the freedom to manage that I enjoyed. Secondly, the UN, unlike the UNDP, was caught in this political gridlock and standoff between America and the developing world with the Europeans unhappily caught in the middle. All of this made reform in the UN very difficult. So the new secretary-general has got a lot to do that we were unable to finish. We did, however, complete some pretty major pieces such as building a new human rights machinery, and a new peace building with the responsibility to protect people, however imperfectly, from genocide the likes of which is taking place...
in Darfur. Nevertheless we were not able to fix the vital management and personnel systems the UN needs if it is to deliver effectively.

■ **What is the greatest personal lesson that you’ve learned from your experience at the UN?**

Well, it’s to never give up. It’s to recognize that one’s years of leadership at the UN are a great privilege and opportunity. The UN is a global organization; it is a global stage. But it’s one which easily diminishes people, where political compromises and the preference for political caution over vision, and a small step instead of a big one, often seem overwhelming. And every time I personally compromised—and I’m lucky enough to be one who didn’t compromise very often—I regretted it. Yes, you have to build a consensus. Yes, you have to be a leader who can be a good listener, persuader, and consensus builder. I don’t mean to demean the value of these skills, after all, you can’t just unilaterally determine the course of things at the UN—you absolutely cannot. But you must never give up on boldness and vision.

■ **In the course of your career, have you observed any organizations, either within the UN or otherwise, that may not be currently well known, yet are having substantial positive impact on the global community?**

I think that in the UN community, an up-and-coming organization is the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) which was better known some years ago than it is today. However, its issue is coming back into vogue in such a strong way. It has a brilliant young leader, Achim Steiner. We’re going to be hearing a lot more of him and UNEP as I think the world is beginning to recognize there is a gap in the international architecture. We need a stronger environment organization. I think that whatever comes about will be based on UNEP. Outside the UN, I think there is a huge dynamism and growth of international civil society in general. Rather than singling out any individual organizations, what might be more useful is to single out a new operating model. You’re going to see joined-up networks and coalitions of NGOs moving issues. The precursor or early examples of this were organizations that came together to ban landmines. It involved countries such as Canada. It involved veterans’ movements, which on other issues were probably on the political right. It involved peace organizations that were from the left. They all combined around their abhorrence of landmines. Similarly on issues of forgiving third world debt, you saw right-wing evangelical Christian communities join up with left-wing citizen organizations around
a similar abhorrence of overwhelming debt burdens for poor counties. You’ll see similar coalitions forming around new issues such as human rights, corruption, climate change, and migration, to name a few. The point is that it’s not about single organizations anymore having all the answers and all the clout. However, these movements will start with an organization or an organizer who is smart enough to coalition build, and likewise smart enough to get beyond his or her own political box and coalition build with people who may be totally on opposite sides of many other issues but converge on this one issue. It’s really when you network globally that you move things. It’s when you employ modern organizing techniques, such as the Internet and dramatic media strategies and promotional activities, to get your point of view in front of busy and low attention-span publics around the world. Somewhere in each of these new networks, I believe you will find the UN because the UN remains, and I think will remain, the global platform on which these things will play out. Take climate change for example: there has been a huge amount of activity by players such as the UK government and NGOs, but it was a recent UN report that is the recognized gold-standard. It contained the shift in the global debate. Yes there is a problem and the scientific community is for the most part, no longer divided on that; and yes, the world is getting a little warmer. I think that’s the way it’s going to work, coalitions coming together and making the case, the UN getting involved to endorse the case and being the place where international legislative action may occur. It is these global networks that are the future.