

Speech at Hudson Institute U.N. Reform Conference
Sen. Tom Coburn, M.D. (R-OK)
September 11, 2006

As we meet on this historic date we need no reminder of the terrible events of September 11, 2001. Yet, September 11th will forever highlight not just our shared tragedy, but our shared values. The acts committed against us were so evil, the darkness of that day so deep, that the light of truth and the reality of our shared values was never more clear.

The rights we cherish are, of course, not American rights. They were not invented by us – we saw them as inalienable because they were endowed by our Creator. President Bush says it well, “I believe freedom is not America's gift to the world; I believe freedom is the almighty God's gift to each man and woman in this world.”

America and her love of liberty, self-determination, and self-government didn't spring up from the fruited plain. Our founders never saw these values as negotiable – precisely because they weren't just American.

We all know that what the terrorists attacked on September 11 were not just buildings but these values. I'm convinced that it was the inherent and enduring truth of these values, and the clarity with which much of humanity saw them, that inspired the French to proclaim that they were “all Americans,” and the British to play the Star Spangled Banner right before the usual British national anthem before the changing of the Guard in front of Buckingham Palace.

Five years later, we obviously live in dangerous times. Nuclear threats by dangerous tyrants are increasing. Deaths from preventable and curable diseases are increasing. Religious and political persecution is proceeding with impunity in many corners of the world. Terrorism is now so commonplace that we don't remember when it used to be considered unacceptable.

My friends, we need a place where free nations can remind one another of our shared values and collectively support one another in pursuing those values. We need our friends to stand with us in the face of the grave threats of our time. And our friends need us to do the same. In other words, if we didn't have a U.N., we'd have to create one.

Let me spend a few minutes discussing some steps I believe we can take to help the U.N. we have, look like the one we'd want to create.

In the Senate, I chair a subcommittee that does oversight on a lot of programs and agencies. Many of these agencies perform critically important functions in our country and abroad. But it's rare when we are able to influence an agency that has a mission so fundamental to preserving human life and dignity around the world from the forces of

oppression, tyranny, and genocide. Some have characterized our efforts as just more conservatives maligning the U.N. – but I don't use my hearings to play political games. Oversight of the U.N. matters.

You see, how money is spent matters when we're talking about the U.N. because the U.N. is in places where life and death are on the line. Where the U.N. operates can make the difference between anarchy and order; between freedom and oppression; between slaughter and shelter.

As a practicing physician, I know that you can't treat what you haven't diagnosed. Despite the profound importance of the U.N. mission all over the world, we can't fix the ways that the mission is compromised without a clear understanding of the problem. So that's why the first and most important agenda item I've been pursuing has been transparency. I like to call it "sunshine." Until we know how the U.N. is spending money, we can't figure out how to shift priorities, to spend more strategically, or how to protect spending from fraud, corruption and abuse.

Of course, it turns out that the U.N. transparency problem isn't just in Turtle Bay. It's in Washington, too. Imagine my surprise at the blank stares we got when we asked the simple question of how much money the U.S. contributes from every agency of the Executive branch, to the U.N. State Department couldn't tell us. OMB didn't know. Nobody had ever compiled that information. After years of hearing about our \$2 billion or so annual contribution to the so-called "core" budget, it turns out that, all told, the U.S. contributes \$5.3 billion each year, and it's only going up. Over the next five years, that would be \$26.5 billion. This is not chump change.

The few reports we have seen of how that money is protected from corruption are not encouraging. This audience knows about the growing litany of financial scandals and improprieties at the U.N. But let's just look at the peacekeeping budget. The U.S. contributes about 27% of that budget. It turns out that's a little less than the percentage of the peacekeeping procurement budget that was lost to fraud and corruption when the U.N. did its own internal audit of the program. The entire U.S. contribution to peacekeeping around the world – lost to corruption and waste and fraud.

And do you suppose that the U.N. was quick to hand over these findings to the public? It took a leak to an investigative journalist to get the information out there. Even today, the report has not been released to the public by the U.N., although fortunately, Ambassador Bolton posted it on the U.S. mission's web site.

This may be business as usual for the "international community." It may represent diplomatic norms. It may be that even the most well-intentioned U.N. employees just accept these problems and try to make due with the money that's left. At a minimum we have a duty to do better not just for the American taxpayer but the AIDS orphan and other vulnerable populations in places like Darfur. Let me read Thomas Jefferson's perspective on transparency that could serve us well today in this area:

“We might hope to see the finances of the Union as clear and intelligible as a merchant’s books, so that every member of Congress and every man of any mind in the Union should be able to comprehend them, to investigate abuses, and consequently to control them.”

You see, you can’t control abuses if you can’t see how money is spent clearly and intelligibly. Some might argue that this idea of openness is such an American value that it would be some sort of cultural imperialism to demand it of a multilateral organization like the U.N. After all, the Freedom of Information Act is American law, not anyone else’s. First amendments and campaign finance laws and bribery bans – perhaps these are all simply American innovations that we should not try to impose on other countries who don’t share our values. I suspect the victims of oppression, religious persecution and malnutrition across the globe would not be so concerned about offending diplomatic sensibilities.

You see, transparency is the first principle of accountability. Without accountability in an organization that is supposed to defend the weak and protect human dignity and promote understanding – the weak and defenseless, the persecuted, the starving and the sick will suffer the most. It is common sense. Most people, even the most intractable diplomats from difficult countries, are too embarrassed to openly oppose the idea of transparency.

When I visited the U.N. a few months ago, I sat down with several members of the Group of 77 – the group of nations that blocked the almost laughably-modest reform efforts being pushed by the Secretary General. They all agreed on the record to support transparency at the U.N. The #2 at the U.N., Mark Malloch Brown, agreed to support transparency. Undersecretary General for Management Chris Burnham has been quite vocal in his support for transparency.

But when it comes down to keeping those commitments, things start to break down. Let’s start by defining our terms. Transparency is not the same thing as admitting that Claudia Rosett just might be correct. Transparency isn’t even making documents available to high-level officials from Member states who request them on behalf of Senate subcommittees who can’t get the documents they want – thank you Ambassador Bolton!

In other words, transparency is not merely the absence of a cover-up. Transparency is the public posting of all procurement and other spending on a publicly and freely accessible web site that is kept up to date, accurate, and comprehensive. That includes sub-contractors and sub-sub-contractors, all the way down to the purchase of the food that feeds hungry people. Those G-77 officials and Malloch Brown and Burnham all agreed to this specific definition of transparency – not a more vague conceptual agreement.

Is this definition a high standard? You bet. Some have argued that the U.S. is hardly in a position to be playing high-and-mighty about financial transparency. They’re

right. We have uncovered waste and fraud in the Federal government that would turn your stomach. The Gulf coast hurricane recovery effort alone has seen one dollar lost to abuse for every 16 dollars spent. While our soldiers are in harm's way in the Middle East, we're being asked to vote for sculpture gardens, blueberry research and other pork projects that are slipped into spending bills in the dead of night. And we are right now in the process of fighting to get a bill through the Congress that would demand this type of transparency of the Federal government – creating a “Google-like” database for Federal spending. I think we're going to prevail. You see, the difference with Congress is that the people can and do vote us out of office when we abuse our power and cover it up.

Not so with the U.N. Americans are on the hook for dues, no matter how wide and deep the Oil for Food scandal goes. No matter how many allegations of sexual abuse we hear about by peacekeepers. No matter how many promises get broken at the Security Council negotiations. No matter how many tyrants and dictators sit on the so-called Human Rights Council. The only leverage we have is our \$5.3 billion a year.

It is time that the Congress gets serious about using that leverage. Americans are fed up. Support for the U.N. is at an all-time low. Prior to our first hearing on the U.N. headquarters renovation plan in 2005, Americans were asked how they felt about the idea of our loaning money to the U.N. to renovate the Turtle Bay complex. 69% opposed it. Over half of Americans strongly opposed it. Americans “get it,” even if their elected officials don't.

With that in mind, we have tried to be realistic and fair with our requests for reform. After our first hearing, well over a year ago, we asked that the U.N. demonstrate a good faith commitment to transparency by starting small – starting with the Capital Master Plan. We asked that all procurement related to the Capital Master Plan be posted on a web site. We figured that would show the skeptics at Turtle Bay that this level of transparency was do-able and they could take the lessons they learn from that effort and apply them to more areas of procurement beyond the Capital Master Plan. Show us that small first step, and we'll approve the loan and will work with you going forward to bring more dramatic reforms later. That was a year ago. Still nothing. At a recent follow-up hearing on the Plan, we learned that things are basically in the same place they were. Lots of money spent on design work at rates much higher than market rates, and still no indication of what we've gotten for that money. No public web site. No disclosure of sub-contractors. No understanding of how the money has been spent. And yet the growing hostility Americans feel toward the U.N. is somehow our fault, top U.N. officials tell the press.

And lest we forget, transparency is only the very first step. Despite the near impossibility of obtaining transparency from the U.N., it is still only the beginning of the story. Real reform comes once you've got the “sunshine.” The great thing about transparency is that it harnesses the power of the public and enlists them in the war on waste. There are only so many Senate oversight committees. We only have one U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. But the populist power of bloggers, journalists, think tankers, activists and concerned citizens is what really defines accountability. That sort of

“rumble” out in the heartland – whether it’s the heartland of America or the Ukraine – that’s when reform really happens because that’s how political will is born. There’s only so much shame and public outcry that freely elected officials in democracies – whether it’s the U.S., Japan, Poland or Germany – can bear before they begin to exert the leverage they do have and demand reform from multilateral organizations dependent on the good will of their member states.

Again, these ideas of transparency and accountable do not matter just in ivory towers or behind marble pillars.

I want to tell you a story about Faela, a thirteen year old Congolese girl who fled her war-torn village in the northeast of her country. She was raped and impregnated by U.N. peacekeepers assigned to a local camp for displaced persons. At that point, she was kicked out of her family, but the larger community shunned her as well. Just to stay alive and support her new baby Joseph, Faela has sex every night with U.N. peacekeepers in exchange for food and money. Accountability matters to Faela.

I don’t just tell this story to criticize the U.N. – but rather to point out just how much it matters how the U.N. responds to the call for greater transparency and accountability. When our military has made mistakes we demand accountability in order to defend our credibility. Reforming the U.N. doesn’t just serve the American taxpayers. True reform at the U.N. has the power to free captives, to feed children near death from malnutrition, and to shelter families who have been terrorized and chased from their villages by fire, machetes and machine guns. True reform at the U.N. has the power to make the U.N. what it should be – an open and honest institution where nations can work together to solve the world’s problems.

I’ve taken a particular interest in malaria, and let me tell you – how the U.N. spends its money matters to the mom holding the third baby in her arms to die from malaria. It matters to the despondent aid worker who hasn’t slept in days and who is contemplating giving up and coming home if another patient dies of this curable disease because she doesn’t have enough of medicine that costs \$1.

I believe we can make progress in transforming the U.N. we have into the one we want. Our task is immense and important. Not only must we defend and safeguard the sacred trust of hardworking Americans and their contribution to the U.N., but we must defend and safeguard the millions of people outside of America whose lives depend on our not losing heart, patience, or political will.

You are among those on the frontlines of this battle. I want to thank you for your ongoing efforts and your perseverance, and for the opportunity to be with you today. I’ll be happy to answer any questions.