

# *Insight & Outlook*

## TURNING THE CENTURY: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

An Interview with Robert Muller

From the radio series *Insight & Outlook* hosted by Scott London

Only a few years remain until we turn the century and begin what many are now calling the “global age.” We see the shift happening on many fronts; we talk about the *global* village, the *global* economy, and *global* affairs.

One of the most thoughtful observers of this push toward globalization is Robert Muller. In fact, he is more than merely an observer, he's been an integral force in shaping world affairs through his work in the United Nations. He served under three secretaries general over the course of almost four decades, and he's been in charge of coordinating the work of the UN's 32 specialized agencies and world programs. He's been called the philosopher and prophet of the UN, and the “best informed man on the state of the world.” Today he is the Chancellor of the University for Peace in Costa Rica.

Robert Muller is the author of more than a dozen books, including *What War Taught Me about Peace*, *Most of All They Taught Me Happiness* and *The Birth of a Global Civilization*. His new book with Douglas Roche is called *Safe Passage into the 21st Century*, just published by Continuum.

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**SCOTT LONDON:** The way you landed your first job at the United Nations was by winning an essay-contest, and the question was: “How do you picture world government?” Is that right?

**ROBERT MULLER:** Yes, that was the case. I was a student at the University of Strasbourg. I had suffered incredibly during the war. I was in a Gestapo prison. My father was in prison. When the war ended, I said, “Look, we cannot continue this way. I have to work for peace.” So I went to the University of Strasbourg to get a doctorate degree in law. I thought that the best solution would be to become a lawyer locally and to go into politics. There was no peace profession whatsoever. One day, in an empty train, with the bridges still half-demolished, I had nothing to read. I was there for two hours. Then I remembered a contest of the United Nations Association of France: “What do you think of world government?” And I said to myself, “Hey, my friend,

that's a question addressed to you. If you want to have peace you'd better answer it." So I thought about it a lot, came home, sat at a type-writer and then I wrote an essay on world government in which I proposed that we organize the world the way the United States is organized: in a federal system with a balance-of-power regime. The Constitution of the U.S. had developed that in order to avoid an authoritarian central government. That was the compromise in Philadelphia: a balance of power between the legislative, the judicial, and the executive. I sent it in and, to my great surprise, I won the prize and landed straight in the United Nations [Laughs].

So, sometimes in life the best results you can achieve are when you have nothing else to do and are completely alone and write something which is very prominent on your mind. That is what happened there.

**LONDON:** Yes, in your book, *Most of All They Taught Me Happiness*, you say that one of the great pathways to happiness is *boredom* – not having anything to read and not having anything to do.

**MULLER:** Yes, then you find yourself, you see. If you are always occupied by television and newspapers and other things you do not really find your nature, so it's very important.

**LONDON:** Let's revisit this question because it's been almost fifty years since you wrote that essay, and today we are on the brink of a new millennium. What do you think of the idea of world government today?

**MULLER:** Well, in my opinion, what is absolutely necessary is that we have to rethink the political organization of this planet. The United Nations is not good enough; it is hanging in the air. It has great world conferences. It plays an enormous role by warning the world that there will be a population explosion, that we are going to have an environmental problem, and so on. But governments are never really forced to abide by what they agree to. For example, they said they are going to reduce the chloroflourocarbons which deplete the ozonosphere. Well, this year we discovered the hole in the ozonosphere is three times the size of China. Governments just do not obey. So, according to many people, we might finish all life on this planet in the next fifty years.

It is necessary to look into this and to say, Isn't there a better way, by looking at the world as a whole – because we know it as a whole.

So there has been a reaction. The prime minister of Sweden, Mr. Ingvar Carlsson, has created a world commission. He doesn't speak about world government, he speaks about world *governance*, which is less frightening. He has now submitted his report, which is very cautious. Again, he is scared of the reactions of people who do not like the idea of world government.

**LONDON:** When you wrote that essay, you pictured the world coming together a bit like the United Nations once did, as a federal system.

**MULLER:** I am advocating very strongly that we should do what George Washington, Jefferson, and the others did when the United States was in chaos. The confederate system didn't work anymore: you had an army in New York, you had another army in New Jersey, you had

fights between the confederates, they hated each other, they didn't let the trade through, and it was chaos. They finally met in Philadelphia to see how they could get out of it. It took them ten years to come up with the American Constitution. On the last day, Benjamin Franklin, who was very old, came in a wheel chair, and he said, "Mr. President, I've been coming here. My hopes went up and down all the time. You have a half-sun painted in gold on your chair and I often wondered if it is a rising sun or a setting sun. I'm very glad it is a rising sun." This is what was called the "Miracle of Philadelphia."

What I'm recommending now is that Philadelphia should take another initiative and try "Miracle #2" or "Philadelphia #2." It's not necessary to get people from abroad, like India and so on, who would confuse the whole matter. But in Philadelphia, they should get the best thinkers together – United States political thinkers, people who have a view of the world as a whole (people like Al Gore who is now Minister of World Affairs) – and sit down and say, "How could we manage this world better?"

**LONDON:** Another example of this kind of world government might be modeled on the European Union.

**MULLER:** Yes. Europe was divided, but has now united itself into the European Union. For the first time, in 1992, I could cross the border in my hometown, the same border that made my grandfather change nationality five times in his life: French, German, French, German, French. Today it is finished. It was a compatriot of mine, Robert Schuman, who said as a child, "If I have a chance in my lifetime to suppress these borders I will do it," because he hated when he rode his bicycle to cross three borders. He lived near the border of Luxembourg and Germany. He never saw it because he died before it happened. I went to his tomb to report it to him. So now, Europe – Great Britain, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Italy – the borders are completely suppressed. Now, it took Europe, to do this, from 1949 to 1992. So you can imagine, it was much longer than it took them in Philadelphia. And probably, if we wanted to have a new political system for the world, it might even take longer to agree on that one. [Laughs]

**LONDON:** But there is still a lot of discussion in Europe. When I was in Denmark not long ago, there was a lot of talk about the referendum, and the resistance to the idea. It was this feeling that they didn't want to owe their allegiance to some bureaucrats in Brussels. There is still a great resistance. So, even though we have seen Europe come together, it hasn't been an easy path.

**MULLER:** Yes, but it's a miracle. If anybody would have told me in 1945 that the border between France and Germany would disappear, I would have said to get your head examined because this will never happen. What is happening is that certain countries wanted to get in and have adhered. I don't remember exactly which ones. Others, like Denmark and Switzerland have refused to get in. Now the Russians are in line to get in, too.

Now, I remember that a few years ago I wrote to President Bush (whom I knew when he was a delegate of the United States to the U.N.) and I said to him, "What are you waiting for in order to create the Americas? When the European Union is created, and once the Russians and the Eastern European countries join the European Union – and now they want to get in – they will reach the north of China." In other words, Europe is no longer just the continent of Europe, it

goes all the way up to Asia. It is one continent. And what did you read in the newspapers the other day? Namely that the Russians and the Chinese have already signed an agreement for cooperation in order to withstand American imperialism.

Bush then reacted. I said, "Look, you have the Americans here, you should at least, for the time when the European Union will be important and will become an attraction to the world, you should create the Americas." When I visited Latin America, every Latin American country was dreaming of joining the European community, via Spain or Portugal. Can you imagine? I thought, this is incredible. Then he launched this idea of the free trade zone – NAFTA – from the North Pole to Tierra del Fuego. This is what you have now: a free-trade area with Canada and another one being negotiated with Mexico, and others being negotiated with the South.

So I think it's irresponsible, at the end of this century, and on the eve of the new millennium, not to at least sit down and to ask, "Isn't there a better way to run this planet than we are doing now, where every nation can do what it wants – even avoid paying its contributions to the U.N., and avoid implementing the decisions which have been taken by the U.N.?" That is my position. And I think that if we do this, it might take ten or twenty years, but it might be very interesting what comes out of it.

**LONDON:** A lot of people seem to interpret globalism in purely economic terms. So they think of free-market economies and transnational companies and *economic* globalization. And, naturally, they see that as something very dangerous and very scary. In fact, I got something in the mail this morning from a group of researchers and thinkers and scientists from 20 countries who say they have "joined together to respond to the threats of economic globalization to democracy, communities, human welfare and the environment." This is the standard refrain we hear, that the push toward economic globalization is a big threat to human peoples. What's your perspective?

**MULLER:** You are absolutely right. As a matter of fact, this is why I recommend the globalization of government. You see, what is happening is that after the Second World War the world was open to something new. The ones who understood this best were businesses and they went in and globalized themselves. They are the biggest globalizers on this planet. The governments – which represent public service, namely protection and service of the people – didn't dare. They had the U.N, but whenever in the U.N. we came up with a new proposal, they fought it. You can imagine how difficult it was to create new specialized agencies, to get a law of the seas as the new commons of humanity, to get a law on outer space. There were very fundamentalist nationalists who were not open to the rest of the world, and then the corporations invaded everything.

So we are now in a world that is governed by corporations. And governments, instead of watching out for this, let them be because they say, "this is *my* multinational," or "this is company Nestle in Switzerland," "this is IBM in the United States." So governments have become the servants of the international corporations, and the corporations, for all practical purposes, rule the world. As a matter of fact, I bought at the U.N. the other day a book which is entitled – I can show it to you -- *When Corporations Rule the World*.

Now there is the beginning of a reaction against it. You now have now a lot of people who are leaving multinational corporations and saying, "This cannot continue."

So you are absolutely right. I wouldn't want to be working in business today, because they are going to be very criticized. For them, the only objective is to make profit. It is even an evolutionary question because Darwin said that life is the survival of the fittest, and business still says that you will survive if you are the fittest. But in the meantime, the consciousness of what you do to the planet has come to the fore. But business does not care what happens to the planet. It is not the preoccupation of business. They couldn't care less.

And now business is becoming a world catastrophe, and there is a reaction on the part of consumers. You have one movement after another that speaks about simple and frugal living. So now they are invading the poor countries.

I live in Costa Rica. The natural fruit juices have disappeared – in a country of fruits! Why? Because Coca-Cola is the thing. The people admire the United States and believe everything that comes from there is better.

The International Monetary Fund has trebled its loans to the developing countries in the last two years. In all the earlier periods there was nothing for the poor countries. Suddenly they trebled. Why? Because now business is moving in and invading the poor countries, creating a certain disaster there because the people cannot afford the level of consumption which we have.

**LONDON:** This brings up the whole question of consumption and the pressures of overpopulation, which you have thought a lot about. Is this as serious a problem as we've been told in recent years?

**MULLER:** Well, in the U.N. conferences now, the poor countries say very blatantly, "Look, you accuse us of having too many children, but one human being in a poor country consumes only one-thirtieth of what an American consumes. So one American means thirty times the consumption in terms of natural resources. So to whom do you complain?"

There is a world commission on population and quality of life which has published a report. It says that people who die in a poor country leave behind 140 times their weight in terms of garbage. Americans leave behind 4,000 times their weight – a mountain of garbage! This is now the discussion you have in the United Nations.

**LONDON:** Let's talk a little bit more about overpopulation. You began to pay attention to this rather early in your career at the U.N. Tell me about that work.

**MULLER:** Well, the population explosion was only discovered about 1960. Until 1952, we didn't even know what the world population was. So we created a Population Commission and Division of the U.N. and got the best demographers, who happened to be French, and then began to make censuses. Then we began to study fertility and mortality. Then we discovered that fertility was never accounted for. The fertility of women decreased slowly, but what happened was that infant mortality collapsed – from 34 per thousand to 14 per thousand. In other words,

children ceased to die – because UNICEF, the Point Four of President Truman, the World Health Organization showed people how to prevent death. But *nobody*, out of statistical ignorance, had the thought of telling the women and the parents, “You no longer need six children to have at least two surviving to take care of you in your old age, or to till the land.” It took us about five to seven years to see this: “My God, with the mortality collapsing, here is a mushrooming population of young children.” The women continued to have the same numbers as they had for centuries, because they had died very quickly.

Then we gave the world population warning and it was, again, a hell of a time. For example, the Pope gave the order to all Latin American countries not even to speak about population control. At that time, I can tell you, when you had the first forecasts of the world population in the year 2000, it estimated that we would be 8.3 billion people. Now the forecast is down to 6.1 billion people. So, by having population policies, by giving the warnings around the world, the U.N. really has been able to reduce the figure from 8.3 billion to 6.1. Now it's improving even more, because the knowledge of this is increasing.

**LONDON:** You're quite optimistic, I take it, that we will be able to turn things around in time.

**MULLER:** Yes, very optimistic. When the Second World War was over, I thought we would have another world war within another ten years. I would never have dreamt that the United Nations would survive. I was told that it would die in five years. Today it is universal. I was told that apartheid would not be suppressed. I was told that decolonization would take 100 to 150 years; it took 40 years. I was told the Cold War would never end; it has ended. Humans are able to do miracles.

**LONDON:** Norman Cousins once called you “a magnificent anomaly” in international politics. How did somebody like you get involved in what we normally think of as a stuffy and rather pessimistic arena?

**MULLER:** Very simply because I never forgot that entering the U.N. was for me something very, very important. All my friends from school died in World War II. So I have never forgotten. Even in the U.N., I had a helmet from a German soldier with holes in it to remind me why I was there. So I never made compromises with bureaucracy or with what the American thought or the Russian thought. My concern was always the planet and human beings. And this nobody could break.

The result it had was that I was shifted around in the U.N. quite a lot. Wherever I went, I became quite unpopular – not with the people, but with the bosses. “He is a heretical guy, he wants to change everything.” I was the shortest director ever of the budget – I think I lasted six weeks. But when you are kicked around, you very often are also kicked upstairs. In that particular case, I was so advanced in my life that I became the right hand of the Secretary General. When U Thant received me, I understood everything when he said, “Mr. Muller, you will be much happier here than you were in the budget.” And when I was with U Thant, you cannot imagine what we did together – it was incredible!

I have a son who works in the United Nations Development Program. The other day he said to me, “Dad, why do you always have such crazy ideas?” And I said, “Look, if I didn't have the crazy idea of creating a revolving fund in the United Nations, you and about four thousand others would have no job. As we were walking near the organization chart of the U.N. which is on a big wall, I said, “Let me find out how many of these organizations I invented or helped to create.” Out of 32 specialized agencies, I was behind eleven.

As a result of this I became a specialist in generalities. I know the essentials of practically everything which is important to know.

**LONDON:** This is especially interesting to me, given that (as you mentioned in one of your books) you don't follow the media. In fact, you don't read newspapers, or listen to radio, or watch television. So how do you manage to stay so well-informed?

**MULLER:** Well, I barely read the newspaper; I just have a glance at it to see if something very fundamental happened. Radio I never listen to. And television I've completely suppressed. If there is some big revolution somewhere, you will be told, you know.

Also, my advantage is that I get an incredible correspondence. At the U.N. I had a rule: all the letters to the Secretary General should be sent to my department. I wanted to see them first. The global brain functions in such a way that *somewhere, someone* has a perception of something that is going to happen that will be a new phenomenon. Then they send it to the U.N. – “You must know this.” I was told about the first climate dangers in letters from climatologists from Colorado and various places of the world. Once I got a number of letters like this which warned of a new phenomenon, I would open a file. Within five years, it would be the new trend.

So this is why I'm one of the best informed people – by being informed by people who have a true concern for the fate of the planet.

**LONDON:** So for you staying informed has nothing to do with the media?

**MULLER:** It has nothing to do with the media. As a matter of fact, I remember that after I wrote that book, MacNeil-Lehrer got me on a program and asked me, “Why don't you read newspapers?” It was great fun. I would like to do another program with them 25 years later and tell them that I still don't read the newspapers and I've cut off television completely [laughs].

**LONDON:** We were talking a moment ago about your work in the U.N., and I was struck by what you said about your experience in the war – how that provided you with a sense of direction. Where do you find your inspiration today?

**MULLER:** As Albert Schweitzer said to a group of old people once, “I cannot tell you what your fate will be, but one thing I can assure you of. That is, if you are really of service to humanity, you will be rewarded with happiness.” And this is my case. I am the happiest person on earth. I don't even have to plan anymore. It comes as if the invisible forces of the universe are saying, “This guy down there is open to us, and we are going to help him.” They put the ideas in

my head while I'm asleep. It's quite a phenomenon. Someone should study me to find out how this all happened, because I don't understand it [laughs].

**LONDON:** Thank you very much.

**MULLER:** Good. Thank you.

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This interview was adapted from the radio series *Insight & Outlook*. This and other transcripts are available online at <http://www.scottlondon.com/insight/scripts>

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