



Source: Bertini, 19 March 2004, New York, Photo UN7778217, Photographer Eskinder Debebe

BERTINI, Catherine Ann

American public servant and ninth Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP) 1992-2002

By **Kirsten Haack** · Version 19 January 2018

Was born 30 March 1950 in Syracuse, New York, United States. She is the daughter of Fulvio Bertini, engineer and city councilman, and Ann Vino, nurse.

In 1988 she married Thomas E. Haskell, photographer. They divorced in 2007 and in 2011 she married Thomas Milton Knobel, managing consultant.

Video: Food (In)Security – Food, Agriculture, and Development, 15 May 2012, <http://news.uchicago.edu/multimedia/food-insecurity-food-agriculture-and-development>; The Charge Moving Forward, 2 June 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=z08renU0IB4

Biography

Bertini, the daughter of an engineer and a nurse, grew up in Cortland, New York. Her father was chairman of the Cortland County Republican Committee and fulfilled three terms as city councilman. Although Bertini wanted to be a music teacher, her interest in government service led her to pursue a bachelor's degree in political science at the State University of New York in Albany, from which she graduated in 1971. As a student Bertini spent considerable time working in support of the Republican Party, which she had joined at the age of thirteen. She worked as a legislative aid to Republican New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller and, as a college senior, she worked full-time on his last gubernatorial campaign. Upon his re-election, she became a trusted assistant to the governor's office.

Her engagement with the Republican Party continued after graduation when she served as youth director for the New York Republican State Committee (1971-1975), followed by work for the Republican National Committee (1975-1976). She then left politics for the private sector for ten years (1977-1987) and moved to Chicago to work for the Container Corporation of America, a manufacturer of corrugated boxes, where she supervised government relations, philanthropic activities and public affairs. In 1986 she also became a fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where she taught a course on corporate involvement in public policy.

In 1987 Bertini returned to public service, serving as the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Family Support Administration in the United States (US) Department of Health and Human Services. She was responsible for implementing elements of President Ronald Reagan's welfare reform, which included carrying out changes to federal regulations that created educational opportunities to enable mothers benefitting from long-term welfare support to join the labour market for the first time and put more pressure on absent fathers to pay child support. In 1988 she married her high school friend and classmate, Tom Haskell, who started a photography business specializing in public relations and event photography in Washington DC. During President George H.W. Bush's term, Bertini was appointed Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services in the US Department of Agriculture (1989-1992), where she oversaw thirteen food assistance programmes, which benefitted one in six Americans, including 25 million children in more than 90,000 schools. She chaired the Breastfeeding Promotion Consortium, which saw an increase of nursing mothers in the US from 38.4 to 50.4 per cent over five years. Bertini was honoured for her work with a citation for excellence in public service from the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1991 and a Leadership Award from the US National Association of WIC (Women, Infant and Children) Directors in 1992.

On the recommendation of President Bush, Bertini was appointed as Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), where she started as the first American to lead the organization on 1 April 1992. In an interview Bertini said that she jumped at the opportunity, 'because jobs like this come once in a lifetime' (Burke 2001). She was only the third woman to be appointed to lead a United Nations (UN) agency, after Nafis Sadik's appointment at the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in 1987 and Sadako Ogata's serving as UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) starting in 1990. Because the WFP is a subsidiary organization to both the UN and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the WFP's Executive Director is appointed by the UN Secretary-General and the FAO Director-General. However, (lack of) support from member states may influence this process positively or negatively. Bertini's appointment was the result of a deal struck between the US government and FAO Director-General Edouard Saouma during the latter's re-election campaign in 1986-1987. Challenged by the member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Saouma offered the US the opportunity to propose to him and the UN Secretary-General an American successor to WFP Executive Director James Ingram in exchange for support of his own bid for FAO leadership, an elected position. While Ingram had proposed his own Deputy Executive Director, Richard Chase, a former career civil servant from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), as potential successor, President Bush preferred Bertini. Although initially disappointed at Chase's rejection, Ingram (2006: 180) writes in his memoirs that Bertini 'turned out to be an excellent choice'.

Bertini joined the WFP in Rome, Italy at a point of considerable change. The body had long seen substantial influence exerted by FAO Director-General Saouma, who regarded the WFP a part of his own organization (many decisions, projects and budgets required his sign-off), whereas Ingram's term in office (1982-1992) was largely dominated by attempts to extract the WFP from this relationship and turn it into an autonomous UN agency. An agreement to the latter effect was finally reached in 1991. Furthermore, in the late 1980s the WFP, set up as a development organization, started to change fundamentally because spending on emergencies began to exceed expenditure on development projects, with the security crises of the 1990s creating further demand on the WFP's emergency response abilities. Bertini commissioned a number of studies, audits and evaluations to

deal with organizational change in light of the external and internal challenges. She shifted the organization's focus from quantifying the tons of food delivered to the number of people fed, thereby placing the beneficiaries of food aid, the poor and hungry, front and centre. In doing so, she created a leadership role for the WFP in all aspects of food aid, including the assistance of other international organizations. The WFP's purpose was thus refined to: 1) saving lives in refugee crises and emergencies (food for life), 2) improving nutrition and quality of life in critical times (food for growth) and 3) enabling development for asset-building and self-reliance (food for work). The WFP became a more strategic organization that responded with greater flexibility and worked with a new managerial culture. Bertini's organizational transformation included a range of changes in management processes, a rotation of every Rome-based headquarters staff member into field locations and the establishment of close working relationships with other UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and civil society. Bertini's successful reforms and efforts to brand the WFP as fast, effective and efficient, raised the profile of the organization, which in turn resulted in an increase in donor funding. Her first term in office was dominated by organizational change, centred on managerialism as a means to both drive and implement reform, but also to generate political consensus. In 1997 Bertini was reappointed with the endorsement of US President William J. Clinton and the Group of 77 developing countries at the UN.

Bertini's second term, according to Ross (2011: 102), saw a shift toward governance, with a focus on the functioning of the Executive Board and its relationship to the Secretariat. This included the establishment of a Governance Steering Committee, a clearer emphasis on strategy, policy, oversight and accountability, as well as better leadership succession planning and overall meeting management. These managerial and operational reforms led the WFP to become one of the best regarded UN agencies, not only because emergency relief was intensified and the relationship between the WFP and US food aid had changed, but also because operations had been 'depoliticized'. While politicization took on a specific form in other UN agencies, such as appropriation of agendas for broader political purposes (for instance, disputes between Liberal and Socialist agendas during the Cold War) and the use of the agency as a platform for condemnation of Israel, which led to the eventual (if temporary) US withdrawal from the International Labour Organization and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, food aid seemed exempt from this infighting. Thus, when arguing in favour of food aid to the drought-stricken Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) in 1997, Bertini cited President Reagan to a sceptical administrator: 'a hungry child knows no politics' (Ross 2001: 47). In doing so, she invoked a commonly used and powerfully emotive image in the aid sector: the exceptionalism of children. On the conflict in Sudan, Bertini (1998) noted that politicians were the ones to end the war. Yet, by emphasizing that 'we all have a moral obligation to prevent innocent people from dying', she showed that humanitarianism drove her mission at the WFP. Thus, neither Bertini nor the WFP were entirely unpolitical. With regard to the position of women, Bertini, in an interview with the *Montreal Gazette*, admitted that the WFP had a clear political agenda, 'to the extent that we can help build women's economic status, we want to do that' (Abley 1995).

As a 'self-declared Republican feminist' (Burke 2001) and someone who was active in the feminist movement during her student days, Bertini did not see her feminism as contradictory to her party allegiance: 'I don't find them mutually exclusive. The Republican party was built on a basis of individual rights and freedoms'. To her, a feminist is simply 'a person who works for equality and equity for all people' (Abley 1995). At the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1985 Bertini noted that in many places the custom was for women to eat last, which in fact was hindering progress and development. At the Beijing Conference Bertini made substantial commitments towards the improvement of women's and girls' advancement, using food aid as a means to change behaviour and improve their status. She committed 60 per cent of the WFP's resources to this goal and more than 50 per cent of school food to be distributed to girls. Women were given the lead in managing relief food in emergencies, while food aid in refugee camps was to be used increasingly to support training for women in basic education, work skills, family planning,

health and nutrition. Her feminist attitude chimed with her humanitarianism, but also relied on a sense of pragmatism as the WFP controversially provided food as a reward to families who sent girls to school. Bertini admitted that, while this may be regarded as 'bribery', it was bribery for a good cause: 'Let's have no illusions. We can't easily change the underlying beliefs and prejudices that do so much damage to women worldwide. We cannot change attitudes, but we can change behaviour. In so many poorer countries food is money, food is power ... Yes, it's bribery. We don't apologize for that. We are changing behaviour, we are giving hope and opportunity to young girls – and that is all that counts' (Abley 1995).

Feminism, humanitarianism and pragmatism played a clear role in her response to the food crisis in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. With the Taliban stealing food aid for their troops, leaving people suffering from conflict and drought to eat grass, some commentators called for food aid to cease so as not to support and embolden the Taliban. Clare Short, the United Kingdom's Development Secretary, even called food aid organizations 'emotional' in their focus on feeding people in the face of the Taliban threat (McCarthy 2001). Bertini, however, achieved what many had declared to be impossible, namely to 'win' over the Taliban. Male and female surveyors conducted a survey of households in need, while bakeries run by women were kept open and women continued to receive food aid (Crosette 2000). The WFP delivered food aid in various crises, including those in Afghanistan, Kosovo, North Korea, Rwanda and Somalia. In several instances, such as in Afghanistan and Somalia, conflict parties threatened WFP staff and food delivery and, among UN agencies, the WFP had one of the highest number of staff killed in the field. Yet, Bertini was outspoken on the risks to aid workers and defended their activity to the global community as she focused entirely on those in need: the hungry and the poor.

As Executive Director of the largest UN humanitarian agency, Bertini was placed in a close network of institutions, which created a variety of working relationships. In 1994 a new operational arrangement was established between the WFP and the UNHCR in order to pool resources and expertise for responding to the growing number of refugees in humanitarian crises, in which the WFP would take the lead in providing life-saving assistance. In 1998 Bertini and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) renewed the Memorandum of Understanding, which was signed in 1976 in order to promote collaboration on issues of development, nutrition and emergency preparedness. These inter-organizational relations connected Bertini with two of the four women leading UN agencies at the time and Bertini, Carol Bellamy of UNICEF and Ogata of the UNHCR worked closely together in several of the humanitarian crises in the 1990s. They communicated during weekly conference calls with the UN Secretary-General and twice a year they joined Sadik of the UNFPA, Mary Robinson, the Higher Commissioner for Human Rights, and Gro Harlem Brundtland of the World Health Organization for dinner. Thus, a sense of camaraderie and collaboration developed among these women trailblazers in the UN.

As part of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, Bertini was also in regular contact with leaders of the UN specialized agencies, while participation in the Secretary-General's Senior Management Group provided a connection to UN headquarters in New York. Kofi Annan's personal papers hint at a warm relationship between Bertini and the UN Secretary-General, with Annan entrusting Bertini with the management of difficult situations, such as her appointment as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa in 2000 in order to avert drought-induced famine. Despite pursuing collaborative working relationships, Bertini was firm in her defence of the WFP as an autonomous agency. When Maurice Strong, who had been charged by Annan to draw up plans for organizational reform, put forward proposals that would effectively disembodify the WFP by merging development organizations such as WFP, UNFPA and UNICEF into the UN Development Programme in order to avoid competition between organizations, Bertini strongly resisted. Bertini and Bellamy of UNICEF also opposed Strong's proposal to place the issue of internally displaced persons into the remit of the UNHCR, as they believed the UNHCR was becoming too dominant in the work of rescuing people in crises. As US citizens and former members of the US executive, both women had

direct lines to the US Congress and the White House, in particular to other women working in the US administration, which enabled them to acquire support for the policies of their agencies. Bertini knew where and when to access institutions and resources in the US administration and food lobby. In 1990 she set up the Friends of WFP, a group consisting of former politicians from the field of agriculture and food aid and from so-called blue chip companies that were recognized as well-established and financially-sound. Her political skills helped her to organize cash donations, as in the case of North Korea in 1997.

Bertini left the WFP on 4 April 2002 when her second term expired and she was succeeded by US citizen James T. Morris. She became Towsley Foundation Policy Maker in Residence at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, where she taught about the creation and implementation of domestic and international food aid policy. In August 2002 she returned to the UN, when she assumed the role of Chair of the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition and was also appointed as the UN Secretary-General's Personal Humanitarian Envoy to Gaza and the West Bank, assessing the humanitarian needs of the people living in the area. In January 2003 Annan appointed her as UN Under-Secretary-General for Management. Here, too, she set upon transforming services and procedures, including overseeing the first phase of the Capital Master Plan related to the renovation of the UN headquarters. She also worked on restructuring the UN postal administration, which was set to be closed, but Bertini succeeded in transforming this administration through lower operational costs and new marketing initiatives, such as issuing UN stamps. She increased gender equality by implementing the same hiring procedures as she had introduced at the WFP. In April 2005 Bertini resigned as UN Under-Secretary-General after only three years, declaring that there were too many obstacles built into the system that did not make it amenable to reform (Ross 2011: 200).

Following her work at the UN, Bertini fulfilled many functions. In February 2005 she became a member of the Audit, Finance and Corporate Responsibility Committee of the Tupperware Brands Corporation in Orlando, Florida. In August of that year she joined the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, where she became a professor of public administration and international affairs and has lectured on UN management, international organizations, executive leadership, humanitarian action, post-conflict reconstruction and girl's education. In 2006 President George W. Bush appointed her as a member of the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development of USAID and President Barack Obama reappointed her in 2009. Between June 2007 and May 2009 she was a Senior Fellow in Agricultural Development at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where she advised on strategies for the development of the Foundation's new agricultural portfolio. Since June 2008 she has been Senior Fellow and Co-Chair of the Global Agricultural Development Initiative of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Bertini furthermore served as a juror for the Hilton Foundation Humanitarian Prize and as a member of the Stuart Family Foundation Board. In 2010 she was named as the only US member on the new High Level Panel of Experts, which advises the Committee on Food Security in Rome, and she acted as a US public delegate to the 2012 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. In 2012 she also served as a member of the Accountability Review Board on Benghazi, appointed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Bertini's international achievements have been widely recognized. Nobel Prize laureate Norman Borlaug (2002: 78) called her 'a gifted leader and administrator' of the WFP. For others, she was 'the right person at the right time', one who pulled off 'minor miracles' in places such as Afghanistan (Gilbert 2004: 103). In 1996 *The Times* of London named her as one of the world's one hundred most influential women. Despite being a Bush appointee, Democratic US Senator Patrick Leahy recommended her to President Clinton, who confirmed her second term at the WFP in 1997, which according to Leahy attested to her 'extraordinary ability with no sign of partisan activity, and as a result, [her] enormous... effective[ness]' (Burke 2001). Bertini has received several honours for her achievements in public service, food aid and nutrition, including the World Food Prize in 2003 for her contribution to 'defeating large-scale famine in our time'. She received twelve honorary doctorates

from universities in four countries and is a member of the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations, fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the International Academy of Food Science and Technology. Receiving the prestigious World Food Prize in 2003 inspired her to create a trust fund to support grassroots initiatives around the world that empower women through the provision of training and educational opportunities for girls.

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