

Ron Noble

The Man from Interpol



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In 2005, Ron Noble was asked to serve his second 5 year term as Interpol's secretary general. Founded in 1923, Interpol is a voluntary international police force with 181 member nations (in 2000); the organization's "primary function is to help law-enforcement authorities share information about suspected criminals worldwide" [Salter, 2002]. When Noble took over the agency, he had the daunting task of modernizing Interpol from its 1923 structure to accommodate the growing membership, adapt to the changing environment, and "create greater efficiencies and more logical combination functions" [Starling 2005]. While this task would seem insurmountable to many, Noble is uniquely qualified to take on such a role and that is what makes his story inspiring to me.

Ron Noble's career management is an interesting case study when considering my own career aspirations. While I may not be looking toward a career in law enforcement, Ron Noble's career choices do have bearing on my own. In hindsight, his choices were ideal to lead him to an important leadership role and give him the skills to reorganize Interpol.

Noble was born to a German mother and American military father; he spoke fluent German and understood that a spirit of cooperation is necessary to help bridge cultural differences. He brings this background to the table every time he visits a member nation (of which he visited 45 in his first year and a half as secretary general!) and tries to foster that spirit within Interpol itself. I am Asian-American and come from a family that highly prizes and reveres education—we view it as transformative and key to the development of any complete person. I bring this love to the table every time I go to an administrative meeting at my University and it has bearing on every policy I promote or decision I make.

Noble is also a trained lawyer which gives him a unique insight into the justice system. In fact, he also clerked with a legendary Federal Court of Appeals judge, A. Leon Higgenbotham, who was instrumental in pushing Noble towards public service. Soon after he

worked as a U.S. attorney and at the young age of 33 he became a professor at New York University. Noble's active engagement with the law first as a student, then as an arbiter, to a prosecutor to eventually an educator trained him to actively engage with the law and understand it from many angles in anticipation of understanding the information necessary to pick out criminals.

Like Noble, I too have actively engaged with the university system. I started out as a graduate student at Stanford—working on a PhD for 4 years and eventually quitting gave me a unique perspective into the pressures and difficulties of graduate student life. During that time I also taught composition where I experienced the complexities of the academic environment from the front of a classroom. These perspectives I gained give me a unique insight into the issues facing the students and faculty I serve as an administrator.

From law professor Noble moved into policing through the Treasury Department. At 36 he was an assistant to the secretary of the Treasury and soon became the first secretary of enforcement. In this position he managed 35,000 employees. In these roles within the treasury department, Noble served political appointees while managing the human resources and business of catching criminals. I imagine Noble learned how large scale policing organizations structure themselves, make efficient use of their resources (both personnel and financial) and the inefficiencies that make them harder to run. I'm sure Noble took these lessons with him when he went on to Interpol.

Noble's transition from the application of law to criminal justice is reminiscent of my own jump from academic to administrator. For me, it was a natural transition from academia to administration because while I enjoyed many aspects of being involved in the active creation and dissemination of knowledge, it wasn't a good fit. I imagine Ron Noble went through a similar realization and purposely transitioned to a political role that eventually gave him the skills to

take on managing a law enforcement agency. I too took on a transitional political role when I worked in a congresswoman's district office. In my role as scheduler and administrative assistant, I grew savvy at dealing with very powerful people. I also learned certain basic administrative skills (that even the lowliest filing duties are an administrative function necessary to keep such an office functioning) which have stayed with me as I moved into university administration.

Despite all that he gleaned from his experience and training elsewhere, Ron Noble did not jump into the secretary general role. He first proved himself while working on the executive committee at Interpol by conducting a study that illustrated a sliding scale for dues made more sense than allowing poorer countries to opt out of the organization. Like the United Nations, Noble felt that having a broader membership enriched the organization more than money. But, while Interpol may have been auditioning Noble for the task of secretary general, I imagine Noble was also using that opportunity to audition Interpol. By suggesting change and then seeing it executed in a non-direct-management role, Noble was able to observe how Interpol functioned and how well it could adopt to change. I suspect the reception his study received at the board level and within the organization was a telling sign of how best to address and approach change.

Although I was not in a position to conduct such extensive studies, I have learned a lot about how Stanford University runs itself as Program Administrator in Feminist Studies. I also found that this connection allowed me to learn about the complexities and dynamics of my current position in the Linguistics Department as the Director of Feminist Studies is also a faculty member of Linguistics. Through her, I learned of certain staffing problems, 'troublesome' faculty, as well as the positive strength of the department. I was able to use this

inside information to ‘wow’ them at my interview and create a working action plan before I’d signed on the offer.

Chuck Salter in his article on Ron Noble speculates that Noble may go on to become a future American supreme court justice or head of the F.B.I. While he may be on short-lists for other, high power roles within the American (and possibly other) government(s), Noble insists he has the job he has wanted all along [2002]. This focus on the job at hand and pleasure at the work in front of him is surprising to observe in someone who has had so many high powered positions over so short a career. It’s hard to believe that Noble isn’t prospecting for future roles elsewhere. Regardless of his true future plans, Noble’s concentration on the job at hand may be part of the reason for his success. He’s driven and keen to do what needs to be done and does not make a show of looking forward for bigger and better job prospects.

While I am not in the job I want forever, I am in the job I want right now. I do sometimes speculate where my career will take me, but I look at Ron Noble and see a wonderful example of taking all the skills and experience to be gained from past roles and responsibilities and really committing to the job at hand. Like Noble, I want to devote every working day to the job I have right now and do the work as best I can to the fullest of my capabilities. Only in this way will I gain the experience and skills I need to do the next challenging task that will take me to my next role within university administration.