

# TOWARD A NEW U.S.-U.N. RAPPROCHEMENT

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IF THE U.N. DID NOT EXIST, IT HAS BEEN SAID, IT WOULD HAVE TO BE INVENTED.  
PERHAPS IT'S TIME TO REINVENT THIS IMPERFECT BUT INVALUABLE INSTITUTION.

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BY RONALD SPIERS

**A**s World War II was drawing to its close, I was a newly minted 19-year-old ensign in the U.S. Navy, impatiently awaiting onward transport from San Francisco to the South Pacific. I was unaware that on that very day, President Harry Truman, seated across town on the stage of the San Francisco Opera House, was putting his signature to the charter of the United Nations. I could not foresee that my own future career would be much involved with the institution launched on that day. But I still remember the heady, optimistic sense of hope that the postwar world would be different, that a kind of Parliament of Man had been created with the birth of the United Nations.

Just as there would be optimistic talk of a “new world order” following the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly half a century later, the United Nations represented the postwar vision of its

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founders in 1945 for a better world. But sadly, the original idea that a coalition of the World War II victors, working together, could be relied on to enforce the peace did not last long. Throughout the Cold War, the Security Council — the heart of the organization’s political and security decision-making — was rendered almost inert by the veto and the inability of its permanent members to achieve consensus.

Consequently, today many of our fellow citizens and leaders believe the U.N. has lost its relevance. Partly for that reason, unilateralism in American foreign policy seems in the ascendancy. Taking its cue from a president inexperienced in, and incurious about, foreign affairs, this administration has instinctively resisted anything that smacked of multilateralism or “nation-building.” In its first year alone, it targeted a lengthy roster of already negotiated agreements and conventions like ducks in a shooting gallery: among

others, the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Control, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Landmine Convention and the International Criminal Court. In addition, withdrawal from the ABM Treaty became a priority, whatever the cost to U.S.-Russian relations. I do not mean to suggest that any of these agreements was perfect, but their faults were clearly susceptible to further negotiations. Instead, the Bush administration dismissed them out of hand.

## **Disdain for the U.N.**

The unilateralist theory seems to be that the United States, enjoying almost a monopoly of power and superior

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moral rightness, cannot let itself be tied down like Gulliver by the Lilliputians. But Thomas Jefferson's warning against "entangling alliances" has been twisted by the Bush administration into a preference for going it alone wherever possible. And where we have sought the help of other nations, we have done so by asserting that "If you're not with us, you're against us." Disdain for the U.N. and other multilateral institutions seems to have become a pillar of a neoconservative credo, even as allies and adversaries alike have become increasingly anxious about the direction of American policy and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan has articulated public worries about the organization's future.

The invasion of Iraq was a crisis point because it pointedly bypassed the provisions of the U.N. Charter, which has the status of a treaty and is therefore, under our constitution, the "supreme law of the land." To be sure, those provisions had been ignored before, but never by a major power on such a scale and on so flimsy a basis.

Incidentally, the petulant demonizing of the United Nations for the fact that most of its member states did not agree with us about Iraq is nonsensical: it is like blaming Fenway Park for the Red Sox. Most members believed, as I myself did, that a weak and debilitated Iraq presented no imminent threat, that we had time to let diplomacy and the inspection process work, that the ultimate human, political and economic costs of a pre-emptive policy were underestimated, and that Western democracy was not something to be easily transplanted in an alien culture of which we had little understanding.

But even taken at face value, the aim of making Iraq a poster child for the Middle East, in hopes of a reverse domino effect, was thought naïve, even by many of our allies. President

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Bush's tendency to conflate the threat of international terrorism with local conflicts, as in Chechnya and Palestine, has been particularly befuddling to professional observers, and further increased suspicion of American aims and motives. And the fact that the senior civilian Defense Department officials urging the attack on Iraq were the same ones who authored the infamous 1996 "Clean Break" memorandum arguing the need to reshape the Middle East to Israel's "strategic advantage" by overthrowing Saddam Hussein did not help at all.

Nor did basic public misconceptions about what the U.N. is. The United Nations, now with 191 sovereign members, is not an independent entity with a life of its own — although most Americans seem to think and speak of it as such. Rather, it is essentially a meeting place — or, more accurately, several places — with agreed rules of procedure and a secretariat to implement decisions reached by its members in accordance with these rules and the U.N. Charter.

Lamentably, such misunderstandings and controversies have obscured the organization's many accomplishments over the past six decades. These reside primarily in its multiple

humanitarian and peacekeeping activities, which are carried out by a family of over 20 semi-autonomous specialized agencies, from the World Health Organization to the International Atomic Energy Agency. The importance of the work done by these organs cannot be overstated but it is seldom recognized or appreciated.

### **Organizational Problems**

With the end of the Cold War, expectations for restoration of the United Nations' effectiveness rose. Unfortunately, several institutional anachronisms have prevented any major improvement in its functioning.

As already noted, the Security Council long ago ceased to be the locus of authority it was designed to be. To begin with, major regional and economic powers are not included as permanent, veto-wielding members. Yet reforming its membership to include some or all of these countries presents political problems the international community has been unable to overcome. A large enough expansion to satisfy all claimants would weaken its ability to act; in addition, no country was willing to risk losing a privileged position on the Council. So we are effectively frozen in the status quo of a body whose make-up is regarded by many as having highly limited legitimacy.

To fix this problem, Security Council membership should be a function of the U.N. assessment scale that accurately measures economic power and its derivative, military potential. The five countries required to make the largest financial contributions to the body would serve as permanent members. (Perhaps then the U.S. would be more diligent about paying its dues on time.) This formula would automatically put Japan (which pays 19.6 percent of the budget) and Germany (9.8 percent) on the Council alongside the U.S. (22

percent), but displace China and Russia (1.5 percent and 1.2 percent, respectively). France (6.5 percent) and the U.K. (5.6 percent) would remain as permanent members, at least until the European Union has expanded and evolved sufficiently to assume a “European” seat in place of individual countries. (This would be quite some time in the future, of course.) Other seats would continue to rotate, as at present, to provide some geographic and cultural balance.

This reform would make the Council more accurately reflect true political and economic heft, though it would obviously be unacceptable to the present veto-holders who would be displaced. But as long as the present format exists, the political reality is the Security Council will be sidelined when it comes to those issues of international peace and security that lack a strong consensus for action in

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the international community. For that reason, I believe the time has come to renew efforts to fix this and other flaws.

The other major organ, the General Assembly, has its own problems. Monaco, with a tiny population and an area equivalent to the Mall in Washington, D.C., has the same voice

and vote as, say, India — a democracy with a population approaching a billion. Another weakening factor is the reality that many of its member governments do not really represent their own peoples. Last year Freedom House gave 85 of the 191 U.N. members the “free” rating that indicates full democracy. Of the remaining 106, 46 were in the “not free” category accorded authoritarian governments; the remaining 60 were considered only “partly free.” It is difficult for democracies like our own to accept that countries whose governments do not represent and are not accountable to their populations deserve an equal voice with those that do. I believe this is one main reason the General Assembly has gradually lost its effectiveness.

In addition, the Assembly’s resolutions lack force or authority. Its so-called “debates” lack focus or discipline, and call to mind the observation

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of the late Rep. Morris Udall, D-Ariz., about congressional deliberations: "Everything has been said, but not everybody has said it yet." It is seldom a forum for serious negotiation. Instead, its major utility is in bringing together world leaders each September.

The ultimate corrective for this situation is clearly out of reach in today's world. Ideally, voting strength should be based on population (perhaps one vote per million of population; voting strength would today range from 1,284 votes for China down to Nauru's 12/1000th of a vote. The U.S. would have 280.) This would put things in perspective and would certainly be democratic in the "one person, one vote" sense. On the other hand, the Chinese people, among so many others, don't have much of a role yet in choosing who speaks for them or holding them accountable.

### **"Multis" vs. "Unis"**

The role of international institutions like the U.N. and NATO in U.S. foreign policy is further affected by the continuing struggle between "multilateralists" and "unilateralists" that has been with us since we became a nation, though (thankfully) not often with its present ideological intensity.

The essence of the difference we face in our body politic is the view, among multilateralists, that the U.S. is a member of an international community and that it is in our interest to act, to the extent we can without clearly jeopardizing truly vital interests, cooperatively with other nations and with a decent respect for their opinions and interests. The U.S. may have overwhelming power but it certainly has no corner on wisdom.

The unilateralists disagree: the U.S. has an effective monopoly of power and should use it forthrightly to pursue national interests, unconstrained by others. The new national

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security doctrine of this administration explicitly advocates "pre-emptive action" against perceived (or fancied) threats. Imagine a world in which all nations claimed the right to make this subjective judgment!

This clearly does not conform to the requirements of the U.N. Charter, which reserves to the Security Council the authority to approve the use of force "to restore international peace and security" in the name of the international community. The only exception is in the case of self-defense against an armed attack until the Council can act. Members pledge not to use force against the political independence or territorial integrity of any state, or, vaguely, in any other manner "inconsistent with the purposes" of the charter.

In the case of Iraq, it could well be argued that neither the political independence nor the territorial integrity of the country was our target. It was not the first time this provision of the charter has been ignored, of course. It had been breached repeatedly by the USSR, by the U.S. in Grenada and Panama, by NATO in Kosovo and Serbia in the Balkans and, most unambiguously, by Iraq in Kuwait.

Granted, the provisions of the charter, I believe, are inadequate to meet a number of current threats not

thought about in 1945: genocide by a government against elements of its own population; violations of international law such as Israel's or China's of the Fourth Geneva Convention; situations such as we see in Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan, Belarus and Myanmar, where governments without the legitimacy conferred by popular choice tyrannize their own peoples; or state sponsorship of terrorism.

Moreover, old-fashioned "declared" state-vs.-state war is not the most frequent threat to international peace and security today, unlike six decades ago when the charter was drafted. Consequently, that framework seems too limited to deal with the new order of transgressions, none of which may be direct threats to international peace and security. But I see little early prospect of international agreement on expansion of the occasions when use of force may be authorized under Chapter 7 of the charter.

### **The Highest Common Denominator**

The U.N. is still essentially an assembly of sovereign states trying, through diplomacy, to find the highest common denominator for dealing with international problems, and each is jealous of its sovereignty. Finding the highest common denominator takes work. The lowest common denominator is easy: you just relax and slip into it. The United Nations has gradually evolved over time (peacekeeping, one of its major activities today, is not even mentioned in the charter), and it is probably going to continue to do so. And this may not be so bad.

As globalization gathers momentum, transnational problems become more pressing: trade-distorting barriers, environmental degradation, non-state terrorism, disease and health issues, weapons proliferation, drugs, climate change, international crime, governance of the global common

spaces, etc. These demand increasingly intimate levels of international collaboration to manage. As of now the United Nations, for all its limitations and imperfections, is the best available framework for these tasks. Our policy should therefore be to strengthen the organization rather than denigrate it.

Much of this is now water over the dam, but the struggle continues between the yin and yang of multilateral/unilateral approaches to the problem of the day: dealing with the aftermath of the war in Iraq. Unilateralists prefer to bypass the U.N. as irrelevant. Multilateralists stress the urgency of restoring respect for the United Nations by ensuring it an important role in post-hostility reconstruction, which the unilateralists want to keep in American (and preferably the Pentagon's) hands. This drama tends to be played out between the poles of the State Department and the

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Defense Department in competition for presidential attention and decision. Not surprisingly, the president seems to lean one way this time, another the next. Confusion reigns.

Multilateralists want to give priority to repairing badly damaged relations with a large number of important countries: Russia, France, Germany, Canada, Mexico, Turkey and a num-

ber of Arab and Islamic nations prominent among them.

Unilateralists are suspicious of anything that implies sharing influence or decision-making or in any way hampering our freedom of action. The concept of an “international community” seems alien and softheaded to them. We don't need to worry about Muslim restiveness since we have the power to deal with it by ourselves, and their wrath will ultimately subside when its impotence and pointlessness are realized.

The U.S. is not an island, entire unto itself, say the multilateralists. They point to the indispensability of international collaboration in the fight against non-state terrorism.

The conflict is not likely to go away; in fact, it threatens to become bitterer and less civil. The petty givenness of the playground seems to characterize much of our public and congressional reaction to those who

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disagree with our policies. This often turns legitimate disagreements over tactics and timing into damaging international crises, as has been the case with Iraq. Relations with France — our oldest ally — hit bottom in an adolescent squabble.

### The Lessons of History

Both my first and last experiences as a 35-year career American diplomat were with the United Nations, and I believe I am as aware of its strengths and limitations as anyone can be. In the mid-1950s I was a junior member of a succession of delegations to the annual sessions of the General Assembly, dealing with political issues on the U.N. agenda. The number of members was in the 50s and the atmosphere was, for the most part, intimate and collegial. The United States was almost universally respected. I met fellow diplomats, then also junior members of their delega-

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tions, who later were ambassadors and foreign ministers and became my lifelong friends. I worked with Dag Hammarskjöld and Ralph Bunche in setting up the United Nations Expeditionary Force, one of the earliest peacekeeping efforts, in the wake of the 1956 Suez crisis. Decolonization was proceeding apace, helped along by the U.N. I was a negotiator with the Soviets and others of the

statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency, an organization today increasingly in the news. The environment was serious and efficient. We had a sense of participation in the making of history.

Thirty-plus years later, I was asked by President George Bush the elder, himself a moderate and intelligent internationalist and advocate of the U.N., to take the position first held by Ralph Bunche as the senior American in the secretariat. On his recommendation, U.N. Secretary General Perez de Cuellar appointed me under-secretary general for political affairs in 1989. The number of members had soared above 160, and the professional staff had increased along with it. But the atmosphere was much changed.

It was a difficult time because attitudes toward the United States had changed as well. This was the era in which our annual dues were being withheld by Congress, some key members of which, perhaps with visions of black helicopters dancing in their heads, were suspicious of the U.N. and were using this tactic to force reform (by which they meant reducing U.S. dues and forcing the organization to cut its staff and budget, which was substantially less than the annual cost of the New York Police Department).

It was symptomatic of the growing turn to unilateralism rather than a rational approach to needed changes. I remember one senator fulminating in outrage at the effrontery of the U.N. for selecting sites in the U.S. to add to the list of World Heritage Sites deserving protection by the international community if protection was needed. We had already withdrawn in high dudgeon from UNESCO, an error only last year reversed under pressure from several members of Congress. It was a crazy era and the U.N. was badly damaged by our deadbeat policy toward our annual assessment, prompt payment of which is a

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treaty obligation under the charter. Naturally, we antagonized many members, including traditional allies.

Clearly the United Nations needed internal reform. My analysis of the problem was that a succession of secretaries general, generally chosen for their diplomatic experience, had little interest in management. The secretariat had become top-heavy and a rabbit warren of overlapping jurisdictions. My counterpart responsible for management (a man of great competence who later became president of Finland) was repeatedly taken away from his duties for special political assignments, while management issues went unattended. My boss, Secretary General de Cuellar, a suave and cultured former Peruvian diplomat, did not seem to see himself as head of a large and complex organization responsible for its efficient performance. It is admittedly difficult to manage an institution staffed by a

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multiplicity of nationalities and cultures, subject to constant political pressures and claims from national governments.

One of my colleagues in the secretariat and I spoke often and saw eye to eye on what had to be done to ratio-

nalize the organization, including the need to resist political pressures and to take management responsibilities as seriously as political ones. This was a mid-level Ghanaian staff member named Kofi Annan. When he became U.N. secretary general years after I retired, my spirits soared.

It has often been said that if the U.N. did not exist it would have to be invented. Unfortunately, if we had to start from scratch I do not believe we could, in the politically charged world of today, improve on what we have. So I believe it is vital to preserve what we have, with all its warts and shortcomings. I can only hope, however, that the time will soon come when the hostile attitude of so much of our present political leadership will moderate and our readiness to work with others as a member of the international community, even at the cost of some of our freedom of action, will reassert itself. ■

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