
United Nations

By Madeleine K. Albright

Bureaucratic. Ineffective. Undemocratic. Anti-United States. And after the bitter debate over the use of force in Iraq, critics might add “useless” to the list of adjectives describing the United Nations. So why was the United Nations the first place the Bush administration went for approval after winning the war? Because for \$1.25 billion a year—roughly what the Pentagon spends every 32 hours—the United Nations is still the best investment that the world can make in stopping AIDS and SARS, feeding the poor, helping refugees, and fighting global crime and the spread of nuclear weapons.

“The United Nations Has Become Irrelevant”

NO. The second Gulf War battered the U.N. Security Council’s already shaky prestige. Hawks condemned the council for failing to bless the war; opponents for failing to block it. Nevertheless, when major combat stopped, the United States and Great Britain rushed to seek council authorization for their joint occupation of Iraq, the lifting of sanctions, and the right to market Iraqi oil.

What lessons will emerge from the wrangle over Iraq? Will France, Russia, and China grudgingly concede U.S. dominance and cooperate sufficiently to keep the United States from routinely bypassing the Security

Council? Or might they form an opposition bloc that paralyzes the body? Will the United States and United Kingdom proceed triumphantly? Or will they suffer so many headaches in Iraq that they conclude, in hindsight, that initiating the war without council support was a mistake?

Both sides have reason to move toward cooperation. The French, Russians, and Chinese all derive outsized influence from their status as permanent Security Council members; they see the panel as a means to mitigate U.S. hegemony and do not want the White House to pronounce it dead. And despite their unilateralist tendencies, Bush administration officials will welcome council support when battling terrorists and rogue states in the future. Although the council is not and never has been the preeminent arbiter of war and peace that its supporters wish it were, it remains the most widely accepted source

of international legitimacy—and legitimacy still has meaning, even for empires. That is why U.S. President George W. Bush and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell both made their major prewar, pro-war presentations before a U.N. audience.

Beyond the council itself, the United Nations' ongoing relevance is evident in the work of the more than two dozen organizations comprising the U.N. system. In 2003 alone, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran had processed nuclear materials in violation of its Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligations; the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia tried deposed Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic for genocide; and the World Health Organization successfully coordinated the global response to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Meanwhile, the World Food Programme has fed more than 70 million people annually for the last five years; the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees maintains a lifeline to the international homeless; the U.N. Children's Fund has launched a campaign to end forced childhood marriage; the Joint U.N. Programme on HIV/AIDS remains a focal point for global efforts to defeat HIV/AIDS; and the U.N. Population Fund helps families plan, mothers survive, and children grow up healthy in the most impoverished places on earth. The United Nations may seem useless to the self-satisfied, narrow-minded, and micro-hearted minority, but to most of the world's population, it remains highly relevant indeed.

“Relations Between the United States and the United Nations are at an All-Time Low”

NOT EVEN CLOSE. One day before the U.N. General Assembly convened in 1952, Republican Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin began hearings in New York on the loyalty of U.S. citizens employed by the United Nations. A federal grand jury then opened a competing inquiry in the same city on the same subject. (Some U.N. employees called to testify even invoked their constitutional right against self-incrimination.) The furor generated massive indignation and mutual U.S.-U.N. distrust. J.B. Mathews, chief investigator for the House Un-American Activities Committee, declared that the United Nations “could not be less of a cruel hoax if it had been organized in Hell for the sole purpose of aiding and abetting the destruction of the United States.”

East-West and North-South tensions transformed the General Assembly into hostile territory through much of the 1970s and 1980s. U.S. ambassadors such as Daniel P. Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick earned combat pay rebutting the verbal pyrotechnics of delegates in the throes

of anti-Semitic passions and Marxist moonbeams. The low point was the passage in 1975 of a resolution equating Zionism with racism.

In the 1990s, supporters of the Contract With America, led by Republican Rep. Newt Gingrich of Georgia, lambasted U.N. peacekeeping, blocked payment of U.N. dues, and ridiculed U.N. programs. Similarly, Republican Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina spoke for many of the far-right-minded but wrong-headed when he termed the United Nations “the nemesis of millions of Americans.”

Today according to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, U.S. citizens consider U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan the fourth most respected world leader (trailing, in order, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, U.S. President George W. Bush, and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon). The United States has paid back most of its acknowledged U.N. arrears. The United Nations' agenda and core U.S. security interests have gradually converged. For example, the U.N. Charter says nothing about the importance of elected government, yet U.N. missions routinely sponsor democratic transitions, monitor elections, and promote free institutions. The charter explicitly prohibits U.N. intervention in the internal affairs of any government (save for enforcement actions), yet the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, created in 1993 at the United States' urging, exists solely to nudge governments to do the right thing by their own people. The United Nations' founders never mentioned terrorism, yet today the United Nations encourages governments to ratify anti-terrorist conventions, freeze terrorist assets, and tighten security on land, in air, and at sea. Polls continue to show that a significant majority of U.S. citizens believe the United States should seek U.N. authorization before using force and should cooperate with other nations through the world body.

“The Bush Administration's Doctrine of Preemption Is Not Authorized by the U.N. Charter”

SO? The charter calls upon states to attempt to settle disputes peacefully and, failing that, to refer matters to the Security Council for appropriate action. Article 51 provides that nothing in the charter “shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security.”

Compare that to this passage from President Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy: “Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no

longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. The inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today's threats, and the magnitude of potential harm that could be caused by our adversaries' choice of weapons, do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first."

The mystery here is not what the administration said, but rather why it chose to arouse global controversy by elevating what has always been a residual option into a highly publicized doctrine. In reality, no U.S. president would allow an international treaty to prevent actions genuinely necessary to deter or preempt imminent attack upon the United States. The notion that the United States has relied solely "on a reactive posture" in the past is not true. In the name of self-defense, U.S. administrations of both parties initiated actions during the Cold War that violated the sovereignty of other nations. In 1994, the Clinton administration considered military strikes against nuclear facilities in North Korea. In 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton launched cruise missiles into Afghanistan and Sudan in retaliation for the terrorist bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa and in an effort to prevent al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden from striking again.

Whether tracking the language of Article 51 or not, the Bush administration's preemption doctrine will prove a departure from past practice only if it is implemented in a manner that is aggressive, indifferent to precedent, and careless of the information used to justify military action. Calibrated and effective actions taken against real enemies posing an imminent danger should not overturn the international legal apple cart. Measures wide of that standard would indeed raise troubling questions about whether the United States is setting itself above the law or tacitly acknowledging the right of every nation to act militarily against threats that are merely potential and suspected. The administration approached that line by invading Iraq, but the issue was blurred by the multiple rationales given for the conflict—enforcement of Security Council resolutions (relatively strong legal grounds), self-defense (in this case, shaky), and liberation (shakier still). The issue now is whether the administration intends to strike first against nuclear aspirants North Korea and Iran (and, if so, on what evidence) and whether it will exhaust other options first. Thus far, the administration is traveling the diplomatic route.

"Political Correctness Often Trumps Substance at the United Nations"

CORRECT. The Cold War and the rapid growth in U.N. membership following decolonization shaped the United Nations' civil service, requiring the distribution of jobs on the basis of geography rather than qualifica-

tions. The U.S. Congress did not help over the years by buying in to the notion that the United States was entitled to many jobs and then filling them with defeated politicians.

While at the United Nations, I used to joke that managing the global institution was like trying to run a business with 184 chief executive officers—each with a different language, a distinct set of priorities, and an unemployed brother-in-law seeking a paycheck. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has done about everything possible within the system to reward high achievers and improve recruitment, but the pressure to satisfy members from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe remains a management nightmare.

Another long-standing problem is that decisions on U.N. committee chairs and memberships are most often made on a regional and rotating basis, with equal weight given to, for example, South Africa and Swaziland. By tradition, these decisions are sacrosanct, leading to the recent spectacle of Libya chairing the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. To prevent such an outcome, one must be willing to break some diplomatic china. Former President Clinton did so in blocking the reelection of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1996 and defeating Sudan's regionally endorsed nomination for Security Council membership in 2000. Both initiatives prompted resentment toward the United States, but both enhanced the standing and credibility of the United Nations.

"U.N. Peacekeeping Has Failed"

UNTRUE. U.N. peacekeeping has maintained order in such diverse places as Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, eastern Slavonia, Mozambique, and Cyprus. The traditional U.N. mission is a confidence-building exercise, conducted in strict neutrality between parties that seek international help in preserving or implementing peace. U.N. peacemaking, however, is quite another matter. During my years as the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, the tragic experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, and Rwanda showed that traditional U.N. peacekeepers lack the mandate, command structure, unity of purpose, and military might to succeed in the more urgent and nasty cases—where the fighting is hot, the innocent are dying, and the combatants oppose an international presence. Such weaknesses, sadly, are inherent in the voluntary and collective nature of the United Nations. When the going gets tough, the tough tend to go wherever they want, notwithstanding the wishes of U.N. commanders.

One possible solution: peace-enforcement missions authorized by the United Nations, in which the Security Council deputies an appropriate major power to organize

a coalition and enforce the world's collective will. The council sets the overall mandate, but the lead nation calls the shots—literally and figuratively—necessary to achieve the mission. The U.S.-led intervention in Haiti (1994), the Australian-led rescue of East Timor (1999), and the British action in Sierra Leone (2000) were largely successful and provide a model for the future.

Peacemaking is a hard, dangerous, and often thankless task. To deter people with guns, other people with more and bigger guns are necessary, and finding such people is not easy. It is one thing to expect a soldier to risk life and limb defending his or her homeland. It is another to expect that same soldier to travel halfway around the world and perhaps to die while trying to quell a struggle over diamonds, oil, or ethnic dominance on someone else's home turf. Most people are simply not that altruistic, especially when they see many intervention forces blamed for what such forces fail to accomplish rather than credited for the burdens they assume. As a result, the world is left with an international system of crisis response that is pragmatic, episodic, and incremental rather than principled, reliable, and decisive.

Without any expectation of perfection or even consistency, the international community can nevertheless make the best of things by doing more to equip and train selected military units willing to volunteer in advance for peace enforcement; by recruiting personnel to fill the gap between lightly armed police and heavily armed conventional military; by prosecuting war criminals; and by attacking the roots of conflicts such as arms peddling and economic desperation.

“The U.N. Security Council Should Be Enlarged”

INDUBITABLY, but don't hold your breath. Probably no U.N. issue has been studied more with less to show for the effort than Security Council enlargement.

To ensure the council's strength as a guardian of international security and peace, the United Nations' founders assigned permanent membership and veto authority to the five leading nations on the winning side of World War II: the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China. (Other countries compete for election to fill the 10 remaining council seats, with the winners serving a two-year term.) Obviously, the world has changed a bit since 1945: U.N. membership has more than tripled, and three of the eight most populous nations in the world can now be found in South Asia. Despite an apparent consensus to enlarge the council, its members have been tied up in knots trying to decide how. Major debates include fair regional representation (if India deserves a permanent seat, what

about Pakistan?) and reluctance to extend veto power to additional countries.

During my years at the United Nations in the mid-1990s, the United States supported expanding the council to no more than 21 members and granting permanent seats to Japan and Germany. This position outraged Italian Ambassador F Paolo Fulci, whose country opposed the addition of more permanent members. By that logic, he argued, if Japan and Germany joined the Security Council, Italy should be included as a permanent member, too. “After all,” he argued, “Italians also lost World War II.”

“The United Nations Is a Threat to the Sovereignty of the United States”

BALDERDASH. The United Nations' authority flows from its members; it is servant, not master. The United Nations has no armed forces of its own, no power of arrest, no authority to tax, no right to confiscate, no ability to regulate, no capacity to override treaties, and—despite the paranoia of some—no black helicopters poised to swoop down upon innocent homes in the middle of the night and steal lawn furniture. The U.N. General Assembly has little power, except to approve the U.N. budget, which it does by consensus. Meanwhile, the Security Council, which does have power, cannot act without the acquiescence of the United States and the other four permanent members. That means that no secretary-general can be elected, no U.N. peacekeeping operation initiated, and no U.N. tribunal established without the approval of the United States. Questions about the efficiency of the United Nations and many of its specific actions are legitimate, but worries about U.S. sovereignty are misplaced and appear to come primarily from people aggrieved to find the United Nations so full of foreigners. That, I am constrained to say, simply cannot be helped.

“The United Nations Is a Huge Bureaucracy”

NOPE. A bureaucracy certainly, but not huge. The annual budget for core U.N. functions—based in New York City, Geneva, Nairobi, Vienna, and five regional commissions—is about \$1.25 billion, or roughly what the Pentagon spends every 32 hours. The U.N. Secretariat has reduced its staff by just under 25 percent over the last 20 years and has had a zero-growth budget since 1996. The entire U.N. system, composed of the secretariat and 29 other organizations, employs a little more than 50,000

people, or just 2,000 more than work for the city of Stockholm. Total annual expenditures by all U.N. funds, programs, and specialized agencies equal about one fourth the municipal budget of New York City.

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