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Ups and Downs in UN History

Richard C. Hottelet*

A peaceful world order was for centuries a noble, yet unattainable ideal, until President Woodrow Wilson called for action in the last year of the First World War. Sickened by four years of slaughter on the battlefields of Europe, the victors wrote a Covenant of the League of Nations into the Treaty of Versailles. It was the kiss of death. The Treaty was a nineteenth century peace—vengeful, greedy, and fear-ridden, which registered only the absence of any ethical and political architecture for a new era. The Senate and the people of the United States promptly rejected both the Treaty and the League. Without America's presence, the grand experiment stumbled down the scale into a melancholy farce.

In 1941, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States took the initiative again, molding the wartime alliance of “united nations” into the world organization of that name. From the beginning, the United Nations (UN) reflected high hopes and stormy times, sometimes in a carnival mirror of weird distortion. Most importantly, at first and still, it showed that the United States was engaged in the international scene. President Harry S. Truman spelled it out in these words:

If we fail to use the Charter and the organization we have created with it, we shall betray all of those who died in order that we might meet here in freedom and in safety to create it. If we seek to use it selfishly for the advantage of one nation or group of nations, we shall be equally guilty of that betrayal, but what a great day in history this can be . . . This Charter is no more perfect than our own Constitution, but like that Constitution it must be made to live. The powerful nations

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must accept the responsibility for leadership toward a world of peace.¹

However, it was clear even before the San Francisco conference adopted the Charter that an evil fairy attended this beginning as well. The Soviet Union intended to use the UN as its instrument. Openly violating Stalin's promise at Yalta to permit democratic governments in Eastern Europe through free elections, the Soviet Union imposed communist regimes. Purging the Polish government took longer than expected; no Polish delegation made it to San Francisco. At one point, the Soviets insisted that the veto power cover also what the Security Council could discuss. The United States replied flatly that it would not join such an organization.

I was present when this was put to the test at the Council's first sessions in March, 1946 at New York's Hunter College. Moscow refused to withdraw its troops from Iran as agreed and set up a puppet republic in the Kurdish provinces. When the Council took this up over his objections, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko gathered his officials and marched out. Several days later he quietly returned.

In 1950 Moscow completely boycotted the Security Council and all other UN organs. It wanted China's UN seats turned over to Mao Zedong's communists, now in power on the mainland. But Stalin shot himself in the foot. No Soviet delegation was on hand to veto the resolution that allowed the United States to rally an international counterforce against the communist invasion and certain destruction of South Korea.

Actually, Article 43 of the Charter envisaged armed forces contributed by member states and commanded by a Military Staff Committee of the Security Council. The Soviet Union never allowed it to form. Since 1948 this committee, comprised of senior officers from the five permanent Council members, has met monthly for an average of ten seconds and has done nothing but establish itself as the fastest gavel at the UN.

Those early days were the organization's preparatory phase. Several big East-West issues were not brought to the Security

1. Pres. Harry S. Truman, Address to the Delegates in San Francisco Who Adopted the Charter of the United Nations (on file with author).

Council. Others, such as the Berlin blockade, the rape of Czechoslovakia and the invasion of Hungary saw western resolutions vetoed by the Soviet Union. The UN learned to live within its limitations. The device used in Korea, a posse of like-minded nations under the authority of the Security Council, was a precedent for Desert Storm in 1991, as well as for Kosovo. The Kremlin bitterly resented Secretary-General Trygve Lie's open support for the Korean operation and cut short his career, only to see him replaced by Dag Hammarskjold of Sweden. Hammarskjold won Washington's gratitude by securing the release of eleven American prisoners of war in China. But he, in turn, lost Soviet support with his activism in the Congo. In summer, 1960 Moscow voted for a UN military operation, ONUC, to clear Belgian forces out of the old colony. That done, the Kremlin tried to establish a special relationship with Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba by sending Soviet equipment and expert help directly to him instead of to ONUC. Hammarskjold refused to allow this. Soviet Party Chief Nikita Khrushchev decided not only to bring him down, but also to prevent the UN from ever again cutting across Soviet plans.

Seventeen newly independent nations joined the UN in the Fifteenth General Assembly. They raised membership to ninety-nine, giving what came to be known as the "Third World" the power of numbers and of violent rhetoric in the Assembly and subsidiary organs. Heads of government from the world came to this Assembly and Khrushchev made himself the spokesman of "decolonization." African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, who came as Ghana's Osagyefo (Redeemer), were seduced easily by his argument that their failings were really the fault of the old colonialists and the "neo-colonialists"—essentially the United States. Khrushchev's tactic, to gain psychological ascendancy in the Assembly, included plunging sessions into pandemonium by hammering his desk with his fists and his old brown shoe. He failed completely in his effort to replace the Office of the Secretary-General with a troika, but Hammarskjold was finished politically before his plane crashed in Northern Rhodesia in 1961.

The Bay of Pigs brought Cuba to the UN Security Council. Washington kept Adlai Stevenson, the new U.S. Permanent Representative, floundering in a welter of misinformation. He did his

eloquent best to argue that U.S. forces were not directly involved, but it was a diplomatic fiasco. The Cuban problem returned to the UN a year and a half later when the Soviet Union installed nuclear missiles on the island. At the Security Council presenting the evidence against the Kremlin, Stevenson asked the Soviet representative for a confirmation or denial. When Valerian Zorin scoffingly replied that he would not answer a prosecutorial question, Stevenson retorted that the Council was indeed a court of world opinion and that he would wait for the answer “until hell freezes over.” The UN’s role was more than that of a courtroom. Secretary General U Thant of Burma helped to pry the contending giants apart, proposing a moratorium, and facilitating the Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence.

In December, 1963 one of those political volcanoes that shape human affairs burst through the paper crust of treaties meant to contain it. Turkish troops in Northern Cyprus claimed a treaty right to protect ethnic Turks from communal violence, a right Turkey invoked to seven years later justify a massive military invasion in another crisis. A UN Force, UNFICYP, sent to Cyprus in 1964 to discourage violence, remains to this day along a line that cuts the island in two. Political talks between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities began in 1968 and they stutter along still. The issue remains whether an independent Cyprus should be a federated state or only the loose confederation of two separate but equal ethnic communities.

Nothing has affected the UN itself so powerfully as the Palestine conflict between Jews and Arabs. All the changes were rung in the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as on the ground in violence and bloodshed, before Britain surrendered its League of Nations Palestine mandate to the UN on May 15, 1948. Cease-fires, agreed to and broken; UN mediators Ralph Bunche and Folke Bernadotte; UN plans and observation units; and new offensives and open war mark those years. So does one cardinal principle of Security Council decision. The Palestine Commission, created by the Assembly to carry out the Assembly’s Plan of Partition for Palestine, found itself an impotent spectator of open warfare. It appealed for help from the Security Council. However, the United States reminded the members that the Charter of the United Nations does not empower the Security Council to enforce a political settlement,

whether it is pursuant to a recommendation of the General Assembly or of the Council itself.

By 1956 no basis for peace had been found. Arabs and Israelis remained violently divided. Britain saw Egypt's new revolutionary leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, seize the Suez Canal. France, at war with Algerian liberation forces, was ready to join any anti-Arab move. Together with Israel, they invaded Suez on October 29. The United States, kept in the dark, summoned an emergency meeting of the Security Council. Two days earlier, Soviet troops attacked Hungary to crush an uprising for freedom. The two crises boiled together at the UN, but in different ways. Moscow refused to move. President Eisenhower persuaded Israel to withdraw from Sinai; Britain and France left voluntarily. The UN Emergency Force (UNEF), a largely Canadian idea with strong U.S. support, filled the vacuum. It was the first of the big, classic UN peacekeeping operations.

Israeli-Arab relations lapsed into the fitful, snarling pugnacity that passed for normal. But Nasser became the champion of a new, anti-Western Arab nationalism and in spring, 1967 and for reasons that remain unknown, the Soviet Union convinced him that Israel was mobilizing to attack Syria. The Soviet ambassador to Israel reportedly called on Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in the middle of the night. Eshkol, pulling on his pants, offered to drive him to the Syrian border. The Russian refused. The charge was false, but Nasser, in his leadership role, felt the need to respond somehow. He mobilized his army and ordered UNEF to abandon the buffer position it held for ten years between Israel and Egypt, in Gaza and on the Sinai Peninsula. He also closed the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping – as U Thant was flying to Cairo to tell him that this was a *casus belli*.

The six-day war saw nonstop diplomacy in both the Security Council and the General Assembly. The first objective was a cease-fire. Some scenes were public and ludicrous. While Israeli tanks assembled on the Golan Heights for the short drive to Damascus and the Syrian ambassador pleaded in the Council for a quick cease-fire resolution, the gadfly Saudi Arabian representative persisted in one of the aimless, endless commentaries for which he was noted.

Withdrawal was argued intensely in private. The Arabs, the Soviet bloc, and the Third World demanded Israel's immediate departure

from *the* (read: all) occupied territories. Not until late November was there consensus on an Anglo-American formula—withdrawal from occupied territories, not specifying the extent or the timing but setting the principle of land for peace. The famous Security Council Resolution 242 was praised by many as a model of “constructive ambiguity” and accepted by all, but with conflicting interpretations that have kept a solution out of reach for thirty-three years.

The UN remained the middleman in six years of small-scale, mostly aerial, warfare between Israel and Egypt. It was President Anwar Sadat who broke the mold, first sending his army forward across the Suez Canal to reassert Egypt’s position as a major player, then going to Jerusalem to tell Israel he wanted peace. The Camp David agreement and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty that followed were the work of President Jimmy Carter.

Hopes were high after that and a certain stability emerged, due in large measure to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). UNRWA has helped to feed, clothe, and educate the Palestinian refugee population that now numbers more than 3.5 million in the Israeli-occupied territories, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. But there was no end of trouble as the conflict came to be primarily Palestinian-Israeli. A Palestinian Authority headed by Yasser Arafat was given parcels of land to administer, but Israel’s continuing settlement and mercantile policy in the territories, as well as appalling unemployment in the growing, youthful population, created a flammable mixture that flared up in mass violence in October, 2000.

The UN has transformed over the years. In the 1950s it was essentially a western club and the United States had little cause to be disturbed. Since 1955 new members, mostly developing and poor, swarmed in and the total membership today is 189. In the roughly twenty-five years before 1980, the radicalization of speech and policy in the General Assembly was a counterpoint of the Cold War. Denunciation of U.S. policy and of the United States was commonplace in debates, and American influence was seen to falter. President Lyndon Johnson and his ambassador to the UN, Arthur Goldberg, tried mightily to put peace in Vietnam on the UN’s agenda. They ran into a stone wall. Hanoi did not want peace but victory and it had the powerful support of the Soviet bloc. President

Richard Nixon pushed every diplomatic button to show Mao Zedong that Washington was strong enough to keep China's seat in the hands of the nationalists. So obvious was this effort that when it failed in 1971, there was jubilation on the floor of the General Assembly. Other incidents turned American public opinion against the UN. An Assembly resolution called Zionism a form of racism. And it was not understood that U Thant had no choice when Nasser ordered him to pull UNEF out in 1967. This turned the public against everything that started with the UN, including UNESCO holiday cards.

Year by year Washington grew more critical of the UN, demanding changes in its structure and operations, and arbitrarily withholding assessed contributions for the regular budget and peacekeeping accounts to force the changes. Apparently unconcerned at being the UN's biggest debtor or by the fact that most of the peacekeeping arrears are owed to other, mostly friendly, members, Congress pays at least enough annually to preclude the loss of its vote in the General Assembly. Successive Secretaries General and especially the incumbent, Kofi Annan of Ghana, elected in 1996, have held the budget steady, cut superfluous staff, streamlined authority, and tightened performance in a way that has earned the commendation of members, including the United States.

In December, 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev came to the General Assembly to announce that the Soviet Communist Party had jettisoned class warfare. It was the official end of the Cold War. Gorbachev said that political disputes could not be resolved by force and he called for world cooperation. Soon the Red Army pulled out of Afghanistan and Eastern Europe, and the Kremlin worked with the United States on the Security Council to end the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. Two years later, Russia joined a Security Council majority authorizing an international force to repel Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. It approved the rigorous sanctions intended to keep Iraq's Saddam Hussein from again acquiring weapons of mass destruction. The sanctions regime is now crumbling. The Security Council is split. Iraq evades the UN's sanctions and bars UN weapons inspectors. Saddam exploits the misery of his people to rally support worldwide for an end of all restraints.

In the new phase that opened with the end of bipolar paralysis, there seemed new scope for UN activism. Secretary General Boutros

Boutros-Ghali responded to the start of the Yugoslav wars in 1991 with the UN Protection Force, UNPROFOR, to safeguard delivery of humanitarian supplies to civilians caught in the Croatian, and then the Bosnian, fighting. In fact, it kept them alive until Serb extremists got around to killing them. President Slobodan Milosovic of Yugoslavia, embarked on the frenzy of ethnic cleansing that eventually led to his indictment as a war criminal, ignored all the UN's resolutions, admonitions, and appeals to his better nature. The Security Council took no steps to stop him. It was only when NATO took control and bombed Serb positions that Milosevic came to Dayton, Ohio, to sign a peace agreement.

Several years later, Milosevic was using the Yugoslav army openly in the mass expulsion and murder of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Once again, NATO bombing backed by ground troops put a stop to it. The UN is now involved, together with European agencies, in a program of nation-building in Bosnia and Kosovo—not to mention its superb effort in East Timor.

The United States is officially and sharply opposed to nation-building. That is strange in light of its own remarkable success in Germany, Japan, and Korea. However, with human rights in the ascendant, there is little doubt that this will increasingly confront the world community. Coupled with nation-building is the issue of direct intervention to deal with the disasters of broken-down failed states, often combined with intra-state conflicts. Kofi Annan underscored the United Nations' dilemma: an organization of sovereign states that is dedicated to the protection and expansion of individual human rights. President Harry S. Truman would applaud Annan's words of last year: "The Charter is a living document. . . . [N]othing in the Charter precludes a recognition that there are rights beyond borders."²

At a Millenium Summit meeting of the General Assembly this fall, President Bill Clinton echoed these sentiments. Referring to internal conflicts which took five million lives in the past decade, he said: "This trend presents us with a stark collective challenge. We must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity. But whether it is

2. Pres. Harry S. Truman, Address to UN General Assembly (Sept. 20, 1999) (on file with author).

diplomacy, sanctions or collective force, we must find ways to protect *people* as well as *borders*.”³

3. Pres. William Jefferson Clinton, Address to the UN General Assembly (Sept. 6, 2000) (on file with author).

