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“1945’s Lesson: ‘Good-Enough’ Global Governance Ain’t Good Enough”

Dan Plesch and Thomas G. Weiss**

Abstract: The 70th anniversary of the signing and entry into force of the UN Charter should call attention to the historical underpinnings of contemporary global governance. Today’s fashion of “good-enough” global governance abandons the strategy of constructing robust intergovernmental organizations; and it is not good enough, especially because our forebears did much better. Insights from 1942 to 1945 remain valid for addressing twenty-first century global challenges. But do we have the wit and will to do what is necessary without a global conflagration?

Key words: United Nations; World War II; multilateralism; global governance; League of Nations.

The 70th anniversary of the signing and entry into force of the UN Charter should call attention to the 1942-45 United Nations Alliance that gave rise to the world body and the underpinnings of contemporary global governance. However, no longer are wars the main threats to international order. The growing list of intractable problems ranges from climate change and migration to pandemics and terrorism.

What remains unchanged after seven decades is that the policy authority and resources necessary for tackling such problems remain vested in individual states rather than collectively in intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). The fundamental disconnect between a growing number of global challenges and the current inadequate structures for international problem-solving and decision-making helps explain occasional, tactical, and short-term local views and responses instead of sustained, strategic, and longer-run global perspectives and actions.

The rediscovery of the wartime United Nations contradicts the conventional wisdom that liberalism was abandoned to confront the Nazis and Imperial Japan; it asserts that the ideals of Kant were found to be essential to the Hobbesian objective of state survival. The attendant historiographical question is why the wartime UN has disappeared from academic and policy consciousness. For those who examine primary sources, this UN is in the pages of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*, mainstream international relations journals, newspapers, and minutes of town-hall meetings.

When governments decide to use intergovernmental organizations, they work. The wartime actions of the UN’s founders suggest that contemporary global governance often is a second-best surrogate for their more robust multilateralism and IGOs. If global problems require global solutions, they also require strengthened intergovernmental organizations, especially those of the UN system.

This proposition flies in the face of an infatuation with problem-solving by anything other than IGOs. A decade ago, Anne-Marie Slaughter viewed networks of various types rather than actual organizations as the key variable in problem-solving.¹ More recently, Dan Drezner and Stewart Patrick have proposed living with the sum of alternative arrangements and dismissed the universal-membership United Nations as hopeless and hapless. Apparently, we can only aspire to a variegated institutional sprawl—or “good-enough global governance.”²

Alas, that is not and will not be adequate without a revitalized United Nations as an integral component of international society. Scepticism about UN capacity are justified, but we are kidding ourselves about the potential of mini-lateralisms—what the *Human Development Report 2013* hopes somehow will constitute “coherent pluralism.”³

Political leaders and civil society actors struggling in the midst of World War II thought otherwise. The Declaration by United Nations of January 1942 and the Atlantic Charter of August 1941 committed the Allies to multilateralism not only to fight fascism in the short term but also over the longer term to maintain international peace and security and to foster post-war economic and social stability.

Revisiting 1945’s Forgotten Insights

The rediscovery of the lost or the suppressed is a recurring theme in literature, mythology, and history from the Renaissance to Western popular fiction since World War II—*Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Star Wars*. The UN at war provides another startling illustration from its founding on 1 January 1942, some three-and-a-half years before the 26 June 1945 signing of the Charter in San Francisco.

“We mean business in this war in a political and humanitarian sense just as surely as we mean business in a military sense.”⁴ Such was US President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s message in November 1943, addressing a White House conference that created the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) that dispensed 1 percent of national income to liberated states from their more fortunate allies to replace industrial equipment, infrastructure, and livestock as well as to stop epidemics and help survivors.

From 1942 the UN Information Office spread the ideas of foreigners to domestic audiences, the reverse of the idea that public diplomacy is about projecting national ideas abroad. The Food and Agriculture Organization planned a global strategy to eradicate hunger—a still elusive goal. At the revived International Labour Organization in 1944, Roosevelt set out the objective of eliminating colonial exploitation.

Before and after the Nuremburg and Tokyo trials, the UN War Crimes Commission supported the indictment of 36,000 people and numerous trials for mass atrocities. It developed new international criminal law to foster the determination among states that law and not mob rule must prevail after liberation.

Bretton Woods in 1944 was formally the UN Monetary and Financial Conference, a G44 to rebuild global capitalism that Josef Stalin had helped craft. The resources of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank were to be far greater than they are today;

and their purposes, to the sometime dismay of recent leaders, still include increasing employment and advancing labor standards--all in the cause of conflict prevention.

The UN Conference on International Organization itself at San Francisco reflected all these initiatives and was not a stand-alone undertaking. These efforts strengthened the political will of populations and reinforced the diplomatic bonds among their leaders. The United Nations was in evidence not only on the European and Asian fronts but also in a commitment to multilateralism and robust intergovernmental organizations, which were viewed as Realist necessities not liberal window-dressing.

Pragmatic Multilateralism in Historical Perspective

There is a woeful neglect of the United Nations as a multilateral commitment and structure *before* 1945. The 70th anniversary of San Francisco should oblige us to drill deeper into history and move beyond fashionable calls for good-enough global governance.

The establishment of the UN system was not peripheral but rather central to policy- and decision-making—not least as a means to reduce direct requirements on Washington after the war. At a moment when one might have expected the disaster of the failed Kantian experiment of the League to have produced a Hobbesian reaction on steroids, those at the helm were resolute: multilateralism and the rule of law, not going-it-alone and the law of the jungle, were the foundations for the post-war order. In fact, the bleak contrast was the Third Reich, the epitome of the right of might and lawlessness.

The combined national decisions to work together and to construct IGOs for peace and prosperity were not a reflection of John Mearsheimer's "false promise of international institutions"⁵ but rather a genuine cooperative strategy that motivated peoples and kept states allied. Multilateralism was tangible and the post-war vision more than propaganda, although "business-as-usual" returned quickly as the default option with the Cold War.

Governments pursued traditional vital interests, to be sure, but the wartime United Nations was more than a temporary multilateral charade to be tossed aside as soon as the armed conflict ended. The "United Nations" was not merely a brand to sell the Anglo-American alliance. We do not imply that the UK-US military effort included other states in planning or that the voices of the weaker and smaller members of the coalition were as loud as those of the major powers. However, it was not the weakness of international cooperation but the intensity of the Cold War that replaced a multilateral commitment with the Marshall Plan's narrower vision of cooperation.

Despite the failed League of Nations, neither governments nor analysts considered a return to the world of 1913. If that had been the case, Allied governments might have insisted on Spartan educational methods to prepare their populations for the next war; or reciprocal mass atrocities perpetrated against the Germans; or bombing Moscow as an encore to Nagasaki. Something fundamental had changed.

That no such retribution occurred should be puzzling; to win and yet not seek revenge and plant the seeds for the next war was not an approach much in evidence in Western history, save in limited form after 1815 as Craig Murphy's accompanying article points out. The post-World War II peace was not supposed to reflect a Metternich-like management of nationalisms but cooperation among friends and rivals.

Learning from 1942-45 should recall efforts to salvage viable components from the general wreckage of the League of Nations. The wartime thinking of the 1940s included earlier international efforts to pursue economic and social development, succor refugees, pursue minority and human rights, and recruit independent international secretariats. The League's toxic brand was disavowed, but its staff and working methods were not as planners sought to re-assemble building blocks for the next generation of intergovernmental organizations.

The British and other Europeans were motivated to follow almost any US lead that would—in contrast to the collapsed League without Washington—bind the United States to a post-war order and help pacify Germany and Japan as well as the Soviet Union. For much of the time since 1945, however, national policy makers—and certainly those in Washington—have seen little need to invest political capital in the world body although more has been devoted to regional organizations. A fresh look at the effectiveness of and investment in liberal internationalism to win World War II could elevate the earlier strategy as a benchmark in comparison with today's routine derision of intergovernmental organizations.

As deliberations in San Francisco occurred before rapid subsequent decolonization—50 states participated whereas today's UN membership numbers 193—it is tempting to simplify the narrative as the West without the Rest. However, the details of Imperial India's and China's contributions to early efforts to pursue war criminals and determine the post-war direction of assistance to displaced persons and of trade and finance, for instance, complicate the story-line. More powerful countries, and especially the United States, had more say during such deliberations; but that customary political reality hardly destroys the argument that multilateralism mattered. Other voices from countries in what is now called the “global South” were on stage and not merely in the wings, including 19 independent states from Latin America and others whose independence was more recent: 3 from Africa (Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa); 3 from Asia (China, the Philippines, and Imperial India); and 7 from the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey).

Throughout the war and the drafting and adoption of the UN Charter, less powerful states influenced the agenda and advanced their own interests and ideals. The Latin American emphasis on regional arrangements in Charter Chapter VIII was one such result; and Chapters XI and XII regarding non-self-governing territories and trusteeship reflected the widespread views of recently decolonized states and other advocates of self-determination. Women from South America led the debates to weave equality throughout the Charter's prose, without which today's gender-based campaigns would be weaker.

The wartime and immediate post-war United Nations was not simply dictated by the West even a generation before decolonization had proceeded apace, and two-thirds of UN member states were in the limelight as erstwhile colonies. Other research shows the extent to which Southern agency has long been a source of global norms.⁶ Indeed, rapid decolonization is hard to imagine in the form and with the speed that it took place without World War II's multilateralism.

Good-enough Global Governance Is Inadequate

An ironic obstacle to better understanding World War II's significance for contemporary analysis is that mainstream international relations has shifted so dramatically away from the study of international organization and law toward global governance, including this journal's pages since 1995.⁷ While the move away from states and their creations, intergovernmental organizations, was a welcome reflection of complex global realities, the analytical pendulum's has swung too far. Most importantly, the United Nations is now viewed at best as a marginal contributor to filling gaps in global governance; that role is far more peripheral than that played by the wartime United Nations or imagined for the postwar world organization. Today's leaders in Moscow and Beijing are not more difficult than Stalin or even Charles de Gaulle.

A close examination of 1942-45 demonstrates that more ambitious and cosmopolitan visions can sometimes overcome the navel-gazing of governments and their constituents. The value of current global problem-solving should be clear to anyone examining responses to the 2004 tsunami or on-going humanitarian crises in Libya or Syria for which we see a constellation of helping hands—soldiers from a variety of countries, UN organizations, large and small nongovernmental organizations, and even Wal-Mart.

However, global governance is not the continuation of traditional power politics, nor the expression of an evolutionary process based on multilateral commitments that could result in intergovernmental structures capable of addressing current or future global threats. In the national context, governance adds to government. For the globe, governance is essentially the whole story, amounting to Scott Barrett's "organized volunteerism,"⁸ with the United Nations at its pinnacle.

There is a powerful overriding consideration to which our longer-term perspective leads. Realists point to the obvious absence of an overarching central authority; they conclude that only self-help is sensible because liberal institutions are a failed pipe dream. The realities of the wartime United Nations and its legacy organizations lead us to a different conclusion: the fear of conquest and annihilation can drive states toward genuine multilateralism. The virtually exclusive remembrance of World War II as a military victory has meant that the more comprehensive multilateral tactics and strategy of 1942-45 remain under-explored and under-appreciated.

Because universal-membership intergovernmental organizations are anemic and atomized, we need to do more than throw up our hands and hope for the best from hordes of norm entrepreneurs, activists crossing borders, epistemic communities, profit-seeking corporations, and transnational social networks. Non-state actors can make and have made essential contributions to global problem-solving. Not to put too fine a point on it, however, they can do little to safely manage geopolitical competition or control the spread of advanced weapons—let alone eliminate poverty, thwart pandemics, fix climate change, ensure macroeconomic stability, agree on international standards, or halt mass atrocities.

The under-staffed and under-resourced organizations that constitute the contemporary UN system have limped along rather than assumed the dimensions foreseen by World War II leaders and planners. A three-pronged strategy is necessary in the decades ahead: the continued evolution and expansion of the formidable amount of practical global governance that already exists; the harnessing of political and economic possibilities opened by the communications revolution that began late in the last century;

and the recommitment by states and civil society to a fundamental re-vamping and strengthening of the United Nations.

Identifying the conditions under which multilateralism's appeal in 1942-45 overcame the recalcitrance of states to collaborate results in two queries: Must the next generation of multilateral organizations arise as a result of unnecessary and unspeakable tragedies—as the United Nations did from the ashes of World War II or the Congress of Vienna from the Napoleonic Wars? Or could more robust institutions result from learning lessons about how best to address felt needs that clearly do not respect borders?

The first question is un-nerving because tragedies are the customary currency for global institutional reforms as Craig Murphy's preceding contribution and our argument here document. Nonetheless, a human capacity exists for learning and adapting; and it is unnecessary to await suffering on a scale that could well dwarf that of World War II. Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) was originally thought to be immutable but is now found to be adaptable within a living creature. We should thus not act as if today's international political order were immutable or pre-ordained.

The 1940s should give us the courage to formulate ambitious visions about improving future world orders. In the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century, addressing trans-boundary and collective-action problems requires refurbishing or creating more muscular intergovernmental organizations with wider scope, more resources, and additional democratic authority.

Too much current scholarly energy is devoted to elucidating the global sprawl of networks and informal institutions, and too little to the requirements for strengthened IGOs, most especially the United Nations. The downside of good-enough global governance contrasts starkly with the approach and operations of the wartime UN, namely a misplaced enthusiasm for ad hoc pluralism rather than for systematic multilateralism. There are many potential and valuable partners in today's variable architecture of global governance; but their limitations should be obvious as well. Without more robust IGOs, especially universal ones like those launched during and after World War II, states and their citizens will not reap the benefits of trade and globalization, discover nonviolent ways to meet security challenges, or address environmental degradation.

Conclusion

Returning to the wartime origins of the United Nations helps to move the conversation beyond cherished notions. Like Samuel Johnson's reflection on hanging, World War II created conditions under which governments were wise enough to overcome their traditional reluctance to cooperate and focus on multilateralism both as a strategy and a tactic. Liberal institutionalism helped ensure the classic Realist objectives of state survival. The 1942-45 UN was not merely an inter-state security forum but also a short-lived apex of global governance.

Notes

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