

## FEATURE: The UN in the Twenty-First Century:

### Why an old dog has to learn new tricks

*This essay discusses the indispensable role of the United Nations, the very negative impact of American foreign policy on the UN, and on the United States itself, the UN's own problems, the adaptations that the UN will have to make if it is to serve us all in the 21st century and what Canada can do to help the UN make those adaptations.*

by Paul Heinbecker<sup>1</sup>

#### The Context

It was not so long ago that the United Nations' future looked bright indeed. On 10 December 2001, Secretary General Kofi Annan accepted the UN's 8th Nobel Prize, for its "work for a better organized and more peaceful world." The Security Council and the Secretariat had belatedly accepted their responsibility for the shameful failure of the UN in Rwanda and reforms had been launched in response. The UN was back in charge in Kosovo. After rocky starts, UN military interventions in East Timor and Sierra Leone were proving successful. Seventy-five heads of government had come to New York that fall to mark the millennium by establishing very ambitious economic and social targets, the Millennium Goals. The Millennium Goals established targets and time-frames for poverty reduction, human rights, education, health, and security. The Secretary General had personally succeeded in putting HIV-AIDS back at the top of the international agenda. He had persuaded, some said coerced, drug companies and governments to cooperate and had, himself, raised hundreds of millions of dollars for the cause.

These successes obscured but did not obviate the very real need for change at the UN. The UN is a mirror of the international community and the international community is itself profoundly divided. There is very little agreement on what the most important issues are, much less on how to resolve them. The world is polarized between "North" and "South", between the rich countries and the poor, over the causes of the all pervasive issue of poverty and how to remedy it. The world is also split between the United States and most other countries on security and how best to respond to terrorists. And there is no agreement on how to reform the aged structures of the UN, which were built for another time and skew representation on the Security Council, still the most important security body on earth.

#### The UN Remains Necessary

This is not to say that the UN is an abject failure. It is far from that. Multilateral cooperation, not multilateralism as some sort of ideology, but as pragmatic problem-solving is indispensable. Over-arching problems can only be solved by over-arching cooperation. This goes for everything from terrorism, for example, where the UN has negotiated twelve conventions; to human rights, with the UN's six core treaties; to arms control and disarmament, the nuclear non-proliferation regime; to health (e.g. managing the SARS crisis); to the environment, including the 76 treaties concluded under UN auspices; to international trade and investment rules, and so on.

In fact, the UN is central to multilateral cooperation and has had many successes. UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), for example, has inoculated 575 million children against childhood diseases; the World Food

There is no agreement on how to reform the aged structures of the UN, which were built for another time and which skew representation on the Security Council, still the most important security body on earth.

Programme (WFP) fed 100 million people in 2003 alone; the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has housed 22 million refugees and internally displaced people; and the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) has saved countless limbs and lives. This work has been belittled by some as mere international social work-- but it is social work with very real human and security benefits.

Two years later, some of the UN's harshest critics were, albeit with Mark Twain-like prematurity, writing its obituary. Neo-con Richard Perle, a member and previously the chairman of the Defense Policy Board, spoke for many members of the Bush Administration when he professed to see two benefits to the war in Iraq. These were first, the disappearance of Saddam Hussein and second, the end of the UN. "Thank God for the death of the UN" he wrote in the Guardian, last March.

### The US and the UN

There was nothing in the post September  
11 reaction of the international community  
to justify abandoning collective defence,  
undermining the UN or jeopardizing sixty  
years worth of international laws...

Such American hostility to the UN is a relatively new phenomenon. Skepticism of the UN was not always the basic operating principle of US administrations. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his younger days a member of the US League of Nations delegation, was the driving force internationally for the creation of a United Nations. President Truman was equally convinced of the need for such a world body. Truman told delegates assembled in San Francisco that they had created a great instrument of peace and security... "We all have to recognize that no matter how great our strength, we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please. No one nation ... can or should expect any special privilege which harms any other nation."

President Kennedy called in 1963 for the UN to become "a genuine world security system . . . capable of solving disputes on the basis of law." President Nixon said "the US will go the extra mile...in doing [its] part in making the UN succeed." Speaking at the inauguration of the Reagan Library, President Clinton recalled that President Reagan had said that the UN stood as "a symbol of the hopes of all mankind for a more peaceful and productive world."

For most of the UN's existence, then, the US clearly saw its security best assured collectively, albeit with its own military strength on standby if needed. What happened? With the end of the Cold War, the US became progressively more powerful and its single, significant, foreign source of "check and balance", the Soviet Union, disappeared. Elegant but self-serving theories appeared in the US in order to explain the inevitability of American dominion and to justify its exceptionalist manifestations. The European Union was said to indulge itself in Kant, while the US was stuck with Hobbes, reflecting Venus and Mars according to a popular book. All that separated civilization from chaos was Washington's willingness to project power. A corollary has been that others, particularly feckless allies, were considered to owe the hegemon decent loyalty, at least when it decided an action is in its vital interest. There was no patience with moral qualms or strategic quibbles, leading some to wonder whether the US was the solution or the problem.

Most tragically, September 11 happened. A country that had pursued a policy of invulnerability through high cost, high tech defence suddenly found itself vulnerable to a low cost, low tech attack by terrorists in the service of medieval Islamic extremism, with horrific consequences. In response, the Bush Administration propounded a national security strategy based not on pre-emption, which is foreseen in international law, but on prevention, which is not. Still, there was little in the post-September 11 reaction of the international community to justify abandoning collective defence, undermining the UN or jeopardizing sixty years worth of international law, most of which previous US administrations had promoted. And all of which were



significant Canadian interests. Further, after the attacks on New York and Washington, the General Assembly and the Security Council had both acted with despatch. On 12 September 2001, the General Assembly, which is not a decision-making body, issued a unanimous message of solidarity with the American people. Within days of September 11, the Security Council, whose decisions are legally binding, proscribed cooperation with terrorists, denying them both safe haven from which to operate and the use of national banking systems to finance their operations.

Many governments, Canada included, sent troops to Afghanistan to fight alongside Americans. Many also committed themselves to spend very large amounts of money to lift Afghanistan out of its failed-state status, so that it would not again become a rear operating base for terrorists. Nevertheless, influential Americans, especially the "neo-cons", seemed to persuade themselves that the potential nexus of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction meant that US would be most secure, in fact, would only be secure, if the US were to act free of the constraints of international law, multilateral institutions and quarrelsome allies. In doing so, they declared war on terrorism, which they portrayed in monolithic terms, not on something tangible such as the Al Qaeda network, thereby effectively making their own victory impossible. Worse, they also sought war on Iraq, despite the absence of evidence of any links between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime.

### Iraq

On Iraq, Washington appeared to regard the UN at best as an instrument for rallying support for US action, and at worst as an unhelpful artifact from another era. UN weapons inspectors were made particular objects of ridicule, which is all the more surprising in light of the great extent US and other intelligence services had depended on them through the years to corroborate third-party allegations. From February 2001, when the Secretary of Defense apparently first raised in cabinet the idea of attacking Iraq to 23 March 2003 when the attack began, Washington steadily raised the pressure for war.

At no time did it seem to register in Washington that a large number of UN member states disagreed that war was necessary and urgent and that their disagreement mattered. Perhaps emboldened by their success in the Security Council in bulldozing their own interpretation of the International Criminal Court Treaty, to which they were not, however, a party, they seemed convinced that the Security Council would ultimately endorse the war. In any case, the US pressed its case. The State of the Union speech repeated the hoax that Iraq had bought uranium from Africa.

In the Security Council days after saying at the Davos World Economic Forum that the US had earned the trust of men, women and children around the world, the US Secretary of State laid out an extensive bill of accusations against the Iraqis that will probably never be corroborated. Meet The Press was told by the Vice-President on March 16, 2003, that the Iraqis had reconstituted their nuclear weapons, an assertion that he admitted was wrong long after the war was over. Mobile weapons laboratories were still being cited as proof of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in January 2004, months after the US Chief Weapons inspector David Kay found that the US had been wrong on WMD across the board, including on the trucks. For this and other reasons, the bottom dropped out of support for the US, according to the Djerejian report on public diplomacy that Washington itself had commissioned.

Throughout the latter part of 2002 and the first quarter of 2003, a steady stream of invective was directed at an institution that most other members considered to be central to their national interests. The rhetorical targets were not limited to the

I agree that Saddam was evil but I respectfully disagree that that made war mandatory.

UN. The Germans were chided for playing electoral politics on a policy initiative that the US rolled out on the eve of the 2002 US mid-term elections. The Russians were mocked for protecting their economic self-interest while Haliburton moved to the centre of Iraqi oilfield recovery. The French were derided for lack of principle while the Security Council was misled about the causes and the urgency of the war. Canada was warned not to pursue a compromise, precisely because it might have delayed the war. Ironically, it might, also, have bought the US more time to deploy troops for the tumultuous aftermath of the war and delivered more international support for military action.

I led a Canadian effort to find a compromise between the US, in its determined march to war, and others, in fact the great majority of others, equally determined to give the UN weapons inspectors more time to do their jobs. The substance of the compromise consisted of setting a series of tests of Iraqi cooperation, on a pass or fail basis, and a limited time-frame within which to assess Iraqi compliance. We knew the odds were long against selling the compromise but we believed the consequences of a war made the effort mandatory. Many, including members of the so-called coalition of the willing, encouraged us to persevere. There is little doubt that it would have been in everyone's interests, especially Washington's interests, to have accepted the compromise.

In the end, the horses would not drink. The war proceeded, with consequences that the world is still trying to calculate. Some believe that even though the *casus belli* has evaporated, attacking Iraq was still the right thing to do. Saddam was an evil man who had taken his people hostage. I agree that Saddam was evil but I respectfully disagree that that made war mandatory. I do agree with Kenneth Roth, the head of Human Rights Watch and a former prosecutor in the Southern District of New York that

...to justify the extraordinary remedy of military force for preventive humanitarian purposes, there must be evidence that large-scale slaughter is in preparation and about to begin unless militarily stopped. But no one seriously claimed before the war that the Saddam Hussein government was planning imminent mass killing, and no evidence has emerged that it was.

There were at least two occasions when such an attack would have been justified: when Saddam attacked the Kurds with gas in 1988 and when he suppressed the Shiites at the end of the 1991 Gulf War. There is no statute of limitations on these crimes and Saddam should have been prosecuted either in absentia or whenever he might have come to hand. I also agree with the report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which found that: 1) In Iraq, WMD were not an immediate threat; 2) the inspections were working; 3) the terrorism connection was missing; and 4) the war was not the best or only option. Furthermore, I agree with the report published early March 2004 by the US Army War College, that argued among other things that: first, the invasion of Iraq was a strategic error; and second, that it was a distraction in the war on terrorism. That is also the view of the former counter terrorism "czar" of successive US governments and a member of the Bush II White House and the man who actually directed the US response on September 11, Richard Clark.

The most obvious consequence of the war in Iraq is that the US and its posse are caught on a morass. They cannot end the occupation precipitously without triggering a civil war and undoing the good they have done in removing Saddam Hussein. But they cannot stay in Iraq without losing more soldiers and more money. Meanwhile,

The Americans have swallowed a razor blade and nothing they do now will be painless or cost free.



the Iraqi toll continues to rise. As one Arab Ambassador at the UN put it, the Americans have swallowed a razor blade and nothing they do now will be painless or cost-free.

### The UN Has Its Own Problems

The US has done itself, and the UN, incalculable harm. It would be a mistake, nevertheless simply to lay all the UN's misfortunes at Washington's door. The UN Charter was written in and for a different age. It treats national sovereignty as an immutable good. As a consequence, a contradiction has arisen between the most basic purpose of the UN, "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and one of its cardinal tenets, state sovereignty. Most wars - the Iraq war a significant exception - now arise within the borders of existing states. The citizens of those states cannot be protected if the international community is precluded from intervening when their own governments cannot or will not protect them, or is itself abusing them. National sovereignty is also the reason why the Charter has little current purchase on the crucial nexus of WMD and terrorism.

It is not necessary to agree with American purposes in attacking Iraq to accept that they genuinely have a point about WMD and terrorists. The issue is not made simpler by American resistance to restrictions on a range of disarmament issues, and by their flirtation, at least, with the idea of producing another generation of nuclear weapons, counter to their international treaty obligations. Nonetheless, it is incumbent on the UN to come to terms with the dangers we face and to reach some understanding on this dimension too of the intervention conundrum, if it is to serve our security interests effectively in the years to come. Some also argue that the international community needs also to be able to intervene when democratically-elected governments are overthrown. Thus the fundamental policy and legal challenge facing the UN is to determine when the international community is justified to intervene in the internal affairs of member states. Addressing such matters would facilitate the construction of a new consensus between the UN and the US. Unfortunately, the largely ex post facto humanitarian rationale for the war on Iraq has raised suspicions, even hostility towards US motives and thereby complicated the task of using military force for human protection purposes. The Iraq war conflated all these issues and made both a common assessment of challenges more difficult and the prospect of UN reform more remote.

The world organization's problems are complicated by the rigidities inherent in its regional and especially cross-regional groups. The hoary Non-Aligned Movement and the equally outdated G-77, holdovers from the Cold War, have become engines of group-think, given to lowest common denominator outcomes. Some of the UN's performances have been disgraceful. Beyond its undeniable failures, notably Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, it has countenanced behaviour that has brought discredit to the organization, notably the Durban Conference against Racism and putting Libya in the chair of the Human Rights Committee. Some of the apologists for the UN have been almost equally as wrong-headed as some of its critics have been. The UN suffers from an acute case of old-think at a time when it is facing decidedly new challenges. Much of its membership is stuck at the Treaty of Westphalia, the seventeenth century treaty on which subsequent norms and state practice have been built. It is difficult to exaggerate the attachment of former colonies who have gained their statehood in the living memories of their peoples to the idea of sovereignty, which some see as a crucial bulwark against their former, or would-be colonial masters. Their determination not to give anyone a new pretext to dominate them is very understandable, given what mainly European colonists did to them in the name of

It would be a mistake nevertheless

simply to lay all the UN's misfortunes at

Washington's door.



progress. Their worries are understandable but not in themselves a sufficient basis to protect their interests in a changing world.

If the UN is to regain its essential effectiveness, all of its members are going to have to come to a new understanding of the limits of state sovereignty. Sovereignty will have to be interpreted in a way that facilitates - not impedes - international cooperation on this century's pressing human security problems, and which responds to the causes of US insecurity. The responsibility does not fall exclusively on the poorer, younger countries. The US, for its part, will need to resist the temptations of empire and exceptionalism and cooperate again with others on global issues that can only be resolved multilaterally. Secretary General Annan put the issues starkly in his seminal address to almost 100 heads of government gathered in New York for last fall's General Debate. "Some say... [that] since an armed attack with weapons of mass destruction could be launched at any time...states have the right and obligation to use force preemptively" (The Secretary General clearly was referring to this US administration) "This logic represents a fundamental challenge to the principles on which, however imperfect, world peace and stability have rested for the last fifty-eight years." The Secretary General went on to say that this could result, "in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force, with or without justification." Finally, he told the leaders assembled that "we have come to a fork in the road" and that we must decide "whether radical changes are needed."

The UN suffers from an acute case of old-think at a time when it is facing decidedly new challenges.

The Secretary General has established a blue ribbon panel to examine UN reforms related to both what the UN does and how the UN does it in particular in that order. Can Canada help the UN to reform itself? Canada can help. We do have the standing to contribute. We can be an active voice for reason and accommodation. When I spoke for Canada at the UN, I was always given a respectful hearing largely because of who we, Canadians, were. Others rightly saw Canada as one of the very few countries where tolerance and generosity towards minorities and foreigners was the norm. Our years of peacekeeping and trying to put the protection of people at the heart of our foreign policy have gained us considerable respect. Our decision to stay out of the war has gained us substantial political credit with the less powerful among the UN's members and with many—probably most—of the more powerful as well.

Washington did express its disappointment that Canada did not support the war but there is no sign that Canadian-US relations have suffered significant harm as a result. We should also not lose sight of the fact that the US itself remains deeply divided over the war.

The Secretary General recently reminded us that Canada, with its long tradition of bridge building among different international constituencies, can play an important role. We need to use our political capital to work with Third World countries, the Africans above all, to persuade them that adapting the idea of national sovereignty is in their interest. It is the Africans who most need intervention. We also can work to persuade the Latin Americans, who hear echoes of the Monroe Doctrine in Iraq, that a less rigid interpretation of national sovereignty is not the threat to them they believe it to be. We also need to help the Secretary General rebalance the international agenda, to address seriously the issues of third world poverty. We need to help him ensure that the pressing insecurities of the poorest four-fifths of humanity, poverty and disease - especially HIV-AIDS and malaria, the current causes of real mass destruction - are also addressed.

If we can help the UN on these scores we also help the Americans in the process. They need the UN to adapt to changing times, to become more responsive to their worries about the nexus of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. They cannot make themselves secure on their own. For their part, the Americans will need to



recapture the spirit of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and others in order to work with the UN, not against it; to change the UN, not try to destroy it.

No one believes that on its hundredth anniversary the UN can be or should be the same as it is now. It took the suffering of the Second World War to create the United Nations. Perhaps the shock of the Iraq war will be enough to produce the reform that the world body so seriously needs. For everyone's sake, let us hope so.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Heinbecker is Director of the Centre for Global Relations, Governance and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. He recently retired after 38 years with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, most recently serving as Ambassador to the United Nations (2000- 2003). This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions above.
- <sup>2</sup> For references, please see website <<http://www.heinbecker.ca>>.

**utpprint**  
A DIVISION OF UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS INC.  
DIGITAL DOCUMENT SOLUTIONS  
CREATE • PRINT • DELIVER

Creative Services  
Thesis Binding  
Poster Printing  
Business Cards  
Digital Printing & Copying  
Web Design

Free Pickup and Delivery

245 COLLEGE ST. ► 100 ST. GEORGE ST. RM. 516 ► 416.978.2525 ► [www.utpprint.com](http://www.utpprint.com)

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

## Collaborative M.A. in International Relations

**MUNK CENTRE**  
FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The Collaborative M.A. in International Relations at the University of Toronto is a new programme for students with a strong interest in interdisciplinary studies who intend to pursue careers in business, government, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, or the academy. The programme combines the approaches and perspectives of a variety of disciplines to make sense of a rapidly changing world, and offers students the flexibility to pursue their own particular interests. Located at Canada's premier research university, the programme draws upon the unmatched resources and opportunities available in Canada's largest and most cosmopolitan city.

To maintain the collegiality of the programme, and to promote interactive learning, the programme admits fewer than 40 students per year. Admissions are highly competitive, and students who enrol in the programme can look forward to an enriching academic experience among a group of highly-talented peers.

**Please visit our website at: [ir.mcis.utoronto.ca](http://ir.mcis.utoronto.ca)**