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Washington's Exceptionalism and the United Nations



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It is still too early to be definitive about what the U.S.–led action in Iraq will mean for the future of Iraqis, for regional stability, and for the United Nations. Answers will have to wait until the future of Iraq itself is clearer, particularly whether the Iraqis can transit into peaceful self-government or will descend into civil war. Nonetheless, some things are clear enough already. One is that what little consensus there was internationally on the nature of the major threats facing the international community, and how to respond to them, has diminished. Another is that with the evaporation of its stated *casus belli*—a threatening Iraq armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) cooperating with Al-Qaida—the United States has significantly deepened the hole it had already dug for itself in international public opinion. Further, the exceptionalistic self-view of Washington is neither concentric with others' perceptions of the United States nor conducive to securing their cooperation. With its Iraq enterprise in jeopardy and November's elections at risk, Washington apparently sees renewed utility in cooperating with the UN in Iraq. But the Iraq war has caused substantial harm to the UN. Whether and how effectively the UN, which already had its own problems—notably a charter written in and for another age—will be able to respond could be decisive to its future.

The debate that commenced spontaneously in the United States after the horrific losses of September 11 about “why these people hate us so much” ended nearly as quickly as it began. People came too readily to the conclusion that the impetus for anti-Americanism, of which terrorism was the most virulent manifestation, was to be found predominantly, even exclusively, in America's successful, creative, and innovative society. It was assumed that terrorists hated the United States not for what it did but for what it was, that the issue was essentially existential and therefore not resolvable.

This precipitous conclusion was more wrong than right. Although the United States is not necessarily seen as a source of enlightenment and a model for emulation, it is respected abroad (extremist, medieval Islamic terrorists notwithstanding) precisely because of its extraordinary domestic successes, because of what it is. What is missing in America's understanding of the resentment it faces is the pervasive and oftentimes negative impact of U.S. foreign policy, of what the United States does, abroad.

U.S. policy toward the UN in recent years has embittered many others. Official U.S. attitudes have arguably never been so contemptuous. Richard Perle, the most vocal and visible of the neoconservative, probably spoke for many in the current administration about two possible benefits from attacking Iraq: the disappearance of Saddam Hussein and the end of the world body—"Thank God for the death of the UN," he wrote in the *Guardian*.¹

It has not always been so. The last time that the United States enjoyed a unipolar moment,² it proceeded very differently. In 1945, the United States bestrode the earth in some respects as colossally as it does today, but first Franklin Roosevelt and then Harry Truman chose cooperation over competition and international law over the survival of the fittest.³ John F. Kennedy called for the UN to become "a genuine world security system . . . capable of solving disputes on the basis of law."⁴ Most U.S. presidents, although conscious of the UN's real limitations and despite occasional significant disappointments, saw value in the organization.

Until the threat that the Iraqi morass presented to the Bush presidency became evident, key people in Washington made no effort to hide their impatience with a nettlesome UN. They believed U.S. security could be best, in fact only, ensured by U.S. military power. Nor were treaties or international law or the UN needed to convey legitimacy to U.S. action. The United States would have multilateral cooperation on its own terms or not at all. If, as with the International Criminal Court (ICC), that meant one law for the goose and another for the gander, that was just the reality of American exceptionalism. Disaffection and hostility toward the United States were inevitable consequences.

How did the United States and so many others, including its allies, come to this divide? September 2001 provides part of the explanation, especially the consequent recalculation of U.S. security interests in the national security strategy. But it was not preordained that such a recalculation would produce a unilateralist, preventive course. The Al-Qaida attacks had triggered worldwide revulsion toward the perpetrators and sympathy toward the victims. The General Assembly and the Security

Council immediately had expressed solidarity and required member countries to support the fight against terrorism. Some governments dispatched combat forces to fight alongside Americans in Afghanistan. There was nothing in the reactions to the attacks on New York and Washington to justify a unilateralist policy response.

One major current difference now from the unipolar moment of 1945 is the lack of any international check or balance on U.S. power. Elegant but self-serving theories have appeared to explain the inevitability of American dominion and to justify its exceptionalist manifestations.⁵ The European Union indulged itself in a world of Kant, while the United States 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, owe the reigning hegemon decent loyalty, at least when it decides an action is in its vital interest.⁶ There is no patience with moral qualms or strategic quibbles.

The United States has had some extraordinary foreign policy successes. U.S. participation in World War II was integral to the defeat of the Axis powers. The containment of the Soviet Union and communism, led by the United States, was a signal achievement of the second half of the twentieth century. Northeast Asia might long since have exploded had it not been for the stabilizing effects of U.S. military and economic power and diplomatic acuity.

At the same time, it is equally evident that the United States can, and does, make errors. The overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadegh government in Iran is still impacting global politics. The war in Vietnam cost 60,000 American combat deaths and millions of Vietnamese casualties and indelibly colored attitudes toward the United States. The United States acquiesced at least in the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Chile. There were also costly errors in Cuba, Central America, and Colombia. U.S. cooperation with the mujahidin in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, and with Saddam Hussein demonstrated a breathtakingly counterproductive Cold War myopia. Many perceive U.S. policy in the Middle East to have become driven by U.S. politics. All of this, plus Iraq, has led some to see the United States as much problem as solution.

The fight in the Security Council in the summer of 2002 over the International Criminal Court presaged what was to come on Iraq. Washington, driven by its own Orwellian interpretation of the powers of a nascent ICC, held UN peacekeeping hostage. Most other governments, including virtually every other democracy, saw the ICC as a means of ending the immunity from prosecution of the world's worst political

monsters, not U.S. service personnel. Extensive safeguards against judicial politicization, many proposed by the United States, had been willingly incorporated into the ICC statute by the states parties. Also, the ICC principle of complementarity precluded ICC action where states diligently investigated and prosecuted crimes committed by their own nationals.

At issue was not just an entirely routine Bosnian mission mandate rollover, but the very idea of a permanent court attacked by the United States with little regard for collateral damage to the UN Charter and to international law. Washington pressed the Security Council relentlessly to reinterpret the Rome Statute and override the plainly stated views of the states party to that treaty and the history of its negotiation. Such pressure carried with it a threat to the integrity of all treaties. If an *ex post facto* reinterpretation of the ICC statute were possible, what prevented similar reinterpretations of any other treaty—for example, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty? By insisting on acting under UN Chapter VII of the Charter, the United States was effectively treating either peacekeeping or the ICC as a threat to international peace. Washington put the Security Council into the position of acting at least extralegally, even illegally. Council members eventually succumbed to enormous U.S. pressure, thereby purporting to shield the United States (as well as China and Russia) from the reach of the ICC, albeit on an annually renewable basis.

The ICC experience may have persuaded Washington that it could win any contest in the Security Council if it only brought enough pressure to bear. At the same time, other states appear to have been strengthened in their resolve not to let the Council again bend to such pressure. The muscular U.S. tactics on the ICC were to backfire on the subject of Iraq.

On Iraq, Washington appeared to regard the UN as, at best, an instrument for rallying support for U.S. action and, at worst, an unhelpful artifact from another era. As UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix has noted, UN weapons inspectors were made particular objects of ridicule, which is all the more surprising given the extent to which U.S. and other intelligence services had depended on them over the years to corroborate third-party allegations.⁷ 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. At no time did it seem to register in Washington that a large number of UN member states disagreed with the U.S. position that war was necessary and urgent and that that disagreement mattered.

The rhetorical targets were not limited to the UN. Canada was warned not to pursue a compromise, precisely because it might delay the war. Ironically, it might also have bought the United States more time to deploy troops for the aftermath and attracted more international support for military action. The Germans were chided for playing electoral politics on a Washington policy initiative rolled out on the eve of the U.S. 2002 midterm elections. The Russians were mocked for protecting their economic self-interest, while Halliburton positioned itself at the center of Iraqi reconstruction. The French, who believed that the Iraqis had already been substantially disarmed, and who were right, were derided for lack of principle. Capitals were pressed to recall uncooperative ambassadors.

In the meantime, the U.S. president's State of the Union speech had repeated the hoax that Iraq had bought uranium from Africa.⁸ In the Security Council, only days after saying at the Davos World Economic Forum that the United States had earned the trust of the world, the U.S. secretary of state laid out an extensive bill of probably never-to-be-corroborated accusations against the Iraqis.⁹ The vice-president told *Meet the Press* in March 2003 that the Iraqis had reconstituted their nuclear weapons—an assertion that much later was acknowledged as a mistake.¹⁰ Mobile weapons laboratories were still being cited as proof of Iraqi WMD in January 2004, after the U.S. chief weapons inspector, David Kay, found that the United States had been wrong on the existence of WMD across the board.¹¹ “The bottom has indeed dropped out of support for the U.S.A.,” according to the Djerejian report on public diplomacy that Washington itself commissioned.¹²

U.S. action has also occasioned the UN much harm. However, the world organization's problems cannot simply be laid at Washington's door. The charter was written in a different age. In particular, a glaring contradiction exists 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, since most contemporary wars arise within, not between, countries. Tragically, the depiction of the Iraq war as one of humanitarian purpose has complicated the task of using military force for human protection purposes. National sovereignty is the rationalization for why the charter has little leverage on the crucial nexus of WMD and terrorism or on the overthrow of democratically elected governments. The fundamental policy and legal challenge facing the UN is determining when and how 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 United States. 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. Moreover, the world organization's problems are complicated by the rigidities inherent in its regional, and especially cross-regional, groups. The hoary Nonaligned Movement and the equally outdated G-77, holdovers from a bygone age, have become engines of groupthink given to lowest common denominator outcomes.

If the UN is to regain its essential effectiveness, its members are going to have to accept a new meaning of state sovereignty, one that facilitates, not impedes, international cooperation on this century's pressing human security problems¹³ and one that responds to the causes of American insecurity. For its part, the United States will need to temper its own exceptionalism and cooperate with others on those global issues that can only be resolved multilaterally. It took the suffering of World War II to create the UN. Perhaps the shock of the second Iraq war will accelerate the reform the world body so greatly needs. 🌐

Notes

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1. Richard Perle, "Thank God for the Death of the UN," *The Guardian*, 21 March 2003. Perle has been the most overt of the UN's critics but by no means the only. Interested readers should consult, for example, President Bush's speech to the UN, 12 September 2002, and Vice-President Cheney's interview on *Meet the Press*, 16 March 2003.

2. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/91): 23–33.

3. See, for example, Stephen C. Schlessinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Boulder: Westview, 2003).

4. John F. Kennedy, commencement address at American University, 10 June 1963.

5. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

6. Condoleezza Rice: "I think there was disappointment in the United States that a friend like Canada was unable to support the United States in what we considered to be an extremely important issue for our security," *Globe and Mail*, 31 May 2003.

7. Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

8. President George W. Bush, State of the Union address, 20 January 2004; Mohamed al-Baradei statement to the UN Security Council, 27 January 2003.

9. Colin Powell, remarks at the World Economic Forum, 26 January 2004.

10. Dick Cheney, *Meet the Press*, 16 March 2003.

11. David Kay, Senate hearing, 28 January 2004. Statement by David Kay on the Interim Progress Report on the activities of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, the House Committee on Appropriations, the Subcommittee on Defense, and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2 October 2003.

12. Edward P. Djerejian, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World* (Washington: Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, 2003), p. 19.

13. See International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), and the accompanying research volume by Thomas G. Weiss and Don Hubert, *The Responsibility to Protect: Research Bibliography, and Background* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001).