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## THE UNITED NATIONS AT 40: MYTH AND REALITY

"The United Nations is a troubled organization; we should not kid ourselves."

--Secretary of State George P. Shultz, at the the 40th Anniversary of the signing of the U.N. Charter, June 26, 1985

### INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. It already has been the occasion for dozens of speeches by former and current U.N. officials and delegates, government officials, and private individuals. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, speaking in San Francisco at the 40th anniversary celebration of the signing of the U.N. Charter in June, was candid in his criticisms of the U.N. Other speakers, however, have made extravagant assertions about the U.N.'s accomplishments and its assured future contributions.

Too many of the retrospectives on the U.N. regrettably allow admirably high hopes and idealism to substitute for facts and data. Within the community of U.N. officials and scholars, in fact, there almost seems to be an eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not speak ill of the United Nations." A notable exception is U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, who is willing to point out some of the organization's shortcomings.

In truth, what the record of the past 40 years shows is that the U.N. in many respects has lost its way. It has by and large failed to fulfill the major goals of its Charter--to promote the peaceful settlement of international disputes; enhance human rights and

fundamental freedoms; cooperate in solving international economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems; and develop "friendly relations among nations."

Despite--or perhaps because of--these failings, U.N. boosters have created a "mythology" about the U.N. They try to insulate the organization from its constructive critics and to shift the blame for its failings onto other organizations and nations, particularly the United States, which has been among its strongest supporters. Perpetuation of such myths, however, ill serves the U.N. in that it prevents the organization from benefiting from its failures. Among the myths, ten are the most widespread--and hence most damaging to the U.N. in the long run.

MYTH NO. 1: The U.N. is still in its infancy.

The parents of this myth are U.N. bureaucrats and officials of U.N.-affiliated nongovernmental organizations. U.N. Under Secretary-General Brian Urquhart, for example, in an ABC Nightline broadcast in September 1983, urged that the U.N. be viewed as an "organization in an embryonic stage."<sup>1</sup> Attending the 40th anniversary of the U.N. Charter signing in San Francisco last month, General Assembly President Paul Lusaka of Zambia called the U.N. "a good child that has done his best, not always with very loving parents."<sup>2</sup>

The fact is that the U.N. is no child; it is four decades old. It is indeed so old that only four of the delegates to the 1945 San Francisco conference are still alive. The U.N. has existed fourteen years longer than the League of Nations had at its demise and is older than NATO, the Warsaw Pact, the Common Market, COMECON, the Organization of African Unity, the Organization of American States, and scores of other international bodies. In history, perhaps the only multinational organization that existed longer than the U.N. was the Holy Roman Empire.

As such, the U.N. cannot be treated as an "infant," "child," or "embryo." Its actions and record must be judged as those of a fully mature entity. Thus, while there may be disagreement about the U.N.'s record of achievements, there should be no disagreement with the fact that the U.N. is to be judged by this record. The record of performance cannot simply be dismissed.

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1. ABC Nightline, New York, American Broadcasting Corporation, September 20, 1983.
  2. Elaine Sciolino, "San Francisco Looks Back to U.N. Birth," The New York Times, June 27, 1985.

MYTH NO. 2: The U.N. should not be taken too seriously, since it is basically ineffective and allows countries harmlessly to "let off steam."

It is sometimes said that U.N. forums, principally the Security Council and the General Assembly, permit nations to vent steam and resolve differences peacefully. In this interpretation, the U.N. acts as the world's safety valve. The U.N.'s "town meetings," it is argued, contribute to peace, friendly relations, international cooperation and harmony. Former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Jeane Kirkpatrick calls this "letting off steam" argument the "Turkish bath" theory of the United Nations.

Yet far from being the world's safety valve, the U.N. often fuels, rather than reduces, international tensions. "Pariah" nations, such as Israel, South Africa, and El Salvador, are made the focus of hatred, making conflict resolution in their regions even more difficult. Instead of venting steam one day and returning the next to contribute to a rational debate, the supposedly injured parties in any one of several global disputes endlessly vent steam. The safety valve, in this context, becomes a threat to peace.

Tensions are heightened further by the General Assembly's strong bias in many of these issues. It favors and confers legitimacy on, for instance, such Marxist-oriented, terrorist groups as the Palestine Liberation Organization, the African National Congress, and the South West Africa People's Organization.

Supporting the safety valve myth is the argument that, since the U.N. is fairly ineffective, it should not be taken too seriously. In this view, since the decisions and resolutions of the General Assembly are nonbinding and since the General Assembly "can't really do anything," its proclamations are "harmless." Argues Thomas Franck, a former official of the U.N. Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and now New York University Professor of Law: "Its [the U.N.'s] ineffectiveness has become almost a virtue when so many of the initiatives, particularly of the General Assembly, are direct assaults against the national interest of the Western world and against democratic values."<sup>3</sup>

The trouble is that U.N. rhetoric is not harmless. It is widely interpreted as reflecting world opinion. Like the House of Mirrors at

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3. Thomas M. Franck, Nation Against Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 7.

an amusement park, the U.N. distorts reality--exaggerating some things, diminishing others, and obscuring most.

What is worse, these distorted perceptions are transmitted and amplified by a "megaphone-effect" throughout the globe via the multimedia vehicles of the U.N. Department of Public Information and its 65 information centers. These centers, in turn, relay one-sided, U.N.-produced reports, data, and other information to schools, universities, religious institutions, and local government offices, particularly in those countries with limited access to competing sources of information. While Western nations can shrug off the U.N.'s output, Third World nations take it very seriously. As such, the anti-West, anti-American, anti-free enterprise barrage fired nonstop by the U.N. does great damage to U.S. national interests.

The General Assembly, moreover, can allocate money for projects that further either the statist and redistributionist economic goals of the U.N. New International Economic Order or the anti-democratic, anti-Western political goals of the U.N.'s vocal majority. Examples:

- o In August 1983, the U.N. Secretariat's Division for Palestinian Rights staged an extravagant seminar in Geneva, which attracted a host of virulent anti-Israel figures and promoted the Palestine Liberation Organization, an avowed terrorist organization that seeks the destruction of Israel. The U.N. General Assembly voted nearly \$5 million for the Conference--almost \$4 million from the Department of Conference Services and nearly \$600,000 from the Department of Public Information and the Office of General Services.
- o In 1984, the General Assembly voted \$51.6 million for the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), of which \$13 million was supplied by the United States. UNCTAD was created in 1964 to foster the economic development of Third World nations through increased trade and improved access to world markets. Instead, however, UNCTAD actually has undermined the Third World's potential growth by spearheading the drive to create the New International Economic Order (NIEO).

MYTH NO. 3: The U.S. should take its role within the U.N. more seriously, since the U.N. represents the views of the Third World.

Without seeing the contradiction, this case is often made by those embracing the Myth No. 2 argument that the U.N. is basically "ineffective." This assertion, moreover, is based on serious misconceptions about the Third World. For one thing, the developing world is far from homogeneous. The categories of North and South, developed and developing, rich and poor are inherently arbitrary.

Developing countries are different in terms of population, geography, tradition, values, and wealth. There is also wide diversity of interests among them. Policies that might help one group of countries would be of limited value, or even detrimental, to others.

For another thing, the bloc system of alliances within the U.N. presents a distorted image of the political, economic, and social views of the individual member states. Many of the blocs, such as the so-called nonaligned pertain only in the U.N. For a variety of reasons, such as fellowship and fear of being ostracized, these nations vote in the U.N. as a bloc, even when the vote does not reflect an individual nation's views. It is quite common, in fact, for delegates from Third World countries, after an anti-Western vote, to approach U.S. delegates and say: "Pay no attention to the vote. It doesn't represent our feelings at all." It thus would be a serious mistake to assume that the U.N. reflects the views of all or even most of the Third World's developing states.

MYTH NO. 4: The U.N. bears no responsibility for the statements or actions of its individual members.

This myth is similar in many ways to No. 3, but it is more often used by the U.N. lobby to deflect criticism of the U.N. organization per se, particularly the General Assembly and the specialized agencies. In essence, U.N. boosters say: "It isn't the institution of the United Nations, the body corporate, that is the problem. It is the behavior of individual nation-states."

This is a silly argument. The fact is that the U.N., by its rules, traditions, and special culture, has allowed and even encouraged nations to behave at the U.N. in certain ways. While the U.N. surely is not responsible for what its members say at the organization, the organization must assume responsibility for the collective or corporate actions of its members. An organization, after all, is the sum of its components. If it is not this, it is not an organization of any consequence and should not be treated as if it were.

MYTH NO. 5: The U.N.'s humanitarian, economic, social, and cultural activities in themselves justify the U.N.'s existence.

This myth, pervasive and particularly enduring, is often used by U.N. supporters who wish to draw critics' attention away from the endless debates, speeches, and conferences that take place in the U.N. headquarters in New York City and in the two other major U.N. administrative centers, Geneva and Vienna. They argue, for example,

that the work of many U.N. organizations "in the field" legitimizes the nature and character of the U.N.

It is widely recognized that a number of multinational agencies associated with the U.N. do provide humanitarian assistance to needy groups around the world. Among the most noteworthy are the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the organization for children known as UNICEF.

The U.N., however, scarcely can take credit for the good works of these groups. For one thing, some--such as the World Health Organization and the International Telecommunications Union--existed long before the U.N.'s creation. For another, the increasingly politicized nature of the U.N. has begun to impede the work of the specialized agencies and voluntary programs. UNICEF, for example, had to struggle to resist the kind of U.N.-inspired politicization that could undermine valuable programs for children.<sup>4</sup> Less successful has been UNHCR, whose refugee camps in Honduras are being used as bases for guerrilla attacks against the Salvadoran government, and UNRWA (U.N. Relief and Works Agency), whose camps have been used as sanctuaries for Palestinian terrorists.

Then, too, the success of many U.N. humanitarian programs may well be the result of the work of scores of international and national voluntary agencies, which run extensive humanitarian aid and refugee programs throughout the developing world. Typically such groups do this at much lower cost than the U.N. Example: UNICEF is often praised as the primary distributor in the Third World of oral rehydration packets, which are designed to prevent dehydration due to diarrhea in children. Yet several other organizations, including the French voluntary agency, Medicins sans Frontieres and the U.S. Agency for International Development, both of which are independent of the U.N., have been instrumental in distributing the same product. The French agency has been providing the oral rehydration packets at least for the past year in several refugee camps in the Sudan.

This myth ignores, moreover, those U.N. agencies that have done enormous damage to those whom they are supposed to serve. Among the most guilty are the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). These groups waste much of their budgets on costly headquarters operations. Worse, they have provided disastrous advice to Third World countries seeking guidance on economic development and other crucial matters. At the core of the economic advice propounded by these agencies, for instance, is the New International Economic Order (NIEO), adopted by

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4. See: Roger A. Brooks, "UNICEF, Beware--Dangerous Shoals Ahead," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 287, August 30, 1983.

the U.N. in 1974. NIEO's basic tenets are anti-development, calling for significant wealth transfers rather than wealth creation. They encourage inefficient bureaucratic control of economies and penalize market mechanisms. Above all, they refuse to acknowledge the lessons of development failures and successes of the past quarter century.

MYTH NO. 6: The U.S., and New York City in particular, benefit from the presence of U.N. headquarters in Manhattan.

Although many data are cited to support this myth, the most common are provided by the office of the Mayor of New York City, which claims that the financial benefits of the U.N. to New York City in 1980 were \$692.2 million.<sup>5</sup> Other statistics covering the amount the U.N. spends in the U.S. in the form of contracts and other purchases vary greatly and often do not clearly differentiate between those funds spent in New York, those spent outside the city, and more particularly, outside the United States.

The trouble with the \$692 million figure is that it is based on almost no hard or independent data. It is not, for example, calculated by New York City officials. Rather, the New York City Commission for the United Nations and for the Consular Corps receives the estimates of U.N. "benefits" directly from the U.N. Office of Financial Services. New York City makes little or no attempt to verify the figures or to make its own calculation of U.N. benefits to the New York metropolitan area.

In its 1981 report, the New York City Commission simply reprinted the U.N.-provided figure of \$325.5 million for U.N. "Programme Budget Expenditures in New York" (New York officials did not even bother to change the Anglicized spelling of "Programme" used by U.N. bureaucrats). The figure includes \$229.7 million for "salaries and other staff costs." U.S. Department of State officials, however, estimate that U.N. Headquarters personnel send at least 25 percent of their earnings to their home countries or spend them outside the U.S. The \$229.7 million figure, therefore, is an exaggeration. The overall \$692 million alleged benefit to New York City, moreover, is composed of at least \$173 million of U.S. taxpayer money, since the U.S. pays one-quarter of the U.N. budget. This \$173 million is hardly "new" money benefiting the U.S.

In fact, when the figures are carefully scrutinized, the U.S. probably receives almost zero financial benefit from the U.N. Indeed, the U.S. pays a hefty price. The hundreds of Soviet spies, who use

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5: The New York City Commission for the U.N. and for the Consular Corps, The Economic Impact of the Diplomatic Community on New York, December 1981, p. 4.

the U.N. as cover and a base of operations for espionage against the U.S., cost the U.S. an enormous amount in terms of increased defense outlays to offset added vulnerabilities to U.S. weapons systems.<sup>6</sup>

MYTH NO. 7: Though General Assembly resolutions do not mention or condemn the Soviet Union by name, neither do they so mention or condemn the U.S.

This myth is simply wrong. While an unwritten but strictly observed commandment of U.N. behavior ensures that the Soviet Union is never rebuked by name in a U.N. resolution, the U.S. often is singled out for attack. The U.N., for instance, has yet to condemn the Soviet Union by name for its invasion of Afghanistan. Yet in 1982, some fourteen separate General Assembly resolutions denounced the U.S. by name; in 1983 the number rose to sixteen.

While the U.S. is attacked for trading with South Africa, the U.N. remains totally silent about the more than 40 African countries and Soviet bloc members that actively trade with South Africa.

The U.N. also attacks the U.S. for its Middle East policies. Example: Resolution 180D (adopted on December 19, 1983, by a vote of 101 to 18, with 20 abstentions) condemns the U.S. for signing strategic agreements with Israel; yet it would be unthinkable for the U.N. to condemn the Soviet bloc for arming Syria or for sending it five to six thousand military instructors.<sup>7</sup> Equally unthinkable would be U.N. condemnation of Libya for invading Chad or of Vietnam for invading Cambodia and Laos. And because the annual U.N. resolution deploring the Afghan situation studiously avoids mentioning the Soviet Union, the worldwide network of U.N. broadcasts and publications has never made it clear to its audience that Soviet troops have invaded and occupied Afghanistan.

MYTH NO. 8: Since every country plays the U.N. "Spy Game," Moscow should not be criticized for using the U.N. for espionage.

Available evidence refutes this.<sup>8</sup> There is an extraordinary difference between FBI counterintelligence operations in New York to

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6. For a more detailed discussion of the costs and benefits of the U.N.'s location in New York and the U.S., see: The Heritage Foundation, Report on the U.S. and the U.N.: A Balance Sheet, Washington, D.C., June 18, 1984, pp. 40-45.

7. Middle East and Mediterranean Outlook, No. 3, January 1984.

8. This myth is advanced in: Michael J. Berlin, "The U.N. Spy Game: Everybody Plays," The Interdependent, January/February 1985, Volume 11, Number 1.



protect U.S. national interests against hostile intelligence agents and the hostile intelligence activities in New York of the Soviet bloc and its Third World clients. Soviet bloc personnel exploit positions of influence within the U.N. system to recruit Secretariat and mission employees to gather political information about the U.S. Much more serious, Soviet bloc nationals use the U.N. as a base for espionage activities in New York and throughout the United States.

There are 295 accredited diplomats at the Soviet U.N. Mission in New York; an additional 333 Soviet nationals are employed by the U.N. Secretariat.<sup>9</sup> All the delegation members and Secretariat employees from Soviet bloc nations, with a conservative estimate of the adult family members accompanying them, total around 2,750 in New York alone. The FBI estimates that at least 35 percent of them are intelligence agents. This means that at least 1,000 hostile Soviet bloc spies use the U.N. as a base for activities against the U.S. Top targets are U.S. high technology, industrial processes, weapons plants, and military facilities. Former U.N. diplomats and Secretariat personnel, including former U.N. Under Secretary-General Arkady Shevchenko, estimate that the numbers actually are much higher.

MYTH NO. 9: The U.N. provides a forum for multilateral disarmament discussions and elaboration of disarmament/arms control conventions.

The U.N. record provides little or no support for this myth. The reasons:

- o Various agreements to limit the dangers of nuclear war have been concluded between the U.S. and the United Kingdom on the one side and the USSR on the other. All of them were negotiated outside the framework of the U.N. General Assembly.
- o The Soviet Union has prevented many of the disarmament forums within the U.N., particularly the General Assembly's Committee on Disarmament, from influencing arms control negotiations. Soviet obstructionism takes the form of highly technical objections and diplomatic procrastination.
- o The Soviets have hindered the progress of U.N. discussions for reductions in chemical weapons stockpiles by flatly refusing to permit verification of any agreement.

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9. See: U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, Soviet Presence in the U.N. Secretariat, Washington, D.C., May 1985.

- o The majority of developing countries has opposed negotiations to reduce stocks of conventional weapons, which have grown enormously in lethality and numbers and which have been responsible for all the world's conflict-related deaths since 1945.
- o After the early 1970s, disarmament was no longer approached as a political issue at the U.N. with direct bearing on international security, but as an instrument for the redistribution of economic resources through the "New International Economic Order." By urging industrial nations to spend less on weapons, Third World states can call for more foreign aid. Strangely, however, calls for disarmament are never directed toward the USSR or those Third World states, such as India, which are major arms manufacturers.
- o The deterrent that has prevented a world war during the past 40 years has not been provided by the U.N., but by the strength of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Those U.N. proposals for disarmament strongly supported by the Soviet Union, moreover, would only serve to weaken NATO deterrent policy.

**MYTH NO. 10: The U.N. has helped keep the peace.**

This myth is among the weakest offered by the U.N. "lobby." Maintaining international peace and security by encouraging the peaceful resolution of disputes and the development of friendly relations among countries is supposed to be the primary rationale for the U.N.'s existence. Regrettably, the U.N. has been no more effective than any other body of nations in keeping world peace; it even seems that the U.N. has been less effective than other organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Since the U.N.'s founding, at least 140 conflicts have been fought around the world in which up to 10 million have died.<sup>10</sup>

In the past three years, the U.N. has failed to address major threats to world peace including continuing Soviet aggression in Afghanistan, an unrelenting Vietnamese campaign against Cambodia and threatened aggression against Thailand, a Cuban offensive in Angola, the imposition of Soviet-inspired martial law and human rights violations in Poland, and the destruction of an unarmed civilian airliner by Soviet fighter aircraft.

U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar warned in 1982 that the U.N. was failing in its prime task of keeping the peace.

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10. Address by the Right Honorable Margaret Thatcher before the U.N. Second Special Session on Disarmament, June 23, 1982, U.N. Doc. A/S-121 PV. 24, June 26, 1982, p. 4.

Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, the New York Democrat and a former U.S. Permanent Representative at the U.N., declared in 1982 that the U.N. "is useless as a means of maintaining world peace. No one pretends otherwise."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the United Nations' peacekeeping roles, particularly those assigned to the Security Council, have become paralyzed. Numerous nations, particularly the Soviet bloc states and many of those within the so-called nonaligned group, have chosen to ignore or defy the U.N. and its conflict resolution machinery.

As for peacekeeping, the United Nations, on a few occasions, has arranged and policed a cease-fire between two or more contending factions. But the U.N. has demonstrated that it can contribute as peacekeeper only in those situations where both sides in a conflict are willing to resolve that conflict or are willing to enter into a limited arrangement, should they be unable to reach an agreement in direct discussions. The U.S. has been the United Nations' staunchest supporter in this role. Yet these operations have never resolved the problems that ignited the conflicts.

#### CONCLUSION

In the U.N.'s 40th year, it is time to reevaluate thoroughly the organization's effectiveness and usefulness. The United States, which devotes over \$1 billion a year to U.N. programs, owes it to its taxpayers to scrutinize U.N. agencies, programs, conferences, meetings, and publications. The 99th Congress already has begun this evaluation, a process that must last beyond the end of this year's 40th Anniversary celebration. Such evaluation must cut through the myths surrounding the U.N. Indeed, these myths do not serve the true interests of the organization. Nor do they serve the hundreds of millions of the globe's neediest citizens, who have looked to the U.N. in vain to serve their interests during the past four decades.

Roger A. Brooks  
Roe Fellow in United Nations Studies

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11. Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, letter to New York Magazine, December 3, 1982, p. 2.