

ACADEMIC COUNCIL ON THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

By:

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Forward

Looking Backwards and Forwards was prepared by John W. Holmes for presentation as the keynote address at the opening session of the first annual conference of the Academic Council on the United Nations System, held at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, on June 23, 1988. Because of illness, Mr. Holmes was not able to be present and his paper was read by John E. Trent. We are pleased that Mr. Holmes has agreed to the publication of his paper which was received with enthusiasm by those at the conference and provides an important sense of purpose and direction as the Academic Council maps out a long-range program of activities.

John Holmes is a founding member of the Academic Council and served on the planning committee for the founding conference and the provisional committee in 1987 – 88. After retiring from a long and distinguished tenure in the Canadian diplomatic service, he began an academic career at the University of Toronto and held a leading position at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. Mr. Holmes has been an important friend in this early period and history of ACUNS, and we are pleased that his talk is the first publication in the ACUNS series of reports and papers.

G.M.L

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Looking Backwards and Forwards

It is hard to understand why I should have the honor of addressing an important group like this on such an auspicious occasion. I agreed reluctantly when I was persuaded that my unique qualification was longevity. I was there in 1945-6 at the Preparatory Commission and the First General Assembly session in London. It would be like having one of those old cracked discs of the actual voice of Florence Nightingale or Clemenceau. So what I propose to do with a cracked voice is make a few personal and unconventional observations about the traumas of the Creation, which might be worth bearing in mind as we proceed to a new and exciting era of UN history, with the great powers born again. Mine is, I admit, a middle-power perspective intended as a corrective and therefore overstated. There were others present at the Creation besides Dean Acheson, you know. Postwar history is based far too much on the great-power archives and memoirs. The UN was not, in fact, the creation of the great powers. As they now have to adjust to a less hegemonial role, fitted into international structures, a useful first step would be to broaden the historical background. Start with some of the good Australian histories.

The revised view of the UN by the Soviet leadership and, we are hoping, the return of the other superpower from apostasy, provides an opportunity to go back to first principles. In embracing those principles for a fresh start, I trust, however, that we shall not ignore the chastening lessons of four or more decades of experience. Beware the fundamentalist as well as the vandal. In listening, during recent months in Moscow and

Toronto, to Georgi Arbatov and colleagues discuss their new ideas on what the UN might do for us all, I have been, as an old UN hand, alternately thrilled to hear them use the phrases I used to draft for Lester Pearson, but disposed also to say: 'Whoa! During your absence we discovered a few facts of life about collective security. Let us by all means press great-power agreement in the Security Council as far as we can, but let's not think we can implement Article 43 for the Persian Gulf. The UN's reach should not exceed its grasp, although your change of heart can enable us to stretch that reach.'

It was perhaps inevitable that the founding fathers and war-weary peoples, at least in the West would think of the UN as a kind of government. It is a concept hard to avoid in the abstract. Sovereignty was a dirty word. Of course, none of the founders had the slightest intention to the legislation of some higher authority. At the beginning we, the faithful, were suspicious of things done outside the UN – even though the Charter told us to try to settle our disputes in any old club before bothering the Security Council. The founders were great orators and they led the public astray with thrilling phrases about 'one world.' Most scholars, but not the general public, now see the UN as the unique but by no means exclusive universal institution, an instrument of, rather than a replacement for, bad old diplomacy, as a kind of core, the yeast perhaps of a galaxy. Much of the research that ACUNS will encourage, I trust, will be about the ways and means by which the UN can serve best in an immensely variegated pattern of IGOs, NGOs, QUANGOs, and the thousand international agencies that we cannot survive without, assuming a sense of common purpose rather than natural antagonisms between the UN and others. This perspective provides an infinitely more extensive agenda for graduate students than the legalistic examinations of the Charter, which

preoccupied international organization scholars in the early years and has been to some extent responsible for strangling enthusiasm for the subject. A new generation starts with the agenda rather than the structures.

One of the causes of the present crisis of confidence is that the public has come to regard the General Assembly as the UN and ignores the vast infrastructure of international collaboration in which it is embedded. I have been haunted of late by the words of the Canadian representative to the League of Nations, writing from Geneva in 1938. What was at stake, he said, was not just the League, but the very habit of international co-operation. The habits of international co-operation have been widely, perhaps extravagantly, institutionalized in the past half-century, but a mood of rejection has come on us again. A rejection of specific institutions and customs is healthy, provided it is discriminating. The reason for concern now is rather than a cynical approach to international commitments, wariness of seeking consensus, short-sighted pursuit of national advantage, and the distressing inclination of the powers, large and lesser, to act unilaterally in response to domestic pressures. International institutions must grow and change and are perpetually in need of critical examination, but contemporary criticism too often implies that they are dispensable or replaceable. International law, in the making since the Dark Ages, is at stake, after having achieved half a victory in the Law of the Sea. Keeping alive the basic structure of the UN is exceedingly important, but it is a mistake to think that the habit of international institutions began only in 1945. As Robert Cox has written, "International organization can be thought of as a historical process rather than as a given set of institutions."

Having experienced the travails of its birth (from a rear seat) I am not disposed to go on about how much better the UN would have been without the veto, with weighted voting in the Assembly, an ECOSOC that could manage the world economy, a Secretary-General with wider powers, and membership restricted to those who would speak nicely. Except in minor ways, Charter reform is not the answer. The UN would never have come into existence at all with those utopian provisions. There was not time to lose. Far from having been naïve about the prospect of postwar harmony among the great powers, the founders knew that they had to get governments committed to a new world organization before the compulsion to collaborate was dissolved by defeat of the common enemy. To get that basic agreement some lovely ideas had to be dropped and we barely made it before the end of hostilities and before the advent of the atom bomb, of which almost all the architects were unaware. If Hiroshima had occurred before the Charter was wrapped up, the concept of collective security might have been more realistic, but I am inclined to think that it would have shattered our chances for great-power agreement of any kind.

We have lost many illusions and we are wiser for being not disillusioned but unillusioned. Our grasp of international organization is infinitely more sophisticated now, but sophistication can discourage faith. We are in danger of losing the vision which the founders had, and which requires a certain simplicity. Brian Urquhart has said: "it seems to me vital to have a sustaining vision of an international system which is relevant to the real problems and dangers and opportunities of our time, and to pursue it in full knowledge of the immense obstacles to be overcome" And he adds for our benefit: "This is not the only business of political leaders. It is challenge to scholars and

teachers, to spiritual leaders and businessmen, and all manner of serious commentators and professionals.” In this spirit, it is important to look critically at what is wrong with the UN or rather the way we are using it, but even more important is to identify what is not wrong with it, what is working reasonably well, what we can build on.

I am not one of those who left their hearts in San Francisco, those who perpetuate a legend that a saintly group of statesmen composed, in the California sunshine of 1945, a beautiful world government which has since been betrayed by governments concerned for their wretched sovereignty. Having a recollection of their words and behavior, I would suggest that the percentage of saints and sinners was not all that different from the present crop. It was many of the same saints who steered us a few years later from the impossible dream of universal collective security to the more responsible practice of collective defense. NATO, in my view, saved the UN by relieving it of an unattainable military role and eventually becoming, along with the Warsaw Treaty Organization, agencies within an UN system by which we could reach détente and could eventually begin arms control negotiations. We could do that under Article 51, although it was not what the founders had in mind at all. The Charter was no architectural masterpiece. It was constructed, like the proverbial camel, by a very large committee and is therefore ungainly. But it is flexible. Capable of organic growth and adaptation, happily ambiguous, perhaps more easily acceptable to those of us in the British constitutional tradition. It is certainly not a world government. The leading historian of its creation, Ruth Russell, aptly described it as providing, “merely the skeleton of authority and principle, or machinery and procedures, whereby governments could resolve their differences through the organization; but it left the use of those

means almost wholly on a voluntary basis.” I realized that these are not points I need to make to this audience, but I urge you to get out into the streets and straighten out both the cynics and the too ardent members of the UN who find it hard to understand a UN which is not at least striving to become a government, and, of course, failing.

Now my prejudices will begin to show. Thank God the process of Charter-making did not stop at Dumbarton Oaks. It was the resistance, often raucous, of the Australians, Canadians, Brazilians among others, that prevented the great powers from creating a centralized, hierarchically organized UN – and I fear they are going to try to do it again. It is its wide membership that gives the UN its resilience and its relevance. It is important to bear this in mind as the superpowers are tempted to move from unilateralism to bilateralism. They both have messianic complexes and a mother-knows-best disposition, and a dyad is much easier to manage than an assembly. If you are tempted to think in these heady times that superpower agreement is all we need, just start by thinking about the control of chemical weapons.

Messrs. Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin were great men for winning wars, but their ideas about international institutions were not only arrogant, they were naïve. They would have had a ‘World Council’ run, of course, by themselves, acting as a kind of executive body to manage the world, its economics as well as its security. There would be a toothless Assembly in which the rest of us would have had the right to whine. Stalin just wanted a UN run by a triumvirate, or preferably a duumvirate, in which the USSR would be recognized as an equal. Churchill’s weird schemes for a world run in improbable regions horrified his own Foreign Office, which was happy to have it shot down by the Commonwealth prime ministers. Sir Charles Webster, the distinguished

historian and adviser at the Foreign Office, described Churchill's ideas as those of the "more futile kind of international wallahs of the last twenty years." Roosevelt wanted a secretary-general who would be a "world moderator." No doubt he would have been an American and pure of heart. Roosevelt saw the UN as the culmination of the American Revolution, now embracing the whole world, and the first UN conference at Hot Springs, ended with 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'

To the devils their due, nevertheless. Roosevelt must be given credit for his charismatic part in getting things started, for bringing America in and keeping it there. The UN was created as a wartime alliance after the United States joined up and we thought of it as a perpetuation of a near universal alliance against aggression. Only allies were accepted at San Francisco. That approach led to illusions about the nature of aggression, but I recall thinking at the time that it brought an element of realism about keeping the peace with more promise than the Kellogg-Briand pact. We were not in a pacifist mood, and paid only lip-service to disarmament- until August. Roosevelt recognized also that the UN would be better launched if it did something practical. So the Hot Springs conference was about food, and led quickly to FAO. I recall that we, the UN wallahs at the time, use to regret that the specialized agencies were set up like feudal baronies before ECOSOC could establish its control. On the whole I think we were wrong. As for Churchill, his contribution was that he, the great warrior, had a dedicated faith in the UN and brought the military sceptics on side. Stalin has to be given credit at least for agreeing to belong to a body he knew would be dominated by the capitalist powers. I am still not sure why he did it, but thank God he did.

As for the more feudal ideas of these men about structures, the prompt response of lesser powers was, in the immortal words of Eliza Doolittle, "Not bloody likely." We argued on functional grounds. The World Council could be a Security Council but only there would the major powers have a special place because of their military capacity. The Council would not be an executive body for the whole UN system. The word veto does not, of course, appear in the Charter. The special status of the five great military powers was regarded as conferring not privilege, but rather primary responsibility for managing peace by pressure and persuasion and, if necessary, by economic or military sanctions and a little moral blackmail. Now that the five great powers are showing more disposition than heretofore to stop fighting and avert conflicts, we should stress the obligation they conferred upon themselves to get on with it, even though the present gang of five are no longer the great military powers in fact.

I suppose the United Nations is bound to be judged in terms of security issues. That is what our minds were on just after the slaughter, although some of us were more determined than in 1918 to have an Economic and Social Council in no way subordinate to the Security Council. It was widely assumed in 1945 that the economic stagnation of the thirties had contributed to the rise of fascism and Japanese expansionism. There was an ingenuous assumption in some quarters (Canadian, for example) that we could set up economic bodies free of political pressures, but politicization set in early, as it was bound to.

Where vision was lacking was in our hazy grasp of the problems of what came to be called the Third World. It is not so much that we were callous as that we were ignorant. The media had not begun to explore the true state of affairs in Africa or Latin

America and there was not television to show us the face of famine. There were a few African representatives at the UN and the Latin Americans present did not look at all impoverished. The preoccupation was with the rehabilitation of war-devastated Europe. The immemorial problems of other continents would have to wait. The U.S. Congress and the Canadian Parliament worried that Europe would remain permanently on a charitable dole and they could not be persuaded to take on Africa and Asia as well. Most of the Third World was still within the writ of imperial powers who did not welcome interference from do-gooders. Besides, there was an unsophisticated confidence in the trickle-down theory. If the channels of trade and finance of the industrial countries could be freed, the benefits would surely be felt by the producers of cocoa and sugar. The very idea of international aid and development assistance on a global scale did not emerge until after the Marshall Plan. I doubt if there are many first principles in this area to which we might return. For one thing, the maps were all wrong.

However, I would point out that the UN programmes were diverted largely to aid and development while the developed state still predominated in UN bodies. Even though the Third World was represented in limited numbers, its voices were powerful. Whatever the provisions of the Charter, India under Nehru was a great power, more influential than either Britain or France. The legend that in those early days the UN was run by the West, if not just by the United States, distorts the reality as I recall it. Americans were certainly predominant, but they could not dominate. Their economic and military strength gave them clout, but they could not get their resolutions passed without concessions. Their will to act as a kind of surrogate UN while UN institutions were getting on their feet was encouraged by less powerful members even though it

worried us in principle. It was hard to act when the United States strongly disapproved, but not impossible. I recall the way in which a coalition of lesser powers rallied round a resolution on the admission of new members drafted in the Canadian delegation and, by simple mastery of UN diplomacy, routed John Foster Dulles. It seems to me unfortunate to go on talking about a UN created and run by the U.S.A. at a time when nostalgia threatens the level-headedness of U.S. foreign policy – not to mention Britain and other powers, including Canada which basks in the mythologies of a mediating mission. When our challenge now is to strengthen the multilateral frameworks in the light of diffused hegemony, it would be better to recall the way in which the U.S., feeling a heavy responsibility for the success of the great experiment in multilateralism, was a better partner, ally and collaborator than might have been expected, given its grossly unequal power. It was infuriatingly self-assured but lacked the ruthlessness and the diplomatic skill to run the show.

While constantly trying to rationalize the sprawling system, we must accept diversity and not make symmetry an end in itself, as scholars are wont to do. Building an international order is a lapidary process, stone upon stone, but the end will not be Westminster Abbey or the Great Wall of China. This is not a finite project. UN bodies as well as non-UN bodies have, or should have their specific functions, and there is no need to say that one function takes priority over another. The United Nations system has been described as a cobweb because of the unsymmetrical yet functional pattern of its connections. Cobwebs are fragile but can be quickly rewoven. A new UN could not be very different from the present one. Although we all talked during the war about the

failure of the League, when the pattern of the new United Nations began to emerge we could not escape the basic League structure.

After the First World War we made our first try, and then after the Second we tried again, wiser but not yet wise enough. We may now be at the end of another war, the Cold War. That end is not fore-ordained; it depends on what we do with our new opportunities. Dismantling the enormous structure of the Cold War, some of which has already been redirected from confrontation to negotiation, requires boldness and prudence. It requires very careful calculation at a time when public opinion is happily heretical, but dangerously volatile. We need from the intelligentsia something more than just ten-year studies of conflict resolution among the Inuit. We need that but also those Op-Ed articles and some resonant phrases. It is an ideal time to launch in all our countries that renewed examination of past experiences of the UN, to discover on what we can build and where not to venture, how we can use the growing threat to the globe itself to create the will for international self-discipline which is what international institutions are all about. Salvador de Madariaga, he who argued that the problem of disarmament was not the problem of disarmament but the problem of world order, also wrote in 1929: "no institution, no co-operation, no-co-operation, no peace."