THE IMPERATIVE OF IDEALISM

by

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The 1997 John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture

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About the John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series

The Academic Council on the United Nations System inaugurated the John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series in 1989 in honor of a founding member of ACUNS. Mr. Holmes had served on the planning committee for the founding conference of ACUNS and the provisional committee in 1987-88. The talk he prepared for the first ACUNS Annual Meeting in 1988, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*, was the first publication in the Council's series of Reports and Papers.

John W. Holmes joined the Canadian Department of External Affairs in 1943 and participated in the planning of the United Nations. He attended the preparatory commission in 1945 and the first session of the General Assembly, and later served as head of UN Affairs in Ottawa and as Under-Secretary of the Department of External Affairs. In 1960, he left public service for a second career in teaching and scholarship, basing himself at the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the University of Toronto.

Mr. Holmes brought to the Academic Council a lifetime of experience and reflection on international politics and the role of the United Nations. He also brought a marvelous mix of idealism and realism, a mix that showed up clearly in the report, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*. In the conclusion, he spoke of the need for reexamining the role of the UN in a way that captures the basic purposes of the Academic Council. "It is an ideal time," he said, "to launch in all our countries that renewed examination of past experience 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."

About the Author

The Imperative of Idealism

James S. Sutterlin

It is both a pleasure and a challenge to deliver the John W. Holmes Memorial lecture to this intellectually discerning audience. I am conscious of the distinguished individuals who over the past years have spoken in this series and of the significance and elegance of their lectures. So it should be, to do adequate honor to the life and work of John Holmes, and not to him alone. For I have always felt that John Holmes personified the unfailing commitment of his country—of Canada—to the objectives and the programs of the United Nations, a commitment which he did much to encourage. I am not sure I can do him or the occasion justice. But I take courage in that my remarks, however airy their formulation, are of a nature to do honor to the ideals that guided John Holmes and the government he served. For I will speak of community and democracy and qualities of the spirit that can bring and, I believe, are beginning to bring our world into a new and better age.

I.

It is an accepted truism that the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a new era. Certainly it did bring changes of a most dramatic and positive nature. But there had been changes well before the Berlin Wall fell that altered human attitudes and perceptions in a most fundamental way. These changes were a factor, and an important one, in the decline of communist

control. Of seminal importance was the extraordinary growth in transparency that has marked the second half of the twentieth century. This transparency—the result of exploding communications technology, vastly increased literacy, and rising standards of life—opened to people in the farthest corners of the globe an awareness of the interests that the inhabitants of all continents and countries hold in common. Transparency is making possible an understanding of the unity of people in their needs and aspirations, and in their common dependence on a world which, for too long, has been ill-used through ignorance, greed, and violence. I would emphasize the words "making possible" for this understanding are by no means fully realized. It remains a task to be accomplished. By its very nature it is a task that demands an idealist approach. Realpolitik may have kept power in balance and borders sometimes secure. But realpolitik is not well-suited to open human understanding to the stake which all persons have in their *common* well-being and their *common* security.

Vaclev Havel has written that any meaningful world order must be anchored ... in an awareness that we are not here alone nor for ourselves alone but are an integral part of higher, mysterious entities.[1] This takes us to realms into which, even as I extol the virtues of idealism, I will not far venture. But Havel has much to tell us of the strength that is to be found in a community of mind and spirit, in commitment to freedom for all—in commitment to democracy. Idealism is required to shape and enlarge this community as the necessary basis of the meaningful world order of which Havel speaks. Perhaps it is mainly idealists who recognize that this community is already well-advanced.

II.

The most serious problems that we are likely to face in the new century have to do with people and their relationship with the world around them rather than with the relations between states. Many of these problems are already evident: environmental degradation, the pressure of increased population and of massive migration, abuse of human rights, disease, narcotics, land mines—a heritage from our century that will linger to endanger ordinary people, not states or their armies. In dealing with these problems governments will not lose their importance. Governments will need only to learn that they are joined in a common interest in the resolution of these problems, that each needs to contribute to their resolution according to its capacity even though this measure requires far more of some than of others.

The eminent historian, William H. McNeill, maintained that public behavior within any given society depends on "mythhistories" or symbolic representations of who they are, what they stand for, and what destinies await them. The great tragedy, he wrote, is that our public myths are by and large narratives and images of a differentiated human race, "us" and "them," friends and foes, believers and infidels, haves and have nots, antagonistic communities and clashing civilizations. Drawing on McNeill, Professor Donald J. Puchala recently concluded that we need a new and compelling myth of human unity.

For the Western countries and for the Communist countries the "them and us" mythhistory made sense as long as the Cold War endured, although its influence may have been excessive. But who are the "them"

now? There is a danger that the poor countries of the South will be seen as the "them" if the old myth prevails. Equally, the South, within the spell of this same myth, tends to see the world in reverse, they being the "us" and the wealthy countries of the North being the "them." The greater reality is the growing commonality of interests that join the North and South in the same global community. Prominent, if not ubiquitous, among them is the growth of democracy. My conviction is that the new myth that Puchala sought is aborning in the spreading acceptance of the essential elements of democracy as the desirable structure of governance, evident not least here in Central and South America. Propagation is still needed, however, and a global archetypical identity, a role that the United Nations does not now, but might still, fill.

III.

Like the United Nations Charter, democracy is a flexible norm amenable to varied application in diverse circumstances. It entails two immutable elements: freedom within the rule of law and responsibility of the governing authorities to the people from whom their power emanates. This responsibility must include respect for human rights and the protection of citizens from abuses. These principles, in the words of former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "are today gaining adherents across cultural, social and economic lines." In 1974 less than thirty percent of the world's countries were democratic. Today, a bare quarter of a century later, the figure stands at sixty-one percent. For the first time in history a slim but clear majority of the world's population lives under democratic govern-

ment.[2] There is ample evidence from Tianmen Square to Tehran that many of those remaining under non-democratic regimes are attracted, too, by their understanding of democracy.

Some scholars and pundits, looking at the ethnic and nationalist conflicts that have deeply scarred the global landscape, have concluded that far from moving toward a global community of shared democratic values, we are well on our way toward a world fragmented by cultural divisions so deep as to be unbridgeable. I believe this is unfounded. These conflicts have uniformly broken out in places where neither the concept nor the institutions of democracy had yet taken root. Ethnic and tribal wars grow not so much from ethnic differences as from the desire of one group to exercise control over or supplant the other—Serbs and Croats, for example, have lived together in peace longer than at war. Where two or more culturally identifiable groups cohabit a common land or region in freedom and where human rights are respected, ethnic disputes and hostility exist but organized conflict is hardly to be found with, I should add, the sad exception of Northern Ireland.

Why is this? The neo-Kantian answers, that democracies do not go to war with other democracies and internal conflict is less likely in democratically-governed states, are by now familiar. But for the purposes of my thesis I will turn not to political scientists but rather to a mathematician and a psychoanalyst for what may be judged an intuitive response. In 1932 Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud had an exchange of correspondence on “Why War?” Einstein recognized that the quest for international security involved the unconditional surrender by every nation, to a certain extent,

of its sovereignty. “I personally see a simple way of dealing with the superficial ... aspects of the problem,” he wrote, “the setting up, by international consent, of a legislative and judicial body to settle every conflict arising between nations ... .” But, conscious that “Man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction,” he asked Freud: “Is it possible to control Man’s mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness?”

Freud replied (and this may sound familiar to UN scholars today) that the transition from crude violence to the reign of law requires the achievement of a certain psychological condition. The union of the people must be permanent and well-organized; it must enact rules to meet the risk of possible revolts; it must establish mechanisms to ensure that its rules—the laws—are observed. This recognition of a community of interests engenders among the group members a sentiment of unity and fraternal solidarity. “This is the kernel of the matter,” he wrote, “the suppression of brute force by the transfer of power to a larger combination, *founded on the community of sentiments linking up its members*.” Everything that produces ties of sentiment between human beings, he argued, must serve as war’s antidote. For example, events that bring out the significant resemblances among human beings create this feeling of community and identification, whereon is founded, in large measure, the whole edifice of human society. I would paraphrase Freud today by suggesting that as the culture of democracy spreads it can bridge cultural and ethnic differences and, by forming an ever larger *community of sentiment* serve, as Freud foresaw, as an antidote to war of all kinds.

The community has its present limits. For some governments and people, the distinction between democratic and non-democratic countries represents another form of the mythic division between "them and us." The conviction is fairly widely held, or at least professed, that democracy and human rights are Western concepts that are not necessarily applicable in other cultures and should not be imposed from abroad. In A*n Agenda for Democratization* Boutros Boutros-Ghali provides a persuasive response to this by pointing out that the essential elements for democratization are defined in three universally accepted UN instruments, the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. The norms that they represent have been universalized by voluntary acceptance, not by imposition. Moreover, there is much in these documents that did not have its origin in seventeenth and eighteenth century Western thinking. The Charter might sound quite familiar to Locke and Jefferson but much in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples would not. I would add that neither Christianity nor Islam is rejected because it originated in one small area of the globe. Both have adapted to very varied cultures. Democracy can and should be seen in a similar light.

IV.

The formulation of strategic foreign policy has been notably weak in the United States and most other leading Western countries, and elsewhere as well, in good part because the guiding myth of "us and them" had lost its relevance. Official United States develop-

ment assistance fell in parallel with declining competition with the communists for influence in Third World countries. Decisions taken in the Security Council on peacekeeping and peace-enforcement have been inconsistent. The provision of troops and police for these purposes has been halting and unpredictable, except in instances where clear and specific national interests were threatened. Movement on the environment has been stagnant.

Still, it can be argued that viewed in terms of narrowly-defined national interests a realist policy of limited goals has been a success for the advanced democracies. The respective ships of state have remained on even keel, only threatening to capsize in the case of the United States when an idealist adventure was undertaken to restore stability in a country where governance had failed. So it may seem.

But the question must be posed: Has this status quo approach placed either the West or the rest of the world in a favorable position to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the global growth of democracy? What has been done to foster a "community of sentiment" as the basis of an era of peace and freedom? The answer is surprisingly little. It might be said that any small growth of idealism was trampled in the streets of Mogadishu.

Yet historically, the United States has had its greatest foreign policy successes when the policy was strongly colored by idealism. The United States led the way in the creation of the United Nations and gained the full support of the American people for this great experiment in behalf of peace. The Marshall Plan, while obviously serving U.S. interests, was nonetheless

pursued with the visionary objective of permitting the growth of a free community of nations in Europe. The Second World War was, in Eisenhower's term, a crusade for freedom. None of the realpolitik of Henry Kissinger achieved a comparable resonance among the American people.

If we look at Western Europe today we find that the dominant figure is the leader, Helmut Kohl, who has departed from the restrictiveness of realism and followed two distinctly idealist visions: a unified Germany and a united Europe. Despite the present disadvantages it may have for a good part of Germany's population, this surely places Europe in a strong position to contribute to a broader community of free and prosperous countries in the twenty-first century. Idealpolitik can thus become realpolitik. The United States government is unlikely to contribute its necessary share for the strengthening of global human security unless the U.S. population is captured by a compelling vision of the better world that is within sight: a world of predominantly democratic countries among which peace is secure, human rights are respected, and commerce is free. Such a world would respond to the real interests of the United States. The wonder is that so little attention is paid to the promise it holds.

V.

To set as a goal a world in which the large majority of inhabitants enjoy the benefits of democracy and, more than that, to expect that the wealthy countries will expend the amount of resources needed for this purpose will certainly be termed an idealist approach to international affairs. Visionary would be an equally accurate

label. To dismiss it on that ground, however, would be quite wrong.

Some very realist arguments can be adduced as to why the achievement of this goal would serve the interests of all concerned. Viewed from the perspective of the established democratic states these interests include:

- more stable environment for the development of trade;
- decreased likelihood of gross violation of human rights that can lead to irresistible pressure for costly intervention;
- decreased likelihood of migratory pressures with potentially destabilizing influence on the social stability of the recipient states;
- less corruption in assistance receiving countries; and
- enhanced prospects for mutual trust.

None of these are absolutes; none are necessarily precluded by the existence of non-democratic states. Trade quite evidently can flourish with China but, for the United States at least, not as smoothly were China democratic. The point is that democratization offers the better prospect of attaining these interests than perpetuation of autocratic regimes.

And then there are reasons of a liberal nature of which I will mention only the most important: The spread of democracy permits the broader engagement of civil society on behalf of global human security objectives such as protection of the environment, the control of disease, and the further limitation of arms.

It would be folly, of course, to imagine that the United States government or any other would embark on an idealist-oriented foreign policy without calculating the effect—or better said, the gains—in terms of national interests. The gains to be obtained through the extension of U.S. support for poor and distant countries in the hope of giving the inhabitants some chance of economic progress and personal security are difficult to present convincingly, especially when media coverage is largely devoted to instances of internal conflict, corruption, and disintegration. But it can be done. I would like to cite an example of one nongovernmental organization's (NGO) attempt to do just this.

The Council on Foreign Relations in New York recently issued a task force report on *Promoting U.S. Economic Relations with Africa.* Many of us have been inclined to view Africa as a place where economic development plans and foreign investment end up alongside dead elephants in communal burial grounds. It is difficult to see beyond the headlines describing the humanitarian and political crises, the collapse of governance, and the military coups that seem endemic to the continent. That is not a true picture. The Council Task Force found that thirty-five African countries are implementing economic and political reforms and that the aggregate growth rates for these thrity-five countries in 1995 and 1996 averaged five percent, more than twice the rates of the previous decades. The reality is that democracy has made remarkable strides in Africa and with it, whatever the causal relation may be, has come a largely unnoticed economic renewal. The Task Force members noted that, nonetheless, the prevailing perceptions of Africa's potential remain overwhelmingly negative in American policy-making and business

circles and in the larger body politic. The Task Force concluded that as an increasing number of African countries are becoming strong candidates as potential trade and investment partners, the United States should be at the forefront of the industrialized world in pursuit of these new opportunities. It recommends that two-way trade and investment with Africa be increased, that development assistance be strengthened, and debt reduction extended to improve credit-worthiness of the African countries committed to "economic and political liberalization and poverty reduction."

The report thus makes the case that the U.S. can benefit from what many would term an idealist concept of a growing community of interests between the U.S. and emerging African democracies. Let me quote:

> "In the U.S., the crumbling of the old conventions that sustained foreign policy throughout much of this century, and the need to redefine the national interests that will guide it into the future, should offer Africa new opportunities for greater engagement with the United States. There now exists a convergence of interests among African peoples' broad objectives of security, democracy and economic development, and the emerging U.S. framework for foreign policy in the 21st century." In other words, it is deemed to be in the US interest for quite practical reasons to support the African people in their search for human security even while recognizing that the continent-wide renaissance is "in its fragile infancy."[3]

The Council on Foreign Relations did not officially endorse the findings of the Task Force. However, in circulating the report it took the unusual step of asking members, if they were so inclined after considering the report's conclusions, to sign a statement of endorsement. This is one way to encourage a sizeable group of influential people to endorse a definition of U.S. interests that would encompass support for the well-being of distant, still poverty-stricken people who, as they move into the community of free societies, can become attractive trade and investment partners for the U.S.

VI.

The United Nations was created with the visionary purpose of saving future generations from the scourge of war. Its Charter defined the structure and the norms through which this would be accomplished. The norms encompassed those elements which still today are widely accepted as the basis for peace both within and between states: democracy, including human rights and the rule of law; and economic and social development. The United Nations was portrayed by its sponsors and widely accepted by people throughout the world as both the symbol and the instrument of peace.

This was a triumphant moment in the idealist approach to history. Yet, with all its idealist principles, the United Nations was structured on a statist model, with a very realist approach to power. This duality was clear from the beginning. Edward Stettinius, the chairman of the U.S. delegation to the San Francisco Conference, wrote to President Harry S. Truman in his report on the Charter that:

> "These declarations of purposes and principles ... which assert the intention of the United Nations to bring about the economic and social conditions essential to an enduring peace, or to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms would not suffice in themselves to meet the evil of war. ... What was needed ... was machinery ... the means to peace."

"Men and women," he wrote further, "who have lived through war are not ashamed, as other generations sometimes are, to declare the depth and the idealism of their attachment to peace. But neither are they ashamed to recognize the realities of power which war has forced them to see and endure."

Professor Bruce Russett of Yale University, in a forthcoming article, contends that while realist theory does not attribute great importance to international organization, the direct relationship between international organizations and peace derives more from realist than liberal theories of international relations.[4] He sees the United Nations as divisible in terms of functions in three parts:

- A predominantly realist "first" UN devoted to securing a liberal world order through such practical means as Security Council enforcement action, sanctions, mediation, and adjudication;
- A "second" predominantly liberal UN mandated to build the economic and institutional foundations on which the liberal vision of peace rests; and

- A "third" UN, also preeminently liberal, dedicated to the promotion of democracy and human rights.

Ironically, very soon after the establishment of the UN, it became apparent that the realist element was not at all a realistic means of maintaining peace. The statist power machinery could not work without agreement among the major states. On the other hand, the "liberal" UN was able to produce remarkable, if often unrecognized, benefits for the world in such forms as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the ground-breaking work of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF); and the financial institutions and the mobilization of global concern for the environment, women, and population management. Sadly, in many countries—not just in the West—public perceptions of the UN were disproportionately influenced by the power policies that frequently immobilized the Security Council and often frustrated the General Assembly. The myth of the "usses" and "thems" permeated the atmosphere of the United Nations even after the divisions among the major powers faded. The early charisma of the United Nations as the best hope for peace, as the embodiment of the principles of the Charter, was prejudiced—whether fatally or not is still to be determined.

This is a crucial question. The issues to be dealt with in the interest of peace in the next century are almost certain to lie predominantly in the liberal field—within the mandate of Russett's "second" and "third" United Nations. Yet it would be illusory to think that the world organization can be a central instrument for human security without access to power. To modify the "us and them" syndrome that taints the exercise of

power by the Security Council, there must surely be a broadening of the Council's interests and a lessening of its seeming separation from the majority of the membership, the General Assembly, and the economic and social organizations of the UN system. This should be seen as the main purpose of Security Council reform. It would be a deception to suggest, however, that even if such a reform were achieved—which at present seems unlikely—the results would penetrate very deeply into the public consciousness. None of the reforms currently contemplated, as desirable as they may be in the successful pursuit of the UN's liberal agenda, is likely to restore to the UN its symbolic significance as leader in the quest for peace, freedom, and justice. Policy in the United States toward the United Nations is heavily influenced by a relatively small but powerful group who are opposed to the UN's liberal agenda. When they insist on reform, they are seeking a UN with less influence rather than more. If this is to change, it will come from the pressure of a civil society mobilized by a vision of a community of shared democratic values; by a realization, to paraphrase Havel, that Americans are not here alone or for themselves alone; and by a conviction that a strong United Nations has an essential role to play in the realization of better world conditions that respond to commonly shared interests. This is needed not just in the United States. I must confess to serious doubt whether this can by any means be brought about. If it can be, the key is in the hands of civil society which leads to certain conclusions with regard to the United Nations.

When the Charter was adopted, its preamble implied that it was an organization that belonged to the people. No matter that this was contradicted by all that

followed. The people felt a connection with the organization, a connection verified by UNICEF collections, UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) national commissions, and widespread and enthusiastic United Nations associations. As the statist nature of the organization has become clearer over the years a gulf opened between the people and the United Nations, the only link being NGOs who have not always been the most constructive go-betweens.

This amorphous body—the people—has remained in its majority positively inclined toward the United Nations. But any sense of responsibility for the organization or participation in its victories and defeats is now largely absent. This may help to explain why the positive attitudes revealed in polls in the United States are not reflected in Congressional attitudes and actions.

This leads me to a conclusion that I long rejected as unrealistic: civil society must be given a participatory role in the United Nations and one large enough to give the people a sense of responsibility for the organization. As is well-known, this is not a new idea. I would add only the insistence that to bring about a new image of the UN as representative of peoples' as well as governments' interests, civil society must be involved in some way in the decision-making process, perhaps in the form of a second advisory chamber of the General Assembly, where the focus would be on the liberal agenda of the UN system rather than on the machinery for its implementation.

The United Nations would then become more truly reflective of Freud's community of sentiment which would underlie a peaceful world order. This broad community is both an idealist vision and a reality in the

process of becoming. The imperative is that it be nurtured and protected. The myth of a world community of a thousand cultures joined in freedom and a common oneness with the world they share must become a determining subliminal guide for governments and people toward a new stage of human development.

NOTES

1 Vaclev Havel, "In Our Postmodern World, A Search for Self-Transcendence," *International Herald Tribune*, July 11, 1994, p. ___.

2 Informal workshop presentation by Professor Donald Puchala at the 1997 International Studies Association annual conference.

3 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Democratization* , 1995, p.1

4 Strobe Talbott, "Democracy and the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (6), November/December 1996, pp. 47-63.

5 Cited from B.G. Ramcharan, "Securing Human Rights" _____.

6 *Promoting U.S. Economic Relations with Africa*, Statement of an Independent Task Force (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 1997).

7 Bruce Russett, "A Neo-Kantian Perspective: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations in Building Security Communities," in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds, *Security Communities in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


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