

## Toward a Third Generation of International Institutions: Obama's UN Policy

By nominating his confidante, Susan E. Rice, as ambassador to the United Nations and restoring the post's cabinet status, President Barack Obama enunciated his "belief that the UN is an indispensable—and imperfect—forum." He not only announced that the United States has rejoined the world and is ready to reengage with all member states, but also that multilateralism in general and the UN in particular would be essential to U.S. foreign policy during his administration by stating the simple fact that "the global challenges we face demand global institutions that work."<sup>1</sup>

The idea of engaging the UN is supported well beyond the members of the Obama administration. A little more than a month before the November 2008 election, Christiane Amanpour of CNN interviewed five former secretaries of state—none of whom lived in the Bush administration's ideological bubble or agreed on much with each other—who stressed the necessity of cultivating friends, finding new partners, and even doing the unthinkable of engaging Tehran and Pyongyang.<sup>2</sup>

The UN's universal membership provides legitimacy and is a unique asset, a belief that Rice confirmed sharing when she stated that the UN as a global institution should "enhance, not diminish, our influence, and bring more security to our people and to the world."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps as much as any recent event, the global financial and economic meltdown made even more clear what previous

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**T**here is a collective lack of historical perspective about international institutions.

crises had not, namely, the risks, problems, and costs of a global economy that does not have adequate international institutions, democratic decisionmaking, or powers to bring order and ensure compliance with collective decisions. According to Henry Kissinger, the current financial and political disarray in international relations is closely linked and highlights a gap between the world's economic and political organizations: "The economic world has been

globalised. Its institutions have a global reach and have operated by maxims that assumed a self-regulating global market. The financial collapse exposed the mirage. It made evident the absence of global institutions to cushion the shock and to reverse the trend."<sup>4</sup>

Now is the time to take a fresh look at international organizations and what the new face in the White House potentially means for their long-term prospects. Although Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, and other heads of states have mentioned a "new Bretton Woods," they are clearly ignoring the limited results of the old one, even at its peak, established in 1944.<sup>5</sup> Policymakers in the United States are no different, as the collective lack of historical perspective plagues their currently feeble policies regarding international public policy and organizations.<sup>6</sup> The New Hampshire resort's recent \$50 million facelift exorcised the ghost of John Maynard Keynes, whose proposals for what became the International Monetary Fund (IMF) originally called for resources equivalent of 50 percent of world imports.<sup>7</sup> The London meeting of the Group of 20 (G-20) in April 2009 agreed to a \$750 billion reinforcement, but the IMF has largely been absent during the current crisis while individual governments piecemeal have committed trillions of dollars, euros, and pounds to paper over problems. Moreover, although the harshest critics claim that the IMF has too much power, the fund's reserves traditionally amount to less than 2 percent of world imports, which epitomizes the perilous gap between proposals and practices.

Expectations of the new administration are impossibly high, and there are few precedents for deliberately destroying existing international institutions and establishing new ones.<sup>8</sup> In a new book about the origins of U.S. multilateralism, Council on Foreign Relations analyst Stewart Patrick makes a persuasive case: "The fundamental questions facing the 1940s generation confront us again today. As then, the United States remains by far the most powerful country in the world, but its contemporary security, political, and economic challenges are rarely amenable to unilateral action."<sup>9</sup>

Looking back on a “remarkable generation of leaders and public servants,” one of the first persons recruited by the UN in 1946, and probably the most respected commentator on the world organization, Sir Brian Urquhart, recalls earlier U.S. leadership as “more concerned about the future of humanity than the outcome of the next election; and they understood that finding solutions to postwar problems was much more important than being popular with one or another part of the American electorate.”<sup>10</sup>

Could that same farsighted political commitment rise again under the Obama administration, if not in 2009 then at least by the end of the first term or beyond? There is no doubt that, after the experiences of first the League of Nations and more recently the second generation of international institutions, a third generation of international organizations should be moved toward the top of the foreign policy agenda. The United States does not dominate the world the way that it once did. The rise of China as well as India and the return of multipolarity, or perhaps the absence of polarity, does not mean that the world is not desperately longing for Rice to make good on her commitment “to refresh and renew America’s leadership” in the UN.<sup>11</sup> However short Obama’s honeymoon, there will be many opportunities for Washington to take charge, in the financial crisis, in the Middle East, in nuclear nonproliferation, in climate change. Will the United States take charge unilaterally, or will it make the UN a central piece of its strategic interests? Furthermore, is the UN, a heavily bureaucratic institution troubled by its own failings, ready for a potentially energetic United States?

### **Why Is the UN Indispensable?**

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Most countries, especially major powers, are loath to accept elements of a central authority and the inroads that this would make into their autonomy. The logic of globalization, technological advances, and interdependence, along with a growing number of transboundary crises, however, should place this eventuality somewhat more squarely on the agenda, even in Washington. It is certainly not far-fetched to imagine that, over the coming decade, the international community of states will see a gradual advance of intergovernmental agreements and powers along the lines that Europe as a whole has nurtured since World War II.<sup>12</sup>

The scent of reinvention may already be in the air. In January 2008, Brown argued before business leaders in New Delhi that, “[t]o succeed now and in the future, the post-war rules of the game, the post-war international institutions, fit for the Cold War and for a world of just 50 states, must be radically reformed to fit our world of globalization where there are 200 states, an emerging single marketplace, unprecedented individual autonomy and the increasing power of informal networks across the world.”<sup>13</sup> The rhetoric after the G-20 meeting in

London in April 2009 was upbeat. As host, Brown proclaimed, “Our message today is clear and certain: ‘We believe global problems require global solutions.’”<sup>14</sup> This gathering was the second in five months—President George W. Bush pulled together the first in the midst of the initial fallout from the economic and financial crisis because the old Group of Seven (G-7) and the Group of Eight (G-8) excluded the countries that now account for most of world economic growth or credit.

Think tanks have followed suit. The Council on Foreign Relations launched a multiyear program called “International Institutions and Global Governance: World Order in the Twenty-First Century,” and its *Foreign Affairs* journal published an article at the outset of 2009 on “Reshaping the World Order,” which argues that “the United States has the means and the motive to spearhead the foundation of a new institutional order.”<sup>15</sup>

**A third generation of international organizations should be imagined.**

In December 2008, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted “Present at the Creation 2.0: How Reinventing the International System Could Become One of the Central Legacies of the Obama Administration.” Richard Hormats and David Rothkopf, two mainstays at seminars, argued that “the United States cannot effectively or affordably achieve its goals without restoring,

renovating, or in some cases reinventing the multilateral mechanisms available to it in each major policy area.”<sup>16</sup> Currently, there is an urgency to develop the next generation of institutions or at least to make dramatic revisions in existing ones.

It is commonplace to state that many of the most intractable problems are transnational, ranging from climate change, migration, and pandemics to terrorism, financial stability, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Addressing them successfully requires actions that are not unilateral, bilateral, or even multilateral, but global. At the same time, the policy authority and resources for tackling such problems remain vested in 192 UN member states individually, rather than collectively in a universal body.

The fundamental disconnect between the nature of many global problems and the current inadequate structures for international problem solving and decisionmaking goes a long way toward explaining fitful, tactical, and short-term local responses to challenges that require sustained, strategic, and longer-term global thinking and action. For all of its warts, the UN is the closest approximation to a central institutional presence on the global stage. The world organization urgently requires strengthening to become, in Obama’s own

description, a global institution that works, not the current G-7 and G-8 or an upgraded G-20 version to include emerging powers, not ad hoc coalitions of the willing or Robert Kagan's "League of Democracies,"<sup>17</sup> but a universal global body. Anything less constitutes wishful thinking to escape from the complexities of addressing daunting global challenges.

In thinking about filling holes in the existing global security order, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observes that "the United States cannot kill or capture its way to victory" and "is unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan—that is, forced regime change followed by nation building under fire."<sup>18</sup> The sobering experiences of occupation have highlighted the limits of military and diplomatic power, a realization that is akin to the mammoth shortcomings in the U.S. inability to address the ongoing economic and financial crisis alone.

What else is on the list for the new administration? Most informed Americans would certainly acknowledge that when it comes to spotting, warning, and managing international health hazards (e.g., the severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS] in 2003, avian and swine flu more recently, and AIDS perennially) the World Health Organization (WHO) is indispensable and unrivaled. Monitoring international crime statistics and the narcotics trade, policing nuclear power and human trafficking, and numerous other important global functions are all based within the UN system. Washington's short list for the UN should include not only postconflict reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq but also fighting terrorism (e.g., sharing information, monitoring money laundering activities), confronting infectious diseases, pursuing environmental sustainability, monitoring human rights, providing humanitarian aid, addressing global poverty, rescheduling debt, and fostering trade. Rice was not the first one to mention these items in her testimony. They also were in Bush's opening address to the September 2005 World Summit on the occasion of the UN's 60th anniversary.<sup>19</sup> Both would probably now add maritime piracy to the list.

Actions will speak louder than words, and the UN surely will be far more appealing to the Obama administration and the American public than it was during the Bush years. The lack of rivals for UN organizations suggests that a common good can be found. Not everything is subject to the all-or-nothing politics and brinkmanship that characterized the Bush administration's approach to global institutions. It is important to recall a usually overlooked historical fact: the United States raced to be the first country to ratify the UN Charter, winning Senate approval on July 28, 1945, barely a month after the ink dried on the signatures by the 51 countries present in San Francisco at the founding conference. Is it not time for Washington to once again take charge, or at least not get in the way?

## Why Is It Imperfect?

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Four disorders individually and collectively often paralyze the UN.<sup>20</sup> The first is the nature of the Westphalian system, which is very much alive if not very well. This chronic ailment, which is actually the basis for the UN Charter and membership in the world body, is 360 years old or young, depending on how you look at it. What most political scientists dub “anarchy,” or the lack of an overarching central authority, still characterizes much of international relations. Yet, the international system functions amidst a growing number of anomalies between virtually all of the life threatening global challenges facing the planet and existing international decisionmaking structures. Similarly, so does the UN, where states make decisions almost exclusively on narrowly defined vital interests. The interests of major powers, particularly the United States as the most powerful, obviously create obstacles to UN action, but such states are not the only ones impeding collective action. Smaller and poorer, or newer and less powerful, ones are as vehemently protective of their so-called sovereignty. Although globalization’s impact and technological advances, as well as transboundary problems, proliferate so that national frontiers make less and less sense, the UN serves as a formidable bastion of sacrosanct state sovereignty.

The second major problem is the diplomatic burlesque that passes for diplomacy in UN circles. It revolves around the artificial divide between the aging acting troupes from the industrialized North and from the developing countries in the so-called global South. Originally begun in the 1950s and the 1960s as a way to create diplomatic space for international security by the Non-Aligned Movement and for economic negotiations by the Group of 77 developing countries, these once creative voices are now prisoners of their own rhetoric. The rigid and counterproductive groups and artificial divisions constitute almost insurmountable barriers to diplomatic initiatives and meaningful policy changes. Serious conversations are almost impossible, and meaningless jousting on the basis of lowest common denominators is prevalent. Prime examples are the remarks of U.S. ambassador to the UN John Bolton and President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela in the General Assembly in the fall of 2006, when Chávez indirectly referred to Bush as the devil and stated that “it smells of sulfur” and “he came here talking as if he were the owner of the world.” Bolton responded by indirectly calling Chávez irrelevant and warned that Venezuela would be “disruptive” if elected to the UN Security Council.<sup>21</sup> Canadian politician and former senior UN official Stephen Lewis’s observation—“Men and women cannot live by rhetoric alone”<sup>22</sup>—seemingly does not apply to UN ambassadors and officials.

The previous two problems affect the arena where states interact and make decisions, which Inis Claude long ago called the “first UN,” whereas two

additional disorders arise within the “second UN,” or among the people who work in international secretariats.<sup>23</sup> The third problem reflects the structural pathologies arising from overlapping jurisdictions as well as lack of coordination and centralized financing among UN agencies and bodies.

Any student who first puzzled over the “spaghetti junction” of the world body that is found in most textbooks, otherwise known as the organizational chart, can easily spot the pattern of institutional turf and unhelpful competition for resources. Less-than-optimal outcomes result from the structure of decentralized institutional silos instead of more integrated, mutually reinforcing, and collaborative cogs among the various moving parts of the UN. This reality has become worse over time as all agencies now relentlessly pursue cutthroat fund-raising for extra budgetary resources, or soft money, in order to reinforce their expanding mandates and mission creep.

The generic label in the caption for the UN’s organizational chart is “system,” but this term implies more coherence and cohesion than characterizes the world body’s actual behavior, which has more in common with feudalism than with modern organizations. Frequent use also is made of the term “family,” a folksy but preferable image because, like many such units, the UN is dysfunctional and divided. Brian Urquhart and Erskine Childers described the UN accurately by stating that “[t]he orchestra pays minimum heed to its conductor.”<sup>24</sup> In his customary picturesque fashion, the Australian logistics genius who moved goods to Malta and the Middle East in World War II and subsequently oversaw a number of UN humanitarian operations, Sir Robert Jackson, began his 1969 evaluation of the UN development system by stating that “the [UN] machine as a whole has become unmanageable in the strictest sense of the word. As a result, it is becoming slower and more unwieldy like some prehistoric monster.”<sup>25</sup> The lumbering dinosaur is now 40 years older and certainly not better adapted to the climate of the twenty-first century.

The final disorder is related to the overwhelming weight of bureaucratic procedures and the low productivity and underwhelming leadership within the international secretariats. Although the stereotype of a bloated and lumbering administration is inaccurate in some ways—it overlooks many talented and dedicated individuals—the nature of recruitment and promotion within the international administration is certainly part of what ails the world body. When success occurs, it usually reflects personalities and serendipity rather than recruitment of the best persons for the right reasons and institutional structures designed to foster collaboration. Staff costs account for the lion’s share of the UN’s budget, but the international civil service is a potential resource whose

**Is the UN ready for a potentially energetic United States?**

composition, productivity, and culture could change and change quickly. The current lackluster leadership of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, however, will continue for at least another three years, perhaps even until the middle of the next decade.

In fact, Rube Goldberg could not have come up with a better design for futile complexity than the current array of agencies, each focusing on a substantive area, often located in a different city from other relevant UN partners and with separate budgets, governing boards, organizational cultures, and independent executive heads. Whatever contemporary issue is of greatest concern—be it climate change, pandemics, terrorism, or WMDs—multidisciplinary perspectives, efforts across sectors with firm central direction, and inspired leadership are required. The UN rarely supplies any of this.

### **How Can We Fix the UN?**

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What can the Obama administration do about prescribing and helping to administer remedies? Are there palliatives, if not cures? The first remedy requires further redefining national interests and building on what has already been accomplished in the spotty but significant progress in recasting such interests in terms of good global citizenship and enhanced international responsibilities. Normative and geopolitical fixes for the ailments of the Westphalian system consist of yet more energetic recalculations of common interests about global goods and respect for international commitments.

This prescription theoretically should be relatively easy for Washington to swallow in that democratic states have a long-term, rational, and vital interest as well as a moral responsibility to promote multilateral cooperation. Moreover, the United States helped build the current international institutions. As a result, they reflect core U.S. values. Princeton University's G. John Ikenberry recalls a striking irony: "The worst unilateral impulses coming out of the Bush administration are so harshly criticized around the world because so many countries have accepted the multilateral vision of international order that the United States has articulated over most of the twentieth century."<sup>26</sup> Gareth Evans, foreign minister of Australia in the late 1980s and now president of the International Crisis Group, coined the expression "good international citizenship."<sup>27</sup> This vision underpins, for instance, the human security agenda of Japan and the Nordic countries and the conviction that there is a relationship between the provision of basic rights and wider international security.<sup>28</sup> The Obama team should make this their program.

With the possible exception of the prevention of genocide after World War II, no idea has moved faster or farther in the international normative arena than "the responsibility to protect," commonly called "R2P," the title for the 2001 report



from the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> It redefines sovereignty as contingent on respect for human rights, rather than as absolute, and locates responsibility for human rights initially and primarily with the state. The report also argues that if a state is unwilling or unable to honor its responsibilities or if itself perpetrates atrocities, then the residual

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responsibility to protect the victims of mass atrocity crimes shifts upward to the international community of states, ideally acting through the Security Council. The responsibility to protect illustrates how to move in the direction of reframing state sovereignty because both the processes leading to its formulation and to its acceptance by the 2005 World Summit holds lessons. It is a more broadly acceptable reconceptualization of the much disputed “humanitarian intervention.”<sup>30</sup>

The Security Council’s inability to address the woes of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and its painful dithering since early 2003 over massive murder and displacement in Darfur, demonstrate the dramatic disconnect between lofty and value-laden multilateral rhetoric and the ugly reality of collective spinelessness in protecting and aiding the forcibly displaced. The change in conceptualization is a necessary if insufficient condition. The altered approach provides the basis for broader agreements to mobilize political will to act and thus is one on which the Obama team could build, for instance, by using a report from a bipartisan Genocide Prevention Task Force led by Madeleine Albright and William Cohen, which contains a host of practical suggestions for early warning and action, described by its members as “a rare and important opportunity for progress.”<sup>31</sup>

The world, therefore, has witnessed a values breakthrough of sorts: the responsibility to protect qualifies as emerging customary law after centuries of more or less passive and mindless acceptance of the proposition that state sovereignty was a license to kill. Rice has clearly expressed the need for Washington to take the lead in conscience-shocking situations instead of repeating mistakes such as the Clinton administration’s lamentable decision to keep out of Rwanda in 1994. With the leading candidates being the Congo, Darfur, and Zimbabwe, John Prendergast of the Enough project, which campaigns to prevent genocide, calls the combination of African specialist Rice, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, national security adviser Gen. James Jones, and senior director for multilateral affairs Samantha Power a “dream team.”<sup>32</sup> As a candidate, Obama’s earlier ruminations in *Foreign Affairs* became a touchstone because he asserted the importance of “military force in

circumstances beyond self-defense” and specifically listed the need to “confront mass atrocities.”<sup>33</sup> This national security team promises to turn rhetoric into action.

The history of diplomacy and international law recounts how states have gradually accepted limits on their conduct.<sup>34</sup> One of the main ways to alter the definition of sovereignty has been through what Eleanor Roosevelt in 1948 presciently predicted would be “a curious grapevine” that would spread human rights ideas.<sup>35</sup> The challenge for the Obama administration and subsequent administrations will be squarely to face the reality that, for genocide prevention as for every other international issue, “the institutions every society relies on to supply essential national public goods do not exist at the global level” where there is no “power to tax, to conscript, to regulate, or to quarantine.”<sup>36</sup>

Moving beyond the North–South quagmire is the second prescription for what ails the UN, which figured prominently in Rice’s confirmation hearing as “the old divisions” of the twentieth century that should not encumber Washington in the twenty-first.<sup>37</sup> On occasion, states have forged creative partnerships across the fictitious borders that supposedly divide the North from the South or the industrialized from the developing countries, and have overcome the long-standing and counterproductive chasms that too frequently separate participants in international deliberations. Less

**The responsibility to protect qualifies as a values breakthrough of sorts.**

posturing and role playing is a prerequisite for the future health of the world organization.

Examples of wide-ranging coalitions, unfortunately minus the United States, across continents and ideologies include those that negotiated the treaty to ban landmines and agreed to establish the International Criminal Court (ICC). In the future, Washington should build bridges across the divides that in fact have become even wider during the Bush administration in climate change, development finance, nonproliferation, reproductive rights, and terrorism, to name a few. The Obama administration starts from the low threshold of cooperation left by its predecessor and thus should seek more legitimate and larger “coalitions of the willing” within international institutions for these issues, rather than the illegitimate and skimpy one that was cobbled together in Iraq. It also can build on the Global Compact, an effort to bring nonstate actors from civil society and transnational corporations such as the private sector and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into a more intense partnership with the UN.

The third remedy would be to implement the approach captured in “Delivering as One,” the title of one of the last reports done before the

departure of Kofi Annan as UN secretary-general.<sup>38</sup> Eyes usually glaze over at any mention of “reform” to improve coordination among UN agencies because nothing has even modestly alleviated the turf battles and unproductive competition for funds that have always characterized the so-called UN system. The former administrator of the UN Development Program and *chef de cabinet* for Annan, Mark Malloch Brown, recalls that although the UN is the only institution where reform is a more popular topic than sex around water coolers and on coffee breaks, no useful reform has taken place.<sup>39</sup> Donors, including the United States as the largest in numerical terms, would have to stop talking out of two sides of their mouths and insist on the centralization and consolidation that they often preach. This task is certainly not impossible, nor is agreeing to modest alternative means of financing the world body, such as infinitesimal percentage taxes on financial transfers or airline tickets. Washington, however, has routinely fought such measures in the past because they would give the UN the kind of autonomy that it requires.<sup>40</sup>

The final heading for change consists of taking steps to reinvigorate the international civil service, the staff members of the UN system whose work is requested and funded by governments. There is an urgent need to rediscover the notion of an autonomous international civil service championed by the UN’s second secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjöld, for which competence and integrity outweigh nationality and gender considerations as well as cronyism, which have become the principal criteria for recruitment and promotion.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the ideal goes back further, to what a working group during World War II called the “great experiment” of the League of Nations.<sup>42</sup> Moving back to the future would involve recruiting persons of integrity and talent. There are numerous ways to attract more mobile and younger staff with greater turnover and fewer permanent contracts while providing better career development for the twenty-first-century world organization. The people who work for the UN account for 90 percent of the organization’s expenditures, and strengthening performance and productivity by improving output and efficiency should be at the top of the Obama administration’s to-do list.

### **Toward a Third Generation of International Institutions**

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The general problems and solutions outlined above require long-range thinking and strategy, which may not satisfy any acute thirst for immediate policy changes.<sup>43</sup> Of course, a number of feasible and near-term steps, both symbolic and actual, would foster U.S. interests and those of the UN as well. These began in the first hours of Obama’s presidency when he halted the Bush administration’s military commission system at Guantánamo (now overturned) followed immediately by his first three executive orders on January 21, 2009, that undid

the previous administration's detention policies by ordering the closing of Guantánamo within a year, directing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to shut its secret prisons, and requiring all interrogations to follow the noncoercive methods of the army field manuals.<sup>44</sup> In April, Washington stepped back from its petulant boycott of the Human Rights Council and announced that it would be a candidate for election (now elected), which was welcomed by New Zealand, which subsequently withdrew its candidacy for one of the seats allocated to the West.

A good start would also be enhanced by clear declarations about full adherence to the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention Against Torture. It also would help if the Obama administration ripped up the "unsigning" communication by the Bush administration of President Bill Clinton's signature on the treaty creating the ICC. These measures would help restore U.S. moral authority and mark a return to the rule of law and the approach of "do as I do" rather than "do as I say."

Moreover, the decision in his first week to restore funding for the UN Population Fund was a promising indicator of the president's determination to set aside ideology and to strengthen the U.S. role in the world through active participation in multinational efforts and institutions. Other such steps would vary from relying on the UN's comparative advantage in peace-building in Iraq<sup>45</sup> to taking a leadership role in preparations for the mid-2010 review to prevent the collapse of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which would be accelerated considerably by implementing the fast-track agreement with Moscow to cut nuclear missiles by one-third already discussed by Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia in London in April; from taking seriously the need in Copenhagen in December 2009 to address a post-Kyoto agreement to cut greenhouse emissions to making good on financial commitments known as the Millennium Development Goals. All of these were listed among Rice's priorities, in addition to reversing another long-standing violation of international good citizenship, namely to "pay our dues to the UN in full and on time."<sup>46</sup>

Yet, the beginning of a new administration ultimately should not be judged on the basis of such tinkering, however critical, but on the basis of a quantum shift in thinking and vision similar to the domestic one that led to Obama's election. Although I have spent much of my analytical career championing practical changes on the margins, I now believe that much of what I and others write would depress even Dr. Pangloss, Voltaire's character who thought everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Policymakers and scholars all agree that more and more threats are transnational but that states remain the only real sources of decisionmaking power. At the same time, the equally obvious need to have more powerful global institutions with more authority is ignored. Ours can not possibly be the best of all possible worlds.

Rather than pursue an ambitious intellectual agenda with the construction of more robust intergovernmental organizations possessing elements of supranationality, virtually all contemporary analysts of international organizations embrace the vaguer notion of “global governance,” and I write this as someone who edited a journal by that name and authored a forthcoming book.<sup>47</sup> “Governance” is the sum of informal and formal values, norms, practices, and institutions that define and constitute relations among citizens, the market, and the state. “Global governance” refers to collective efforts to identify, understand, and address worldwide problems that go beyond the capacities of individual states to solve. It reflects the capacity of the international system at any moment to provide government-like services in the absence of a world government.

Applying the notion of “governance” to the planet, however, is fundamentally misleading. It captures the gamut of interdependent relations in the absence of any overarching political authority and with intergovernmental organizations that have virtually no power to compel behavior or exert effective control in the international system. Quite a distinction exists, then, between the national and international species of governance. At the national level, there is governance plus government, which, whatever its shortcomings in Mexico or the United States, can usually exert authority and control as well as ensure fairly widespread compliance. At the international level, there is governance minus government, which means virtually no capacity to secure compliance with collective decisions. To borrow an image from the international relations analyst most identified with turbulence in world politics, James Rosenau, a “crazy quilt” of authority at the international level is constantly shifting, a patchwork of institutional elements that varies by sector and over time.<sup>48</sup> Other images from nonscholars may be more apt, including Gertrude Stein’s characterization of Oakland—“there’s no there, there”—and the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, a grinning head floating without a body or substance.

It is instructive to spell out the three reasons why the cottage industry of global governance arose to replace the study of international organizations. First, beginning in the 1970s, interdependence and rapid technological advances fostered recognition that certain unanticipated problems defy solutions by a single state. The evolution of a consciousness about the human environment and especially the UN’s conferences in Stockholm and Rio in 1972 and 1992 respectively are usually seen as key.

**We need a quantum shift in thinking and vision about international organizations.**

The second reason is the sheer expansion in numbers and importance of nonstate actors, both civil society and market. That intergovernmental organizations such as the UN no longer occupy center stage for students of international organization was symbolized by the agreement at the UN's Millennium Summit to make use of the Global Compact.<sup>49</sup> UN organizations share the crowded governance stage with many other actors, and it was necessary to reflect this analytical reality. Robust intergovernmental organizations now are an afterthought rather than a central preoccupation for analysts of contemporary world politics. The current generation of such organizations is inadequate, and we, as analysts and citizens, have to do more than throw up our hands and hope for the best from norm entrepreneurs, activists crossing borders, profit-seeking corporations, and transnational social networks. Not to put too fine a point on it, burgeoning numbers of NGOs and corporations with resources and energy will not eliminate poverty, fix global warming, or halt murder in Darfur.

Yet, the world's collective embarrassment of the seemingly simplistic and supposedly overly idealistic notion of supranationality is the third reason for the popularity of the global governance concept.<sup>50</sup> Although Europe proceeds apace, the planet is apparently different. A world federal government or even elements of one is not only old fashioned, it is generally thought to be the preserve of lunatics. As Robert Jenkins summarizes, "Once a staple of informed debate on international affairs, the term [world government] is almost never uttered in mainstream political discussion, unless it is to dismiss those who advocate the idea as hopelessly naïve, or to demonize those suspected of secretly plotting the creation of a global leviathan."<sup>51</sup>

Today it is almost impossible to imagine a United States in which policy discussions could occur about the creation of a world government. It now seems the stuff of science fiction that a sizable group of prominent Americans from every walk of life, including politicians who passed resolutions in 30 state legislatures in the late 1940s, supported a U.S. response to growing interdependence and instability that would pool U.S. sovereignty with that of other countries.

The Bush administration's on-and-off-again suspicion toward international organizations was the latest illustration of what Edward Luck has called "mixed messages" in the United States.<sup>52</sup> A visceral hostility toward the UN reappeared following the lack of support for the Iraq war, which closely followed the initial international support after the September 11 attacks. One now requires unknown powers of imagination to envision a Washington where a House of Representatives resolution might argue in favor of "a fundamental objective of the foreign policy of the United States to support and strengthen the UN and to seek its development into a world federation."<sup>53</sup> Such a sense of Congress resolution existed in 1949 in House Concurrent Resolution 64, sponsored by 111 representatives including two future presidents, John Kennedy (D-MA) and

Gerald Ford (R-MI), as well as such other prominent and hard-headed legislators as Christian Herter (R-MA), Henry “Scoop” Jackson (D-WA), Jacob Javits (R-NY), Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA), Mike Mansfield (D-MT), and Abraham Ribicoff (D-CT). In the 1940s, it was impossible in the United States to read periodicals, listen to the radio, or watch newsreels and not encounter the idea of world government.

**NGOs will not eliminate poverty, fix global warming, or halt murder in Darfur.**

This all evaporated by the early 1950s, when the idea of world government was hidden by the iron curtain, overshadowed by the Cold War, and eclipsed by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s (R-WI) witch hunt. On the right wing, this jumpstarted the engines of the black helicopters that are still whirling and fostered labeling advocates for world government as Communist fellow travelers. More recently on the left wing, the idea has encountered fears of top-down tyranny in a dystopia. In any case, this “ancient history” now seems quaint. Academics or policy analysts do not write about big visions. I cannot recall a single undergraduate or graduate student inquiring about the theoretical possibility of a central political authority exercising elements of universal legal jurisdiction. The surest way to secure classification as a crackpot is to mention a world government as a hypothetical or, worse yet, desirable outcome.

Global governance is a useful analytical tool to understand what is happening in today’s world. At the same time, it lacks prescriptive power to point toward where the international community should be headed and suggest what it should be doing. It is a process, not an entity, within which there is a hodgepodge of not just states but almost any stakeholder with an interest in whatever topic is at hand. Alice’s Cheshire cat is smiling.

With no vision of where to go, the international community is condemned to remain where it is. In the United States especially, the enthusiasm for nonstate actors and their potential for problem solving has now reached its limit. Unfortunately, the United States no longer thinks about moving toward a third generation of intergovernmental organizations. Indeed, even more robust UN organizations now often seem far-fetched and irrelevant.

## **The Audacity of Enhanced Global Governance**

In the aftermath of World War II, Washington led the effort to construct a second generation of international organizations on the ashes of the first, the League of Nations. Does the United States now require a comparable calamity to demonstrate the abject poverty of current thinking? Is such a disaster necessary

to catalyze a transformation of the current feeble system of what many of us now call “global governance,” the patchwork of formal and informal arrangements among states, international agencies, and public-private partnerships, into something with at least some supranational attributes?

If the answer is not “yes,” we need a big international vision from the Obama team. As Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution and former deputy secretary of state, recently wrote, “[M]ega-threats can be held at bay in the crucial years immediately ahead only through multilateralism on a scale far beyond anything the world has achieved to date.”<sup>54</sup> The new president excels in political imagination; he has faced some daunting odds in his life and has found ways of overcoming them. He might well emulate another great communicator, Ronald Reagan, and draw on his skills for two educational challenges in the United States with direct relevance for the future health of the UN.<sup>55</sup>

First, he should help overcome what can only be described as the abysmal level of public ignorance, including among members of Congress, about why the UN agglomeration works the way that it does. The UN cannot be compared to the vertical and hierarchical structures of national governments, militaries, or Fortune 500 companies. Yet, it is worth asking why, despite its weaknesses, the UN has a presence in every trouble spot and in every emerging issue that anyone can spot. Moreover, Obama should point out the difference between mock parliamentary diplomacy, which pretends that voting on a text ends everything, and real diplomacy in which the parties try to find ways to reduce their differences in approach and aim to a level of agreement. U.S. diplomats often denigrate the UN because, unlike governments of lesser states, the United States has leverage from military force and other means of power. In the contemporary world, however, U.S. diplomats as well as the public need to understand the usefulness of setting goals; seeking cooperative programs, even those that are never executed, as is hardly unknown in governments, militaries, and businesses; and thinking of global policies as a better way of maintaining order rather than trotting out the tanks.

Second, Obama needs to communicate his understanding of a crucial tenet of democracy, which is essential to building the next world order as well, namely, that disagreements over priorities and policy choices have to be resolved through consensus on process. Even some fans criticize his willingness to negotiate with domestic adversaries. This trait, however, is not a sign of weakness. In fact, on the international level, it is a prerequisite to moving beyond evaporating U.S. hegemony. With power shifting, the UN is no longer a detour that delays but rather a destination that enriches U.S. options and influence. Obama’s talents as a consummate communicator should not only help sell this reality to the U.S. electorate but also to the rest of the world, which already has noted changed U.S. attitudes. “If there’s Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a



brandy, that's a—that's an easier negotiation," the president noted while admitting that Washington had not had its way at the G-20 summit in London. "But that's not the world we live in, and it shouldn't be the world that we live in."<sup>56</sup>

It is not enough that the UN be made to work. It must be seen to work for all. Obama may be the leader who makes Americans and other citizens of the world agree on the need for a new grand bargain, a third generation of international organizations. "It is much easier to prescribe American foreign policy if you don't take the rest of the world into account," just as "global discussions about what American policy should be are much more elegant if they don't take into account American interests and needs!"<sup>57</sup> The choreography of any grand bargain is delicate. It will happen in stages, with all parties giving up something to get something. The era of unending U.S. gains through the application of unilateral power is over, but there can be addition by subtraction. Compromises that preserve a substantial degree of U.S. persuasiveness in the long term are worth sacrificing some power in the short term.

There are still many members of the contemporary flat-earth society for whom the mere mention of "the benignly labeled 'global governance' movement" is anathema.<sup>58</sup> For those whose ears do not pick up the humming of black helicopters but rather a loud collective sigh of relief with the prospect for enhanced international cooperation under an Obama administration, we are obliged to ask ourselves whether we can approach anything that resembles effective global governance without something that looks much more like government at the global level. It is necessary to respect subsidiarity, or the commonsense principle that higher levels of society should not take on tasks and functions that can be accomplished better at lower levels. At a minimum, however, more creative thinking about more robust intergovernmental organizations is required to address many pressing threats. We also need more passionate or less embarrassed advocacy for steps leading toward elements of a European Union-like supranationality for the world, rather than hoping somehow that the decentralized system of states and a pooling of corporate and civil society efforts will be sufficient to ensure human survival and dignity.

Paradoxically, intergovernmental organizations seem more marginal at exactly the moment when enhanced multilateralism is so sorely required. Ironically, this reality coincides with a period when globalization—especially advances in information and communication technologies along with reduced barriers to

**How soon will we have the audacity to revert to thinking about world government?**

transnational exchanges of goods, capital, and services of people, ideas, and cultural influences—makes something resembling institutions with at least some characteristics of supranationality appear feasible. As Daniel Deudney and Ikenberry stated in a recent article, “[T]he relentless imperatives of rising global interdependence create powerful and growing incentives for states to engage in international cooperation.”<sup>59</sup>

Current intergovernmental organizations are insufficient in scope and ambition, inadequate in resources and reach, and incoherent in policies and philosophies. Annan often referred to “problems without passports.”<sup>60</sup> If solutions without passports are necessary to address climate change, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, terrorism, and numerous other threats, how soon will the international community, including the Obama administration, have the audacity to revert to thinking about the old-fashioned concept of world government?

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