

Balancing Bureaucracy and the Individual: Institutional Reform and Peace Operations

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“We need to encourage the role of ‘commandos’—not in a military sense, but in the civil realm. We need a small group of individuals who can operate within institutions but also take personal responsibility for their actions and decisions.”

Modern institutions, both national and international, have by and large achieved their central goal: to keep the irrationality of the individual (namely the sovereign) outside the decisionmaking process. The collective decisionmaking process that has evolved is thoroughly internalized in our daily lives. Although it may seem provocative, I have started to wonder whether this success has caused even greater problems, especially in the United Nations. By emphasizing the collective to the detriment of the individual, the institution has become a shield for individual accountability and has forgotten the importance of individual genius and initiative. A new theory of institutions, which combines the strength of their structures with the genius of individuals, should be developed.

KEEPING THE WHIMS OF KINGS AT BAY . . .

Collective decisionmaking processes symbolize the success of modern institutions. No longer does the whim of the king rule the land. Instead, the rationality of collective decisions prevails. Bureaucracies developed these rational models in an effort to

create a more effective and efficient process, with the implicit and logical assumption that a collective decision was more likely to be rational than an individual decision. And of course, the principles of fairness and justice followed rationality.

These processes are now part and parcel of our daily lives, and the system of checks and balances, which varies from institution to institution, has become a requirement of most societies. All institutions and individuals are forced to operate within the confines of a bureaucracy. As a result, institutions and institutional structures—which transform collective decisions into actions—are stronger and more powerful than any individual. The irrationality of the individual has been, so to speak, outlawed. And collective decisionmaking is par excellence a demonstration of democracy and successful social evolution.

. . . HAS BACKFIRED?

We have become so used to collective decisions that we often attribute to them the ability to decide, to choose and to judge, and we have started to believe that responsibility is also collective. In my opinion, most institutional problems stem from these erroneous assumptions. The dependence on collective accountability may well be the indication that institutions are too successful, that they have become convenient scapegoats for individuals.

Bureaucracies often pride themselves on the fact that their officers are anonymous: they take satisfaction in the humility of not being identified. So, it has become a virtue for a bureaucrat to hide his individuality behind the institution itself. That is fine indeed. But bureaucrats often feel that just as recognition should go only to the institution, blame also should be attributed only to the institution. Does that imply that the institution alone is responsible?

Institutions do not have brains, but the individuals who make up the institutions do. Institutions do not cast votes and debate their opinions, but individuals do.

The United Nations is no exception. The secretary-general, commenting on the unfolding tragedy in the Balkans in the mid-

1990s, complained that it was not his fault, but that of the institution. However, the secretary-general is a part of and presides over that institution. I have often wondered what would have happened if the UN secretary-general had moved his personal office to the besieged city of Sarajevo. Despite the inability of the Security Council to act, what if the secretary-general had staked his credibility on the issue? What was the worst case scenario—his death? How many UN officials have died in the line of duty? Would history have changed? We will never know. But we do know that neither the image of the United Nations nor that of its leader profited from that tragedy.

Over the last few decades we have moved gradually in the direction of bringing individual responsibility back to the forefront of international affairs. International war crimes tribunals are a splendid example of this change, and we are actually holding some individual leaders accountable for their actions.

PRECEDENTS AND INDIVIDUAL GENIUS

Due to their reliance on the collective, bureaucracies often resort to precedents and mathematical models. However, organizations such as the United Nations often deal with crises that result from the whims of dictators and warlords (i.e., irrational individuals). We cannot deal with such unexpected events using only the logical models of our collective decisionmaking processes. We cannot apply precedents to new events. Instead, institutions should reintegrate the genius of the individual into their policies.

A little individual initiative can make the difference between victory and defeat. The first battle of the Marne in World War I exemplifies the importance of flexibility. Before the beginning of the war, the German general staff had prepared a logical plan for the attack.

The plan had been waiting, perfect in every detail for almost a decade before it was used. In other words the German General Staff was, if anything, over-prepared. But when that perfect logic ran up against reality on the banks of the Marne, the whole machine stopped. . .

. The French army had the advantage of being marginally less organized. . . . This meant there was just enough room for individual initiative. . . . [The French generals] Gallieni and Joffre stopped the Germans by acting irrationally.¹

If we had followed precedent and stuck to the rationality of the system, we would never have liberated the Western hostages from Beirut in the early 1990s. Imagine a secretary-general with no mandate, no official request to act (except from the families of victims) and accordingly no budget, who eventually accomplished what several intelligence services had already failed to do. Terry Anderson, Terry Waite, the other nine Western hostages and more than 100 Lebanese detained without due process did not care about the logic of precedents and mandates; they just wanted to be freed.

I believe we violated a number of UN rules during that operation. At the time, I knew that if I failed to negotiate their release, I would have been forced to take personal responsibility and resign. To be sure, that operation could not have succeeded without the structure that the institution provided and which I fully exploited: communications, transportation, logistical support and human resources.

Integrating Commandos into Institutional Structures

On one hand, we need to retain collective decisionmaking processes and institutional structures. The core of the United Nations engine is to ensure international legitimacy for some nations' policies and actions while allowing others to participate in the collective decisionmaking process. The structures that have been established serve this purpose successfully.

The UN secretary-general appointed a group of specialists (including me) for the 2001 Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. We prepared a book about the dialogue as a methodology to facilitate a new paradigm of international relations and presented it to the secretary-general. In it we stated that the United

¹ John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (New York : Free Press, 1992) p. 197.

Nations was a locus where an international social contract has been struck.

The global social contract is based on the need for legitimacy by some and the request for participation in the decision making process by others. Both sides may refuse to grant what they possess, but both sides in part do possess one of the two currencies: either the ability to grant legitimacy or the ability to grant participation in the [collective] decision making process.²

The organization only works when this deal is made. If member states are not interested or do not agree to the deal, the organization by and large works poorly.

But on the other hand, we need to encourage the role of “commandos”—not in a military sense, but in the civil realm. We need a small group of individuals who can operate within institutions but also take personal responsibility for their actions and decisions. If commandos succeed, the organization wins. If they fail, they resign or get fired, but the organization does not fail.

A commando does not go by precedent and does not seek another signature to cover his or her own responsibility. A commando galvanizes and inspires others to achieve what has never been done, not what has been done before. There are already a few such men and women in every organization. There is no question that in the United Nations, the first commando can be and perhaps should be the secretary-general. His or her ultimate objective is clear: to disabuse those who perceive diversity as a threat and to allay the fear of those who see common values as a path toward homogenization.

Commandos and institutions are not mutually exclusive; instead they are complementary. One cannot succeed without the other. Therefore social scientists should perhaps attempt to construct an institutional theory that combines elements of structural rationality with the unpredictability of human nature. And

² *Crossing the Divide: Dialogue Among Civilizations* (South Orange, NJ: Seton Hall University, 2001) p. 186.

in practice, I would like to see institutions such as the United Nations lose their fear of commandos.

THE FUTURE OF PEACE OPERATIONS

The United Nations may be more successful when it operates outside precedents, but structure and planning are still needed. We learned in the 1990s that traditional peacekeeping—i.e., a separation force between two neighboring states—was only one of the possible scenarios. We often found ourselves peacekeeping within failed states, but we believed that these states were generally marginal and would not constitute a major threat to peace and security beyond their own immediate region.

The idea of a marginal failed state, however, may be a misconception. Since the end of the Cold War, the mafia, drug cartels and terrorist groups have tried to seize and capitalize on weak state structures. From Latin America to the Balkans and beyond, we have witnessed as much. Clearly, a failed state represents an easier prey for those groups, although it had never before happened quite as successfully as it did in Afghanistan. With a failed state in the hands of a transnational group, which operated outside the confines of international law, the marginal state did not only harm itself and a few others in the region.

This is the challenge, for UN peacekeeping and peacemaking for the future. At the peacemaking level the issue is whether we can negotiate with everybody and over everything. As the types of actors on the international scene expand, the question is no longer as easy to answer. Non-state actors have deprived the nation-state of its monopoly on political power as well as its monopoly on the use force. Ironically, despite the increase in the number of member states, there are more players on the international scene with no seat in the United Nations than ever before.

What is equally ironic is that they have been brought into the UN negotiating processes, nevertheless. From the Balkans to Sierra Leone to Afghanistan, the UN secretary-general's envoys have negotiated with parties that we never would have thought about talking to a mere 20 years ago. (Back then, more than in-

genuity was needed to communicate with the Turkish Cypriot community, which was not a recognized entity, and contacts with the Afghan opposition in the early 1980s were pursued only in secret.)

Peace operations have changed in other respects as well. UN peacemaking is often a joint venture with regional organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), NATO or the European Union. Although some say that we live in a unipolar world, we also live in a world where power is dispersed to an unknown degree. After all, al-Qaeda emerged during the time of US hegemony, not during the Cold War era.

The Aftermath of September 11

The UN response to the events surrounding September 11 demonstrates the adaptability and changes that have already begun within the system. In 1993 and 1994, some high-level UN official—today no longer with the organization—received a detailed account of how foreign extremist groups were infiltrating Afghanistan and setting up a state within a state that would have ramifications far outside the borders of that sad country. The warning was so impressively prophetic that it is hard to imagine. Of course it was a warning that could not have been handled by invoking any precedent, let alone without rocking the boat. So little action was taken.

But in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the member states looked toward the United Nations to provide legitimacy and individual leadership. No other organization could have offered a better framework within which member states could unite against terrorism. More important, no other organization could have provided the same level of legitimacy for the international community. UN Security Council Resolution 1373, which requires every member state to implement financial and administrative measures against terrorists, was passed on 29 September 2001 and is likely the most significant UN contribution to

the struggle against terrorism.³ The resolution is unprecedented in both substance and scope. It is not only mandatory, as all Security Council resolutions are, but also demands wide-ranging changes in domestic legislation and administrations. Additionally, sanctions can be imposed if member states fail to comply.

Furthermore, UN commandos of sorts were given an opportunity to effect change. Kofi Annan selected Lakhdar Brahimi as his envoy for the peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan. We would probably not have achieved a positive result at the Bonn Conference without him. The context and the individual worked together, and the structure of the institution and the genius of that individual did make a difference. When asked whether the Kosovo or East Timor examples were points of reference, Brahimi answered in the negative. We could not have used a precedent or model to respond successfully to what happened in Afghanistan after September 11, a situation that had never existed before.

Lastly, the international force in Afghanistan received the UN's blessing but was not per se a UN force. This does not represent a defeat for the organization. The international community looked toward the United Nations for legitimacy. Surely the challenges raised by the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in failed states is unlike others that the blue helmets have faced before. And this will remain a trial for the future.

CONCLUSION

Under the right leadership, the organization has shown a tremendous ability to adapt to change, even if the reforms are not formalized and institutionalized. This adaptability is mainly attributable to the individual capacity and genius of those within the system, both at the government and at the UN secretariat level. These individuals have learned how to take into account changes without calling for institutional reforms and entering a minefield of endless debates.

³ For the full text of the resolution, see online at: <<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2001/sc7158.doc.htm>>.

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Institutions do adapt to change. But to be successful, perhaps it is important not to openly state that change is happening. Therefore, the UN's institutional structure does prepare it to deal with the most implacable rule of all—perpetual change—albeit quietly. 🏰