

***Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations*, by Stephen C. Schlesinger**

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Schlesinger, Stephen C. *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations*. Colorado: Westview Press, 2003. xviii + 374 + notes, index.

Modern diplomacy, as embodied by its most essential institution—the maintenance of plenipotentiary ambassadors in foreign capitals—has existed for about five hundred years. The idea that sovereign states could improve their chances of survival by combining together in a federal association is almost as old. It first appeared in a work entitled *Le nouveau Cynée* (1623) by the French monk Émeric Crucé.^[1] In common with earlier humanist writers like Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, Crucé believed that the prevalence of war in human affairs was a reflection of wickedness and stupidity. Its remedy, however, lay not in a transformation of human nature, but in reform of the international system. The surest way for states to restrain their natural propensity for conflict was to submit their disputes to a permanent international assembly, comprised of representatives of the great potentates of Europe, Asia, and Africa; which assembly would possess the collective wisdom to do justice, and the collective strength to enforce agreements. The resulting decline in international violence would in turn reduce the prestige of entrenched warrior elites, and encourage the rise of social groups dedicated to pacific pursuits like commerce and agriculture. Of these Crucé judged the most important to be international trade, whose free exercise was constitutive of, and dependent on, the maintenance of peace. As for the hard men of war, he believed they would find their place as members of professional armies designed to suppress pirates, "savages," and other renegades who threatened the system.

Crucé's work fell on stony soil, and was soon forgotten, though his hope that free trade might encourage international harmony would find an echo, a century and a half later, in the works of early capitalist theorists like François Quesnay and Adam Smith. They and their followers argued that, as markets expanded to encompass more of mankind, the hidden hand that insured their efficient and peaceful operation would embrace the realm of politics as well. Political practitioners, however, were fully persuaded that war could be a paying proposition, at least for the winners; while political theorists, whose main concern was to define the source and boundaries of state power, tended to follow the lead of Crucé's great contemporaries, Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes, who regarded war as a necessary evil that might be moderated or rendered more efficient, but could scarcely be dispensed with. Even those who favored peace and liberty as the ultimate ends of politics agreed that these values counted for little in the state of nature, the notional space where all sovereignties were imagined to reside. Although schemes for perpetual peace based on universal arbitration continued to appear from time to time, they remained curiosities.

The idea of a great international federation moved from the realm of abstract utopianism to that of practical politics because of its forcible advocacy by the United States. That advocacy, needless

to say, has been disconcertingly inconstant. The United States intervened in the First World War after its president, Woodrow Wilson, had concluded that traditional international practices could not insure against a recurrence of war on a scale of destructiveness that dwarfed the political objectives of the belligerents. Having successfully lobbied his reluctant allies for the creation of a League of Nations, however, Wilson bungled the ratification process back home. America and the League drifted apart, and Americans were left to glare disapprovingly from the sidelines as their erstwhile partners grappled with the rise of fascism in Europe and Asia.

Yet the call to international engagement was not silenced, above all in the Democratic Party, which included ratification of the League charter in its platform throughout the 1920s. Its standard-bearer in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt, had been part of the American delegation at Versailles, and came away convinced of the League's necessity. Roosevelt interpreted the failures of the League in the 1930s as a sign not that collective security was hopeless, but that a more robust system of enforcement was required. While accepting that the legitimacy of any international organization depended on the sovereign equality of its membership, he also recognized that, as a practical matter, only the Great Powers could keep the peace. In the 1940s German and Japanese aggression overwhelmed the temperamental and ideological barriers that had kept those Powers apart, and Roosevelt was determined that they should remain together afterwards, as the guarantors and "policemen" of a new world order. A strong system of post-war collective security was an explicit American aim even before the United States entered the war, and its appeal to American opinion was enormous. As Stephen Schlesinger observes in his new book, *Act of Creation*, polling in the spring of 1945 revealed that eighty per cent of Americans supported the establishment of the United Nations (67), a much higher percentage than had favored going to war in the first place.^[2]

Roosevelt believed that founding the U.N. would be his greatest achievement. He did not live to accomplish it. His death on April 12, 1945, is the starting point for Schlesinger's book, which tells the story of the conference convened in San Francisco thirteen days later, where delegates from forty-six nations came together to draft and sign the U.N. Charter. It is a circumstantial account, surprisingly gripping considering that its subject is, in essence, two months of meetings and memoranda. Schlesinger leavens his mass of evidence by paying close attention to the personalities of his protagonists, whose "unusual intellect and honest idealism" (xviii) he admires. Among these the spotlight falls most consistently on the head of the American delegation, Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, who served as the conference president. Stettinius, a wealthy business executive with limited international experience, was generally held in scant regard by his contemporaries, but here he receives appropriately high marks for his skillful handling of the conference's day-to-day proceedings, and for his management of the competing pressures to which the American delegation was subject. Schlesinger's book lacks the analytic edge of Robert Hilderbrand's study of the Dumbarton Oaks conference of 1944,^[3] where the basic outlines of the United Nations' organization were hammered out among representatives of the United States, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union. It offers instead a strong sense of how much contingency and uncertainty attended the final steps toward the UN's creation. San Francisco was a place where a lot could still go wrong, and for the most part didn't, owing to the good judgment and dedication of the people who were there.

The San Francisco conference convened in the shadow of two wars, the World War then in its final throes, and the Cold War, whose early auspices haunt Schlesinger's tale. Roosevelt had forced the pace of post-war planning, because he believed that once the guns fell silent the competing national objectives of the victors would reassert themselves, as they had at Versailles a quarter-century before. By the spring of 1945, however, the end was already sufficiently in sight that the attention of the winners had begun to turn toward how best to claim their shares of the fruits of victory.

For the Soviets this meant first of all the elimination of any possible threat from a restored Germany. American planners accepted the justice of this, but assumed that Soviet anxiety could be sufficiently assuaged by the exclusive presence of small, militarily insignificant states along the

Soviets' western frontier, backed by an explicit mechanism of Great Power oversight in which the U.S.S.R. would have a decisive say. They were mistaken. The Soviet effort to establish a system of indirect rule in Eastern Europe was well underway by the time the San Francisco conference began, and it cast a pall over the proceedings, by heightening American suspicions of their most important negotiating partner, and by opening the American delegation to charges that any concession to Soviet wishes amounted to appeasement—as was said, for instance, of the decision to allow the Soviet Union two additional seats in the General Assembly (for Ukraine and Belarus), in order to balance America's preponderant influence in Latin America.

Next to managing relations with the Soviets, the greatest challenge facing Stettinius and his colleagues was to insure that the results of the conference would be acceptable to the United States Congress, where suspicion of any arrangement prejudicial to American sovereignty ran high. The League had been doubly damned in American eyes, for lacking adequate enforcement powers, and for lacking any means by which the United States (had it been a member) could have opted out of military obligations imposed against its will. The means by which this circle was to be squared was the U.N. Security Council, which would have the authority to enforce whatever measures it deemed necessary to keep the peace, while affording the Great Powers, who would be Permanent Members,^[4] the right to veto any action of which they disapproved.

On this matter Soviet and American interests converged, up to a point: neither was prepared to be bound by any majority of which it was not a part. The Soviets, however, wanted to extend the veto to include questions of "procedure," which would have given Permanent Members the right to prevent any questions they found awkward from even being discussed. This the Americans could not swallow. Nor could the representatives of the forty-odd smaller states also present in San Francisco, who were aware that they were being asked to accept second-class status in the new organization, and declined the Soviet offer of a muzzle. It was on this question that the conference came closest to failure, only to be saved by Stalin himself, who told his representative, Vyacheslav Molotov, to accept the American plan for a more limited veto, since the issue was "insignificant" (217).

Reading Schlesinger's account of Stalin slicing through the Gordian Knot of the San Francisco conference, one cannot but feel the cold breath of Realpolitik on the back of one's neck. Stalin regarded the San Francisco negotiations as one element in a comprehensive settlement with the United States, the success of which, from his point of view, would require American acceptance of an extensive Soviet sphere of influence in Eurasia, and the effective neutralization of Central (and perhaps Western) Europe. Failure to reach agreement on this larger question did indeed render the details of the U.N.'s organization insignificant, and it is difficult in retrospect to see how this could have been avoided.

The Cold War consigned the U.N. to the realm of "soft power," from which it has lately struggled to emerge, in order to confront the myriad threats to peace and order that fifty years of East-West confrontation left unaddressed. It has been a dispiriting spectacle. As originally constituted, the United Nations is ill-adapted to our present moment, whose requirements were, to say the least, unanticipated at San Francisco. Its Charter enshrines the sovereignty of its members as the preeminent value of global politics and envisions no legitimate use of military force apart from the defense of one state against attack by another. Moving beyond this stale consensus toward one better able to contend with terrorism, genocide, nuclear proliferation, and egregious misrule, is now the central challenge of international relations, and one on which the struggle to create the U.N. casts some useful light. Collective security, as Schlesinger demonstrates, must embrace democratic values to the extent that it can, and may even encourage democratic reform, but it is not a democratic process in itself. It depends, rather, on the mutual trust and confidence of the relatively small number of advanced societies that are strong enough and rich enough to play the kind of constabulary role that Roosevelt, and for that matter Crucé, envisioned for them. For nearly a century, leadership for this kind of revolutionary re-invention has come overwhelming from the United States, and it is for this reason that America's current disillusionment with the possibilities of collective security, and the collapse of its foreign policy into unilateralism and

preventive war, pose such grave risks for the future. It is because of the United States that remorseless anarchy is no longer an absolute given of international politics. This is a considerable achievement, and one that should not lightly be thrown away.

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References

1. In English as *The New Cyneas of Émeric Crucé*, edited and translated by Thomas Willing Balch (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane and Scott, 1909). The original Cyneaus was an advisor to the Hellenistic King Pyrrhus of Epirus (319-272 BD), whose atavistic military adventures are recalled in the expression "Pyrrhic victory."
2. Public opinion polls taken a month before Pearl Harbor showed that only forty-seven per cent of Americans favored intervention in the war in Europe, even if failing to intervene meant a German victory. See Robert Dallek, *Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 311.
3. Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: The Origins of the United Nations and the Search for Postwar Security* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
4. The Permanent Members were originally the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China. France was added during the San Francisco conference. France had earlier declined Permanent Membership, in the hope of assuming *de facto* leadership of the small states.