The Illusions of Internationalizing World Politics

Ernest W. Lefever
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On December 31, 1984, the United States withdrew its participation in and support of UNESCO because that international body had become politicized and had lost sight of its original purpose of encouraging scientific, cultural, and educational advancement, primarily in the Third World. In mid-January of this year, the United States decided not to participate in the Nicaraguan case before the World Court because that case was, in the words of the State Department, “a misuse of the Court for political and propaganda purposes.” Alan Romberg, the department spokesman added: “We profoundly hope that the Court does not go the way of other international organizations that have become politicized against the interests of the Western democracies.” The World Court, which the United States joined in 1949, decided in November 1984 by a vote of 15 to 1 to take up the charge of Nicaragua’s Sandinista regime that the United States had violated international law by supporting anti-Sandinista guerrillas and mining a Nicaraguan port.

In an editorial criticizing the U.S. decision not to participate in the Nicaraguan case, the New York Times (January 20, 1985) said: “Strictly speaking, there being no world government, there’s no such thing as world law. There is no parliament to write the law and no policeman to enforce it. Yet there sits this thing called the World Court, pretending for much of this century not only to adjudicate some disputes between governments but also to define some norms of international behavior . . .” The editorial acknowledged there is “legitimate doubt” whether this was an appropriate case for the Court (which was never intended to have jurisdiction over warfare) and “whether all the Court’s judges are sufficiently independent of their government’s policies.”

The Times inexplicably concluded that the United States is wrong for thumbing its nose at this “strange but real institution.” The editorial reveals a persistent confusion between the realities of international politics and the dream of taming

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the perennial struggle of power by internationalizing the process for adjudicating, resolving, or preventing conflict among sovereign states. It is this confusion I wish to address.

The Nature of Contemporary World Politics

World politics is a vast, unending drama with history as its stage. Its actors today are some 160 legally sovereign states, with the two superpowers as the chief antagonists. The U.N. Charter confers “sovereign equality” on all states, but as Samuel Grafton commented as the charter was being drafted: “Even after you give the squirrel a certificate which says that he is quite as big as an elephant, he is still going to be smaller, and all the squirrels will know it and all the elephants will know it.” (New York Post, November 23, 1943). Continuing the image, some states are like lions, some like jackals, some like sheep, and some like mice. There are predatory states and peaceful states. There are live-and-let-live governments and even live-and-help-live governments.

World politics, like all politics, is a struggle of power and purpose. Morality or ethics is an inescapable element in all political behavior because such behavior, especially on the part of the superpowers, has consequences for good or ill. After World War II, Moscow incorporated Eastern Europe into its “evil empire.” In contrast, the United States and its allies transformed Western Europe into a zone of freedom. President Truman’s decision in 1950 to defend South Korea from Communist aggression succeeded in preserving the freedom and independence of more than 30 million people. Moscow’s invasion of Afghanistan has brought death and destruction to millions. The less than adequate U.S. effort to defend the independence of South Vietnam led to its ultimate conquest by an ally of the Soviet Union with dire consequences for the Vietnamese people and for the state and people of Cambodia. We could multiply examples.

We live in a dangerous world. Those who seek independence, freedom, and genuine self-determination are threatened by both chaos and predatory states, the most powerful and brutal being the Soviet Union. There are also local conflicts that have little to do with vital superpower interests, but most regional conflicts involve the Soviet Union and the United States. Since Hiroshima, there have been some 140 conflicts fought with conventional weapons which killed more than ten million people. Independent states are threatened by outright aggression as in Afghanistan, by externally sup-
ported subversion as in El Salvador, and by international terrorism.

The threat of nuclear war is often given center stage, but perhaps equally dangerous is capitulation to nuclear blackmail. For forty years the nuclear balance of terror has held firm in spite of the forward surge of Soviet nuclear might in the past fifteen years. The U.S. determination to offset partially the threat posed by Soviet SS-20 missiles targeted against NATO military facilities and cities from Oslo to Istanbul has enhanced stability and made capitulation to Soviet political demands less likely.

We live in a world where our most cherished values—freedom, order, justice, respect for human dignity—are threatened by chaos, local and regional conflict, and the predatory imperialism of the Soviet Union. It is not quite a Hobbesian world of a “war of every man against every man” because men are not totally selfish and there are historical forces of order and decency at work. These constructive forces must be harnessed to the power of governments if they are to make their full contribution.

_Rational Idealism vs. Historical Realism_

The human drama is not without meaning. The Judeo-Christian tradition asserts that our worldly existence is characterized by a struggle between good and evil. In political terms this means a struggle between freedom and tyranny, justice and injustice, human right and oppression. Biblical religion declares both what is and what ought to be. It asks and answers two questions of central concern to understanding ethics and world politics: “What is the human situation?” and “What is the duty of man?” An understanding of what is is essential for understanding what ought to be.

Morally concerned persons in their zeal often become so preoccupied with the imperatives of human responsibility that they ignore the realities of human existence. This is especially true in the world arena where few people experience the limitations on human action they take for granted in their daily lives. This undisciplined moral fervor has often lead to utopian crusades that have ended in disaster. The long road from Versailles to Pearl Harbor and beyond is cluttered with the whitened bones of crusades that failed—the League of Nations, peace through economic planning, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, world peace through world law, and world government, to name a few.
These crusades failed not for lack of good intentions or enthusiasm but because the crusaders tended to believe that morally desirable goals were politically possible because they were morally desirable. They misread the facts of current history and the possibilities of the future because they failed to understand the tragedies and contingencies of the whole realm of history. They misunderstood history because they did not understand the limits and possibilities of human nature. As Reinhold Niebuhr has said: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." James Madison expressed the same view in Federalist Paper 50: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

Both Madison and Niebuhr are proponents of what Niebuhr called historical realism as opposed to rational idealism. Rational idealism is the child of the Enlightenment and Social Darwinism, and in its pure form it affirms the perfectibility, or at least the improbability, of man and the possibility, if not the inevitability, of progress in history. It has confidence in the triumph of man's nobler nature and tends to rely on reason as the redemptive agent that can save man and politics and eventually usher in an era of universal peace.

In contrast, historical realism emphasizes the moral limits of human nature and history and has its roots in St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Edmund Burke, and Madison, along with most classical Western thinkers. Rejecting all forms of religious and secular utopianism—including Facism and Communism—the post-Versailles realists have included men as varied as Niebuhr, Carl L. Becker, Winston Churchill, and Dean Acheson. Noting that the extravagant expectation of the Wilsonian ideals were not ratified by subsequent events, the realists hold that all political achievements are limited by man's dogged resistance to drastic reconstruction. Thus, perfect peace, justice, security, and freedom are not possible in this world, though approximations of these lofty goals are not beyond man's grasp.

To the rational idealist, the "impossible ideal" is achievable because it is rationally conceivable. To the historical realist, the "impossible ideal" is relevant because it lends humility without despair and hope without illusion.

Of course, there are few consistent rational idealists or historical realists, but we all tend to lean in one direction or the other. Most Americans appear to be more optimistic about the distant future than about the present where the problems and difficulties are more vividly perceived.
Many rational idealists seem to assume that international action and institutions are more noble or moral than unilateral actions by states. A brief glance at recent history will explode this assumption. The Communist International was hardly a benign force, nor is the Warsaw pact by which Moscow holds its "allies" in thrall and threatens the freedom of Western Europe. Few people would regard OPEC a constructive force. And, of course, many unilateral actions by states are constructive—ranging from self defense to helping an ally to defend itself. The simple assertion that international action is better than national action reminds one of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "Two Legs Bad, Four Legs Good." It is the moral quality and political wisdom of behavior that counts, whether that behavior is expressed unilaterally, bilaterally, or through a regional or near-universal international agency.

There is little debate about the necessity for and desirability of governments cooperating with other governments to achieve common ends. The political and moral confusion arises when it is argued that state behavior has a higher ethical status or "does more good" if it is channeled through and disciplined by a near-universal organization like the League of Nations, the United Nations, or the World Court. The problem becomes even more serious when it is suggested that these universal agencies should be endowed with power and sovereignty to curtail or limit the sovereignty of the participating states.

In structural terms, world politics can operate in only two ways—with one government or with more than one government. From the beginning of history we have had the second system—more than one government, whether isolated tribes, tribes in conflict, city states, territorial states, nation states, or empire states. Some rational idealists and many utopians believe that wars, conflict, aggression, and tyranny could be eliminated if we somehow could transform the multi-state system into a one-state system. They believe world government would solve our problems. But as Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out in his classic essay, "The Illusion of World Government" (*Foreign Affairs*, April 1949), an inclusive international government invested with sovereign power was neither politically possible nor morally desirable. Sovereignty is the right to act without asking the permission of any external agency. Would the Soviet Union, or for that matter,
the United States, surrender this right to a higher authority without the assurance that the values each regime cherishes most would be fully protected in the new arrangement? Competent Western observers believe that the highest value of the men in the Kremlin is to hold on to the power and privileges they enjoy. No universal government could offer them this. The U.S. government and the American people likewise could not be assured that the new universal order would preserve the freedoms we now enjoy. Hence, neither the superpowers nor the lesser states are prepared to sacrifice their sovereignty to a superstate.

Even if it were possible, world government would not be morally desirable because one global authority would be tempted to become absolute and tyrannical. The new elite would enjoy a monopoly of the instruments of coercion. Since there would be no external foe, there would be no need for an army to protect the state against external danger. But there would be a world police force to deal with the dangers from within—insurrection, disaffection, secession, conflict, terrorism, and other crimes. Unless the citizens of the world state and the tribes, classes and interest groups they belong to would be radically transformed into peaceful and benign persons and organizations, conflict would persist. The universal dream would probably become a universal nightmare. Niebuhr concludes his critique of world government with these words: "We may have pity upon, but can have no sympathy with, those who flee to the illusory security of the impossible from the insecurities and ambiguities of the possible."

What is Both Possible and Responsible?

Laying aside the illusion of world government, some idealists insist that we should develop "global systems of governance" (whatever that means) and as a first step strengthen and improve the United Nations. If by "strengthening" the United Nations is meant endowing it with a measure of sovereignty, this is by definition impossible. Sovereignty is not divisible. A state either has it or it does not. The claim that sovereignty can be shared reminds me of the esteemed lady in Madrid who was honored with "The Order of Chastity—Second Class."

When a state submits a dispute with another state for arbitration and is willing to abide by the result it has not surrendered its sovereignty, but affirmed it. By submitting a par-
ticular issue to a "higher authority" or to a third party, the state is exercising its sovereign right to act unilaterally or otherwise. After all, it submits for external judgment only what it wishes to. Members of the Common Market in Europe have not given up their sovereignty; they are affirming it by voluntarily joining other states to achieve common objectives. When their vital interests are at stake, governments will withdraw from the jurisdiction of any agency that infringes on those interests, just as the United States has refused to acknowledge the jurisdiction of the World Court in the Nicaraguan case.

The complicated and confusing conglomeration known as the U.N. system that includes the World Court, the Security Council, the General Assembly, and a score of specialized agencies presents an interesting problem. As an historical realist and a student of world politics, I believe that no part of the U.N. system can or should be given sovereign authority. In fact, no related agency claims to possess any. The United Nations is not a supernational entity with a mind, will, and power of its own. It is a forum, a continuing conference for member states who do and should use it as an instrument of statecraft.

The World Court convenes only when two or more contending governments agree to submit to its jurisdiction and its opinions cannot be imposed on any state. Decisions of the General Assembly are not binding. The Security Council has a built-in veto; consequently any of the five permanent members can prevent action deemed inimical to its interests.

The specialized agencies have no independent existence apart from supporting member states. All of these agencies could and some of them have operated independent of the U.N. system. The Universal Postal Union was established long before the United Nations. Related U.N. agencies, such as UNESCO, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the International Telecommunication Union, and UNICEF could operate, and probably more effectively, wholly independent from the political United Nations.

Because of the lofty aspirations articulated in its Charter and subsequent declarations on human rights, the United Nations is a symbol of international cooperation and peace even as it reflects the dangerous and divided world as it is. There is little evidence to support the conclusion that either the Security Council or the General Assembly has made a contribution to peace or nation-building that could not have made more effectively if there were no United Nations. All U.N.
peacekeeping efforts have been carried out only with the consent of the states directly involved and the support of other states that sought the same limited objective. All of these operations could have been conducted as well or better and with less political cost without the involvement of the Security Council or the Assembly.

The four-year U.N. expeditionary force sent to the Congo (now Zaire) in 1960 to maintain the peace and assist in strengthening a newly independent state involved 94,000 men from 34 states. The cost was $411 million, of which the United States paid 42 percent. After a thorough examination of this largest international peacekeeping mission in history, I came to some sobering conclusions. (See Lefever, Crisis in the Congo: A United Nations Force in Action, Brookings Institution, 1965, and Uncertain Mandate: Politics of the U.N. Congo Operation, Johns Hopkins Press, 1967.) The U.N. Congo mission did not suspend either internal or international politics. By internationalizing the crisis, it magnified it and probably prolonged the conflict, while at the same time occasionally muting the violence of the internal adversaries. Designed to insulate the Congo from the Cold War, the mission insured that the Cold War would be waged there, but under constraints that, as it turned out, furthered the interests of the United States and frustrated the objectives of the Soviet Union. In retrospect, the goals of restoring order, consolidating the independence of the Congo, and thus serving the strategic interests of the West could have better been served by a joint Belgian, French, British, and U.S. peacekeeping effort.

On balance, the political United Nations since its creation in 1945 may have done more harm than good. The one-state-one-vote character of the Assembly both distorts political reality and subjects the members to bloc voting and manipulation that often results in resolutions that condemn responsible foreign policies and overlook irresponsible ones. As Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick has said of the General Assembly: "selective name-calling is almost entirely reserved for the United States and Israel. The Soviet Union goes unnamed in the resolution on Afghanistan; Vietnam goes unnamed in the resolution on Kampuchea—in both of which cases, aggressive, expansionist invasions and occupations took place." (Statement before the General Assembly, December 14, 1984.)

I would anticipate no great harm to our national interests or to the cause of peace, freedom, or justice were the United Nations to disappear. But as long as it is with us, we
should fight within it for honesty, fairness, and our interests as Ambassador Kirkpatrick has so effectively done. She has made a great contribution to reducing moralistic posturing, double-standards, and hypocrisy at the East River headquarters.

A Responsible U.S. Foreign Policy

Since the end of World War II the United States has sought to defend its security and that of its allies through NATO and other alliance arrangements. It has pursued trade, investment, and aid policies that respect the freedom and independence of all states. It has defined its national interest in terms broad enough to respect the legitimate interests of other states and peoples. Successive administrations have pursued a live-and-help-live policy. Our external policies have not been without flaws, but our shortcomings have been due more to innocence than to arrogance. The United States has been the major force for peace, freedom, and development since the end of World War II. In sharp contrast the Soviet Union has been the major threat to peace and freedom with its brutal, messianic, and expansionist policies.

The existence of the United Nations has not had a fundamental impact on the struggle between tyranny and freedom and has played virtually no role in curbing conventional conflict or in stabilizing the nuclear confrontation. If the United Nations has been a weak reed, or as some more severe critics would contend, a snare and a delusion, where can we turn for help in the unending task of seeking greater stability, freedom, and justice? How can we better curb aggression and subversion? How can we encourage and guarantee genuine self-determination and economic development in the Third World? How can we more effectively deter nuclear war and make capitulation to nuclear blackmail less likely?

As the leader of the Free World, the United States must recognize the realities of power and assume the responsibilities that history has thrust upon us. We must be true to our deepest values. At the same time we must be strong enough militarily, economically, and politically to deter the Soviet Union from further expansion by outright conquest, subversion, or nuclear blackmail. This means that we must recognize the importance of maintaining a balance of power in favor of freedom. Responsible power must be arrayed against irresponsible power. We must work for peace through strength, including spiritual strength, and we must defend
our interests with determination.

We do live in an interdependent world, but this interdependence cannot be expressed in an all-encompassing organization endowed with the power to suppress diversity and freedom in the name of universal security and order. In a world of many states, America should strengthen its alliances with democratic and other states that pursue live-and-let-live foreign policies. By diplomacy, trade, investment, economic aid, and military assistance we should seek to help Third World states to develop economically and politically. We should not attempt to flee power, but rather to use it in the cause of peace, security, and freedom.

The battle within history is never wholly won or lost. The struggle goes on. But we must turn our back on wishful thinking and utopian visions if our values and institutions are to survive. Winston Churchill introduced the final volume of his history of The Second World War with this theme: “How the Great Democracies Triumphed, and so Were able to Resume the Follies Which Had so Nearly Cost Them Their Life.” His grim warning is as valid today as it was in 1953 when he wrote it.