

Background

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Reform the United Nations

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President George W. Bush's major address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 23 was a powerful wake-up call for an organization that is in danger of becoming an outdated irrelevance on the world stage. At the dawn of the 21st century, the United Nations looks more like a glorified debating society than a serious global body designed to confront the world's growing threats and problems.

The inability of the U.N. to deal with the Iraqi dictatorship was symbolic of its broader failure to address the rising global threat posed by international terrorism and rogue states. The credibility of the United Nations was largely shattered by the Security Council's failure to address the Iraqi threat.¹ Instead of acting as an effective mechanism for advancing global security, the Security Council became a barrier to progress and was used as a tool by European nations such as France and Russia to try to limit the ability of the United States to act on the world stage.

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair displayed outstanding world leadership at a time when the United Nations demonstrated a lack of moral fortitude and a blatant unwillingness to enforce no fewer than 17 resolutions calling for Iraqi disarmament. Indeed, the appeasement of Saddam Hussein by members of the U.N. Security Council will go

1. This remains the case despite the Security Council's unanimous endorsement of Resolution 1511 on October 16, 2003. The resolution provided a framework for U.N. participation in the post-war reconstruction of Iraq.

- The United Nations should not have a veto over U.S. foreign policy, and Washington must not allow the U.N. to limit the freedom of the U.S. and other democratic nation-states to act in their own national interests.
- The Bush Administration should call for fundamental revision of the U.N. Charter to broaden the right of nation-states to self-defense in the face of mounting threats from rogue regimes and international terrorist networks.
- The Bush Administration should call upon other leading member states, such as Russia and China, to make greater contributions to the U.N. budget.
- The Bush Administration should call for the major reform of the U.N. Human Rights Commission and support the removal of tyrannical regimes from the commission.
- The Bush Administration should call for a thorough external audit of the United Nations to hold U.N. bureaucrats to a far greater level of accountability.

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down in history as one of the most shameful episodes of the early 21st century.

Unsurprisingly, the latest polls show that 60 percent of Americans believe the United Nations is doing a “poor job.”² It is an organization on life support. If it is to avoid going the way of its predecessor, the League of Nations, it must undergo radical restructuring that includes revision of its Charter, reform of its major commissions, and the streamlining of its bloated bureaucracy.

Wide-ranging reform will be critical to the U.N.’s future success, a point made forcefully by Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs Kim R. Holmes: “Fear of reform, not its prospect, holds the greater risk for the United Nations.”³

Key Goals for U.N. Reform

There should be six main goals for the United States in reforming the U.N.

1. **International Security.** The U.N. should be an effective multilateral body for addressing threats to international security, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
2. **U.S. National Sovereignty.** The U.N. should not limit the ability of the United States to ensure its own security and that of other democratic nation-states. The U.N. Charter should be revised to allow for the use of pre-emptive action against rogue regimes and state sponsors of terrorism.
3. **U.S. Funding for the U.N.** Funding should be more equitably distributed among U.N. member states. The current system, whereby the U.S. contributes far more than any other permanent member of the Security Council, is unfair. Non-permanent members of the Security Council should also contribute more. A greater level of funding by smaller member nations would give these countries a greater stake in the future of the organization.

4. **U.N. Bureaucracy.** The U.N. must not become a growing burden on the U.S. taxpayer, and it must provide value for money. The U.N. bureaucracy should be streamlined and made more cost-effective.
5. **Human Rights.** The U.N. should become a more effective force on the world stage in advancing human rights. The U.N. Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), currently chaired by Libya, has made a mockery of the U.N.’s supposed commitment to human rights.
6. **Ideological Agenda.** The U.N. should not be used as a vehicle by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for advancing radical left-wing social agendas. Although the U.S. has rejoined UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), it should make future funding conditional on reform.

The U.N. Security Council and Great Power Relations

In his address to the United Nations, President Bush warned of “the deadly combination of outlaw regimes, terror networks, and weapons of mass murder” and called on the nations of the world to “have the wisdom and the will to stop grave threats before they arrive.”⁴ The relevance of the U.N. in the coming years will be sorely tested by its willingness to deal with the growing crises over nuclear weapons production by Pyongyang and Tehran.

However, the U.N.’s past record does not bode well for the future. Since the Second World War, the United Nations generally, and the U.N. Security Council in particular, has sought to manage great power relations. As an organization, the United Nations is not suited to undertaking this responsibility. During the Cold War, the Security Council remained in stalemate as a result of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Subsequently, most key diplomacy involving U.S.—

2. For example, see the *CNN/USA Today*/Gallup poll of U.S. attitudes toward the United Nations conducted on August 25–26, 2003. Only 37 percent of respondents believed the U.N. was doing a “good job.”

3. Kim R. Holmes, Assistant Secretary of State, “The Challenges Facing the United Nations Today: An American View,” address to the Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2003, at www.cfr.org/publication.php?id=6451#.

4. President George W. Bush, “President Bush Addresses United Nations General Assembly,” September 23, 2003, at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030923-4.html.

Soviet relations, including arms control agreements and disputes over security matters, was handled on a bilateral basis and not through the Security Council. More recently, the Security Council has been fractured because of disagreements over a variety of issues, the effects of which have been seen, for example, in the Security Council's failure to uphold its own resolutions regarding Iraq.

The institutional structure of the United Nations needs to reflect a less ambitious set of institutional responsibilities. These responsibilities should focus on providing services for mediating and arbitrating disputes between member states and facilitating member states' participation in addressing humanitarian and social needs on a global basis.

Revised institutional structures at the United Nations need to account for the fact that every member state in good standing is sovereign. Further, these structures need to be organized to harness the sovereign authority exercised by each state for the purposes of maintaining peace and meeting humanitarian goals. Currently, they are designed to compete against sovereign authorities and usurp their powers. As a result, the existing Security Council structure is not appropriate to promoting cooperation in the exercise of sovereign authority by U.N. member states.

U.S. National Sovereignty: Rewriting the U.N. Charter

The right of member states to use force is too narrowly drawn. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter states: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations...." This right of self-defense is too narrowly conceived in two ways.

First, the existence of powerful weapons precludes states from waiting to be attacked first in all instances before defending themselves. The Bush Administration's National Security Strategy quite properly allows for the United States to take pre-emptive action in order to secure its people and institutions against attack. This policy is entirely appropriate, but the language of Article 51, at a minimum, raises questions about its legitimacy in the eyes of other states.⁵

Second, nation-states have legitimate reasons for resorting to the use of force in cases other than countering armed attacks across their borders or the borders of their allies. The language of Article 51 does not recognize this fact.

The criteria for exercising the legitimate use of force need to be broadened. The Charter should allow for pre-emptive action and recognize that nation-states have a right to use force when their vital interests are threatened.

U.S. Funding for the U.N.

Ever since the U.N. was created in 1945, the United States has been its biggest contributor. The United States currently contributes 22 percent of the U.N.'s regular budget. In contrast, France contributes 6.4 percent, Britain 5.54 percent, China 1.53 percent, and Russia 1.2 percent. Three nations—the United States, Japan, and Germany—contribute a disproportionately large amount of money to the U.N. regular budget: 51.3 percent of the total.⁶

Moreover, despite its high level of funding for the U.N., the United States is underrepresented in terms of U.N. personnel. American citizens make up just 7.2 percent of the total.⁷

U.S. contributions to the U.N. system in 2001 totaled \$3.5 billion, including \$612 million in

5. This point was raised by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan in his address to the U.N. General Assembly on September 23, 2003. According to Annan, "this logic represents a fundamental challenge to the principles on which, however imperfectly, world peace and stability have rested for the last 58 years. My concern is that, if it were to be adopted, it could set precedents that resulted in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force, with or without justification." See press release, "Adoption of Policy of Pre-Emption Could Result in Proliferation of Unilateral, Lawless Use of Force, Secretary-General Tells General Assembly," United Nations, September 23, 2003, at www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/sgsm8891.doc.htm.
6. Figures cited in Vita Bite, "UN System Funding: Congressional Issues," Congressional Research Service, September 10, 2003.
7. U.S. General Accounting Office, *United Nations: Targeted Strategies Could Help Boost U.S. Representation*, GAO-01-839, July 2001, p. 12.

assessed contributions to the U.N. regular budget, \$712 million toward U.N. peacekeeping, and \$2.2 billion in voluntary contributions.⁸

In the past decade, the U.S. has spent substantial sums of money supporting United Nations peacekeeping operations worldwide. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, the Department of State and Department of Defense gave the U.N. \$3.45 billion in direct contributions to conduct peacekeeping operations between 1996 and 2001.⁹ This figure is dwarfed by the estimated \$24.2 billion in indirect contributions¹⁰ made by the U.S. government to help support 33 U.N. peacekeeping operations in 28 countries during that five-year period.

The United States should reconsider its levels of funding for the United Nations and link them directly to the pace of U.N. reform. Washington should call for a more equitable distribution of funding for the U.N. among members of the Security Council. Major non-permanent U.N. Security Council members with aspirations for a bigger international role, such as India, Pakistan, South Korea, Brazil, and South Africa, should also be encouraged to increase their levels of funding.

Smaller nations (all of which have a vote in the General Assembly) should contribute more too. This would give these countries a greater stake in the administration of the U.N. At the same time, the U.S. should push for greater representation of U.S. nationals in all U.N. agencies.

Streamlining the U.N. Bureaucracy

The reputation of the United Nations for tolerating excessive bureaucracy is legendary. The U.N. currently employs over 56,000 staff.¹¹ The vast majority of its bureaucrats are housed in the Secre-

tariat, the U.N.'s specialized agencies, and its committees.

For years, those advocating reform at the United Nations to reduce the bureaucracy have pinned their hopes on finding a strong Secretary General to lead the reform effort. This approach has not worked. The temptation is to blame individual Secretaries General, and in some cases, the blame is richly deserved.

In reality, however, the very structure of the Secretariat is at the heart of the problem. Secretaries General enhance their power by building the bureaucracy as a means to counter the authority of member states in managing United Nations programs and operations. The member states need to exercise their rightful authority in managing these programs and operations and not allow the continuation of a bureaucratic structure under the Office of the Secretary General that seeks to undermine that authority.

There has been almost no significant reform in the U.N. during the past decade, yet U.N. reform remains high on the agenda of the Secretary General. Kofi Annan recently announced the establishment of a 12-member U.N. Panel of "Eminent Persons" "to review past and current practices and recommend improvements for the future in order to make the interaction between civil society and the United Nations more meaningful."¹²

This latest announcement does not, however, hold out much hope of real reform. What is required is not yet another expensive exercise in window-dressing, but a thorough external audit of the running of the United Nations. The U.N. must provide accountability, transparency, and value for money.

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8. *Ibid.* Voluntary contributions go toward specialist U.N. programs such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Program.
 9. U.S. General Accounting Office, *U.N. Peacekeeping: Estimated U.S. Contributions, Fiscal Years 1996–2001*, GAO–02–294, February 2002.
 10. The GAO defines indirect contributions as "U.S. programs and activities that (1) are located in the same area as an ongoing U.N. peacekeeping operation, (2) have objectives that help the peacekeeping operation achieve its mandated objectives, and (3) are not an official part of the UN operation." *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 12. The panel is drawn from Brazil, Iran, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Hungary, Jordan, Colombia, India, South Africa, the Philippines, Mozambique, and Mali.

Reforming the U.N. Commission on Human Rights

The U.N.'s credibility has been gravely damaged by the fall from grace of the organization's Commission on Human Rights, which notably failed to voice any concern over the plight of the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein. Libya's chairmanship of the commission and its appeasement of brutal dictatorships in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East has irreparably harmed the U.N.'s reputation.

Under Libya's leadership, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights has become an absurdity on the world stage. Libya remains one of the world's most repressive regimes, along with North Korea and Iran. Since coming to power in 1969, Colonel Muammar Qadhafi has built up a reputation as one of Africa's most brutal and thuggish dictators. As the State Department's annual report on human rights practices points out, the Libyan regime suppresses domestic opposition, tortures prisoners, arbitrarily arrests and detains its citizens, and refuses detainees a fair public trial. It also seriously restricts freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion and is even accused of trafficking in human slavery.¹³

Current members of the UNCHR include many of the world's worst human rights abusers, such as Sudan, Syria, Cuba, and Zimbabwe. (Other members of the 53-nation commission with appalling track records in human rights include China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Algeria.) Zimbabwe and Sudan remain the most oppressive nations in Africa. In Zimbabwe, 7 million people face starvation by man-made famine. In Sudan, the modern-day slave trade is thriving with the complicity of the Sudanese government, with thousands abducted in recent years. Yet the U.N. has not condemned the brutal regimes in Harare and Khartoum.

Libya, Cuba, Syria, and Sudan are all on the State Department's list of state sponsors of international terrorism. By permitting these states to be members of the Commission on Human Rights, the United

Nations is sending a clear message that it not only condones human rights abusers, but also grants legitimacy to rogue regimes that help facilitate global terrorist networks and are producing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The UNCHR has, in effect, become a platform for many of the world's most odious and dangerous regimes.

Unless there is fundamental reform of the UNCHR, the United States should threaten to withdraw from the commission and at the same time refuse to provide long-term funding for it until it can demonstrate that it stands for the advancement of human rights.¹⁴ Strict criteria for membership on the commission should be introduced. Nations that clearly do not adhere to the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be excluded from membership, as should nations that support international terrorism and/or engage in the development of WMD. Democracies within the UNCHR should band together to form a caucus of democratic states to act as a bulwark against dictatorships exercising influence at the commission.¹⁵

The United Nations must live up to the original vision of its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today, it turns a blind eye to slavery, human trafficking, forced famine, torture, censorship, and political oppression in its own member states, many of which sit on the UNCHR. If it is to be a body with any semblance of moral authority on the world stage, the U.N. must advance—and abide by—the principles of human dignity, individual liberty, and political and religious freedom.

Combating Anti-Americanism at the U.N.

The United Nations has frequently provided a forum for virulent anti-Americanism. The overt anti-U.S. bias in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization prompted the U.S. to withdraw its membership for almost two decades.¹⁶ The Bush Administration decided to rejoin UNESCO in 2002 at a time when the U.S. needed to build up diplomatic support for military

13. See Brett D. Schaefer, "Libyan Fox in the Human Rights Henhouse," commentary, The Heritage Foundation, August 22, 2002, at www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed082202.cfm.

14. The Senate Appropriations Committee has already recommended that the U.S. delete \$11.7 million from requested funding for the U.N. regular budget to protest the way in which the UNCHR is being run.

15. This is an idea advanced by the U.S. Representative to the UNCHR, Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Assistant Secretary of State Kim R. Holmes.

action against Iraq. However, the jury is still out as to whether UNESCO has fully rid itself of its wealth of problems: rampant budgetary mismanagement, an overwhelming anti-Western bias, and a radical social agenda, to name but a few.¹⁷

The Senate Appropriations Committee has recommended that U.S. funding for UNESCO (\$71.4 million) be withheld until it can be demonstrated that the organization has been reformed and that U.S. membership is in the national interest. The Bush Administration should place UNESCO on probation and guarantee long-term funding only when it is fully satisfied that U.S. taxpayers' money will not be misused.

In addition, the Administration should work to reduce the influence of radical left-wing NGOs, which wield increasing influence in the U.N. structure.¹⁸ The U.S. should continue to boycott U.N. conferences that have been hijacked by the extreme left.

Key Recommendations for the Bush Administration

- **National Sovereignty.** The United Nations should not have a veto over U.S. foreign policy. While the United States should remain an active participant in the United Nations, Washington must not allow the U.N. to limit the freedom of the U.S. and other democratic nation-states to act in their own national interests on the international stage.
- **Charter Reform.** The Bush Administration should call for fundamental revision of the U.N. Charter to bring it in line with the modern world. The Charter should be amended to broaden the right of nation-states to self-defense in the face of mounting threats from rogue regimes and international terrorist networks.
- **Security Council.** The U.S. should oppose any expansion of the Security Council. An increase in the number of permanent Security Council members will not improve the effectiveness of
- the United Nations. Indeed, it could well have the opposite effect. The Security Council as an institution has become increasingly obsolete and frequently acts as a barrier to the advancement of U.S. foreign policy. The organization needs to explore new structures for addressing pressing security concerns.
- **U.S. Funding for the U.N.** No nation in the world contributes more to the work of the United Nations than the United States. The Bush Administration should call upon other leading member states, such as Russia and China, to make greater contributions to the U.N. budget and bear a larger share of the financial burden. Future levels of U.S. funding for the U.N. general fund should be linked specifically to the pace of U.N. reform. The U.S. should also make future funding of U.N. commissions, such as UNESCO and the UNCHR, conditional on reform and demonstration that long-term membership on these commissions is in the national interest.
- **Human Rights.** The Bush Administration should call for the major reform of the U.N. Human Rights Commission. The U.S. should support the removal of tyrannical regimes from the UNCHR and support efforts to build a caucus of democratic states within the commission. Washington should press for the U.N. to apply a "zero tolerance" policy toward repressive regimes.
- **Secretary General.** A strict term limit should be imposed on the U.N. Secretary General, with each Secretary General allowed to serve no more than one five-year term in office.
- **External Audit.** The Bush Administration should call for a thorough external audit of the United Nations. At present, the U.N. does not even publish an annual report. U.N. bureaucrats need to be held to a far greater level of accountability to the taxpayers who fund their salaries.

16. The U.S. withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 and rejoined 18 years later.

17. For further background on UNESCO, see Brett D. Schaefer, "Look Before Leaping to Rejoin UNESCO," Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum No. 745, May 7, 2001.

18. For a detailed assessment of the pervasive influence of left-wing NGOs, see Marguerite A. Peeters, "Hijacking Democracy: The Power Shift to the Unelected," American Enterprise Institute, March 2001.

Conclusion

The United Nations continues its slow decline as a force on the world stage and will go the same way as the League of Nations unless it is radically reformed and restructured. Reform of the U.N. Charter will be fundamentally important for the future relevance of the world body. The U.N. failed spectacularly to deal with Saddam Hussein, and its influence is likely to diminish further in the coming years unless it demonstrates a greater willingness to address the threat posed by international terrorism, state sponsors of terror, and rogue regimes developing weapons of mass destruction.

It is in the interests of the United States to engage the U.N. and help shape its future, rather than sit

back and watch the organization self-destruct. The U.N. can and should play an important role in mediating disputes between nations, advancing human rights, and countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, it is imperative that the U.N. does not act as a barrier that prevents nation-states from taking pre-emptive action in self-defense.

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