

Defending U.S. Interests  
and Principles in the  
United Nations

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick

Foreword by  
Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.

## Previous President's Essays

<i>A Letter to My Children</i> Whittaker Chambers	1986
<i>Up from Liberalism</i> Richard Weaver	1987
<i>The Economic Necessity of Freedom</i> Wilhelm Roepke	1988
<i>Errand Into the Wilderness</i> Michael Novak	1989
<i>Isaiah's Job</i> Albert Jay Nock	1990
<i>Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism</i> Frank S. Meyer	1991
<i>Enlivening the Conservative Mind</i> Russell Kirk	1992
<i>Responsibility and Freedom</i> F. A. Hayek	1993
<i>The Conservative Framework and Modern Realities</i> William F. Buckley, Jr.	1994
<i>A Letter to the Young</i> Midge Decter	1995
<i>The March of Freedom: The Westminster Speech</i> Ronald W. Reagan	1996
<i>Capitalism and Freedom</i> Milton Friedman	1997
<i>Liberty and Property</i> Ludwig von Mises	1998
<i>Farewell Address</i> George Washington	1999
<i>Four Essays</i> Leonard Read	2000
<i>The Minister to Freedom: The Legacy of John Witherspoon</i> Joseph Loconte	2001

The first twelve President's Essays have been collected as  
*The March of Freedom* by Edwin J. Feulner, Jr.

---

Foreword copyright © 2002 by The Heritage Foundation.  
Essay copyright © 2002 by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick.

## Foreword

**P**resident Jimmy Carter's foreign policy—with one notable exception—was characterized by one calamity after another: the ousting of the pro-West Shah of Iran and his replacement by the fanatical Ayatollah Khomeini; the coming to power of the Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua; the surrender of the Panama Canal to a drug-running dictator; the deliberate derecognition of a long-time ally, the Republic of China on Taiwan; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the establishment of Marxist regimes in Angola and Mozambique...the litany seemed almost endless. The exception was Carter's historic Camp David summit meeting and the ensuing agreement between President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel. But that single success did not begin to compensate for the many failures.

At the core of the dysfunctional Carter diplomacy was a utopian irrationality that alarmed our friends and encouraged our enemies. Asked to explain Communism's unrelenting aggression, particularly in the Third World, Andrew Young, Carter's ambassador to the United Nations, suggested in all apparent seriousness that the thirty thousand Cuban troops in Angola brought "a certain stability and order" to the country and the region.

In sharp contrast, President-elect Ronald Reagan was determined, as he put it, to send a powerful message to the Soviets "that we weren't going to stand by anymore while they armed

and financed terrorists and subverted democratic governments.” He chose as his United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations someone who he knew would neither excuse nor disregard Soviet aggrandizement: Jeane J. Kirkpatrick. Reagan had read Kirkpatrick’s penetrating article, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” published in the November 1979 issue of *Commentary* magazine and had sent her a highly complimentary three-page letter.

In her article, Kirkpatrick asserted that the failure of the Carter Administration’s foreign policy was now “clear to everyone except for its architects.” Referring to Nicaragua and Iran, she criticized the Administration for undermining pro-American, “right-wing” autocracies while accepting the rule of Communist regimes. She stated that the Carter Administration’s idea of national interest bordered on doublethink.

It may not always be easy, Kirkpatrick wrote, “to distinguish between democratic and totalitarian agents of change, but it is also not too difficult.” In words that anticipated the Reagan Doctrine, the Georgetown University professor of political science (and liberal Democrat) said that “authentic democratic revolutionaries” aimed at governments based on the consent of the governed and believed that “ordinary men are capable of using freedom, of knowing their own interest, of choosing rulers.” They did not assume, like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, that it was necessary to postpone elections for several years while they “cured” the false consciousness of the people. Such lucid analysis appealed strongly to Ronald Reagan.

In February 1980, Jeane Kirkpatrick was invited by Richard V. Allen, Reagan’s national security aide, to meet with the presidential candidate and a group of foreign policy experts. Kirkpatrick was impressed by the serious questions that Reagan asked and what she called his “intuitive grasp” of the issues. That evening, she sat next to Reagan at a private dinner hosted by conservative columnist George Will. Afterward she told her

husband, political scientist Evron Kirkpatrick, that Reagan's view of foreign affairs was "generally correct and very realistic."

This was high praise from Jeane Kirkpatrick, who throughout her academic and political career always stressed the importance of rationalism and reason in foreign policy. She now faced a dilemma. She wanted to be part of what she saw as an important and even historic presidential campaign, but how could she, a lifelong Democrat, join the Republicans? She then remembered that Reagan had teased her at the Will dinner, saying, "I was a Democrat once, you know."

In May 1980, the Reagan campaign announced the establishment of a twelve-member policy council, supplemented by two groups of advisers, one on foreign affairs, the other on defense. Prominent among the names was Jeane J. Kirkpatrick. When a reporter asked her if she was supporting Reagan, Kirkpatrick mentioned the dismissive treatment by liberal Democrats and the friendly messages from conservative Republicans that she and other "Jackson Democrats" (referring to Democratic Senator Henry Jackson of Washington) had been receiving. "After a certain time," she explained, "it begins to seem irresistible." And, always realistic, she added, "especially if the person seems likely to be the next president of the United States."

Jeane Kirkpatrick was the first Democrat to attain a Cabinet-rank position in the Reagan Administration when the president-elect named her on December 22, 1980, to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, the first woman to hold that position. The professor turned diplomat promised to resign if she could not in good conscience represent the policies of the administration, but Jeane Kirkpatrick quickly became one of Ronald Reagan's most loyal and effective spokesmen in the U.N. and around the world.

The road from relatively unknown academic to political superstar began in Duncan, Oklahoma. Jeane Duane Jordan was the daughter of an oil wildcatter who moved his family to a succes-

sion of small towns in Oklahoma and Illinois. Always interested in philosophy and history, Jeane Jordan received an A.A. degree from Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, and then, in a turning point in her life, moved to New York City to attend Barnard College, a women's college affiliated with Columbia University. She earned a B.A. from Barnard and an M.A. in political science from Columbia. She had thought about studying journalism at college, "but I felt I didn't know anything to write about ... so I decided to study ... the big ideas."

She did postgraduate work as a French government fellow at the University of Paris's Institute of Political Science where she developed a lasting interest in French politics, history, and cuisine. She still spends a large part of each summer in Provence in southern France reading and thinking and cooking for her family and friends. A second big change in her life came when she married the well-known political scientist Evron (Kirk) Kirkpatrick in 1955. She was then a research associate at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and working on a history of the Marshall Plan.

The Kirkpatricks soon had the first of their three sons (Douglas Jordan, John Evron, and Stuart Alan), and the young mother was faced with the choice of rearing her children or actively pursuing an academic career. "I decided to stay home," she recalls. In fact she spent most of the next eight years at home until her youngest son entered school, although she continued to read and study and write. "If I had a goal," she says, "it was not to become rusty" and lose touch with the academic world. She did not and never has.

In 1962, she became an assistant professor of political science at Trinity College in Washington, and five years later was appointed associate professor of political science at Georgetown University. A clear sign of Kirkpatrick's superior academic ability was that she received both appointments without having a Ph.D. Completing her dissertation (on Peronist politics in Argentina), she obtained her doctorate from Columbia

University in 1968. Only five years later, Jeane Kirkpatrick was appointed a full professor at Georgetown, and became Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Professor in the Foundations of American Freedom in 1978. A quarter of a century later, she retains the position of Thomas and Dorothy Leavey University Professor and, with all her responsibilities, including that of a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and co-director of Empower America, still offers two seminars in government at Georgetown.

Always a prolific writer, Kirkpatrick authored numerous scholarly articles and books, including the ground-breaking work, *Political Women*, often cited by academics. But she did not ignore what was happening outside the groves of academe. Like other liberal but strongly anti-Communist Democrats, Kirkpatrick became alarmed at the rapid rise of the counterculture and the antiwar movement of the 1960s. She argued that their leaders were fundamentally opposed to American institutions and advocated unrealistic and utopian reforms. Unwilling to sit on the political sidelines, she ran in May 1972 in the Maryland primary on a slate of delegates committed to former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey—but the slate lost. To counter the influence of McGovernites within the Democratic Party, Kirkpatrick and like-minded liberals formed the Coalition for a Democratic Majority. The CDM's goal, she explained, following the resounding defeat of presidential candidate George McGovern in the fall, was to reclaim the Democratic Party from the "antiwar, antigrowth, antibusiness, antilabor activists."

Increasingly, Jeane Kirkpatrick found herself in the company of what came to be called the neoconservatives. "Mugged by reality" (Irving Kristol's pungent phrase), these former liberals attacked the radicals as despoilers of the liberal tradition. In place of liberal radicalism, Kristol and others called for a return to the "republican virtue" of the founding fathers and invoked the idea of a good society. They endorsed the notion of a "moral and political order" and conceded that a "hidden hand" had its place in the marketplace. Jeane Kirkpatrick, however, remained

a Democrat because she retained a belief in the welfare state (or at least much of it) and the importance of organized labor.

The neoconservatives had an extraordinary impact on American politics in the 1970s and 1980s because they were, as Theodore White put it, “action intellectuals,” with connections to America’s leading universities and the more important mass media, direct access to officeholders and the political elite, good relations with major elements of the labor movement, and strong roots in influential foundations and think tanks with multimillion-dollar budgets. With her 1980 appointment as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick became one of the most influential action intellectuals in the world of politics.

She eloquently defended Reagan policy during such crises as Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, the U.S. overturn of a Marxist regime in Grenada, and the Soviet downing of Korean Airlines flight 007, which killed everyone aboard. She justified the Administration’s policy of granting arms assistance to El Salvador’s military junta, which was under attack by Cuban-backed Marxist guerrillas. In a debate with a former Carter official, she asserted that the alternatives were “whether we do anything at all, or whether we leave the government unsupplied while the Cubans or the Soviet Union supply the guerrillas.” She was especially vocal in support of aid to the anti-Communist Contras in Nicaragua and was deeply moved when they named one of their 400-man brigades the Jeane Kirkpatrick Task Force. Americans were equally enthusiastic about their forthright U.N. representative. Evron Kirkpatrick recalled that once when he and Jeane were out for a walk in Manhattan, “a truck driver sticks his head out the window and says, ‘Give ‘em hell, Jeane.’ Things like that happen all the time.”

Understanding that the U.N. did not operate in a political vacuum, she sent the voting records of every member nation to Congress. As the *New York Times* reported, the message was clear: any country that opposed the United States on an issue important to Washington might find its foreign aid significantly

reduced. Her tough stance got results that had not been seen in years. An Arab resolution to expel Israel was rejected. A Cuban attempt to cite the U.S. for “colonizing” Puerto Rico was blocked. A Nicaraguan campaign castigating U.S. policy in Central America died.

She took every possible opportunity to stress the importance of public diplomacy, cognizant that the United Nations is not only a forum for relations between states but a forum to reach out to publics behind the governments around the world. The transforming power of public diplomacy was driven home to Jeane Kirkpatrick when she visited Managua, Nicaragua, in October 1987, two years after she left her U.N. post. Cries of “Viva Kirkpatrick!” filled the air as she addressed a public rally of Contra supporters. Reading her speech in Spanish, Kirkpatrick was repeatedly interrupted by applause as people in the audience waved small American flags. She referred to the Sandinista government as a dictatorship and said the Contras were fighting for “the right to live normal lives free of oppression and reprisals.” Three years later, in an internationally monitored national election, the outspoken anti-Communist Violeta Chamorro defeated the Sandinista presidential candidate Daniel Ortega.

Jeane Kirkpatrick was criticized by U.N. diplomats and U.S. liberals for her “non-diplomatic” behavior in the United Nations, but one man in particular endorsed strongly what she was doing. With President Reagan’s approval, William P. Clark, the national security adviser until 1983, made Kirkpatrick an independent counsel to the President. She could see the President whenever she wanted and telephone him at any time. “She had absolutely direct access to him,” says Judge Clark. “When she put her feet under the desk of the Oval Office, the President listened and he usually agreed with her.”

She was also a member of the Administration’s top-level foreign-policy-making committee, the National Security Planning Group. Every week or so, the group gathered in the Situation Room in the White House basement; they included the

President, the Vice President, the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Director of Central Intelligence, the national security adviser, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the White House chief of staff, the White House counsel, and U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. “She had a substantial impact,” remembers Lawrence S. Eagleburger, the former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, who frequently joined the meetings.

And she had considerable help at the U.N. from a strong diplomatic team that included Charles M. Lichenstein, a former Yale instructor and research director for the Goldwater for President Committee; Kenneth L. Adelman, a former assistant to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; Cuban émigré Jose S. Sorzano; and Alan L. Keyes, a blunt-talking black graduate of Harvard. Lichenstein, who served as Kirkpatrick’s chief deputy, became famous for his 1983 response to a Soviet delegate who rose on the U.N. floor to express his country’s “indignation” about the “illegal and unprecedented” act of denying landing rights to the plane of Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko. Gromyko was scheduled to arrive at the United Nations a few days after Soviet jet fighters shot down Korean Air Lines flight 007 over international waters.

Such an act, said the Soviet official pompously, “raises the question of whether the U.N. should be in the United States.” Lichenstein immediately responded in true Kirkpatrickian fashion: “If, in the judicious determination of the members of the United Nations, they feel they are not welcome and treated with the hostile consideration that is their due, the United States strongly encourages member states to seriously consider removing themselves and this organization from the soil of the United States. We will put no impediment in your way,” he added, “and we will be at the dockside bidding you a farewell as you set off into the sunset.”

The following year Ambassador Lichenstein came to The Heritage Foundation as a distinguished fellow in international

relations and remained with us until his death earlier this year. America owes Chuck Lichenstein a great debt of gratitude for the passion and skill with which he conducted his duties at the United Nations and subsequently. He was a boundless source of knowledge, history, and expertise on international institutions and the shape of conservative government.

I was to see firsthand the profound difference that Ambassador Kirkpatrick made at the U.N. In the summer of 1982, I was appointed by President Reagan as the Public Representative to the United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament (SSOD-2, in U.N.-speak). To an idealistic young Reaganaut, the notion that I would be a part of the “Kirkpatrick Team” was exhilarating. That the late Sam Stratton (D–NY) and John Warner (R–VA) would represent the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, respectively, was encouraging. Heritage had worked with both men on disarmament issues, and their presence would ensure that the United States—the executive branch and the Congress—would speak with one voice.

On the first evening of the Session, Ambassador Kirkpatrick hosted a small dinner at her official residence in the Waldorf Towers in New York—it was the last time the whole team would be together during SSOD-2. Since the General Assembly was not in session, Jeane had committed herself to an extended trip to Africa. In her absence, Ken Adelman was given the responsibility of handling the U.S. position at the SSOD-2. As I trudged around with Ken in subsequent weeks, I learned the secret kitchen exits from every hotel ballroom in the city, a mandatory learning experience for everyone expected to attend the National Day celebrations of all 160-odd members of the U.N. Knowing the quickest route out of a hotel ballroom after shaking hands with the ambassador and the senior government officials from the host country allowed us to attend either another reception or to get back to serious negotiations with the Soviet delegation or others who had a real stake in disarmament issues.

As the weeks went by and the deadline to conclude SSOD-2 approached, it was easy to be caught up in the deliberate rhythm of the U.N., where haggling over a phrase or even a word took on a life of its own—even when it was a minor change in a communiqué which no one would ever read, let alone comply with. SSOD-2 was scheduled to terminate on June 30. However, the actual meetings went into the July 4 holiday period, and both Congressman Stratton and Senator Warner left New York City to honor commitments back home.

On the day of the final session, it turned out that I, with my seven weeks of service, was the ranking member of the American delegation and would therefore deliver the U.S. address from the podium. I was asked by the career advisers of the U.S. delegation if I had a preference as to when we should be on the agenda. I suggested that it should be four or five speakers after the Soviet speaker. This caused some consternation because he was not scheduled until late in the afternoon and listening to various and sundry delegates speak on the desirability of disarmament was not the way anyone at the U.S. Mission wanted to spend their holiday weekend. For me, however, it was essential to follow the Soviets rather than precede them so that if they made any wild and reckless charges an official U.S. reply could be made.

As it turned out the Soviet speech was more confrontational than had been anticipated, and a huddle of Americans began reworking my text. In a sidebar conversation, one of them reminded me that under the U.N. rules, alphabetically rotating seats meant that the front row would contain Iran, Iraq, and Libya—hardly the most supportive audience for an American speaker. With some trepidation, I mounted the dais, stood at the podium to be greeted by hisses from the front row, and gave an eminently forgettable speech to anyone who happened to be listening. Thus, did SSOD-2 pass into history.

I recount this incident in such detail because the teamwork, which was evident among both political appointees and career

foreign service officers in the American delegation, was remarkable. We met frequently, worked from a common agenda, and realized that we were all representing the views not simply of a department but of an Administration which stood for certain principles. We were all determined that those principles would be reflected as best as possible in policy decisions and certainly in the rhetoric of any debate. It was, of course, Jeane Kirkpatrick who was the soul of this enterprise and whose leadership and unflagging good spirits kept us all working from that shared agenda.

Since her tenure at the United Nations, her relationship with The Heritage Foundation has been close and collaborative. When she co-founded Empower America, several Heritage people were intimately involved in that enterprise. When Heritage has put together a program on any aspect of foreign policy, one of the regular participants has usually been Ambassador Kirkpatrick. And when we sponsored a series of nation-wide lectures by leading men and women of ideas to mark our 1998–1999 “Leadership for America” campaign, Jeane Kirkpatrick delivered the address on Strength.

Ambassador Kirkpatrick probably reached the apogee of her political career at the 1984 Republican national convention when she blistered the Democrats, who had already met in San Francisco, as the “blame America first” party. The San Francisco Democrats, she pointed out, blamed America for the invasion of Grenada and not “Cuba and the communists for threatening American students and murdering Grenadians.” When the Marine barracks in Lebanon were bombed, the San Francisco Democrats blamed America and not the terrorists who killed Americans in their sleep. These same Democrats blamed the United States and not the Soviet Union for the impasse in arms negotiating. And they had the effrontery to judge U.S. involvement in Central America without regard for the real issue—Marxist dictators who “shoot their way into power.”

The following year, after serving longer than any other U.S. ambassador in decades, Jeane Kirkpatrick resigned her U.N. position, returned to Georgetown University, and officially joined the Republican Party. Echoing Ronald Reagan, she explained that she had changed philosophy “a long time before I changed parties.” She said that Republicans were more sensitive to threats of Communism and their foreign policy “was more sensible and more successful.” And in an interview published in the Heritage Foundation’s *Policy Review*, Kirkpatrick admitted that she had also modified her views about the welfare state during her service on the U.N.’s Economic and Social Council. “I learned how much more successful market strategies are than any sort of statist strategies.” She was also influenced by the experience of the Reagan Administration, which demonstrated that “even incremental enhancement of reliance on the market stimulates the economy and helps achieve goals like lower employment far more effectively than any kind of state action.”

There was widespread speculation in 1988 that Jeane Kirkpatrick might be the vice presidential candidate on the Republican ticket, and in 1996, she was on everyone’s short list for secretary of state if Bob Dole were elected President. But in her post-U.N. years, for the most part, Kirkpatrick did what she had been doing for several decades—guide her students through the prickly thickets of history and philosophy, write widely respected books like *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State and Other Surprises*, receive awards like the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Distinguished Public Service Medal of the Department of Defense, serve on national panels like the Defense Policy Review Board and the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, and speak before a wide variety of associations, government and nongovernment institutions, and university audiences, always offering clear cool thinking about public policy and public diplomacy.

The following original essay, “Defending U.S. Interests and Principles in the United Nations,” was first drafted in 1985 by

Ambassador Kirkpatrick shortly after she left the U.N. She has revised and updated it for The Heritage Foundation, and we are very pleased to be able to publish this important analysis of U.S. foreign policy for the first time.

Essentially, the essay is Jeane Kirkpatrick's answer to the question, "What did you learn in your years at the United Nations?" What she learned needs to be remembered as the United States exercises leadership in the U.N. and elsewhere. The lessons include: international relations depend, above all, "on the values and the relative power of nations." Power in international affairs is cumulative: "the more you have, the more you get and vice versa." And U.S. effectiveness and power in places like the U.N. require "absolutely that we have confidence in our values, our experience, our country."

Looking at the U.N. when she served there and today, Kirkpatrick asserts that it is not "a utopian arena" but a place "where a very hard game of politics is played." It may shock some, she concedes, but "it is not the merits of the case that determine who is condemned for what and when; it is the power structure inside the United Nations." Ambassador Kirkpatrick notes that the Soviet Union was more skillful and ruthless than the United States in securing support within the U.N. of countries in their own bloc. The problem was that there were neither rewards for helping the United States nor "a price for opposing us even on issues of concern to us."

The U.S. delegation learned that it was important for a nation seeking influence to practice what Thomas Jefferson called "the peaceable coercions" of international politics. The U.S. team came to understand that the complex politics of the United Nations—and by extension all of world politics—required cultivating and maintaining relations with a hundred-odd countries both inside and outside the U.N. And while it was not necessary that the United States dominate on every issue or even most issues, it was vital, in Kirkpatrick's words, that "we secure a decent respect for our values and our important

principles.” As she has stated frequently throughout her life, foremost among those principles is that “freedom works.”

Ambassador Kirkpatrick concludes her essay by stating that she wished that “power, conflict and self-interest” did not play so large a role in the U.N. But we must accept the United Nations and the world as they are if we are “to protect ourselves, our principles, our values, our friends and indeed our civilization.” If we are to survive in “this world of terrorists and weapons of mass destruction,” she says, we should take care to remember the central role of power—and that “self-defense is not an aggressive act in the United Nations or out of it.”



There are several individuals without whose help this publication would not be possible. I would first like to thank Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick for giving us permission to use her unpublished essay as this year’s President’s Essay. I am also grateful to Lee Edwards who first suggested Jeane Kirkpatrick as the author and assisted me in the writing of the foreword. Lien O’Neill, Richard Odermatt, Michelle Smith, and Drew Bond have all helped in the production of this essay. Finally, sincere thanks to all of our friends who, with their numerous suggestions and encouragement, continue to make this annual publication possible.

*Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.  
President  
December 2002*

# Defending U.S. Interests and Principles in the United Nations

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick



# Defending U.S. Interests and Principles in the United Nations

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick

*This essay was written shortly after I ended my tenure as United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations, where I served from January 1981 through June 1985.*

## **PREFACE**

***October 22, 2002***

To pass a resolution of the fifteen-member U.N. Security Council at least nine positive votes are required with no “no” votes from the five Permanent Members. Even one “no” vote is enough to veto a resolution.

Normally negotiations on a resolution continue until a consensus is reached. Sometimes a resolution is abandoned by its sponsors if the necessary nine votes cannot be assembled or a veto avoided. That could happen on the U.S. resolution on Iraq.

Whatever the outcome of negotiations on this resolution, many Americans, perhaps including those at the White House, will have learned that securing passage of a resolution by the Security Council may be neither easy nor certain. The pages which follow explain the many factors that influence the fate of a resolution—even one submitted by two such important Permanent Members as the United States and the United Kingdom.



People often asked me, what did you learn in your years at the United Nations? I replied, a great deal. The United Nations is a microcosm. All the countries in the world meet there to discuss all the issues in the world. It is the world writ small. To be sure, the United Nations is not an accurate reflection of the world. It has developed structures and institutions of its own, and they have their own influence. But it is nonetheless a place where very important lessons may be learned about the 159<sup>1</sup> nations which meet and interact there.

Much that can be learned about the behavior of nations inside the United Nations is true as well outside the United Nations. There is no substitute for experience inside the institution.

A book written in 1954 by one of America's most distinguished diplomats, George Kennan, called *The Realities of American Foreign Policy*, illuminates the interaction of nations inside the United Nations, as well as outside. Its brief, clear descriptions of the realities of American foreign policy are as accurate today as they were 40 years ago. Certainly, its major points coincide with the realities of my experience of the United Nations. I can summarize those points as follows:

- International relations depend, above all, on the values and the relative power of nations;

---

1. As of 2002, U.N. membership has grown to 191 nations.

- The power in international affairs is cumulative; the more you have, the more you get and *vice versa*;
- The relative position of the United States and the Soviet Union depends in very important measure on our success in dealing with non-Communist nations in the world;
- Our influence with other nations depends in important measure on their hopes and fears—hopes of gains, fears of losses;
- And, finally, our effectiveness, our power, in places like the United Nations requires absolutely that we have confidence in our values, our experience, our country.

The bad news is that, even though we are a rich nation with great military strength and all the resources needed to protect ourselves, our values and our civilization, in the course of 20 years we came to be virtually powerless inside the United Nations—largely because we ignored those basic facts about politics.

The good news is that, by returning to the basic principles of international politics, we have been able to reverse the negative trend and restore America's position and capacity to act inside the United Nations. Maintaining decent respect for the United States requires behaving with the same kind of realism and common sense inside the United Nations that we regularly have in our private and political lives.

We got into trouble in the United Nations because we did not face realities about the behavior of nations. Getting out of trouble has been our principal preoccupation at the U.S. Mission and mine, quite specifically, during my four-plus years at the United Nations. I propose to share some of the lessons I learned as I observed and participated in the major processes that take place at the United Nations. You may not like those lessons much. Some people say America would rather preserve a sentimental, optimistic view of the world that is untrue, than face a

less optimistic vision of the world that is true. I don't believe that. Anyway, I shall speak about realities.

A first fact, long since understood by most Americans, is that the United Nations, as of 1981, is not in any sense what its founders had intended or expected it to be. It is not in any sense a utopian arena where nations seek dispassionately, objectively to solve problems. It is, instead, a place where a very hard game of politics is played, whose outcome depends less on the merits of issues than on the relative power of the players within the U.N. system. It may appear that the behavior and the votes of nations at the United Nations are determined by rational debate about the issues. But we all know appearances are often deceiving. Reasoned debate plays a role inside the United Nations. But its role is often less to persuade than to justify. It is important always to demonstrate that we have good reasons for our position—because, if we don't and we do not respond persuasively to attacks against us, our silence will be interpreted as giving consent to the arguments of our adversaries. It is also true that debate inside the United Nations sometimes has a ripple effect in the world outside—because the journalists of all the world gather there.

But the fact is that normally it is less debate that determines decisions in the U.N. than decisions that determine debate. The interesting facts about the United Nations lie just beneath the surface in what determines the content of the resolutions that are offered there, the character of the debates, the votes, the efforts at implementation. At first glance, it isn't easy to understand what's going on in the U.N. or why. Some very strange things happen there. Some subjects are brought before the United Nations again and again. Some very important issues are never brought before the United Nations. Some countries are condemned by the United Nations again and again, and some countries are never condemned at all. That might seem reasonable enough; after all, some countries do cause many problems and some help solve them. Some countries are international outlaws and some are constructive citizens of the world. But the

first big shock in looking closely at the U.N. is to realize that praise and blame inside the U.N. is awarded on a basis that is nearly opposite of what would be the case if it were determined by the merits of the issues.

Let me give you a few examples. Libya, a dictatorship which invades and threatens its neighbors, organizes assassination plots and sponsors terrorist groups, is never the object of U.N. condemnation. But Israel, a democracy which deeply desires peace with her neighbors and which is the victim, not the perpetrator, of terrorism is regularly the object of complaints and condemnation in the United Nations. The Soviet Union, which gives very little economic assistance to Third World countries, is never the object of pressure to give more. But the United States, which gives a great deal of help to the poorest people of the world, is frequently criticized for not giving more. Socialist economies, which have failed in every country in the world where they have been tried, are recommended in resolution after resolution. But market economics—the free enterprise system—which is responsible for growth in every developed country in the world, is regularly denounced.

The explanation of why such resolutions were proposed or passed lies not in the objective facts. The reasons lie in the power relations among the countries in that body. The first hard fact to be faced is that the United Nations is not a place where issues are decided on the merits of the case. It is not the merits of the case that determine who is condemned for what and when; it is the power structure inside the United Nations.

Again, I offer some examples: Libya is protected from condemnation by its political strength inside the U.N. Israel is attacked because of its lack of political strength inside the U.N. Libya is a member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Those memberships protect and empower it. The United States used to be attacked because of our lack of political strength in the U.N. as well. Neither the intellectual strength,

nor the facts, nor the eloquence of our arguments, nor the morality of our positions could win fair play for us, or for any other nations. Influence in the United Nations depends on other factors. It does not depend on reason or morality.

Influence in the United Nations depends, in part, on the bloc system of voting: a bloc is rather like a political party. Inside the U.N., it helps to be part of a large bloc and it hurts to be part of no bloc. We are part of no bloc. Influence in the U.N. depends in part on the ability to influence decisions that are made inside one's blocs and also to have alliances in other blocs. It depends in part on understanding how the system in the U.N. works. It depends in part in persuading other countries that they have something to gain or something to dread from their treatment of the United States inside the United Nations. Being right will not win votes. Being eloquent will not win votes. Being well-liked will not win votes inside the United Nations.

When power relations dominate, as they do in the U.N., then the content and the fate of resolutions are determined by these power relations. For example, when power relations dominate, a resolution on economic development will be less concerned with giving good advice to countries seeking development than it will be concerned with expressing the short-range political interests of the strongest bloc. A resolution on economic growth in a U.N. dominated by the Soviet bloc will have as its principal purpose not promoting growth but attacking what they call capitalism, and the United States, as responsible for all the poverty in the world. A resolution on the Middle East will not have as its purpose winning peace in the Middle East. A resolution on the Middle East will have as its purpose establishing the position of the most powerful Arab states in the United Nations. A resolution on human rights in El Salvador will be less concerned with the objective facts of the situation than with blaming the government of El Salvador for whatever is wrong in that country.

The thorough-going politicization of the United Nations took place long ago. Although the United Nations was created in the ashes of World War II as an antidote to international relations based on power and conflict, no one should be surprised it has itself developed a power structure and power processes which sometimes operate quite ruthlessly, with little regard for truth, fairness or friendship.<sup>2</sup> A country can count on being fairly treated if it has power within the system and uses it. Useful, constructive action can be accomplished inside the United Nations when constructive countries have power within the system. The United States lost its influence inside the United Nations in the mid-'60s. And for 20 years, the United States was not treated fairly inside the United Nations. The democracies lost their dominant role to other blocs in the mid-'60s. And with that, the United Nations lost much of its capacity to work for constructive purposes, exactly the constructive purposes it was established to achieve.

The United Nations can only act against terrorism if the nations which oppose terrorism have more power in the U.N. system than those which sponsor the terrorists. The United Nations can only help promote economic development if the nations which desire economic growth and know something about how it is achieved are more powerful than those which preach and practice failed policies. The United States can only help the United Nations or itself if we are strong inside that system. But the fact is that the United States sunk slowly to a position so impotent and isolated inside the United Nations that we could not even protect ourselves against the attacks of arrogant dictators who are dependent on us for help. Obviously, from such a position we couldn't protect anyone else, or accomplish anything useful.

Inside the United Nations, power feeds on itself—and so does the lack of power. Those who have power find it easy to get

---

2. A recent example was when the United States was blocked from membership on the Human Rights Commission last year.

more. Countries that lack power are avoided because they are powerless. The United States' standing on the United Nations had sunk so low that even our best friends kept their distance from us and from our positions. On many issues, they preferred to position themselves as neutral or non-aligned or "moderate," between the American position and that of some other group like the non-aligned.

George Kennan said it: "one of the great realities of political life is the cumulative nature of power and the factor of momentum in human affairs" (what one president once called the "big M"). The support of the powerful is vigorously courted inside the United Nations because the support of the powerful is important to the success of any activity.

Conversely, those who lack power cannot expect to have their opinions taken into account. Inside the United Nations, not to be taken into account means not being consulted about resolutions that are being drafted. It means not having one's support sought for resolutions that are being drafted. It means not being able to protect one's country from slanderous attacks by anyone. It means not even being able to count on the normal courtesies that are available to all nations—for example, in the Security Council, the 24-hour delay before the Security Council votes. Being helpless before humiliating attacks further weakens a country's standing. Being denied normal courtesies further weakens a country's standing. And a downward spiral of isolation and humiliation continues. The United States traveled far down that vicious spiral of isolation and humiliation while momentum of the opposite kind swept the Soviet Union and associated radical states to more and more victories inside the United Nations. It gave them more voice in more proceedings of the United Nations.

Improving the position of the United States, breaking that momentum of American powerlessness, was our major task at the United Nations during my four years because it was a prerequisite to achieving any other goal. Inside the United Nations

power is measured by numbers of votes, and votes are awarded on the basis of one country, one vote. That means, for example, St. Kitts, with its population of 120,000 at the height of the tourist season, has one vote and the United States has one vote. Our problem in the United Nations could be reduced to the simplest level: it was to persuade more countries to stop voting against us and to start voting with us. Some of those countries included our best friends. Most of the countries in the U.N. are small, poor, Third World countries. Many of them are countries with whom the United States has friendly relations outside the United Nations. Yet, in spite of those friendly relations outside the United Nations, we kept failing to get a hearing, and failing to get their vote. We kept being isolated, less because of the opposition of the Soviet Union than because of the behavior of the non-Communist Third World countries. Slowly, we came to realize that the Soviets' strength inside the United Nations derived, above all, from the fact that they were better than we Americans were at winning support from the non-Communist countries of the Third World. We realized, too, that we were confronted with a problem that was simultaneously more complex and more soluble than is often imagined. I don't mean the problem was simple, and it is not simple today; the fact is, it was very difficult. But it is a different problem than often supposed.

Why was it that the United States, which helped more countries than the Soviet Union, respected their independence, and really is a peace-loving nation, was continually doing less well than the Soviets with the Third World countries inside the United Nations? Because the Soviets had understood better than we the multilateral politics of the United Nations. Because they were more skillful and flexible than we at playing U.N. politics. So, we also came to realize, were the British, the French, the Dutch, the Arabs, the Africans, and almost everyone else.

The Soviets were succeeding where the United States was failing because they were more skillful and more ruthless than the United States in securing support inside the U.N. of countries in

their own bloc. Bulgaria, for example, or Cuba, or Hungary, always voted with the Soviet Union; but Britain, France, our other NATO allies, and our Latin American friends, only sometimes voted with us. The Soviets were also more successful than we, because they were better at securing the votes of countries outside their own power bloc. India, for example, also regularly supported the Soviet Union but is clearly an independent nation. Thailand, a country quite friendly to the United States, but thoroughly independent, only sometimes supported the United States' position inside the United Nations. Finally, the Soviets were succeeding where we were failing because they were more skillful at securing the support of genuinely neutral states, like the Arab Gulf states, Nepal, Argentina, or Brazil.

The United States acted as though everything mattered to us, but nothing mattered much. There were neither rewards for helping the United States nor a price for opposing us even on issues of concern to us.

George Kennan's famous 1954 warning was clearly relevant to our predicament, but nobody had heeded it. In 1954, he had written:

I view with skepticism our chances for exerting any useful influence unless we learn how to create respect for our possible disfavor, at least as great as the respect for our possible favor.

Kennan knew the behavior of nations is not normally motivated or controlled by disinterested gratitude or friendship, but rather by the hope of gain and the fear of loss. Kennan knew that it was important for a nation seeking influence to remember what Thomas Jefferson had called "the peaceable coercions" of international politics.

What could we do? We came to understand that the complex politics of the United Nations required cultivating and maintaining relations with a hundred-odd countries in the U.N.

concerning the U.N., and outside the U.N. concerning the U.N. But these relations must be reciprocal. They must be based on mutual respect and not on our respecting others while others fail to respect us. That reciprocity, we came to understand, must be continually renewed. It does not require that the United States dominate on every issue in the U.N or even most issues in the U.N. In fact, in order to be effective, we must always respect the interests of other nations, and sometimes give priority to their concerns.

U.S. effectiveness in the United Nations does not require that we always prevail all times. It does require that we secure a decent respect for our values and our important principles. That can be as often achieved when others take a leadership role than when we seek to dominate. George Kennan understood that, too, and he had a warning that was relevant. In dealing with Third World nations, he warned, being effective, friendly and supportive did not mean we needed to “breathe down their necks all the time or try to smother them with our influence.”

This brings me to the final point: that to be effective inside the United Nations the United States must have confidence in our national experience, our principles and, of course, we must be faithful to them. Sometimes America’s representatives have behaved as though they secretly agreed with our adversaries. Sometimes they’ve behaved as if they didn’t believe that we had advice and experience as well as money to share with others.

Having confidence in ourselves, being true to ourselves and our standards, does not mean judging ourselves by the Sermon on the Mount and everybody else on the curve. It does not require unilateral disarmament or unilateral risk; being true to ourselves does not require, it does not even permit, being indifferent to our security. Strong, the United States can help to build and preserve a world of independent countries living at peace with one another. Weak, the United States cannot even protect itself much less its principles or the independence of other nations.

The United States has had great difficulty in understanding and accepting the truth about how the United Nations works. Partly because we had been certain that this great “town meeting of the world” would behave differently than any town meeting ever did. We believed that reason would replace power, that peace would take priority over selfish interests, that decisions would be decided objectively. I cannot conceive why we ever supposed that countries would behave differently inside the U.N. than they ever had in history. Or why we ever supposed that they would behave differently than most people do in their own lives. The answer to that terribly important question lies in a national susceptibility to a nearly utopian optimism about the world.

Our nation’s tendency to this brand of utopianism about international affairs has been noted, described and regretted by such distinguished students, writers and practitioners of world affairs as Hans Morgenthau, Walter Lippmann, Dean Acheson, George Kennan, Henry Kissinger.

Kennan traced the source of the problem to the long period of peace and security the United States enjoyed in the 19th century. During that period, he said, we had no problems on our borders and, largely because of the strength of the British during the 19th century, we felt safe and secure and did not find it necessary to defend ourselves. That long period of peace and security, Kennan said, served to eliminate from our consciousness all feeling of vulnerability.

It is strange that a people as realistic and skilled in practical conduct, personal affairs and domestic politics should lose its clear-eyed, hard-headed, common-sense views when it deals with international affairs. The history of the 20th century, probably the most violent century in human history, certainly does not support a romantic view of the world and of international affairs any more than the history of the United Nations supports a romantic or a utopian view of the United Nations. We wish that it were different.

I wish that power, conflict and self-interest did not play so large a role in the United Nations. But, we are stuck with living in the world as it is, with operating in the United Nations as it is, if we are to protect ourselves and our principles, our values, our friends and our civilization. If we are even to survive in this world of terrorists and weapons of mass destruction, we should take care to remember that doing so requires the necessary power and weapons.

Self defense is not an aggressive act in the United Nations or out of it. 🇺🇸