**Is the United Nations a Useful and Effective Organization?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Background\_\_\_\_\_\_**

The United Nations has been the subject of debate since its inception in 1945. Since that time the UN has changed. As the nations of Africa and Asia gained independence, they joined the UN and gave greater representation to the developing countries of the world. The United Nations has broadened its commitment to the medical, social, cultural, and educational welfare of the developing world. Un peacekeeping and peacemaking missions have increased in number and size.

The viewpoints presented here examine two perspectives on the UN. Professor Gerald Segal believes that, while the UN is flawed, it is generally a useful organization that provides a valuable forum for the poor and weak nations of the world. Ted Carpenter claims that the United Nations has many basic faults and needs to accept a much more limited role in the world.

**Useful Roles of the UN\_\_\_ \_\_**

To be sure, there is much that is very wrong with the UN. It is often out of touch with reality, unwieldly and run by incompetents. But, as the most universal of the proliferating international organizations … it continues to serve useful, if mundane functions….

The ritual incantation of support for the UN have roots in the odd mixture of idealism and realism that existed when the organization was created. The idealism was rooted in the horror of the Second World War and the carnage that followed the failure of the previous world organization, the League of Nations, to confront the aggression of Japan, Italy, and Germany. The UN was supposed to overcome these failings by operating a system of collective security where aggression would be repelled by the common action of a concerned world. What is ore, to help prevent conflict breaking out at all, the UN would take an active role in furthering economic and social progress….

The rapid increase in members not only wrested the control of the UN from the United States; it also raised the second major issue for the organization – North-South relations. The UN had been an early participant in the decolonization process….But when North-South relations moved beyond the broadly popular issue of ending colonial rule, the UN became the setting for the damaging, extremist rhetoric of North-South relations. The South demanded various ‘new orders,’ meaning the transfer of resources from North to South….It was no wonder that the United States (by far the largest backer of the UN) responded by cutting back its funding and began decrying the one-state-one-vote principle in the UN General Assembly that had given it so much power back in the 1950s.

But, for all its obvious excesses, the UN has its good points. First, its various types of peacekeeping have all been useful. By now we are familiar with strange mixed-race, multi-lingual, blue helmeted soldiers, lightly armed and operating in squalid or remote places under bewildering acronyms like UNFICYP, UNIFIL, or ONUC. They have to carry out difficult, if not impossible, tasks because the UN itself is rarely sure about what it is doing and does not give its forces much authority. These soldiers have been described as ‘false teeth’ or an umbrella taken away the moment it rains…

Second, UN–organized international co-operation had also been evident in the various moves…to impose sanctions on Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and latterly on South Africa. Third, the UN serves a passive role as a venue for traditional diplomacy. In the more obscure, smoky corridors or small back rooms, enemies can meet, signals can be sent and talks can begin. Even in a shrinking world of modern communications, there is still a need for face-to-face contacts.

Fourth, the UN has established a wide range of specialized agencies and associated organizations that are of practical use. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are perhaps two of the best known suppliers of funds to states in economic need. The UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) provide essential help for individuals in need. The International Telegraph Union (ITU) and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) assist modern means of communication….

Finally, the UN is simply a place where the poor and weak, in a world so dominated by the Superpowers and the developed states, can feel they are being heard. To be sure, this has too often deteriorated into absurd and outrageous proposals, childish antics and shrill speeches. The impotent may feel better for upbraiding the powerful but their actions only undermine the ability of the UN to act effectively. The UN has become much more an arena for conflict and co-operation. Clearly, the organization can do better but that is no reason simply to ignore or deride the place. If the UN did not already exist it would certainly have to be invented.

Source:

Excerpted from Gerald Segal, *The Stoddart Guide to the World Today*, Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited. Don Mills, Ontario, 1988.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Limitations of the UN\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

A blizzard of hype from the UN’s cheerleaders cannot disguise the organization’s numerous faults. Its record in the realm of conflict resolution has been unimpressive. The nation-building project in Somalia (which has to be the model for rehabilitating failed states) produced a bloody fiasco. The UNPROFOR mission in Bosnia, essentially an attempt to manage a civil war, fared no better. Even the UN’s much –touted achievement in ending the long civil war and fostering democracy in Cambodia has unraveled.

To be fair, the UN has not been without successes. The organization played a constructive role in helping to end the armed conflicts in El Salvador and Mozambique and in supervising elections that brought independence and democracy to Namibia. Nevertheless, the failures are decidedly more spectacular than the successes and serve to emphasize the UN’s inherent limitations.

On non-military matters the UN’s performance has been dreadful. The organization is plagued by problems of mismanagement and corruption. Much of the UN’s energy and funds has been devoted to pushing such pernicious measures as the Law of the Sea Treaty and holding pretentions summits on the environment, world population, and other issues. Delegates to those gatherings habitually embrace the discredited notion that more government intervention and regulation are the solution to any problem.

Ultimately, the United States needs to reexamine its enthusiasm for the entire concept of global collective security. We should no longer accept on faith that it is either feasible or wise to attempt to ‘globalize’ civil wars and minor cross border conflicts.

America ought to have a restrained and somewhat skeptical relationship with the United Nations. The belief that the UN was mankind’s last best hope for peace was erroneous when the organization was established in 1945 and its erroneous today. The United Nations is neither the guardian of global peace nor the institutional conscience of humanity. (The investigation of US prisons by a UN functionary to ferret out alleged human rights violations is precisely the kind of overreaching and gratuitous meddling that justifiably infuriates Americans.)

The UN has limited utility as an international forum for different points of view and a mediation service to resolve quarrels. It also can play (and indeed has payed) a useful role in coordinating humanitarian relief efforts. But the notion of the United Nations as a powerful global security body is unrealizable and undesirable.

The United Nations is merely an association of the world’s governments – not, it should be emphasized ,the world’s peoples. As such, it is, and should be, only a marginal player on the global stage.

Even the more limited version of an activist United Nations, with a standing military force and a mandate to rebuild “failed states’ around the planet, would constitute a dangerous entanglement for the United States, Not only is it dubious wisdom to make parochial conflicts a matter of global concern and intervention, but the lives of American military personnel should be put at risk only to defend American’s vital security interests. Their lives should never be sacrificed for the abstract and illusory goal of global collective security.

Source:

Adapted from Ted Galen Carpenter, ‘Pruning the United Nations,’ 18 November, 1997.

**Decide which of the viewpoints you tend to support and explain why. If you agree with neither, state the position you do support and explain it. Be sure to use specific information from this textbook, the readings, and other sources to support your position.**