

## Challenging Empire: The United Nations in a New Internationalism



*Phyllis A. Bennis*

Although many reject the terminology of “empire” with regard to the United States, the truth is that the United States is an empire that is using all of the power that empires have used throughout history.

In the Greek empire, Athens developed democracy narrowly: democracy for some. Athens then realized that it needed to protect its fragile little democracy and so sent troops to the island of Milos and said, “Well, we need your island.” The citizens of Milos said, “We don’t think so.” The Athenians said, “Sorry, but we are bigger and stronger than you. We are taking your island.” The people of Milos asked, “What about democracy?” And the Athenians said, “Well, for us, there is democracy. For you, there is the law of the powerful.”

I started using that story during the Clinton administration, when there was a great deal of what I considered false commitment to multilateralism. With the Bush administration, no one pretended to be committed to multilateralism, particularly after September 11, when public fear became so palpable. Since then, the American people have been craving leadership, craving an answer, craving some sense that they could be protected from the events of September 11 happening again because, unlike so much of the rest of the world, they haven’t had the experience of terrorism over the last hundred years.

This craving for security made it possible for the rising American empire to use power in a way that would never have been acceptable before September 11 except among a minority of people. It was thundered, “We must never have another event like the terrible events of September 11, and we must go to war against Iraq so we never have another event like the terrible events of September 11.” In reality, there was no link between Iraq and September 11. But people heard it often enough that it worked. And so the use of unilateral, imperialistic power grew to unprecedented heights.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF OPPOSITION

Increasingly, however, people are finding it discomfiting that public opinion means very little to the government. And that, ironically enough, can begin to transform the power of public opinion altogether. Consider this quote: “Thank God for the death of the United Nations. Its abject failure gave us only anarchy. The world needs order. Saddam Hussein’s reign of terror is about to end. He will go quickly, but not alone. In a parting irony, he will take the United Nations down with him. Well, not the whole United Nations. The good-works part will survive. The low-risk peace-keeping bureaucracies will remain. The chatterbox on the Hudson will continue to bleat. What will die is the fantasy of the United Nations as the foundation of a new world order. As we sift the debris, it will be important to preserve, the better to understand, the intellectual wreckage of the liberal conceit of safety through international law administered by international institutions.”

Guess who said this, and who thinks the United Nations is on the Hudson River, not the East River? This was Richard Perle, resident fellow of the American Enterprise Institute and former chairman of the Defense Policy Board, writing in the *Guardian*, interestingly, in the United Kingdom, not in an American paper, where it might be more easily quoted. What is extraordinary is the openness, the acknowledgment that this is the view of people associated with the American government.

The irony, of course, is that, even now, after September 11, there still are moments when the United States looks to the United Nations as the framework for holding other nations accountable to the international law that we violate with impunity—particularly U.N. resolutions and the U.N. charter itself. Our government holds itself outside of accountability to the United Nations, while at the same time it holds other “rogue” states accountable.

The foreign policy that they have brought us since September 11, when the urgent demand of the American people was for safety, has been a foreign policy that is reckless, unsafe, and unfair. And it has shown people around the world that we are unconcerned about safety, fairness, and responsibility.

THE TWO SUPERPOWERS: THE UNITED STATES  
AND GLOBAL PUBLIC OPINION

In this atmosphere of aggressive American power, the United Nations has emerged as the most important venue for organized resistance to the abuse of unilateralism. Even in the months before September 11, one can see the beginnings of opposition to the rising, uninformed American empire. The United States lost its seat on the

Human Rights Commission the same day it lost its seat on an international drug commission, seats that America had taken for granted would be theirs forever. And for an extraordinary eight-month period in late 2002 and the first half of 2003, the United Nations did exactly what it set out to do in its charter—preventing the scourge of war. The United Nations probably never had a more relevant period than this moment, when it stood defiant against the United States, defiant against an illegal and unjust war. The United Nations helped create the “second superpower.” Two days after the extraordinary demonstrations around the world in February 2003, the *New York Times* did something it almost never does: it told the truth on the front page, above the fold. It said that, once again, there are two superpowers in the world—the United States and global public opinion.

The United Nations was part of that second superpower. The United States put enormous pressure on, particularly, the six uncommitted countries within the Security Council, desperately trying to get them to change their votes and say they would endorse an American war. The United States talked about a “coalition of the willing,” but others talked about a “coalition of the coerced” and a “coalition of the killing.”

In response to the enormous American pressure, it was expected that countries would give in, particularly poor countries like Angola, Cameroon, Pakistan, and Guinea. Chile was expected to fall in line because the United States told the Chilean government that it would not ratify the proposed free trade agreement without Chile’s support of the war. And yet Chile stood defiant along with other nations.

The reason for this resistance was that there is a framework within the United Nations that provides political cover and potential for economic support for poor countries to oppose the United States along with more powerful countries like France, Germany, and Russia, who were opposing the war as well. Although many countries eventually acquiesced and voted in favor of the U.S. stand, the potential for the United Nations as a site of opposition was clear.

In February 2003, when that extraordinary Security Council meeting was held, when the two United Nations inspectors gave their report and were expected to provide the last justification for the United States to go to war and didn’t do it, the French Foreign Minister said, “The United Nations must be an instrument for peace and not a tool for war.” And then there was an amazing response: The Security Council, this staid, formal body where nobody ever blinks, roared with applause. It had never happened before in the history of the United Nations.

The next day there were demonstrations around the world, all saying the same thing: “The world says no to war.” Just before the rally began in New York, a small group met with Kofi Annan at the United Nations. The delegation was led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The first thing that Bishop Tutu said to Kofi Annan was, “We are here on behalf of all the people that are marching in the 665 cities, that we know of around the world, and all of those millions of people are saying no to war. They

are also saying that we claim the United Nations as our own. We claim the United Nations in the name of this global mobilization for peace.” It was a moment in which one can see the United Nations’s potential as a venue for an extraordinary challenge to the American empire.

## THE AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE UNITED NATIONS

Despite supporting the war in Iraq in significant numbers, the American people have never wavered in their support of the United Nations. According to a Pew Center/University of Maryland poll, when about 75 percent of Americans were supporting the war, about the same percent were saying that America should solve key international problems collaboratively with other nations. One question in the poll gave respondents three choices. The first choice was to solve problems collaboratively with other nations. The second choice was for the United States to solve problems on its own. The third choice was an isolationist choice—withdrawal. Only 12 percent took the second choice and significantly fewer took the isolationist view. Some 76 percent said we should be working with the United Nations, and 88 percent said that the United States should have received permission from the Security Council before going to war.

In that same poll, two-thirds of Americans said that the lesson of the war in Iraq should not be that it’s okay for the United States to use its power unilaterally without United Nations approval. Since then, support for multilateralism has remained firm among the American people. All the efforts by the administration to render the United Nations irrelevant have failed.

This support is in stark contrast to the official U.S. presence in the United Nations, which tends to punish nations that have a different opinion. Diplomats remember the letter sent by the United States during the run-up to the Iraq war to almost every member state of the General Assembly, except Israel and the United Kingdom. The operative line in the letter was, “Given the current highly charged atmosphere, the United States would regard a General Assembly session on Iraq as unhelpful and as directed against the United States. Please know that this question, as well as your position on it, is important to the U.S.”

## REFORM IN THE UNITED NATIONS

How should we go about reforming the United Nations to make it the strong, independent voice of world opinion that it should be? Some want to reform the Security Council by eliminating the veto and the existence of permanent members.

This seems unlikely to happen in the short term, so we need other ideas for democratization and reform of the United Nations.

We need to begin with the General Assembly. Historically, in the first forty years or so of the United Nations, partly because of the Cold War paralysis, partly because of the legacy of colonialism, and partly for a host of other reasons, the General Assembly, rather than the Security Council, was the engine of motion. It was to the General Assembly that newly independent former colonies would send their representatives to claim independence in front of the world. It was the General Assembly that created UNIDO, UNESCO, all of the agencies dealing with the role of international corporations, and all of the economic and social agencies that were designed to help countries of the global South compete on a more level playing field with the wealthy countries of the North.

The best way to empower the General Assembly is for the United States to simply back off because right now we are facing a situation where even in the General Assembly, where there is no veto, fear of antagonizing the United States forms a huge block on the ability of countries to take advantage of the global reach of the United Nations.

One example of this is the issue of protection of Palestinians living under occupation. In 2003, there was a vote in the Security Council, fourteen to one, in favor of providing protection. Kofi Annan had called for Chapter 7 protection, including the force of arms. Others on the council had argued for an unarmed or lightly armed separation force to provide protection. Protection would have been provided not only to Palestinians living under occupation, where there is a clear obligation of the international community that has held that occupation illegal, but to Israeli civilians who face the consequences of occupation, attacks which come as a result of the cruelties and the desperation brought by occupation.

The United States vetoed that resolution, and it was immediately put aside with the reasoning that if the United States would not support it, Israel wouldn't either. But there is another way in which the issue could have been approached. If countries in the General Assembly took their charter mandate to be responsible for assigning funds, they could pass a resolution supporting the creation of a protection force for Palestinians. They could allocate the money to pay for that protection force, and they could recruit troops.

Just imagine a combination of, say, 4,000 United Nations soldiers and police wearing blue helmets, divided up into four groups of a thousand. One group flies to Beirut and drives down to the Israeli border, to the occupied Golan Heights. Another group flies to Cairo and drives to Rafah, at the end of the Gaza strip. The third group flies to Jordan and drives out to the river. The last group is assigned to a ship that sails to the edge of Israeli territorial waters. Israel might refuse it entry, but the U.N. forces would be an important presence—and a visible presence, with the camera crews of Al Jazeera and the BBC and CNN, all watching and waiting for Israel to change its mind.

What would that mean in the context of international diplomacy and public opinion on a global scale? It's hard to know, but it would change something. It would make something possible that isn't possible today.

Another possible area of reform is the fight for the primacy of the United Nations over the Bretton Woods institutions. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were supposed to be special agencies of the United Nations. The World Bank is supposed to be accountable to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, not to its highest donors.

## CONCLUSION

We now are faced with a scenario in which, as Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor in the Carter administration, said recently, the United States is more isolated in the world diplomatically than it has been since 1945. It also is a moment when diplomats are quitting, when the credibility of the diplomats is being attacked by the right, and when the very notion of diplomacy is being discredited in favor of war. The idea is that we don't need a State Department because we have a Pentagon.

The American government's policy of creating "coalitions of the willing" for each event is very dangerous. We have already seen the tendency during the Clinton administration (e.g., in Kosovo) of sidelining the United Nations and claiming that the approval of NATO is the equivalent of such approval. But NATO is a military alliance, which naturally favors military solutions. That is why NATO should not be the entity making decisions to go to war. That is exactly why we need the United Nations.

How do we craft a new foreign policy that is based on safety, fairness, and responsibility? We begin by recognizing the intersection of domestic and international policy. We can't just talk about a safe America, a secure America. We can only begin that discussion if we talk about a secure America in a secure world. When there is not security for others, we are not secure.

We must return to multilateralism. We must fight for the United States to return to a commitment to international law. We must commit to treaties like the Rome treaty of the International Criminal Court and the Nonproliferation Treaty, particularly Article 6 of the Nonproliferation Treaty, which requires the official nuclear-weapons countries to move towards complete disarmament. We can't expect all other countries, which are not nuclear-weapons states, to accept their nonnuclear status when we are making threats now to get a new generation of "useable" nuclear weapons.

And we must reassert the legitimacy and the centrality of the United Nations. The United Nations must deal with the illegal military occupation of Iraq. The first obligation of a military-occupying power is to end the occupation. That is true of

Israel in Palestine, and it is true of the United States in Iraq. The United Nations has to be the alternative to military occupations.

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