

## The UN and Multilateralism under Siege in the “Age of Trump”

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This essay poses two questions: “Would the World Be Better without the UN?” and “Would the World Be Better without Donald Trump?” The answers are “No” and “Yes.” It begins by discussing the UN’s value and continues by probing the historical context of U.S. approaches to multilateralism and Washington’s unhesitating leadership during World War II, an era as fraught as ours. It then analyzes the implications of the Trump Administration’s “America First” policy on the United Nations and considers the possibilities for concerted international action without Washington. It concludes by examining the odds that the world body can become fitter-for-purpose.

The title of my most recent book asked, “Would the World Be Better without the UN?” This essay adds another: “Would the World Be Better without Donald Trump?”

The answer from me to the former is a considered “No.” The answer to the latter is an unequivocal “Yes.” The data and argument marshalled in the former provide additional factual material that could mitigate the onslaught against anything multilateral by the current U.S. Administration. Of particular note are the 45th president’s frequent remarks that disparage the United Nations as mostly a waste of money accompanied by his aversion to collaborative decision-making in any context.

Answering the question in my book’s title would have been essential at any time since 1945 but is even more critical in the “Age of Trump” (Weiss 2018a, 2018b). It is more pressing still after the spring 2018 appointment of John Bolton as his third national security adviser. Both Trump and Bolton routinely denigrate international organizations and cooperation. Partners and allies are irrelevant in their zero-sum ideology. Yet, past U.S. foreign policy successes demonstrate their approach to be ahistorical as well as wrong.

My book and this article concentrate on the United Nations, but the current U.S. administration disdains multilateralism in all forms. Security organizations (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, as an example, is obsolete or costing too much according to this Administration) and fares no better than cooperative economic efforts (the European Union, EU, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP, now the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership), the North American Free Trade Association, NAFTA, and the World Trade Organization, WTO), which are moving ahead without the United States or attacked by it. Meanwhile,

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discrete problem-solving efforts (the Paris Agreement on Climate and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration) as well as informal groupings largely are dismissed (the G7 and the G20 have become the G7 minus 1 and the G20 minus 1). Trump is committed to pulling out of multilateral arrangements in favor of making bilateral “deals.” Even the minimum for a multilateral agreement, the three-party NAFTA, became two sets of bilateral talks, first with Mexico and then with Canada until the completion of the trilateral USA, Mexico, Canada Agreement, or the USMCA.

This essay unfolds in the following manner. The first section briefly discusses the UN’s value. The second probes the historical context of U.S. approaches to multilateralism and Washington’s unhesitating leadership during World War II, an era as fraught as ours. The third section analyzes the implications of Trump’s “America First.” The fourth considers the possibilities for concerted international action without the USA. The fifth section examines the odds that the world body can become fitter-for-purpose.

## A Better World without the UN?

While a reader might be tempted to say that my negative answer is obvious because former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan wrote the “Foreword,” the book poses an honest question, and the response involves tough choices and unassailable (and sometimes unhappy) facts that are uncomfortable for the world organization’s foes and friends alike. The book, discusses the two main outputs of the United Nations—ideas, norms, standards, and principles on the one hand, and field operations on the other. It details these contributions under the three main kinds of activities: international peace and security; human rights and humanitarian action; and sustainable development (Weiss et al. 2018).

The book employs a two-part counterfactual: the first consists of specific illustrations about how the world would have been far worse off at several crucial junctures over the last seven-plus decades without critical inputs from the UN system. That part of the argument should give pause to the foes of multilateral cooperation such as in the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Trump Administration in their declared war on *the* rules-based international order that the USA established and has championed since World War II. Readers should note that I did not write the indefinite *a* rules-based order that the administration insisted upon in Québec during the G7 summit in June 2018; the definite article refers to *the* rules-based order that we have, which is in USA and, frankly, everyone’s interest as John Ruggie (1996, 1998) and John Ikenberry (2001 and 2006) argue.

“What’s the evidence?” We would unlikely to be better off without what Inis Claude long ago called the “First UN” of member states and the “Second UN” of staff members (Claude 1956, 1996).<sup>1</sup> Denying such a proposition would involve asserting, among many other things, that we would not be worse off without a host of successful international efforts, including: the cooperative international campaigns to eradicate small pox in 1977, and more recently for polio and guinea worm; the advocacy to formulate women’s rights and to study the effects of climate change; the seemingly endless efforts to deliver emergency aid to war victims in the Democratic Republic

<sup>1</sup>This is not the place to probe the “other” UN of non-state actors (Weiss et al. 2009).

of the Congo and Sudan; military deployments to keep the peace on the Golan Heights, Cyprus, and Kashmir; visionary decolonization and development ideas in the early years; and first steps to protect cultural heritage in war zones, to prosecute war criminals, and to ban land-mines.

Counterfactual reasoning is at times dismissed as a toy for social scientists, but it is a useful analytical device (Tetlock and Belkin 1996). The first counterfactual requires hostile critics to consider these examples; it would be difficult to imagine them as “alternative facts.” While that is certainly not inconceivable for members of the Trump Administration, a modestly objective observer would acknowledge genuine assets on the UN’s ledger.

At the same time, the second counterfactual and the second half of the book are for a different audience, namely cheerleaders in UN Associations worldwide, the UN Foundation, and the UN’s own Department of Public Information. This second counterfactual deals with debits on the ledger, which are substantial. It would be impossible to maintain that the world would not also have been a far better place had there been improved performances by member states and UN civil servants. For example, what if the permanent and elected members of the Security Council had acted earlier and with less hypocrisy during Rwanda’s real-time genocide in 1994? Or, currently for the tragedies in Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar? What if peacekeepers had not raped children in the Central African Republic and spread cholera in Haiti? What if more dedicated and competent staff had performed better in implementing development projects, conducting research, and hard-hitting monitoring to hold governments’ feet to the fire? What if there were fewer inter-organizational turf-battles and more genuine collaboration among the organizations of the so-called UN family? In short, my second counterfactual explores how much better the world could have been if the UN’s 193 member states had behaved more responsibly and its 100,000 civilian staff and about the same number of soldiers and police been more creative, competent, and courageous.

When submitting the proposal to the Carnegie Corporation’s Fellows Program,<sup>2</sup> I thought that recounting stories about the UN’s main contributions—ideas, norms, and principles, on the one hand, and field operations, on the other hand—would be helpful as the world organization approached its 75th anniversary in 2020. My task became considerably more urgent especially because amidst the widespread national preoccupations with the Trump Administration’s policies—racism, tax benefits for the rich, xenophobia, rolling back environmental regulations, attacks on the Constitution, separation of immigrant families, and the litany of outrages goes on—multilateralism seems always to get lost. It should not.

It would be worthwhile merely to tick-off the most obvious menaces by the Trump Administration in its first two years. Among the first acts was cutting funding to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), which fosters girls’ and women’s reproductive health. At the end of 2017, Washington withdrew formally from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) despite an emphasis on girls’ education and the protection of such cultural heritage as Palmyra, supposedly U.S. priorities. What else happened in between? Pulling out of the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and

<sup>2</sup>The program awards grants to individual scholars nominated by their university presidents. See <https://www.carnegie.org/news/articles/andrew-carnegie-fellows-application-information/>.

cancelling the promised contribution to the Green Climate Fund despite the last half-decade of record-setting natural catastrophes; and pulling out of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, an effort to improve the chaos of refugee flight and economic migrants. Finally, Washington predictably vetoed (score 14–1) a Security Council resolution criticizing the wisdom of moving Israel’s capital to Jerusalem. When the General Assembly voted likewise, the administration pouted and froze more than half of the remaining U.S. contribution to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). 2018 was not better, which included shredding the Iran deal brokered by the G5 + 1, withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council—“a cesspool of bias” in U.S. ambassador Nikki Haley’s description—and halting all funds for Palestinian refugees.

The evidence in the book is important for resisting Washington’s current approach to multilateral policy in the Age of Trump, mobilizing some modest facts to counter the administration’s ignorance, poor judgment, and ethical shoddiness. There is growing evidence that its initial “shots across the bow” of many “multilateral boats” may become substantial broadsides in the future. U.S. tantrums suggested as much during the 2018 G7 and NATO summits, which continued with salvos in a trade war.

In short, the UN is not a four-letter word but a two-letter invective. Let me now try to put into historical context both U.S. policy and Trump’s performances at the UN General Assembly in September 2017 and 2018.

## Some Historical Context for Existential Threats and Multilateralism

After service in the European theater during World War II, Brian Urquhart from the United Kingdom was the second official recruited for the United Nations secretariat in 1946. After a distinguished career as an international civil servant, he quipped, “The UN is the last bastion of national sovereignty” (Weiss et al., 2005, 318).<sup>3</sup> He was lamenting the world organization’s inability to come to the rescue of desperate human beings caught in the cross-hairs of violent attacks on their human rights. Their presidents, princes, and prime ministers claimed that what they did at home was exclusively their business. For decades, UN member states went along.

More recently, the international community of states occasionally has applied the “responsibility to protect” and revoked the license for mass murder by sovereign thugs who abuse their citizens (ICISS 2001; Weiss and Hubert 2001).<sup>4</sup> In addition, states have agreed to limit their sovereign prerogatives through international treaties of various sorts—some 560 of which are on deposit for signature and ratification at the UN. Moreover, globalization means that states are often powerless to halt invasions of financial transfers, technology, and information.

In short, sovereignty ain’t quite what it used to be (Plesch and Weiss 2015b). Nonetheless, the UN and other intergovernmental organizations—even the more supranational European Union (EU)—remain firmly grounded in sovereignty, which Donald Trump made even clearer when he

<sup>3</sup>A cd-rom of the complete transcripts is available from the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of the City University of New York’s Graduate Center.

<sup>4</sup>For evaluations, see *Evans (2008), Thakur (2017), Bellamy (2009), Orford (2011); and Hehir (2012)*. The author’s own interpretation is *Weiss (2016a)*.

uttered the word “sovereignty” 21 times in his September 2017 address to the UN General Assembly. While he reduced the redundancy in 2018 (only six times), his message remained clear, “we must protect our sovereignty and our cherished independence” (Trump 2018). His mantra gave a permission slip for such champions of human rights as Russia, China, Myanmar, Sudan, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and Cuba. These countries customarily have emphasized sacrosanct sovereignty in order to ward off criticism by Washington. That is no longer necessary. The contrast was stark with Barrack Obama, whose first address to the General Assembly referred to “sovereignty” once, which he used to reaffirm Washington’s commitment to international cooperation and multilateralism (Obama 2009).

Trump’s emphasis on sovereignty and wrapping himself in the flag is reminiscent of the mindless patriotism that Samuel Johnson once condemned as “the last refuge of scoundrels,” or that Yascha Mounk (2018, 215) more recently characterized as resembling “a half-wild, half-domesticated animal.” The president and his vice-president Mike Pence have tried unpersuasively to square the circle. However, “America First” actually means “America Alone.” The bite from the strident emphasis on sovereignty on the world’s biggest stage in 2017 and 2018 was supposed to diminish when he told other leaders that they too put their countries first. However, his pitch was music to the ears of thugs who abuse their populations, a declaration of war on international obligations and cooperation. Additional atonal notes came later from Bolton who launched a blistering verbal attack and threatened retaliation with sanctions against its judges and prosecutors should the International Criminal Court (ICC) dare to proceed with a probe into alleged war crimes by USA or allied personnel in Afghanistan.

It was difficult to know quite what to expect for Trump’s encore in September 2018 following his attacks on allies and embraces of dictators Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin. He was more subdued than expected. He justified U.S. withdrawal from the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. He also threatened the ICC. Then he identified the new menace to the United States of “global governance,” which he rejected along with other “forms of coercion and domination” and the “ideology of globalism.” His self-congratulatory platitudes embraced “the doctrine of patriotism.”

Both performances in the General Assembly’s limelight demonstrated Trump’s unconvincing stance to reassert the power of one to address global problems. His performance flew in the face of the reality of contemporary problem-solving (Weiss and Wilkinson 2018). Among the “fake news” being peddled by the Trump Administration is that going-it-alone is the way to address pressing problems—for instance, a repeat of the financial crisis of 2008; the Ebola pandemic of 2015; new terror attacks in Boston or Burkina Faso; North Korea’s nuclear weapons; or the planet’s warming climate.

Yet, at various times and in various ways, the UN system has been helpful in addressing these and other pressing transboundary problems. Trump’s positions also ignore some areas in which the UN and international cooperation have truly made a difference. I am not the only analyst to recall a predecessor namesake: the America First Committee was the largest and best-organized anti-war group ever, founded in 1940. It is interesting to go back to the initial reaction of well-known supporters, Charles Lindberg, Henry Ford, and Father Charles Coughlin. The chair of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee at the time, Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg,

was initially supportive but shifted dramatically away from isolationism. Indeed, he became the leading voice for the USA to be the first state to ratify the UN Charter in July 1945. He explained his shift: “I do not believe that any nation hereafter can immunize itself by its own exclusive action” (Patrick 2017, 79).

What was clear to Vandenberg should be even clearer today: no country is powerful enough to solve global problems on its own, to impose its will on others. To state the obvious, the USA cannot manage globalization on its own or protect itself from terrorism. Tending one’s own garden is simply not a salient strategy in 2019.

The America First Committee collapsed after Pearl Harbor; Trump’s version has not yet. In the mind of this president and his Administration, the USA can only “win” and prosper when other countries lose. There is no common good, no universal values, and no community of nations.

At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the paradox is that the United Nations is the logical location to convene conversations and orchestrate numerous actions to address global problems. This universal membership institution provides the means to confront a multitude of life-threatening problems that national actions simply cannot address effectively. At the same time, the world organization’s limitations— not only its sovereignty-bound foundations but also its atomized and wasteful operations—are obvious to any except the blindest UN cheerleaders.

The ninth secretary-general, António Guterres, took over from his lackluster predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, on January 1, 2017, shortly before the inauguration of the 45th U.S. president. Hopes for a new beginning were and remain unrealistically high among civil society, UN staff, and many member states. Nonetheless, in the Age of Trump, can the United Nations become a more pertinent mechanism to pool efforts in a world of sovereign states? As a basis for international action, can 2019’s world body provide a dose of sanity for a collective pursuit of survival with dignity? Formulating answers requires taking stock of the UN’s problems and the likelihood of the secretary-general’s reform efforts, to which we return. First, however, it is imperative to address the UN’s origins and U.S. interests, which reflect a dramatically different approach by Washington to existential threats and multilateral cooperation. The USA has long had an ambivalent relationship with multilateral cooperation. Edward Luck (1999) has pointed to “mixed messages” in U.S. policy toward international organizations since 1919, which Stewart Patrick (2017) called “sovereignty wars” as the main characteristic of foreign policy. Yet, Trump’s zero-sum world is without precedent. Until now, a rules-based international society has never been seen to be for “suckers.”

That the current or any other U.S. administration pursues vital interests through the United Nations and other international bodies hardly surprises. George W. Bush’s Washington “unsigned” the Rome Statute establishing the ICC because it was against U.S. interests, except when it was not, and Washington wished it to pursue Sudanese and Libyan war criminals. The Security Council was helpful to issue a blank check in Afghanistan in 2001 but hostile to any approval for the Iraq War in 2003 but then not for post-occupation administration. Barrack Obama’s Washington relied on the council for a green light in Libya but had none for Syria—because of Moscow’s and Beijing’s vetoes. However, that same moribund body suddenly sprang to life when Washington and other capitals turned to the UN

and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons capacity, or later to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify the "Iran deal."

Such opportunism is so commonplace as to require no comment, except that most observers overlook the actual birth of the "United Nations." We should revisit the poorly understood—actually virtually ignored—set of considerations during World War II, when in the midst of a truly existential menace U.S. leadership calculated very differently its national interests (Plesch 2011; Plesch and Weiss 2015a).

The UN's creation reflected a radically contrasting U.S. opportunism and attitude toward consistent multilateral cooperation in the face of the life-threatening specter of a fascist world order. It began with the Declaration by United Nations on January 1, 1942, which built on the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. That declaration committed twenty-six (later forty-four) Allies to multilateralism—not only to crush Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the short term, but also over the longer term to maintain international peace and security as well as to foster postwar economic prosperity and social stability. That commitment was in evidence on the European, Asian, and African fronts as well as with Allied coordination of national policies; it was prominent as well in the commitment to international obligations and eventually to the intergovernmental organizations of the UN system.

Observers customarily trace the collapse of this supposedly misplaced idealism to the end of the war, when the combination of Hiroshima and the growing tensions between the West and the Soviet Union eliminated the traces of Washington's commitment to redesigning international society. Too few observers recall the powerful mixture of realism and idealism in the Lend-Lease Program and the wartime United Nations, which subsequently fell out of favor in Washington, which is where Michael Mandelbaum (1996) tells us that supposedly "we don't do social work." However, alongside U.S. military muscle, not only multilateralism but also social work were integral to the exercise of U.S. sovereignty during World War II. In fact, a wide variety of Allied wartime efforts revolved around Washington's social commitments to decolonization, international criminal justice, post-war reconstruction, refugee assistance, international development, regulated world economic activity, public diplomacy, and agricultural and educational policy. They sustained the military enterprise and lay the foundations for future stability. Wartime planners rejected unilateral military might and lawlessness. The second world conflagration, following the one incorrectly billed by H.G. Wells and Woodrow Wilson as the one "to end all wars," underlined the wisdom of multilateralism.

The establishment of the United Nations after the San Francisco Conference on International Organization and the creation of the UN system were not peripheral but rather central to U.S. decision-making and calculations about the best way to pursue vital interests. One might well have expected the fall-out from the failed League of Nations to produce proposals for Hobbes on steroids (Cottrell 2018). Yet, those overseeing the Allied war machine and thinking about the future were resolute: multilateralism and the rule of law, not going-it-alone and the law of the jungle, should underpin the post-war order. In fact, the bleakest contrast was with the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire, which epitomized the right of might and the pursuit of lawlessness.

The combined national decisions to collaborate and to construct international organizations for peace and prosperity were central to the mobilization against and defeat of fascism. Even enlightened Realists had trouble rejecting the merits of multilateralism, which seemed to contradict E.H. Carr's (2016) interwar analysis and what John Mearsheimer (1994) later dubbed the "false promise of international institutions." A genuine cooperative strategy motivated people, kept states allied, and won the war.

I have gone on at some length because, then as now, governments pursue vital interests. World War II threatened the USA and the planet, and we often overlook that victory was hardly a foregone conclusion. Thus, it is essential to emphasize that the wartime United Nations was more than a temporary multilateral charade to toss aside when the going got tough. It was not a brand to soft-soap the Anglo-American partnership, but rather it was a commitment to collaboration as the best path toward peace and prosperity. The resulting clarification call for a new world order was a lofty goal that summoned states to a higher standard in the conduct of international affairs. The bottom-line was straightforward: neither governments nor analysts calculated that a return to the world of 1913 was desirable—that is, before World War I and without even a toothless League of Nations. The solutions were not completely novel or unprecedented; they were not 1914 minus but rather 1918 plus. It was not any demonstrated weakness of international cooperation but rather the intensity of the Cold War that produced a diminished vision of the lowest common denominator of narrowly defined national interests.

The Trump Administration has forgotten these lessons. Middle and smaller powers purportedly prefer multilateralism and major powers unilateralism. However, the UN's wartime origins suggest the relevance of collaboration for the most powerful as well when the political conditions and leadership are right.

## **The Implications of "America First" on First Avenue**

The "Age of Trump" looms large at UN headquarters in New York. However, the first thing to note is that he is hardly alone. Nativist-populist "ages" are everywhere: of Putin, Erdogan, Xi, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Netanyahu, al-Sisi, Orban, Maduro, Obrador, and rising right-wing parties across Europe and elsewhere. Together, they pose a death-threat to global cooperation. They are generally against aspects of globalization and global trade. At best, these leaders are unsympathetic to the work of coalitions and international organizations.

Still, we should scrutinize how the UN's most important member state and largest funder appears since the inauguration in January 2017. What is the damage to date? Bowing to his base on abortion, Trump began his term with a non-negotiable total cut of U.S. funding (saving about \$70 million) for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). Simultaneously, his administration urged drastic cuts to peacekeeping—the USA share of the subsequent decision to reduce by \$600 million was about \$170 million. President Trump has regularly pilloried the UN as no friend of liberty, democracy, and Israel, which explains the freeze on a remaining 2017 payment to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) and then eliminating it for 2018. The combined savings amount to a rounding error in the U.S. budget, but they have a far more deleterious impact on UN operations and morale. No



other donor has jumped in to pick up the tab; no one is standing in line to take up the mantle of leadership.

The 45th U.S. president's 2017 UN debut and 2018 encore highlighted his disdain for the web of intergovernmental organizations and the rule of law nurtured by the USA since World War II. However, his attacks elsewhere about trade and the environment are additional telling illustrations of the likely global fall-out for multilateralism from Washington's inward-looking policies. The administration's decision to revoke the U.S.'s traditional role as the leading proponent of free trade was the first indication of narrow nationalism. This extraordinary stance began by withdrawing from the TTP, thereby setting aside the potential benefits of access to Asian markets and the advancement of human rights and environmental protection that were requirements. Trump has continued by periodically menacing to scrap NAFTA, often accompanied by threatening border tax adjustments. He imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum from allies against WTO logic (exploiting a loophole based on the claim of a threat to national security) and then blocked nominations to seats on the organization's appellate body, which could then make it unable to hear cases (against the USA and others) after 2019.

Such visceral anti-multilateralism has played directly into the hands of China and Russia. Both have long sought to divide the West. Beijing and Moscow no longer have to pursue policies to drive wedges between western countries; the Trump Administration does that for them. Moreover, Beijing and Moscow already have sought to take advantage of Washington's UN cost-cutting momentum to pursue their own agendas. These two countries have proposed reducing the human rights aspects of peace operations as a way to cut costs.

China has made the most of this opportunity presented. It now can dictate more easily the standards for international commerce in Asia; it has picked up new trading partners worldwide; it ironically appears as the new champion of free trade and predictability. Even pessimists, who viewed the rise of China and other emerging economies as inevitable, underestimated the speed at which the U.S.'s stature has diminished and credibility evaporated. A strident and unpredictable Washington seems keen to start a trade war. Meanwhile, Beijing appears to be the calm and steady voice for stability.

Of perhaps even greater significance was the May 2017 announcement that the USA was abandoning the Paris Agreement and would make no effort to meet voluntary targets to curb planet-warming emissions agreed by 196 parties. Going it alone, rather than international cooperation, clearly has become Washington's standard operating procedure. Once again, China is the direct beneficiary of this policy strategy. Beijing is happy to play an unexpected role as the leading advocate for climate change, ironically at the same time that it became the world's largest producer of greenhouse gasses. Meanwhile, green technology producers in China forge ahead—to control three-quarters of the world's production of solar panels—and the Trump administration vows to create coal-related jobs. It does not seem to matter that ten times the number of U.S. workers currently work in green technologies, or that various coal-fired power plants are closing as uneconomical. The pursuit of such policies certainly will not make America great again, although they undoubtedly can make it more polluted again.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election will occur one day before the four-year legal limit on the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. By then,

perhaps, more U.S. voters will re-evaluate their presidential votes along the lines that many did for the House of Representatives in November 2018. In any case, the mobilization of U.S. cities, states, and corporations to respect the agreement will mean that a multilateral, not unilateral, approach will still be possible and prominent in 2020. Michael Bloomberg's funding for the bipartisan coalition "We Are Still In" was one manifestation as was California Governor Gerry Brown's "Global Climate Action Summit" in San Francisco in September 2018. Indeed, California's economy is larger than that of France (where the UN-brokered climate agreement was signed) and another 190 countries. The final communiqué from the July 2017 G20 meeting in Hamburg – noting that the agreement was irreversible and non-negotiable – reflected the continuing commitment by the other 19 members while the Trump Administration pouted.

The complete withdrawal from UNESCO was affected at the end of December 2017, where the USA had already stopped paying its bills in 2010 over the admission of Palestine. The sad list continued with the withdrawal from the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, a sensible UN effort agreed in July 2018 – by the entire membership minus the USA – to put some order in the record-breaking movement of migrants. Then in contrast to every other country, the USA, after resolutions by the Security Council and General Assembly, threatened more retaliation to those friends and foes who sought to recognize Jerusalem's sacred character for three world religions not one. The withdrawal – the first country to do so – from the Human Rights Council continued UN-bashing, shortly after the Iran "deal" was shredded.

## What's Possible without Washington?

Trump joined a distinguished list of bombastic leaders who have made for good theater on the UN's stage. Stories still circulate about audience-shocking performances in what historian Paul Kennedy (2006) called "The Parliament of Man," where the General Assembly's limelight has illuminated what the Irish author and politician Conor Cruise O'Brien (1968) characterized as "sacred drama." For instance, there was the notable performance by the Soviet Union's General-Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who banged his shoe on the table to demonstrate his diplomatic dyspepsia. Another was by a non-state representative, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's Yasser Arafat, who ceremonially checked his revolver at the door and then brandished an olive branch. Still another was by a Third World rabble-rouser, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, who began by sniffing the chamber, indicating that it "still smells of sulfur" because the devil (George W. Bush) had spoken the previous day.

The ultimate performer, President Trump, made his debut in the reality show on First Avenue in September 2017 with an encore a year later. Trump hardly set a new standard for succinctness and spoke for almost three times the suggested 15-minute limit in his debut and followed in 2018 with about the same after arriving late (an unusual breach of protocol). The refined world leaders and protocol-obsessed diplomats hardly knew what to expect. While many had cringed earlier, a U.S. president like no other was initially more tepid than his previous petulant performances would have led one to expect. His references to "partners" and "value for investment" provided

temporary relief accompanied by the appeal to sovereignty, security, and prosperity. He then reverted to his self-promotional “chest-thumping” and ranted about North Korea and Iran. While expected, the menace to North Korea was a new first – using the assembly hall devoted to the peaceful resolution of disputes to threaten nuclear annihilation. Less unexpected were his attacks on communism, socialism, Cuba, and Venezuela along with the U.S. unfair share of the budget. The 2018 version reversed and threw flowers to Kim, which was preceded by the fanciful claim – undoubtedly for domestic consumption in the midst of the latest scandals in Washington – that his “administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country.”

Great powers seem never to be too reluctant to throw their weight around, which the UN Charter recognizes with five veto-wielding permanent members in the Security Council. Indeed, Trump’s disdain for international organizations and cooperation resembles that of a far more prominent, respected, cultivated, and dignified world leader. It is undoubtedly surprising to mention him and Charles de Gaulle in the same sentence, but it is justified here.

The comparison is apt because de Gaulle was temporarily successful by attacking multilateral institutions in combination with his Gallic nationalism. He pejoratively dismissed the UN as “le machin” [the thing] in order to create space for France outside of the US-Soviet hegemonic divide. A few years later as president of the Fifth Republic, he threatened NATO’s common military structure by seeking autonomy within the western alliance and keeping French forces outside. He also temporarily left the French seat empty (the “chaise vide”) in the European Economic Community (EEC, and since 1993, the EU) in order to ensure that members retained full sovereignty and that Britain be excluded. Although steeped in history, de Gaulle overlooked that the predecessor of “the thing” had liberated occupied France. De Gaulle also ignored NATO’s and the EEC’s essential contribution to maintaining peace and ensuring growth and prosperity in France and on the continent.

Trump’s unilateral and populist perspectives – going far beyond the UN to include the “obsolete” NATO, the unfair TPP, NAFTA, and WTO, along with every other form of multilateral cooperation, including the G7 and G20 – will be revealed as short-sighted and as off-the-mark as de Gaulle’s over half a century ago. It is important to “hold the fort” in the interim. Just as the multilateral institutions discounted by de Gaulle were resilient and ready to expand operations and membership after his departure from the Élysée Palace, the UN and NATO and international cooperation more broadly should also be after Trump’s disappearance from the White House.

We should not forget that this Administration’s assault on multilateralism is not the first low point in U.S.-UN relations. For example, the 1975 General Assembly “Zionism is racism” resolution 3,379 alienated Washington for forty years until its repeal. The 1985 Kassebaum amendment (named after the former Republican Senator from Kansas) demanding more large funders’ control over UN spending created financial headaches with U.S. arrears until Ted Turner eased the pain with a private donation a decade and a half later. Washington pulled out of the ILO in 1977 when the American trade-union leader George Meany insisted that the appointment of a senior Soviet official endangered American and other workers; but the USA rejoined three years later.

It is never wise to hazard predictions; but there is nonetheless room for hope. The results of the November 2018 mid-term elections could produce conditions for a better *modus vivendi* between Washington and Turtle Bay. Democratic control of the House of Representatives undoubtedly will result in the exercise oversight responsibilities that will be a major source of distraction for and act as a brake on the White House. Thus, the Trump Administration will have less time and energy to devote to attacking multilateralism in general and the UN in particular; such policies have little domestic political pay-off. As a result, there may be more margin for maneuver for those like the Secretary-General who seek to make the United Nations more central, or at least less peripheral, to world politics. Lessons, in this respect could be gleaned from international decisions in the late 1990s to move ahead without Washington (and other major powers) with the Rome Treaty to establish the ICC and the Convention on the Prohibition on the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction.

### A Relic or Relevant?

Trying to reform the UN has been virtually a perpetual task since 1945 and the ink dried on the Charter's signatures. Efforts seemingly never cease to improve UN effectiveness and impact; to make it more inclusive, transparent, and accountable and to pull together its autonomous parts. The results have been modest and uneven at best. Those who see the United Nations as essential interpret outcomes optimistically as an encouraging sign of life. Critics, in contrast, see the sclerosis of an aging institution that is not worth saving.

The decimal levels of criticism are rising, including but certainly not only in Trump's Washington. The context for global policy-making—what Richard Haass (2017) called “a world in disarray”—is seemingly ever more complex and uncertain precisely when predictable collective action is so desperately required. Powerful and less powerful countries and their publics appear skeptical about intergovernmental organizations. They are increasingly likely to take a transactional approach to multilateralism of all stripes, including the United Nations. Many governments—including such UN stalwarts as Sweden (Brown, Connelly, and Weiss 2017)—are distancing themselves from key international organizations that they long have sustained and rarely questioned. The multilateral narrative simply has less visceral appeal than in 1945, or even a few years ago. Benefits and costs have to be commensurate.

It is in this context specifically that my examination of the world without the UN has potential traction. For instance, U.S. president John F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev recognized U Thant's little-known shuttle diplomacy during the Cuban Missile Crisis as an important contribution to defusing that conflagration (Blight and Welch 1989). UN diplomacy was obviously not the only variable in avoiding World War III. However, would we like to test the proposition for future crises that such a capacity is irrelevant? What about a cost-benefit analysis of the elimination of small-pox? The total cost at the time was only \$300 million; of this sum only about \$100 million came from international funds (and \$35 million from Washington), or the cost of a single fighter jet at the time. The savings?

Several billion dollars a year since 1977 in vaccines and administration in addition to the absence of the human costs of that scourge. It is helpful to emphasize the value for money represented by aspects of the UN system.

The imperative for UN reform was already obvious during to the 2016 U.S. presidential primaries and election, when simultaneously António Guterres was running his successful campaign to become the ninth resident of the UN's top floor (Weiss and Carayannis 2017). The stage was set for only the second time—the first was in 1996—when the campaigns for the U.S. president and the UN secretary-general ran in parallel. Both were protracted. The UN version produced a slate of thirteen nominees—seven of whom were women, whereas over the previous seven decades only three had been actively considered for the UN's top post. All candidates in 2016 pursued their respective campaigns in person and through lobbyists, while the “1-for-7-billion” civil society campaign pestered member states. The selection process as a result was somewhat open and transparent, although only an inveterate Pollyanna would have hoped to eliminate completely back-room horse-trading in the Security Council's small electoral college—the five permanent members.

In a refreshing break from previous practice, the General Assembly gathered for two-hour hearings with each candidate from April to September 2016; it also organized an open public event for all of them; and civil society debates in New York and London augmented the intergovernmental gatherings. Curricula vitae were available for public and private scrutiny. Candidates circulated “vision statements,” which contained thoughts about how to reshape the unwieldy UN family and make better use of its personnel.

The front-runner for several months and winner of five straw polls in the usually divided Security Council, Guterres secured its recommendation. The General Assembly endorsed his candidacy by acclamation in early in October 2016. Having previously served for two successful terms first as prime minister of Portugal and as head of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), he is the first socialist former head of government to hold the top UN post. While thus not the *Wall Street Journal's* candidate, his distinguished government and UN management experience, together with his evident energy and diplomatic finesse, made him the best of the declared candidates.

In short, the selection process no longer resembled a papal conclave. Arguably, Guterres would not have emerged under the old rules—he obviously is not a Central European woman, when geographical rotation dictated an Eastern European, and many insisted on a female. Moreover, his predecessor undoubtedly would not have been selected in 2006 had the new procedures been in effect. Perhaps these welcome, albeit modest, steps into a more merit-based and transparent process will have knock-on effects for other senior UN positions. This result appeared to have been the case in the May 2017 election of WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and the November 2017 election of UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. It could have an impact at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, whose top jobs have always been reserved for USA and European nationals, respectively.

Among his first remarks in January 2017, Guterres signaled the prevention of armed conflict as a priority, a familiar plea from previous secretaries-general as well. His two other stated emphases involved getting the world

organization's pillars—peace and security; human rights and humanitarian action; and sustainable development—to work together instead of separately; and implement management reform of the bureaucracy. The latter two are not easy, but they are in his job description.

His reform agenda needs to reflect the emerging, long-term opportunities that global instability signals. This moment may allow the United Nations to define its value differently, to become the primary catalyst for global risk management in a world of trans-boundary threats; the organization can be the logical convener for cooperative responses to global problems. The secretary-general is the world's most visible advocate and manager of an essential institution. It and he are more crucial than many believe.

At the same time, the waste, overlap, and lack of synergy in the United Nations and its system of organizations is hardly news. High-level panels, international commissions, academics, and the media have underlined the fragmentation of UN activities and the unrelenting turf-wars over scarce resources. Can the Secretary-General replicate the administrative slimming down and decentralization that he implemented over a decade at UNHCR's helm? If not, the world organization could well continue along a path to becoming a fossil.

Two years into a five-year term, the ninth secretary-general's "honeymoon" is over. His position remains what the 1945–1946 Acting Secretary-General Gladwyn Jebb described as "admittedly about the most difficult one in the world," and which the first incumbent Trygve Lie glumly agreed to be "the most impossible job in the world" (Ravendal 2017, 39). Based on his experience, Guterres is fully aware of the world organization's political flaws and structural and staffing shortcomings. We must hope that he somehow finds the fortitude not to shy away from the Sisyphean task of transforming the way that the UN does business.

Could Guterres use the Trump Administration's tightening of financial screws to do what has needed doing for so long? There are some indications of movement in his proposals to make the UN development system more fit for purpose and to consolidate the peace and security architecture. His proposals for ECOSOC related to UNDP's role in the system and taxing tied resources to pay for coordination may be a step, as would the consolidation of peace operations, peace-building, and political affairs. However, he has not done enough to deliver the type of agenda-setting speech at which Annan was so adept. If Guterres is addressing problems quietly—and we must assume so—he certainly is not doing enough to reassure constituencies that he is actually working behind-the-scenes, and that there is a strategy for dealing with particular issues. His technocratic agenda is difficult to sell even within the system, especially without a bigger, bolder vision behind it. Given the deep challenges that the UN is facing, he simply has to rock the boat, which apparently, he promised not to do as part of his successful campaign in the Global South.

If the secretary-general fails—and his lack of visibility to date is not a good omen (Weiss 2018c)—a self-reinforcing dynamic will ensue; the UN's obvious failure to manage better global problems will mean additional blowback for multilateralism. At that juncture, we could have a real-time test of my proposition that the world could be even worse *without* the United Nations. Donald Trump undoubtedly will chortle; the rest of us are unlikely to do so.

## Conclusion

This essay dwelled on the 45th U.S. president and state sovereignty, because it undoubtedly is the worst ailment of the United Nations (Weiss 2016b). Charter Article 2 incorporates it as the point of departure for the world organization. However, sovereignty can be and has been interpreted more inclusively – including, dramatically, during World War II – to justify intense cooperation in the face of threats to vital interests. Sovereigns can calculate and define their interests to help or hinder efforts to improve the quality of human life and address trans-boundary menaces that former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan (2002) aptly called “problems without passports.” Whether through abstract advances in norm-setting or concrete gains in the areas of conflict resolution, poverty alleviation, human rights, and democratization, the world organization helps and has helped to make the planet a little more habitable and hospitable than it would have been without it.

The cautionary and oft-cited remark attributed to Dag Hammarskjöld is apt: “The UN was not created to take humanity to heaven, but to save it from hell.” The UN system will need to adapt if we are to address many of the current threats to human survival and human dignity. Not all problems are global; but for those that are, solutions increasingly involve a range of actors, sectors, and international institutions. The UN of the future may well do less operationally itself, instead serving as a “legitimizing” at the apex of multi-actor partnerships of increasing complexity.

Nonetheless, one reason that we are not in Hammarskjöld’s netherworld already is the existence of the United Nations. Indeed, it has become an embedded part of today’s world order and often is taken for granted, which is a different type of danger. “We are barely conscious of the continuing stabilizing role it plays in setting the broad parameters for the conduct of international relations,” is how Australia’s former prime minister Kevin Rudd (2016) framed the issue. “If the UN one day disappears, or more likely just slides into neglect, it is only then that we would become fully away of the gaping hole this would leave in what remained of the post-war order.” If that is the case, historian David Mayer (2018, 8) reminds us, “the liberal order conceived just after World War II will appear to future generations as a thing of relative wholesomeness.”

Multilateralism of all stripes is under siege. Yet, the United Nations, warts and all, remains essential. “We are calling for a great reawakening of nations,” is how President Trump concluded his 2017 remarks to the General Assembly. He ignored the fact that the USA created the world organization to curb the demonstrated horrors of nations and of nationalism.

Instead, he and the rest of us should be calling for a great reawakening of the United Nations.

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