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### **United Nations**

The United Nations is one of the most hotly debated institutions in American politics. Critics portray it as corrupt, ineffective in preventing wars, and a threat to American interests. Supporters argue that such cooperation among nations is necessary in an interconnected world, that the United Nations has had a positive impact around the globe, and that in crisis, it brings world leaders together to talk through their differences. Some conservatives argue that the United States should leave the United Nations altogether, while liberals argue for greater investment in it. The debate between those who wish the United States to act independently in its own national interests and those who see U.S. interests tied to international and global interests has surged back and forth for more than a century. The first crisis occurred at the time of World War I.

### **World War I and the League of Nations**

World War I produced death and destruction on a scale never seen before. Year after year, millions died in harrowing circumstances. By 1918 the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Turkish, and German empires were all destroyed.

Many people in power and in the general public, especially in the United States, believed it was essential to create a political process to prevent another catastrophic war. Most Americans were very much opposed to the centuries-old feuding of Europe's empires and vowed to avoid being ensnared in such foreign entanglements.

In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, led the United States into the war on the side of Britain and France, and antiwar protestors suffered lengthy jail sentences. Wilson proposed a 14-point program for a lasting peace. The final point of the 14 was to create a new organization, called the League of Nations, to preserve the peace. Its main tool was economic sanctions, which required a consensus of all member states to be enforced.

The organization was crippled from the start, however, when the United States, having invented the League, refused to join it. After the war, many Americans were alarmed at the prospect of never-ending engagement in foreign disputes and favored isolation. Leading senators in opposition to the League prevented the U.S. Senate from ratifying the treaty, a procedure essential for the United States to make treaties.

Britain and France, exhausted and embittered by the war, felt that Wilson had foisted the League upon them. They could not carry forward the farsighted goals of the League without the help of the United States. A turning point came in 1932, when Britain and France, at a world disarmament conference, humiliated the then progressive German government by refusing to disarm equally with Germany. The German government returned home to face a public convinced that military force and a strong nation were the only ways to revive Germany, and Adolf Hitler took full advantage.

Having rejected disarmament, the British and French then showed no will to fight when Japan, Italy, and Germany began to break international agreements and take over the land and peoples of other states. By the time Hitler attacked Poland in 1939, the League of Nations had lost all credibility. Nevertheless, some of its organizations for combating slavery, drugs, and the exploitation of labor continued under the new United Nations after World War II.

### **Origins and Structure**

The United Nations was distinct from the League of Nations in three main respects. First, it grew from the alliance that ultimately won World War II. These allied countries were motivated by the prospect of building a better world, and the new organization began life on the wave of victorious enthusiasm. Second, the United Nations was not one organization but a system of economic, security, legal, and social structures. Third, the critically important security organization of the United Nations had the power to force other states to act and to go to war but also gave the victorious five nations the power to prevent the

institution from taking action, especially military action. These five—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have permanent seats on the UN Security Council and a veto over any decision.

The alliance that would become the foundation of the UN system we know today was created by U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill three weeks after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. That winter Roosevelt held a long secret conference with Churchill at the White House. On January 1, 1942, they launched the 26-member United Nations to increase support for the fight; bring in the Soviet Union, which was fighting the Nazi armies on the Eastern front without help; and neutralize any sympathy for Hitler's anticommunism among the American public. China and India were part of the alliance, which pledged to fight together until victory and to advance a postwar human rights agenda that would include democratic freedoms, social security, labor rights, and free trade. In the twenty-first century, this agenda seems liberal, but at the time, the war leaders regarded it as necessary to motivate people to fight and build for the future. War was widely regarded as a product of poverty, competition for resources, financial chaos, and arms races. It is for these reasons that in August 1941, Churchill and Roosevelt issued the Atlantic Charter, an eight-point manifesto that included the statement that nations had to abandon using armed force in international affairs.

After the Declaration by the United Nations, the term *United Nations* appeared daily in official documents, the media, and popular culture. In December 1942, the United Nations made one of the first international statements condemning the mass murder of Jews in Poland. And at the end of the war in Europe, President Harry S. Truman informed the American people that Germany had surrendered to the United Nations. Roosevelt and his partners were determined to create new global organizations to prevent a third world war. In 1943 the United Nations created interim organizations: the UN War Crimes Commission, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and the UN Food and Agriculture Commission. By using the same name for the military and political effort, Roosevelt took an integrated, internationalist approach that aimed to avoid the public rejection of the United Nations that the League of Nations had suffered.

The wartime United Nations created world financial organizations and the UN we know today. In 1944 the UN Monetary and Financial Conference (UNMFC) created the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Today the UNMFC is better known as the Bretton Woods Conference, so named for the site at which it took place in New Hampshire. Similarly, the 1945 conference that created the UN organization we know today is popularly known as the San Francisco Conference and officially called the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO). At the time, the creation of the United Nations we know today was the crowning glory of the UN political and war effort. Article 3 of the UN Charter states that the first original members of the UN are those who signed the UN Declaration in January 1942. Fifty-one states came to the UNCIO, as did a huge nongovernmental lobby that achieved some amendments to the proposals the great powers had made at the Dumbarton Oaks and Yalta Conferences. One nongovernmental achievement was the explicit mention of women in the UN Charter, which has provided the basis for many global women's initiatives over the last half-century.

In the late 1940s, the rivalry between the Western and Communist worlds escalated into the cold war. From then on, neither side wanted to remind people that they had been allies in World War II. During this period, the term *Allies* referred to the non-Soviet forces that had fought Hitler, and since then, the wartime United Nations that preceded the San Francisco Conference has been forgotten.

The contemporary United Nations is made up of two main bodies, the Security Council and the General Assembly. The Security Council consists of five permanent members (the "P5")—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as well as ten members with three-year terms.

The Security Council has the power to make international law and take military action, but this power is subject to the veto of any one of the five permanent members. Also, under Article 51 of the UN Charter, states have a right to defend themselves militarily. These features, along with the use of majority voting in the General Assembly, are major differences between the United Nations and the League of Nations, which needed consensus before it could act. The Soviet Union used the veto power in 1946, when it tried to prevent the West from bringing fascist Spain into UN membership, and many times after that. In recent years, the United States has used the veto most often, sometimes in defense of Israel.

The General Assembly includes all member states, controls the budget, and organizes the general

work of the United Nations, which focuses on using economic and social measures to reduce the risk of war. The original wartime organizations evolved into 22 subsidiary or associated bodies, including the World Court; the World Health Organization; the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the Conference on Trade and Development; the Development Program; and other organizations aimed at helping children and refugees.

### **The Cold War and Decolonization**

The cold war dominated global politics by the 1950s. This confrontation prevented the United Nations from taking action as each side canceled out the other in Security Council debates. The United Nations also provided a global political forum at which people not aligned with either side could be courted for their support and provided a nonviolent arena for competition and dialogue at a time when a U.S.-Soviet war could have resulted in a nuclear holocaust.

American debates on the country's role in the United Nations shifted with the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s, when people who favored progressive causes faced being fired from their jobs and socially excluded in the fight against communism.

The Korean War (1950–53) was fought by the U.S.-led United Nations on one side and North Korea and the People's Republic of China on the other. The Soviet Union, apparently surprised by North Korea's initial invasion of South Korea, was boycotting the Security Council at the time and was not present to veto UN action. China's seat on the Security Council was held by the pro-American government based in Taiwan. Some 50,000 of the more than 3 million war dead were U.S. military personnel. The war froze East-West relations until the later 1960s. One product of a thaw in relations was the 1970 UN Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which is considered a foundation of international security.

Increasing numbers of new states have changed the character of the United Nations as it has grown to 192 members. This has occurred in two waves, the first in the 1950s and 1960s as the British and French empires collapsed, and then in the 1990s, after the collapse of communism and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union and of other nations—notably, Yugoslavia—into smaller sovereign states. These new states have tended to favor the political opponents of the empires that governed them; states in Africa and Asia looked to the Soviets and, since 1991, people emerging from Russian domination have looked to the West as a model to follow.

In the first wave of new state creation, many of the new states adopted socialist or communist policies and were hostile to their former Western colonial masters. Led by India, Yugoslavia, and Indonesia, many of the newly liberated states rejected both the capitalist and Communist systems to forge a third world movement of nonaligned states. The Suez Crisis of 1956, the war in Congo in the 1960s, and the Vietnam War were all key points in the political history of these years. People in the third world expressed desperation at the economic conditions they perceived as imposed on them by capitalism, and this produced hostility to the U.S. business-focused approach. As a result, U.S. politicians came to regard the United Nations as hostile to the United States, a perception that continues to this day. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan withdrew the United States from membership in UNESCO because of what he deemed its leftist policies. Nevertheless, public opinion polls in the United States continue to show support for the nation's membership in the United Nations (above the 50 percent mark into the twenty-first century, down from the above 80 percent level of support in 1945).

### **Into the Twenty-First Century**

The collapse of communism produced a brief renaissance for the United Nations in the 1990s. For decades Western leaders had blamed the Communists for the inability to get UN action, so with the collapse, came a great expectation that the United Nations would be empowered to act. In 1990 Iraq leader Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait led to strong UN support for the expulsion of his troops from that country by military force, which was accomplished in 1991. Peacekeeping operations expanded rapidly after 1990. Whereas in 1987, there were some 10,000 UN peacekeepers on missions around the world, by 1995 the number had grown to more than 70,000. These peacekeepers are all sent by member states—the United Nations itself has no forces, and despite the intentions of the founders, very little military planning staff,

and no troops on standby in the forces of its member nations. This lack of capacity represents the will of the member states. For example, during the Korean War of the 1950s and in the war in Iraq of 1990–91, the United States provided its full military capacity, but usually there is no such commitment from member states and resistance to the development of a UN capacity that might rival U.S.-favored organizations such as NATO. Consequently, UN military missions are inevitably slow to assemble and tend to be poorly organized.

UN peacekeeping has a bad name in U.S. politics. The long, violent conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, and more recently Darfur, indicate to many the weakness of the world body. In Rwanda, in 1994, hundreds of thousands died in ethnic violence. The UN and U.S. involvement in the east African state Somalia marked a rapid turnaround in U.S. political attitudes in 1992–93. President George H. W. Bush deployed 25,000 combat troops to Somalia to help restore order. Shortly after taking office, President Bill Clinton reduced the U.S. military presence there to a few thousand; in the fall of 1993, however, he both refused armored support for U.S. troops and authorized a raid by U.S. Rangers that ended in 18 U.S. dead, a large number in the politics of the time. Clinton was anxious to reduce the negative political impact, so the mission was portrayed as a UN rather than a U.S. action.

In Bosnia, UN peacekeepers were unable to stop ethnic cleansing and were denied a mandate and power to attack aggressors. With U.S. public and elite opinion divided and cautioned by the debacle in Somalia, the United States left the matter to the Europeans and the United Nations, while denying them aid from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Finally, when the conflict appeared out of control and domestic concern had grown, the United States led military action and a negotiated settlement. For many, the situation in Bosnia underlined the reality that whatever the legal niceties at the United Nations, only the United States had the muscle to impose peace in the world. The image of America as the reluctant sheriff gained ground in U.S. politics, while in other parts of the world, the image of the United States as police for the powerful had greater resonance.

UN conferences gathered momentum after the end of the cold war. The Earth Summit in Brazil in 1992 on environmental issues set the new standard and led to others, including the 1997 meeting in Kyoto, Japan, that created the first global agreement to combat climate change. UN-sponsored disarmament agreements banned chemical weapons (the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993) and the testing of nuclear weapons (the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996).

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, were a defining moment at the start of the new century. The UN Security Council offered its immediate support and endorsed U.S. military action to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Despite its previous hostility to the United Nations, the administration of President George W. Bush sought a closer relationship and rejoined UNESCO.

The run-up to the war in Iraq and subsequent events have once again seen the United Nations portrayed in U.S. politics as either villain or weakling. Prior to the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, UN inspectors seeking weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were criticized as being dupes of Saddam Hussein. Despite stating that the United States needed no “permission slip” from the United Nations to attack Iraq, President Bush sought first one and then a second Security Council resolution to pressure Iraq, arguing that the UN’s failure to support the United States made it as useless as the League of Nations in the 1930s. Some Democrats contend that the pursuit of the first resolution was merely an attempt to secure centrist votes in the November 2002 midterm congressional elections, and the second was never seriously pursued. In retrospect, the Bush administration argued that earlier resolutions and the right of preemptive self-defense provided the backing of international law for its actions. UN supporters pointed to the wisdom of the majority of nations on the Security Council who refused to support what they saw as a disastrous war.

UN member states provided funds for a budget of \$20 billion in 2008, excluding the IMF and the World Bank, while the United States has accumulated unpaid dues to the United Nations of some \$1.5 billion, the lion’s share of overdue payments. By way of comparison, the \$20 billion budget is about half that of the single U.S. state of Virginia, while the UN agency responsible for controlling nuclear proliferation, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has just \$200 million to spend. The United Nations also lacks permanent peacekeeping forces or even a headquarters and communications unit comparable to that of most of its member states.

*Reform* is a term much used in discussions of the United Nations. Some debate focuses on issues of corruption and ineffectiveness; for some states such as India, Germany, and Japan, the issue is to secure a permanent seat on the Security Council. The term *UN reform*, therefore, does not describe a single agenda. The U.S. nationalist agenda includes removing those members of the United Nations alleged to be undemocratic or inhumane from any influence, cutting the budget, and introducing standards of efficiency drawn from the corporate sector. Others in the United States seek greater resources for peacekeeping and other missions. Internationally, many states believe that either the veto should be done away with or expanded to other major states, such as India.

As Mark Twain put it, “any jackass can kick a barn down, but it takes a carpenter to build one.” As new crises arise, the familiar arguments will resume between those who see the United Nations as an ally of liberal causes that should not impede U.S. goals and those who regard it as a necessity in an interdependent world.

*See also* foreign policy and domestic politics since 1933; Korean War and cold war; New Deal Era, 1932–52.

#### FURTHER READING

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