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**INTERNATIONAL**

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# U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND MULTILATERALISM



By Franklin Thomas

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*The time will come, if it has not already arrived, when thoughtful men must ponder whether peace can ever be made secure without great sacrifice of national sovereignty — or whether national sovereignty is always to be more deeply cherished than collective peace. If national self-interest is to take invariable precedence over the international common good, the future may well be bleak for mankind.*

— Ralph Bunche (1952)

**T**hirty-five years have passed since Ralph Bunche, winner of the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize, wrote those words, but they continue to speak loudly to us today. The need for this nation — every nation — to look beyond its own borders to help solve problems and meet critical challenges has not diminished. Indeed, it has grown. Each year, we become aware of new fields of human activity which no single government, no matter how powerful, can manage alone.

Before turning to particular challenges facing the United States which cry out for multilateral approaches, let us step back and look at where we've been, where we are, and what forces are at work shaping our future choices.

Our heritage is a proud one; the U.S. has been the greatest force behind this century's multilateral experiments. President Woodrow Wilson was the founding father of the League of Nations and President Franklin Roosevelt the moving spirit in the evolution of the United Nations system. When Roosevelt returned from Yalta in 1945, he described the new world organization to the U.S. Congress in these terms:

*"It spells, and it ought to spell, the end of the system of unilateral action, exclusive alliances, spheres of influence, balances of power, and all the other expedients*

which have been tried for centuries and have always failed."

Under United States leadership, a collective system of peace and security was going to replace national security systems and the arms race. Arms limitation and disarmament would logically follow on the establishment of this system.

In 1945 the United States was the unquestioned leader of the international community, the sole nuclear power, and by far the richest country in the world. U.S. generosity and statesmanship in the post-war era are among the crowning glories of our history. The fruits of that statesmanship included the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which started the rebuilding of the war-shattered world; the Bretton Woods arrangements, which set up the post-war economic framework, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; the United Nations and its system of specialized agencies; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Marshall Plan; and the international program for the peaceful uses of atomic energy. All of these were pioneering multilateral efforts. They set the shape and tone of the post-war world. They articulated the vision of a multilateral, cooperative system which alone would manage the increasing complexities, opportunities, and dangers of the second half of the 20th century.

It was perhaps only natural that time and experience would bring about a retreat from this radical ideal of a new world order.

In 1945 a number of developments that now appear obvious were not, in fact, clearly foreseen. For example, it was not fully appreciated that the ideological gulf between the East and the West, with all of its military and political consequences, would soon become the single most dominant feature of international politics. Thus the collective system of security and disarmament which was the centerpiece of the U.S. Charter, would never become a reality.

Also, it was not clearly foreseen that nuclear weapons would fundamentally alter the political role and military weight of the most powerful states. Nor did the United States take into account the pace of decolonization and the emergence of what is now called the "Third World." Finally, the scope of the technological revolution and its fundamental impact on virtually every aspect of human life was scarcely mentioned.

These and other developments profoundly modified the enthusiasm and self-

confidence with which most Americans originally viewed the post-war world — so much so that in recent years a strong movement has grown up to reject many of the multilateral structures which we ourselves first took the lead in developing. We see its manifestations in negative attitudes toward the United Nations and the International Court of Justice; in the refusal to ratify the Law of the Sea Convention; and in the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO, just to name a few.

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In part, we are witnessing a backlash of resentment at the misuse and manipulation of these instruments by nations hostile to the United States and its ideals. But there are also some Americans who seem to reject both the wisdom *and* the necessity of multilateral arrangements. At best they accept them only on terms of U.S. control and ownership, terms that ultimately undermine multilateral cooperation.

When aspirations are set high, reality almost always falls short. This country's experience with the struggle of the 1950s and the 1960s to put an end to racism and poverty is in some ways a good analogy. Expectations soared so high that our inability to fully reach the goals was interpreted by some as complete failure. Disappointment bred a sense of defeat and a pulling back from the original goals. The spirit of the times contracted and, in many quarters, expansiveness and hope gave way to a narrowing of vision and a tendency to blame the victims for their plight.

America's post-war internationalism may have been naive, and perhaps even excessive. But surely it is no answer for us to swing radically in the other direction. That early vision of world community was, after

all, the hard-won lesson of the Second World War. It may not have worked as intended, but who can say that the instincts behind it were wrong? If anything, 40 years of tempestuous change have added compelling *new* reasons for effective multilateral action.

Those reasons are evident in the global impact of the recent stock market crash, the global threat of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union, the world oil situation, the vast problem of international drug trade, environmental hazards which threaten to deplete the ozone layer, and the spread of infectious diseases like AIDS. We see them, too, in the tragic waves of human migration, people fleeing threats to their lives and seeking opportunities which respect no national boundaries. And we see them in the impact of massive urban growth and in the global imbalance between surplus food production and starvation. None of these will be solved by any *one* nation. None of them will be solved at all, without cooperative efforts.

There is still another fundamental dimension to the U.S. need for multilateral arrangements and institutions, especially the United Nations. As a global power we have an abiding interest in all forms of international stability. But we must also steer clear of direct involvement in many regional conflicts. At the present time, the United Nations is centrally involved in the negotiations on the Iran-Iraq war, and on Afghanistan. It also plays an important peace-keeping role in Cyprus . . . and southern Lebanon. The peaceful management of such disputes is critical to America's global interests, and clearly the U.N. is a very useful vehicle for us to deal with aspects of a number of troublesome regional conflicts and crises.

As I said earlier, the United States has traditionally been the leader in trying to establish, through the United Nations, an effective permanent system for international peace and security. This has proved to be a frustrating and elusive task. As you know, under the U.N. system there are five permanent members of the Security Council — the United States, the Soviet Union, China, France, and Great Britain. The original intent was that they were to take the lead in facing threats to peace and, if necessary, pool their military resources to deal with them. Of course, in the last 40 years this system has been incompatible with the realities of the times and especially of the East-West relationship.

Nonetheless, in dangerous situations governments *have* tended to come back to the United Nations when all other approaches have failed. That was what happened with respect to the seven-year war between Iran and Iraq. Perhaps the one positive aspect of that long tragedy has been the new unanimity it has brought to the permanent members of the Security Council.

Moreover, in recent months there have been signs of what may be a significant change in the Soviet attitude toward the United Nations. The change is summed up in General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's published statement of September 17 outlining a new Soviet international stance, particularly with regard to its participation in U.N. operations. In this striking reappraisal, Gorbachev appears to be suggesting a far more active and positive Soviet role in multilateral and international organizations within the context of managing peace and security in a post-nuclear world.

The Soviets have also announced their intention to pay arrears of some \$200 million owed to the U.N. for international peace-keeping dating back to 1973. In September the Soviet foreign minister suggested that the security of shipping in the Persian Gulf should be a United Nations responsibility. The Soviets also have urged the revival of the Security Council Military Staff Committee, which consists of the Chiefs of Staff of the five permanent members.

Whatever one may think of these developments or the motives behind them, they require serious consideration and response from the West. Pragmatically, in the Gulf region, for instance, it seems now to be agreed that there are some threats to world peace which are simply too dangerous and too complex for East and West *not* to cooperate on.

Personally, I hope that this trend toward a renewed spirit of multilateralism will widen to take in other vital world problems. I am thinking, for example, of the situations in Southern Africa and in the Middle East. For, as long as the international community's response is divided along East-West lines, it will be much more difficult to resolve these and other serious regional conflicts.

In light of past experiences, caution is certainly in order. But if there really is a chance to increase the effectiveness of multilateral action and responsibility in dealing with international conflict and sta-

bility, we should at least actively examine that possibility. We should *not* let the high ground of international leadership be lost to us.

There is much to build on. The U.S. has a long and often successful record of using the United Nations to rally and lead an effective international constituency on a wide range of global problems. We can and must continue to do so. This is not only a matter of justice and of respect for human rights, central as those are. It is also increasingly a

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question of human survival in any reasonably acceptable conditions. And before us lies perhaps the greatest challenge of all — to release the human spirit and human creativity from the bondage of poverty, prejudice, violence and ignorance under which it has labored for far too long.

Our knowledge and technological mastery run on a two-way street. They can lead to human progress and improvement previously undreamed of. Or they can lead to lingering global disaster. This is a choice which has not presented itself so sharply to previous generations. In other words, if we are to survive in reasonable conditions, we have to manage not only our conflicts but also our progress.

This, I believe, is the major challenge of the last years of the 20th century — a challenge that concerns every man, woman, and child on this earth. And when one comes to terms with it, it is essentially a very practical matter. It requires hard work, clear thinking, and resistance to short cuts or ideological schemes. The United States is fortunate to have great human resources to face this challenge. It is vital that we use them well.

By its very nature, two qualities are essential for meeting this challenge — leadership, and cooperation.

In the post-war years, the United States provided an extraordinary degree and quality of international leadership. It is critically important to revive that role. There is an urgent need for international leadership in many areas which have a direct bearing on the future of our planet. There is also, I believe, a new majority forming in the world of moderate, pragmatic states, but they await an inspiring leadership.

What is the challenge to this leadership? In the first place, it has to balance the national interests with those of the world community as a whole. We need to identify clearly what developments and events *must* be managed cooperatively, regardless of political, economic, or ideological differences. We need to learn how to use international regional institutions more effectively. The new leadership will also need to dispel popular apathy and sense of non-involvement, which can so quickly nullify the most imaginative of enterprises.

Much of the multilateral machinery to achieve these goals already exists. Some important parts of it have long lain dormant. We need to get the machinery out, modify it, overhaul it, and *use* it. □

*Franklin Thomas is the president of The Ford Foundation. The above was excerpted from the Ninth Mordecai Wyatt Johnson Memorial Lecture at Howard University, November 20, 1987, in honor of the first Black president of Howard University. In his lecture, Thomas noted the fact that "Dr. Johnson devoted his life to the service of truth, to the pursuit of intellectual excellence, and to the ideal of shared understanding among all races, all people. The values and principles he espoused are enduring ones, to which we must turn again and again if we are to meet the complex challenges facing this country and the world."*