

# **The United Nations and its Friends**

## **What if the United States Wanted the United Nations to be Successful**

a speech by William J. vanden Heuvel\*

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Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a member of the Knickerbocker Club for 32 years before he resigned on April 27, 1937. The President stated in his letter of resignation that “it seems improbable that I shall find it possible to use the Club not only because of absence from New York but also because of the difficulty of getting up and down steps.” The reference, of course, is to the disability that resulted when, at the age of 39, Franklin Roosevelt was stricken with infantile paralysis. He would never walk or stand again unassisted. He was a man of incomparable personal courage. The pain of his struggle is almost unimaginable – learning to move again, to stand, to rely upon the physical support of others – never giving in to despair, to self-pity, to discouragement. Just twelve years after he was stricken, he was elected President of the United States and took command of a paralyzed nation. He lifted America from its knees and led us to our fateful rendezvous with history.

The Knickerbocker Club was close to his residence at 45 East 65<sup>th</sup> Street – a home that had been a wedding present to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt from his mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt. That historic building is in the process of beautiful restoration by Hunter College which bought it some 60 years ago from the Roosevelt estate. FDR undoubtedly used the Knickerbocker Club a great deal before 1921 – it was a place whose membership and ambiance he enjoyed.

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By the way, in accepting FDR's resignation, the Club Secretary pointed out that it only became effective upon the payment of his indebtedness to the Club which totaled \$93.75. The President immediately instructed Missy Lehand to pay his obligation. If the debit is still on the books, I herewith offer to pay it – without cumulative interest of course!

Eleanor Roosevelt had a different kind of contact with the Knickerbocker Club. Her father, Elliot Roosevelt, the brother of Theodore Roosevelt who became the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, was a member. He was also an alcoholic. As Eleanor recalled,\* “my father had several fox terriers that he seemed to carry everywhere with him. One day he took me and three of his fox terriers and left us with the doorman at the Knickerbocker Club. He said that he would be away for a minute while he ran an errand. I sat there, a six year old, for six hours until the doorman sent me home in a cab. My father had been drinking in the bar of the Club and had forgotten all about me. Yet he hadn't meant to hurt me, and I still adored him.” It was a shattering experience for a child who was already obsessed with the fear of being deserted by those whom she loved, and when she spoke of it in later years she sometimes added the terrible detail that she had seen her besotted father carried out of the Club.”

Those vignettes tell much about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt who are regarded among the greatest Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This evening, I will talk briefly about a commitment both of them shared and an institution they did much to create and sustain – the United Nations.

The founding of the United Nations was a singular act of political creativity, certainly the most successful in history's long record of efforts to fulfill Mankind's quest for a just, compassionate and peaceful world. More than anyone else, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the instrument of that creation. He understood that collective security

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\* I Remember Hyde Park, by Eleanor Roosevelt, McCall's Magazine, February 1963; Eleanor and Franklin, Joseph P. Lash (Norton 1971) pp. 51-52.

required the most powerful nations to be responsible partners in this great enterprise. Despite illness and the incredible hardship of the journey, President Roosevelt went to Yalta to assure Russian participation in the proposed international organization. In his report to Congress upon his return, President Roosevelt said: “There can be no middle ground here. We shall have to take the responsibility for world collaboration, or we shall have to bear the responsibility for another world conflict.”

While the Second World War was being fought, the peace to follow it was being prepared. Even before the U.S. entry into the war, the President addressed the Congress and insisted that the terrible sacrifices that the world was about to endure could only be justified if, in the world to come, all nations and all peoples could be assured of the Four Freedoms, namely, Freedom of Speech and Expression, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want and Freedom from Fear. The declaration of the Atlantic Charter sustained this theme. The Charter of the United Nations itself and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was to follow it had this commitment to freedom at their core. The separate responsibilities of the Security Council and the General Assembly were intended to reflect both the power needed for collective security and the democratic participation of all nations in the processes of the United Nations. There were no illusions. FDR understood very well the oppressive totalitarianism of Communism under the Soviet Union. He also understood that the Allied victory in World War II was due in substantial measure to the extraordinary sacrifice of the Russian people who had lost 27 million dead with much of their country plundered and destroyed. He also understood that we were about to enter the nuclear age and that conflicts among nations now required a forum for these conflicts to be resolved by means other than war. The United States, at this point, as Roosevelt advanced the cause of the U.N., was unquestionably the dominant power of the world, the singular possessor of nuclear weapons, the overwhelming economic force among nations with a military capacity that had no competitor. The United States was more powerful then in relationship to the rest of the world than it is today. Those who repeat the mantra of our overwhelming power today as though it justifies the flaunting of the opinions of other nations should remember that at no time since the Second World War has the United States been anything but the most powerful nation on earth with

military, economic and political resources essentially beyond challenge. Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and George Herbert Walker Bush understood how important the United Nations could be as an instrument of governance that could protect American interests and encourage the acceptance of American values. The Cold War delayed and certainly endangered the possibilities of the United Nations that had been envisioned by its founders. Nevertheless, the intervention in Korea in 1950 was under the flag of the United Nations. And, in the most serious crisis of the nuclear age, President Kennedy very effectively used the United Nations as the means of convincing the world of the legitimacy of America's response to the presence of Soviet missile weaponry in Cuba.

As with so many things, the Vietnam War undermined the developing peacekeeping possibilities of the U.N. President Johnson chose to Americanize the conflict in every way, manipulating a "coalition of the willing" rather than seeking UIN mediation to bring the civil war to an end. The United Nations was made to look weak and irrelevant but, in fact, it was the United States that paid the price of a profoundly divided nation and a generation of self-doubt.

Before considering the impact on the United Nations of the Gulf War in 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in March of this year, let me say that one of the problems in our country is lack of knowledge regarding the UN – ignorance of its history, of what it is, of how it operates, and of what it can do. A basic lesson about the UN would tell us the following: the UN is not a sovereign entity. It is an association of sovereign member states. The United Nations is not a government. It is not an executive, it is not a legislature that can command the peoples of the world. It is not a Court that can adjudicate and then enforce its decisions. It has no standing army, no air force; no, not even arsenals kept ready to support its missions. The assessed annual financial obligation of the United States to the UN is approximately \$300 million.

The United Nations is a mirror of a very imperfect world; it can only do what its 191 members permit it to do. The national interests of the United States can be advanced

if our government has the will and skill to do so but, because of our veto and our power, nothing significant can happen in the UN that adversely affects us.

Now that is the reality.

Most Americans are fair-minded and willing to listen and learn but in the complicated field of international relations where the President has primary power, it is the President and his spokesmen who must explain American interests in encouraging the success of the UN. Absent that powerful advocacy – and it has long been absent – the enemies of the UN, well financed, well organized and unencumbered by any need, desire, or responsibility to make balanced presentations to their audiences have done great harm to the relationship between the United States and the United Nations.

When Saddam invaded Kuwait in August 1990, George Bush, Sr. made it very clear that this aggression would not be allowed to stand. He set out to organize the United Nations in such a way that Saddam was confronted by a united world resisting his fundamental transgression of the Charter. George Herbert Walker Bush led both the United States and the United Nations brilliantly in the Gulf War, a struggle where France as well as the United Kingdom, where Germany as well as Japan, where Arab nations as well as Israel, where Turkey as well as Mexico stood with us and even paid the financial burden of \$100 billion.

In his memoir, A World Transformed, written five years ago, George Bush, Sr. wrote the following to explain why he did not send American forces to Baghdad – a decision in which he was supported by General Colin Powell and General Schwartzkopf and by every senior member of his government:

*Trying to eliminate Saddam... would have incurred incalculable human and political costs. Apprehending him was probably impossible... We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq... there was no viable "exit strategy" we could see, violating another of our*

*principles. Furthermore, we had been self-consciously trying to set a pattern for handling aggression in the post-Cold War world. Going in and occupying Iraq, thus unilaterally exceeding the United Nations' mandate, would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish. Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land.*

How painful it is to hear those words in the light of what has happened and is happening in Iraq today.

American policy relating to Iraq as determined by this Administration was profoundly influenced by a group of ideological radicals who have made careers out of bombastic nationalism and vicious, well-funded attacks on the United Nations. I cite as an example Richard Perle, who as Chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board led the demand for war and the invasion of Iraq.

On March 21 in the Guardian, Mr. Perle wrote: "Saddam Hussein's reign of terror is about to end. He will go quickly but not alone – he will take the U.N. down with him. Thank God for the death of the U.N." If we believe in internationalism, if we believe that America has tried to play a constructive role in leading the world toward democratic values, if we believe that the United Nations is an important instrument in this age-old struggle to control the greed and corruption of Mankind, we must realize that we are jeopardizing the ideals of America that great generations of Americans have sustained in the last 70 years as the responsibility of world leadership has come to us.

It is the obligation of our leaders to give the nation and the world a vision of hope and confidence and courage. The Great Depression and World War II were much greater crises, much greater threats to the existence of our nation than anything we face now. President Roosevelt who understood the corrosive nature of fear strove to restore the nation's confidence in itself. "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," he said in his first

Inaugural – and Americans believed him. “Freedom from fear is an objective that should be sought for all nations and all peoples” – and the world believed him. September 11, 2001 was an overwhelming and terrible crime. Terrorism emerged in a new form and with a new name, Al Qaeda. It is the responsibility of our political leaders to identify our enemy and to mobilize the resources to defeat it. Al Qaeda is not an enemy that threatens the existence of our nation; it threatens the soul of our people. Our response should be one of determination, of courage, of confidence – not feckless fear that undermines the very values that define America for ourselves and the rest of the world.

I wondered during the course of the Iraqi debate: could there be any doubt that America’s national interests would best be served by America’s challenge to Iraq being legitimized by U.N. approval and support? Did not our leaders understand the meaning, opportunity and value of the U.N.’s immediate support of the American response to the terrorist crime of September 11<sup>th</sup>? It was said during the Senate debate – and I repeat it now – the war was the easy part – the world’s finest, most powerful military force was contending against a country of 24 million people, a country with no comparable armed force, a country a third of which was already occupied by our ally, the Kurds, a country that had no response to our air power which was prepared to decimate it. It was always the Occupation that required U.N. legitimacy as the best shield for the brave men and women left with a responsibility for which so little planning had been done. In its own most basic interest, the United States had to make the enforcement of the 17 U.N. resolutions violated by Iraq a U.N. approved mandate.

There were several occasions during the time when I had the honor of representing the United States in the Security Council, that my Soviet counterpart and I would talk very privately of the world that could be achieved if our nations worked together to try to make the U.N. the effective instrument of international governance that its Founders hoped it to be. As I watched the Iraq debate, I asked myself a variation of that question – What would the U.N. and our world be like if the American government, now the world’s only superpower, truly wanted the U.N. to succeed? What would a President do who wanted the U.N. to be effective and successful? Every poll prior to the

Iraq confrontation showed more than 70% of Americans wanting the U.N. to be successful and wanting America to be the leader in that effort. Understanding that every such action would have to be defensible as furthering and strengthening our national interests, I wondered what an American government led by someone with the vision and pragmatic discipline of FDR would do today if its purpose was to lead the U.N. in creating a better world. Here are some thoughts:

1. First of all, we would not begrudge the sum that we pay as our assessed obligation, recognizing that the \$300 million annual obligation is probably the most cost effective dollar that we pay in terms of American security. We would never stop reminding our countrymen that the U.N. is not a sovereign body, that it has no power or resources beyond what its members give to it, and that U.S. leadership is indispensable to the U.N.'s success.
2. We would not degrade the character and quality of the international civil servants who serve the United Nations and its specialized agencies. Instead, we would recognize the high standard of their performance and do everything possible to motivate and encourage them to still greater achievements. And we would mourn with them the loss of the brave men and women in the bombing in Baghdad – and the hundreds of UN personnel who have been killed in peacekeeping operations over the years.
3. We would acknowledge the extraordinary good fortune of having a Secretary General of the character, integrity, intelligence and experience of Kofi Annan. We would take advantage of his tenure to use his diplomatic brilliance and his unparalleled connections to the nations of the world in order to further democratic objectives in the United Nations.
4. We would understand that the world has witnessed immense changes since the founding of the United Nations, that the U.N. has been the midwife to many of those changes, such as the peaceful end of the colonial era, but that changes in

structure and procedure which are never easy in national or in international organizations should be considered. For example, a crucial objective in the years ahead is a capacity to recognize and respond to the needs of nation-building. The Trusteeship Council whose original mission has been essentially completed could be reorganized for the purpose of nation-building so that the U.N., with the assistance of the United States and other member states, could train and have available civil administrators, development experts, teachers, police, firemen and security experts to assist nations disintegrating because of civil strife in negotiating and enforcing a social contract that would give the possibility of peace and social justice.

5. We would recognize the difficulty in reforming the Security Council as witnessed by the discussions and proposals of the last decade. Instead of being discouraged by political roadblocks that are not easy to resolve, the United States could insist upon close coordination and communication between the Security Council and important member states that under other circumstances will be considered for permanent membership. Close coordination and communication with all member states and regional groups should be the order of the day. In an age of instant communication, such a working procedure is clearly possible.
  
6. We know that civilization needs a police force just as every one of our communities looks to its local police for security and protection against the lawless. If thugs control the streets, forget the hopes and dreams of civilized society. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi hoodlums brought the world to the precipice of destruction. The tinhorn dictators who challenge democratic values today when they carry out ethnic cleansing and assault innocent people, destroying their lives and their hopes, are in the same gangster tradition. The United States does not want to be nor should it be the Policeman of the World. But for the United Nations to have the ability to enforce its moral authority, the United States must participate and lead. We should encourage the creation of forces that would be available to the Security Council to allow for timely peacekeeping and

peacemaking interventions. It is not difficult to organize rapid deployment forces that would be available to the Security Council for specific purposes which its permanent members would have to approve. If the United States wanted such a rapid deployment force, we could make it happen. The Armed Forces of the United States could lend their extraordinary ability and experience to the creation and training of such a force as well as peacekeeping forces. We could invite young American men and women to volunteer for a special unit in our Armed Forces which could be made available for peacekeeping or peacemaking missions. We would show the world how the idealism and courage of our young men and women can serve the purposes of peace and social justice as well as war.

7. Understanding the crucial role of the United Nations in the fight against AIDS and other threatening plagues and epidemics, we would constantly remind Americans that the World Health Organization, one of the specialized agencies of the United Nations, is a major force in protecting our country. We would be proud of the extraordinary achievements of WHO which we have helped bring about, such as the elimination of smallpox and the near eradication of polio – and we would tell Americans that the World Health Organization is indispensable to the international cooperation necessary to fight the plagues and diseases which threaten the world and leave no nation immune.
  
8. We would use the United Nations as a forum to stand up to tyrants and to lead the world in recognition of the Rule of Law. There is no greater benefit to the national interest of the United States than to have a world which recognizes the Rule of Law. It should be our special mission to encourage the United Nations by every means possible to fulfill this objective. The progress that has been made in the last 60 years is stunning. We have helped make it possible. We should be leaders in extending the concept of the Rule of Law. We should welcome the International Court for Criminal Justice, for example, and if for whatever reason we could not promise ratification of the treaty that has created it, we certainly should not stand in the way of other nations carrying out its mandate. We would

use the United Nations and instruments like the ICCJ to make it clear to tyrants that international legitimacy requires the consent of the governed and that all rational means will be used to end their oppression. We would take pride in the American role in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Recognizing the limitations of the U.N. Human Rights Commission, we would work to make it more effective – and, in any event, invite the nations of the world to join with us in making human rights a priority consideration on the international agenda. We would recognize the unique possibilities of the U.N. in mediation, arbitration and conflict resolution and would move to strengthen those procedures in every possible way.

9. We would recognize the indispensable role of the United Nations in achieving a most urgent objective, namely, nuclear non-proliferation. We would strengthen the International Atomic Energy Commission and find the diplomatic means to accomplish the purposes of the non-proliferation agreement while at the same time making it clear that a civilized world cannot tolerate nations threatening the use of nuclear weapons. We would remember the bargain that we made in asking the nations of the world not to pursue the development of nuclear weapons – a bargain that obligated the United States to lead the international effort to reduce armaments and nuclear weapons.
  
10. We would proudly remind the nations of the world of the obligations that all of us undertook at the Millennium Summit. We would work to give credibility to our commitment to help the less developed nations of the world in terms of strengthening their civil societies and their economic prospects.

It was clear before the invasion of Iraq and it is abundantly clear now that we would be in a much stronger position in pursuit of our legitimate objectives if the United Nations and through it the nations of the world were with us, strengthening our efforts to bring peace and a representative government to the people of Iraq.

Making the UN a successful part of international governance will serve our country's interests for generations to come. A peaceful and prosperous world cannot be organized without the active engagement and leadership of the United States. Presidential leadership is absolutely vital to our role in the United Nations. The Congress can be hostile, the extremists can continue their rhetorical explosions, but if the President is clear in his purpose and willing to exercise the necessary political will, the United States can inspire the world by making the UN a powerful, effective instrument in the governance of a world that pleads for our leadership.

If history is our guide, we know that the window of opportunity for the beneficent exercise of our power will not remain open forever. Other nations will emerge in this century that will rival us and challenge our dominance. The American dream is not empire; it is constitutional democracy that assures personal freedom and equal opportunity. Our destiny is to create a better world where democratic values are fundamental. In that quest, the United Nations can be a crucial partner.