

Where Are We?

Opening Address by Newton Bowles

Thinkers' Lodge, July 18, 2002

In the 14th Century, at least one-third of Europe died in the black plague, a natural disaster. In our 20th Century, around 200 million people were killed by the hand of a man, by war. And out of this inferno came the noble, fragile United Nations. This year, with the addition of East Timor and Switzerland, altogether 191 nation-states will have signed the U.N. Charter, renouncing war. This year, some two dozen home-made wars are continuing; and this year, global military expenditures will climb back up to some \$800 billions. The United Nations is the theatre where all can see this travesty, this tragedy.

And this year, onto this stage flashed suicide terrorists, bringing down twin temples of global power. September 11. This happened on the doorstep of the U.N. in New York, and just as the General Assembly was beginning, a stroke of genius. The U.N. shuddered. A security cordon was thrown around the world headquarters. The annual NGO conference was shut down, thousands went home. Heads of state, poised for their September jamboree, were put off until November. The special session on children, elaborately prepared for September, was postponed till May. On September 12, the Security Council met in emergency session, and with one voice affirmed the Chartered right of the U.S.A. to fight back. On September 23, the Security Council spelled out what all U.N. states must do to suppress international terror. The General Assembly went along. The September terrorists succeeded in scaring this dysfunctional U.N. family into quick and concerted action. With the U.S. in the lead, this looked like new life for the U.N. Not only was the U.S. insisting that the U.N. must poke its nose into domestic affairs of all its members -- intervention is the code word -- but at the same time the U.S. had paid its current U.N. dues and around two-thirds of its overdues. From trial by fire, was the unilateral George W born again as a multilateral man of the world?

Terrorism was not new to the U.N. Already before September 11, there were 12 formal treaties against specific aspects of terror -- in the sky, at sea, in diplomatic enclaves, and most recently in financing of terror. The U.S. was a partner in this panoply. No nation alone could fend off terror, that was clear. With terrorists at its heart, would the U.S. now embrace the U.N.?

No likely. The U.S.-led coalition has turned the American war machine onto Afghanistan. And a comprehensive treaty on terrorism, tying all 12 together, is stuck because any generic definition of terror would target not only naughty stateless terrorists but also terrorists in shining state-sponsored armour. The September terrorists triggered American paranoia, turning the nation against itself and against a world seething with enemies. The worst has not happened, no big ban; but the legitimate American search for security is moving in a dangerous go-it-alone direction. Standing in the way of understanding the September terrorists are Pentagon fantasies of world domination from the skies. This would be a wild success for September. Bombs feed terror. Complicating all this is the fact that the Pentagon funnels big bucks into industry. Paranoia feeds greed. Not only in the U.S., but world-wide, there is an enormous psychological-political investment in fear, in armour.

To some degree this affects every approach to disarmament at the U.N. At the recent NPT PrepCom, there was not even a symbolic gesture toward abolishing nukes. The U.S. won't sign the Test Ban; and instead the Pentagon plays with making little nukes. Washington and Moscow have agreed to reduce active nukes to 1,700 each over the next decade. That is

certainly a good thing, a big step in a good direction; but it is cluttered up the Americans' unilateral killing of the ABM treaty and Pentagon's persistence in funky missile defense. Everyone knows that missile defense won't work, and that what is real is star wars, plans to put weapons in space. This is no longer a cold war world. The American stance feeds the nuke craze in China, India and Pakistan, not to mention Israel.

Add to this the U.S. refusal last year to give monitoring teeth to the treaty banning biological weapons. Strange, isn't it, considering possible bio-terror?

To finish off this quick look at disarmament, just a year ago there was the first-ever U.N. conference on controlling illegal small arms. The conference agreed on practical ways to regulate and reduce the enormous stocks of these little killers, although the U.S. block efforts to prohibit their flow through clandestine channels. Still, this was an important first step, an essential supplement to the landmines treaty.

Despite the shock waves of terror, U.N. peace operations have been substantially strengthened along lines recommended in last year's Brahimi Report. Over 47,000 personnel are serving in 16 U.N. operations. Cyprus is healing at last. Ethiopia and Eritrea are slowly making peace. Exhausted Angola can begin again. Greed feeds war in Democratic Congo. Between Israel and Palestine, only an international presence will do; and it looks like the EU will have to take this on. Read the third attachment to my newsletter.

Considering the fact that no one is prepared to give the U.N. even a battalion for quick action, isn't it astonishing that U.S. peace operations get better? It was the Aussies in East Timor and the Brits in Sierra Leone who jumped in and pave the way for U.N. peace-building. This is what NATO thrust on the U.N. in Afghanistan. Nation building likes this goes far beyond the old notion of trusteeship. There is money enough for the military, but uncertain little for peacemaking. In these war-torn countries, the U.N. has had to improvise within flimsy budgets.

For over 150 years Afghanistan has been buffeted by great powers, most recently bombed by the Russians and now the U.S.A. Even when left alone, Afghanistan has never had an effective national government. Afghanistan was a transit station, not the source of terrorism. To fashion and sustain a national government will require big external aid for many years. Will we stay or walk away?

Not incidentally, it is our Canadian Colleague, Nigel Fisher, who right now is in charge of all U.N. humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

At our Pugwash meeting in March this year, we had a look at the U.N.'s right to intervene, the responsibility to protect against gross violations of human rights. The U.N. at the highest political level has sanctioned and mandated intervention against terrorism. Does this extend to customary violations? Mary Robinson said that September 11 was a crime against humanity. The implication was that the Security Council should train its guns on itself, on Russia in Chechnya, on China in its prisons, maybe even on the U.S.A. in its death penalty. Nevertheless, there is nearly universal adherence to the basic treaties on human rights; and there is an elaborate monitoring of national compliance. The Human Rights Commission is the court of public exposure where dirty laundry will hang. Only in the past decade has international judicial enforcement begun, with the Security Council's War Crimes Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda, followed by the 1998 Rome launch of a permanent International Criminal Court (the ICC). It is an encouraging political fact that all governments, including our own, hate to see their dirty laundry hung out.

Even more threatening is the prospect of individual prosecution, begun in the ad hoc War Crimes Tribunals and soon to be followed by the ICC. Canada was a leader in getting the ICC off the ground; and the ICC began its formal existence on Canada Day this year, with 66 governments ratifying. An era of impunity is ending, said our Philippe Kirsh.

Well, is it? At this year's Human Rights Commission, repressive governments ganged up to block any look at China, Chechnya, Iran or Zimbabwe. Kofi Annan warned against using terror as an excuse for smearing the innocent. Mary Robinson will leave in September. As for the ICC, while over 70 governments have joined, several big countries stand aside. Most troubling is U.S. intransigence. The Bush administration made history by canceling the American signature, short of ratification, of the Rome Treaty. How weird that Washington then took its fix to the Security Council, threatening to kill the U.N. in Kosovo unless Americans were made immune to ICC prosecution.

By implication, this would put an end to all U.N. peace operations. Washington must be playing to a domestic audience since there is no basis in the ICC for American concern. National courts have the first go at prosecution. The deal that let Washington back off, at least for now, is weird indeed. The deal, in effect, imposes Security Council authority over a treaty among more than 70 governments. The Security Council; 15 members of the U.N., tells the ICC to grant, for starts, a one-year immunity to American and other peacekeepers. This may be political wallpaper; but if the Pentagon really stands behind this, it could destroy international law. Both the Security Council and the ICC are losers. Time will tell.

I have already taken up too much of your fun time; but I can't end without saying something about poverty, development and globalization. Extreme poverty is perhaps the worst crime against humanity, it makes for a wobbly world, it invites terror. Out of the 39 poorest countries, the least developed, nearly one half have endured armed conflict which not only retards but actually sets back their development. The Security Council makes the right noises about all that, setting its site on conflict prevention. The main millennium goal for the U.N. family is to cut extreme poverty in half by 2015. By whatever yardstick, can that be done? The U.N. has become the main political forum where the poor can speak and where the inequity of globalization is exposed. Last September the Monterrey Conference on financing development succeeded in bringing together major donors, the international financial institutions and the neglected poor in what looked like a common approach, getting away from useless confrontation. Another \$12 billion in grant aid was promised, still far short of the \$100 billion implied in the 0.7% of GNP that is the U.N. norm for grant aid. Canada is far from reaching this norm, although it came from our own Lester Pearson.

Preparations for the impending Johannesburg Conference, intended to turn pledges into action, show that the chasm between rich and poor has yet to be bridged. Of the annual \$50 billion in grant aid, only some \$5 billion goes through the U.N. for social programs. The special U.N. fund to attack AIDS, TB and malaria is barely getting off the ground. On the world scene, this is peanuts. The market economy is not only unfair, it is fragile and not so efficient. George W has demonstrated that free trade is not free. Who is in charge? Read George Soros' book on Globalization. Read Joseph Stiglitz' book on Globalization and its Discontents. Stiglitz is Nobel laureate and former chief economist at the IMF.

The United Nations is our world. Where are we? Most nations go beyond rhetoric in their commitment to the U.N. Interlocking global problems demand global solutions. Today the U.N. is under attack from right to left; but, short of planetary disaster, the U.N. must grow.

Is our time any crazier than before? Maybe not crazier, but certainly more dangerous. And in radical ways more perplexing. What I find most astonishing is the common paralysis

among many good people – intelligent, well-informed but inert. A general feeling of impotence – I guess you could call it despair. We think most Germans were complicit in the Holocaust. Are we complicit in something worse?

I guess one reason for my personal optimism is that, with UNICEF. I have seen really astonishing achievements on a world scale.

Hope is energy.

In Barney Rubin's definite book on Afghanistan, I have come across lines from a 12th Century Persian poet, Sa'adi:

The Children of Adam are limbs of one another,

Created from a single substance.

When one limb suffers misfortune,

The others cannot be at rest.

You who do not suffer the pain of others

Do not deserve to be called human.