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America's Interests and the U.N.

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Phoenix, Arizona, on February 11, 2008.

Jeane Kirkpatrick was frequently asked why the U.S. didn't simply withdraw from the U.N., and her answer was, "Because it's more trouble than it's worth." The fact is that the U.N., at times, can be an effective instrument of American foreign policy. Of course, to say this is heretical to the real devotees of the U.N., for whom the U.N. shouldn't be an instrument of anyone's foreign policy. But the fact is that everybody who participates in the U.N.—all of the 192 member governments, all of the non-governmental organizations, and all of the civil servants in the U.N. secretariats—try to advance their own interests. The only entity that gets criticized for that, needless to say, is the U.S. government.

Although I want to talk about some of the U.N.'s failings in the international security area, I first want to mention an issue that doesn't get as much attention, but which in many respects is more troubling and affects American interests in ways that could have a profound impact well into the future. This is what our friends in Europe call "norming."

"Norming" is the idea that the U.S. should base its decisions on some kind of international consensus, rather than making its decisions as a constitutional democracy. It is a way in which the Europeans and their left-wing friends here and elsewhere try and constrain U.S. sovereignty. You can see how disastrous this would be just by looking at the

geography of the floor of the U.N. General Assembly. Look out at the representatives of the 192 governments spread out over the floor and you wonder where the U.S. even is. Well, we're there somewhere. But the fact is that we're sitting with a majority of countries that have no traditions or understanding of liberty. The argument of the advocates of "norming" is "one nation, one vote." That sounds very democratic: Who could object to that? But its result would be very *anti*-democratic. As an illustration of this, a friend of mine once went to a conference on international law and heard a professor from a major European university say, "The problem with the United States is its devotion to its Constitution over international norms."

We have controversial issues within the United States—issues that we debate, and over which reasonable people can disagree. But these controversies should be resolved through our political process, according to our Constitution, just as other countries can resolve their controversies as they see fit. Take, for example, the question of the death penalty. This is a matter about which many people feel very strongly, both for and against. We've just seen New Jersey repeal the death penalty. At the federal level, procedures have been reformed to meet objections from the Supreme Court, so that the death penalty can be handed out in appropriate cases. Opinions on the subject change constantly as we debate in the U.S. whether we should have a death penalty and, if so, under what circumstances. But at the U.N. this debate

is closed; the death penalty has been ruled out. The new Secretary-General of the U.N., Ban Ki-moon, comes from South Korea—where they still have the death penalty—and last year, during his first few months in office, he remarked that this question is for each government to decide for itself. Upon saying this, he was all but subjected to articles of impeachment for failing to realize that the U.N. had already decided that question for all countries.

As I say, I think it's perfectly legitimate to debate the death penalty from either side. But it is inconceivable to me that anyone can seriously argue—as advocates of "norming" do—that the death penalty violates international standards of human rights, when in a democratic society like ours we are debating it.

Another issue on which "norming" is brought to bear is gun control. In 2001, the U.N. had a conference about international trafficking in small arms and light weapons—weapons that flow into conflict zones and pose a risk to U.N. peacekeepers. The idea was to discuss methods to deal with this threat. But the discussion turned out to have nothing to do with small arms and light weapons in African or Asian civil wars. Instead it was about gun control in the U.S., with advocates of "international norms" pressing for the prohibition of private ownership of firearms of any sort. The U.S. delegation made it clear that while we were concerned about the illicit flow of weapons into conflict areas, we were not going to sign on to any international agreement that prohibited private ownership of guns. I explained

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[Latin]: in the first place

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that we had a Constitution that precluded any such restrictions. This was treated as an entirely specious notion.

These are the kind of “norming” exercises by which foreign governments hope, over time, to build up a coral reef of U.N. resolutions and pronouncements that can be used to manipulate U.S. policy.

Although the U.N. is perfectly capable of passing resolutions about the death penalty and gun control—not to mention smoking—it has proved utterly incapable, even after 9/11, of agreeing to a definition of terrorism that would enable it to denounce terrorism. The U.N. is incapable of doing this, even to this day, because several member governments think there is good terrorism and bad terrorism. It is inconceivable,

in my judgment, that the U.N. will ever be able to agree upon a definition of terrorism that’s not complete pablum—and therefore utterly useless.

So in all the areas where the U.N. shouldn’t be involved—issues best left to sovereign countries—it is very successful in passing judgment, especially when it can spit in the eye of the U.S. But in the one area where the U.N. could be of most use in promoting international peace, it has failed completely. So much for “norming.”

Attempts at Reform

We, as Americans, are pretty practical people. We like to solve problems. I think that’s the way most Americans approach

the United Nations. So we have looked for ways to make the U.N. work better. But virtually every serious effort to reform it over the years has failed.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Most of us are familiar with the oil-for-food scandal—the mismanagement and corruption that accompanied the efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people after the first Iraq War. Even Kofi Annan, the previous Secretary-General, recognized that this scandal caused grave damage to the U.N.'s reputation. Thus he brought in Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, to investigate and propose reforms. One of Volcker's most important findings was that the oil-for-food scandal was not a unique incident—that it represented flaws endemic to the entire U.N. system. So Volcker proposed a whole series of reforms, chief among them being effective outside auditing of U.N. programs. We worked hard with other governments to get these reforms adopted by the General Assembly. Months and months of negotiation led to a vote by the U.N. Budget Committee, and the reforms were rejected by a margin of about two to one.

Let me repeat this for emphasis: The U.N. Budget Committee voted two to one against effective outside auditing of U.N. programs. This tells you pretty much everything you need to know about how the U.N. operates. And I should add that the countries voting in favor of these reforms contribute over 90 percent of the U.N.'s budget, whereas the countries voting against them contribute under ten percent.

We engaged in another reform effort to fix the U.N. Human Rights Commission—a body that everybody in Europe, and even Secretary-General Annan, admitted was a stain on the U.N.'s reputation. It spends most of its time defending human rights abusers and passing resolutions critical of the U.S. and Israel. We proposed a series of procedural reforms that would have changed the membership of the Human Rights Commission in a way to rid it of the worst human rights offenders. But the third world countries, led by Russia and China, adamantly refused to consider

these reforms. One by one, our European friends allowed them to be dropped, so that the reform package got smaller and smaller. I knew that the effort was completely lost when it couldn't even be agreed that governments under sanctions by the Security Council for gross abuses of human rights or support for terrorism would be prohibited membership on the new Human Rights Council. At that point I recommended to the Secretary of State that we vote against the resolution. But ultimately the new Council was created with only four countries voting against it—the U.S., Israel, and our other two close allies, Palau and the Marshall Islands.

The Europeans criticized us at the time for giving up on reform, and my response was that it is foolish to put lipstick on a caterpillar and call it a butterfly. But in the end the Europeans cared less about reforming the Human Rights Commission than bludgeoning the U.S. into being more submissive to the U.N. So they expressed outrage at us, rather than at the countries that had rejected real reform. Subsequently, even the editorial boards of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—neither of them conservative supporters of the Bush administration—called the new Human Rights Council even worse than its predecessor.

What I concluded following my 16 months as ambassador—and based on my work in the U.N. system dating back to my earliest service in the Reagan administration—was that efforts at marginal or incremental reform of the U.N. are doomed to failure. Instead, I believe that we should focus on one issue: changing the arrangement by which financing of the U.N. is mandatory.

Under the current system, the U.S. pays 22 percent of the cost of most U.N. agencies, and 27 percent of peacekeeping costs. We are far and away the largest contributor, and every year Congress pays the bill as apportioned by the General Assembly. My revolutionary reform principle would be this: The United States should pay for what it wants and insist that it get what it pays for. This would break up the entitlement mentality at the U.N. and foster an

organization that is both more transparent and more effective.

Unfulfilled Promise

International peace and security was the objective that motivated the founders of the U.N. after World War Two. And it is precisely here that the U.N.'s promise has been least fulfilled during its 60-plus years of existence. During the half-century of the Cold War, the U.N. was fundamentally irrelevant to the great struggle between liberty and tyranny due to the make-up of the Security Council and the veto power held by the Soviet Union and, later, by the People's Republic of China. Since the end of the Cold War, many people have thought it possible that the U.N. could play a more important role in world affairs. These hopes have been completely dashed.

Take the present case of Darfur. Acts of genocide have been committed by the government of Sudan against the people of the region, and unspeakable brutality has gone on for over three years. Yet the Security Council has been incapable of inserting a U.N. peacekeeping force. Why is that? In part, it is because China has given protective cover to the Sudanese government. And why does China do this? Because it has a large and growing demand for energy and wants oil and natural gas leases in Sudan. Thus the genocidal government of Sudan has stood down the entire U.N. Security Council for years.

Or consider the case of Iraq. In the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent expulsion of Iraqi forces by the U.S.-led coalition, we and Saddam Hussein agreed to a cease-fire based on a number of conditions expressed in various Security Council resolutions. Saddam Hussein ignored those resolutions. Leaving aside the issue of weapons of mass destruction, there's no doubt

that he failed to comply with the cease-fire resolution and other key resolutions of the Security Council. Yet when President Bush suggested that the Security Council take its own resolutions seriously, he was rebuffed. This is a perfect example of the U.N. being willing to talk but not act.

What is the lesson learned when unlawful governments are the subject of repeated resolutions by the Security Council and yet suffer no consequences for ignoring them? We find the consequences played out now in two direct threats to the U.S. and to international order: the nuclear weapons programs of North Korea and Iran. And, as in the days of the Cold War, the U.N. is fundamentally irrelevant in the face of these grave threats to world peace.

I'm sure all of you recall the Israeli Air Force raid last September that destroyed a major facility in Syria. It turned out to be a nuclear facility that was being constructed with the assistance of North Korea, quite possibly financed by Iran. This reminds us of the real threats we face, of the ineffectiveness of the U.N., and of the importance of U.S. military power and foreign policy.

There is one point of view here in America—a view given expression during the 2004 presidential campaign by Senator Kerry—holding that American foreign policy should meet some kind of “global test.” By this way of thinking, America needs, in effect, to demonstrate the legitimacy of its foreign policy decisions by getting the approval of the U.N. Security Council or some other international body. The same suggestion will no doubt surface again this year, in the run-

up to the November election. In the 21st century, then—just as in the 20th—the political decisions we make here in the U.S. will be much more significant than those made at the U.N. ■



DID YOU KNOW?

Hillsdale College junior Katie Cezat was one of ten players nationwide to be named First-Team All-American by the Women's Basketball Coaches Association and one of four to be awarded Daktronics First-Team All-American honors by Division II sports information directors. In the 2007-08 season, Cezat led the Hillsdale Charger women's basketball team to their best record in school history, 23-5, while personally breaking ten school records.