
The Case for the United States in the United Nations

By

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My thanks to the United Nations Association and the other organizations who have joined in sponsoring this Assembly. I am told that the representatives of nearly 100 national and community groups are here today—ranging from the AFL-CIO and the American Bar Association, to the Girl Scouts and the Grey Panthers, to the Sierra Club and the Salvation Army, to the U.S. Catholic Conference and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The participation of these and other organizations—everyone here at this event—is an encouraging testament to the quantity, quality, and diversity of grass-roots backing that the UN has among the American people.

As you know, this has been quite an eventful week for UN as well as for American diplomats and for NATO military forces in the former Yugoslavia. The week began with a murderous Serb mortar attack against civilians in Sarajevo on Monday. That outrage demanded an international response, which the UN has authorized and NATO has delivered. The message to the Bosnian Serbs and to all the parties to this conflict is clear and it is simple: now is the time to stop killing and start talking peace. With that message and that objective in mind, Assistant Secretary of State Dick Holbrooke and his team have made real progress, although much remains to be done.

Earlier today, we announced that the foreign ministers of Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia have agreed to meet for talks next week in Geneva, under the auspices of the Contact Group—the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. Others, including UN diplomats and representatives of the European Union, will also attend.

Thus, a week that began with an all-too-familiar act of wanton carnage is coming to a close with a development that could augur an all-too-rare breakthrough for diplomacy. After four years of brutal war, the United States is committed to helping the people of that region face the responsibility of peace. One thing is certain: Our diplomatic effort will go forward, and we will persist in our pursuit of peace at the negotiating table—in Geneva and beyond.

Whether this process unfolds against a backdrop of continued airstrikes or a continued suspension depends on whether the Bosnian Serb leaders commit themselves to end the shelling of the UN safe areas, end all attacks on representatives of the international community, including those representing the UN, and end their strangulation and intimidation of Sarajevo. My boss, Warren Christopher, has frequently said that diplomacy must often be backed by force. That is the case in the Balkans today. . . .

In my short time with you, I will address the subject of our Administration's policy with regard to the UN. But first, I would like to put that subject in a broader context.

We as a nation face some fundamental choices. We are just beginning a great national debate. At issue is whether we are prepared to do what it takes—and that means spending what it takes—to have a foreign policy worthy of our aspirations and our interests as a world leader—indeed, as the world leader.

We are facing these choices and conducting this debate now because we have entered a new era. It began 10 years ago—in 1985—when Mikhail Gorbachev took control of the Kremlin. He ushered in a series of reforms that he hoped would revitalize the Soviet communist system. As it happened, *perestroika* and *glasnost* led not just to reform, but to a democratic revolution. That revolution helped, in turn, to trigger a stunning series of triumphs for democracy around the globe.

In recent years, we have seen Germans tear down the Berlin Wall, we have seen South Africans free Nelson Mandela from Prison and elect him their President, and we have seen Cambodians cross minefields and defy death threats to vote against the Khmer Rouge. Over the past decade, nearly 2 billion people in some 70 nations on five continents—from Brazil to Ghana to Poland to Bangladesh to the Philippines—have moved decisively toward democracy and free markets.

A decade ago, we routinely, unquestioningly spoke of there being three worlds: the free world, the communist world, and the Third World. The organizing principle of international politics was a global ideological struggle: the heirs of Vladimir Lenin versus those of Thomas Jefferson, the proponents of the ideas of Karl Marx versus those of Adam Smith.

Now, to an extent few of us ever expected to see in our lifetimes, there is one world—joined in a loose, imperfect, incomplete, but still extraordinary consensus in favor of open societies and open markets. During this dramatic transformation, America has not been a bystander. Far from it. From South America to Eastern Europe to Central Asia to the Pacific Rim, our foreign policy has helped nation after nation to emerge from totalitarianism—and to keep moving in the right direction. Thanks in large part to American leadership, the political and economic principles that we have nurtured here in the United States for over 200 years are now ascendant around the globe.

An important moral of the end of the Cold War—a story that is still unfolding and will be for a long time—is that the United States must maintain its position of international leadership. Only if we do that can we take advantage of historic opportunities, not just to combat threats and enemies but also to build a world that reflects our ideals and promotes our interests—a world that will be more peaceful and provide better economic opportunities not only for our generation, but for our children's and grandchildren's as well.

The flip side of that proposition is just as important to recognize clearly: If we do not provide international leadership, then there is no other country that can or will step in and lead in our place as a constructive, positive influence. Make no mistake about that. And make no mistake that there are plenty of other forces that will fill the vacuum we leave, and they will do so in ways not at all to our liking or to our advantage or in keeping with our interests. For instance, thanks to American leadership, the enemies of the Middle East peace process—in Iran, Iraq, Sudan, and Libya—are now more isolated than ever before. But if we let down our guard, the leaders of those rogue states can still make trouble by menacing their neighbors, sponsoring terrorism, and stockpiling weapons of mass destruction.

Whether deterring threats or seizing opportunities, the United States needs to remain fully engaged in the world. That point should be self-evident, but unfortunately it is increasingly controversial—or at least it is increasingly obscured by other controversies. There is, in our

country, a resurgence of the view that our vital interests in some sense end at the water's edge. I say "resurgence" because we have heard that argument before. In the aftermath of the Cold War, just as after other great struggles earlier in our nation's history, there is a temptation to draw back into ourselves, to devote more of our attention and our resources to fixing our own problems—to let foreign countries fend for themselves.

That temptation, if over-indulged, would turn the American eagle into an ostrich. Today's isolationists echo the narrow-visioned naysayers of the 1920s and 1930s, who rejected the League of Nations, embraced protectionism, and were complacent about the rise of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin; who thought that Lend Lease and the Marshall Plan were costly give-aways; who opposed help to the victims of aggression and inadvertently endangered our security—chanting all the while the crowd-pleasing mantra "America first."

Part of the problem, no doubt, is that today, as in the 1920s and 1930s, we suffer from a collective lack of confidence in our democratic institutions. Many Americans think that government spending is virtually synonymous with waste and abuse, resulting not so much in public welfare as in public debt, not so much in national security as in rising taxes, which is to say, personal insecurity.

In this atmosphere, our foreign policy is especially vulnerable. Why? Because the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of Soviet communism mean that there is no longer a single, world-class dragon for us to slay. It is easier to justify drawing inward and, conversely, harder to justify engagement overseas. Well, maybe not really harder, but it takes more words than you can fit on a bumper sticker.

Thus, when Congress returns to debate these issues next week—ten blocks from here, on Capital Hill—the foreign affairs budget of our government—your government—will be under a two-pronged attack. It is under attack from those who think we can afford to withdraw from that very complicated world, and also from those who think we can significantly reduce the federal deficit by reducing our spending overseas.

But the fact is, those who would slash foreign spending in the name of fiscal responsibility are deluding themselves. The deficit, as we all know, began to mushroom out of control in the early 1980s. But the 1980s saw no corresponding boom in our international budget. Quite the contrary: over the past decade, the amount of money that the U.S. Government spends each year on foreign policy has actually declined nearly 40 percent in real dollars—adjusted for inflation—and is now at its lowest level in over half a century. Even if we were to eliminate our foreign affairs spending altogether, it would make very little difference to the cause of deficit reduction.

The current international affairs budget is only about 1.3 percent of total federal spending. That tiny fraction pays for all our embassies and diplomats overseas, our foreign aid and economic assistance programs, and our participation in international organizations. It pays for our support of multinational peacekeeping operations, many of our arms control initiatives, and our overseas public information services. We have long since cut most of the fat out of our foreign affairs budget, and we are now in danger of cutting into muscle and bone and vital arteries.

Let me put it as simply and bluntly as I can: Every single foreign policy initiative and program we have underway in the world today—from our support of new democracies and market economies in the former Soviet Union and Central Europe, to our support for the Middle East peace process, to our fight against international crime and narcotics trafficking, to the battle against further genocide and famine in Africa, to our commitment to assure the safe

dismantlement of nuclear weapons that have been aimed at our cities—every single one of those efforts and countless more are in dire jeopardy. This is the danger facing us now: not next year or next month—but next week, when the Congress returns and misguided members pick up the meat cleaver with which they are hacking away at the American people’s ability to defend and advance their national security interests.

Let me now turn to the United Nations. It, too, is on the chopping block—not just our position in the UN, but the UN itself.

Throughout the Cold War, our nation’s leaders—Republicans and Democrats alike, in both the executive and legislative branches—viewed the UN as the key instrument for advancing U.S. interests. Whether it was fighting communist aggression in Korea or smallpox in Africa, we turned to the UN to help us achieve our goals and further the cause of freedom.

But today, the bipartisan consensus in support of the UN has frayed badly. The UN is “the longtime nemesis of millions of Americans,” says one leader on Capitol Hill. It is “a totally incompetent instrument anyplace that matters,” says another. Some in Congress would all but eliminate U.S. funding for UN operations, meaning that the United States Government would be forced to default on its fundamental treaty obligations under the UN Charter. If we further reduce our payments to the UN, others will surely follow, undermining the financial viability of the UN. If Congress pulls the plug on basic UN activities such as conflict resolution, as some of its members wish, then the UN might very quickly join the League of Nations on the ashheap of history.

I should say a word about UN peacekeeping, since that is the area where UN activities and costs have increased most dramatically in recent years, and where the UN has come under the heaviest criticism from its opponents on Capitol Hill. Since the end of the Cold War, the United Nations has taken on peacekeeping assignments that no nation would undertake alone—and conducted most of them admirably. It has demonstrated a unique ability to bolster the confidence of parties who have had enough of war, but who are fearful of what might happen if they lay down their arms.

- In El Salvador, where America spent more than \$4 billion in economic and military aid during the 1980s, the UN brokered an end to the civil war, disarmed and reintegrated the rebel forces into society, monitored human rights and elections, and oversaw the creation of a new civilian police.

- In Cambodia, the UN has succeeded in clearing mines, repatriating refugees, and organizing elections, thus making an astonishing transition to democracy possible.

- In Cyprus, UN troops have played an essential role in keeping the peace between Greece and Turkey—two NATO allies that are also regional rivals.

- In Haiti, the UN, under the exemplary on-the-scene leadership of a splendid international public servant, Lakhdar Brahimi, is quietly, persistently, and effectively helping the people and the government restore security and democracy.

- Even in Somalia, which is another one of those place names that has become a synonym for failure, the UN went a long way toward fulfilling its humanitarian mandate; its operations have saved hundred of thousands of lives.

As then-Secretary of State James Baker put it when he testified in Congress in 1992, “UN peacekeeping is a pretty good buy and we ought to recognize that. . . . We spent trillions of

dollars to win the Cold War and we should be willing to spend millions of dollars to secure the peace." My own boss, Secretary Christopher has said much the same thing—and done so more recently—but I thought I would quote his predecessor here to underscore that support for UN peacekeeping is a tenet of American foreign policy that ought to enjoy bipartisan backing.

UN peacekeeping, like the United Nations as a whole, is a good bargain for the United States. The U.S. share of UN peacekeeping costs us an amount equal to less than half of one percent of our defense budget. The per capita price to Americans, for the entire UN system—from blue helmets for peacekeepers to polio vaccines for babies, is less than \$7 per year—about the price of a ticket to our nation's most popular movie, which currently is something called *Mortal Kombat*.

Some American critics of the United Nations have focused not so much on cost, but on concerns about the effectiveness of UN operations, decisionmaking, and management. In the current political environment, the only target that is juicier for rhetorical and budgetary attack than big government is world government. The United Nations is, of course, no such thing, but it does represent an attempt—welcome, admirable, and promising—to concert the energies of sovereign states on a variety of common causes, and as such it is vulnerable to demagoguery, particularly these days.

We all know that it is easy to caricature the United Nations bureaucracy. In truth, the UN has sometimes resembled a corporation with 185 members of the board. But throughout its history, the UN's universal membership has also been its greatest asset—albeit one that requires adroit management.

But in assessing the future potential of the UN, we should keep in mind the handicaps under which it worked, and often worked quite well, for most of its 50-year history. The Cold War divided not just the world, but the Security Council. Now, the old ideological and political polarization has either narrowed or vanished completely. The UN still does not work as well as it should, but UN-member nations share a renewed and intensified interest in fixing it.

The Clinton Administration came to Washington with a vision of a United Nations that makes a difference in the lives of ordinary people around the world. That is why Vice President Gore went to Cairo for the Conference on Population and Development that began on Labor Day last year; that is why the Vice President and First Lady went to the Social Summit in Copenhagen this March; that is why Under Secretary of State Tim Wirth went to the Climate Change Conference in Berlin in April; that is why President Clinton made reform of UN economic and social agencies a top priority at the G-7 Conference in Halifax in June; and that is why Madeleine Albright will go straight from her daughter's wedding tomorrow to join the First Lady and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala for the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing.

In our determination to make sure that American taxpayers' dollars are better spent at the UN, we have worked to streamline the bureaucracy and empower those who are working at the grassroots and on the front lines. Under Secretaries General Karl Paschke and Joseph Connor have embarked on an aggressive campaign to change the entire management culture of the UN and to crack down on waste, fraud, and abuse. We are confident that they will get the job done if we stay involved ourselves—with our funds and our leadership.

But in spite of these efforts, and the relatively low cost of the UN as a whole, some American critics of the UN still feel that the United States is somehow being played for a sucker; that we are turned to constantly for help by those who are unwilling to pay their own

way or to take their own fair share of risks. Such feelings are understandable, and sometimes play well at home. But America is not just another country. We are a global power with global interests, and if we do not lead, we cannot expect that others will. Our position in the world may, to some, be grounds for complaint, but to most Americans, it is grounds for pride and a sense of security.

So by all means let's get on with the great debate. But let its starting point be a shared recognition of our nation's three greatest strengths:

First, the strength and global appeal of our democratic values and institutions:

Second, the strength of our economy, which depends on global peace and stability—on open societies and open markets; and

Third, the strength of our military power.

In short, we have the heart, the brains, the wallet, and the muscle to exercise international leadership and to do so on behalf of our own interests as well as those of humanity as a whole.