

Friday, October 17, 2008

THE US AND THE UN: AN EVOLVING STORY

Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN's second Secretary-General said it bluntly. "The UN was not created to take humanity to heaven, but to save it from hell." Realism tells us that the UN is a mirror of the world, which reflects divisions and disagreements as well as hopes and altruistic goals. In the new century it is becoming ever more obvious that no nation can solve--or even escape from the interconnecting complex of world problems alone. No matter how wealthy or how powerful, no nation can build a safer, better world, alone.

Global challenges require global solutions. The UN is the only universal institution formed to deal with these problems. Sometimes the failures of its powerful member states are blamed on the UN. A notable example: American officials blamed the UN for not preventing the genocide in Rwanda, despite the fact that Washington, in the person of Madeleine Albright at the behest of then President Clinton, blocked the Security Council from taking action. The previous Secretary General known in the UN as the SG, has joked that the letters stood for scapegoat.

What do Americans think of the UN? From May 2000, to Feb 2002, both before and after 9/11, the UN received some its best ratings from the American people, with a majority consistently applauding its efforts. When the UN rebuffed the US request for authorization for use of military force in Iraq, American views polled in Feb. 2008, had turned sharply negative, down to a "good" rating of only 27%. This low was augmented by bad publicity in the media and misrepresentation of the Oil For Food Program.

Despite significant image problems, the UN still continued to earn Americans' support as a major policy making body. 68% of Americans still wanted the UN to pay a major or leading role in world affairs. The UN is generally still viewed favorably for its humanitarian work, efforts to reduce poverty, help for refugees who are victims of natural disasters or political strife, for its mammoth food aid programs, and its impressive work in fighting the spread of disease.

Some disappointments have continued over time., particularly the failure to halt the genocide in Darfur, the attempt to stop the spread of nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea, and the UN's limited ability to stop human rights abuses.

Friday, October 17, 2008

THE US AND THE UN: AN EVOLVING STORY

However a newer poll in July 2008 shows a significant improvement in the UN's image. There is now overwhelming concern about America's standing in the world, as well as America's failure to work through international institutions. 79% of Americans think that strengthening the UN should be a priority of US foreign policy. Sizeable majorities think the US should participate in a new international climate change treaty, and the International Criminal Court.

80% of voters have abandoned the "go-it-alone philosophy and believe that working together with major allies and cooperating with international organizations is a wiser strategy for achieving US goals in international affairs. Americans now are beginning to realize that international involvement is essential both in meeting the challenging humanitarian needs and the even more difficult political arena, as well as the pressing issues of energy sources and climate change.

The UN is sometimes the only practical means of response to US needs. As an obvious example, the international framework for the global battle against terrorism was arrived at in a binding Security Council resolution after the 9/11 attack. Without this cooperation and legal authority, Washington would have been forced to negotiate and ratify separate treaties with 191 countries, taking many years for a barely possible task.

Through its specialized separate agencies, the UN has alerted the world about epidemics such as the SARS virus, and the possible pandemic of avian flu. The UN organized research on climate change has brought this issue to US national attention,. Here as elsewhere, the public understands that the US cannot go it alone.

The UN's agencies have great expertise in delivering humanitarian aid quickly in both natural disasters and man-made emergencies arising from wars. The US contribution to humanitarian assistance is helped immeasurably by working through the UN. The change in US attitudes should lead to a change in action. We urge that the new administration reflect the growing wish of the American public. As a first step, the US should honor its commitment and pay off its one billion dollar debt to the UN.

Phyllis Ehrenfeld, President of the National Ethical Service of the AEU, and NES Representative to the UN Dr Sylvain Ehrenfeld, IHEU Representative to the UN