

Southeastern World Affairs Institute
Black Mountain
July 30, 2006

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Was there ever a more urgent moment in which to examine the role and relevance of the United Nations? Was it ever more timely to recall first principles, the great traumas that occasioned the UN's creation and to the challenges that have beset it – and its supporters – from the very beginning?

We meet this weekend at an extraordinary time. Israel continues its assault on the people of southern Lebanon, with children the main victims among the 50 or more killed just this morning in the town of Qana. Hezbollah missiles continue to fall on northern Israel. We have the unprecedented spectacle of a United Nations secretary general accusing a government, Israel, of deliberately targeting a UN observation post on the Israeli-Lebanon border. And meanwhile, this morning in Beirut, the UN headquarters is ransacked by Lebanese enraged by the world's failure to stop their country's destruction.

The Security Council is poised to meet in urgent session, taking up an as-yet undrafted resolution intended to facilitate a ceasefire in southern Lebanon – a ceasefire contingent on a promised disarming by the Hezbollah militia that appears far from certain and premised on the commitment of international peacekeeping forces from European countries that have thus far been conspicuous mostly by their silence.

We have a U.S. representative to the United Nations who openly mocks the institution, disparaging it as just one forum among many for addressing international problems. We are pressing a UN Security Council resolution on Iran's nuclear program that we call a last-chance ultimatum in advance of global sanctions – and that the Russians and Chinese characterize as simply a warning. Iraq spirals ever more out of control, the UN barely a factor. And even where the UN is present, in Congo or Sudan or Haiti, it is far from clear what difference it has made.

Against that sort of backdrop perspective is a precious thing, and perspective, in my view, was the watchword of this year's conference.

We recalled the excruciating challenges of bleak times past, from the global carnage of World War II through the Cold War and McCarthyism, a half century and more of the Arab-Israeli blood feud and the ever dueling strains of American isolationism and interventionism. We were reminded of how extraordinary individuals rose to those challenges – people like Eleanor Roosevelt and people like the founders of our own American Freedom Association and the early leaders of world federalism. We were inspired by the possibilities of action today – in the

winning essay by high-school student Omar Hassan and in the grassroots work of activists like Ginger Stillman.

Klaus Becker, our intrepid conference chair, told us that Saturday, July 28, was the anniversary of the day in 1945 when Japan sunk the USS Indianapolis. 853 sailors were killed that day – still the largest single-day loss in U.S. Navy history. A week later the first of the atomic bombs would fall on Japan, with tens of thousands dead. A week or two more and the war was done.

Awful times, and yet out of that trauma emerged a generation determined to forge a better world. Many of them, as Davidson College historian Ralph Levering reminded us, were right here in North Carolina – right here among the founders of the American Freedom Association, people like Neil Potter and Marie Judson, Frank Smith and MacNeil Smith and Charlie Blanchard ... and of course Ralph's parents, Miriam and Sam.

The document they adopted at Women's College in 1946, creating the World Federalists of North Carolina, was, in its simple eloquence, stunning – that “there can be no permanent peace without justice, no justice without law, no law without institutions to enforce it.”

Ralph helped us recall from whence the vision came – not just the trauma of two world wars but also the social gospel movement and a faith in the possibilities of self-government, borne of the New Deal, that is today but a distant hope. For awhile – before Korea, before the Cold War, before Joe McCarthy's straitjacket on free thought – the world federalists looked to hold the future in their grasp. There were hundreds of active members in North Carolina, 47,000 across the country, congressional resolutions of support. Ronald Reagan himself, an early enthusiast.

Ralph suggested that in some ways the world federalists were naïve, or premature – that they presumed the embrace of U.S.-style government checks and balances and limits on national sovereignty in a world still consumed by the nationalist struggle against colonialism and by the standoff between communism and capitalism. But the federalists learned from their experience too, he said, tempering their goals and building pragmatic alliances, as with the Law of the Sea, wherever they could.

So Miriam reached out to oil and gas interests on the Law of the Sea, Ralph pointed out, because she knew that nothing would get through Congress unless she brought those economic interests on board first. And even Sam – Ralph described him as “a very self-assured world federalists” and some of us might even go so far as to call him “stubborn” – even Sam came eventually to see that “process is as important as ideas, that you have to think of a process and work your way gradually to the goal.”

Political scientist Russell Crandall, also of Davidson, drew on his own specialty, U.S. policy in Latin America, to make the point that administrations of both parties have sought the cover, at least, of multilateralism even in pursuit of mostly unilateral goals – as in the military interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada and Panama.

In the Dominican Republic case, in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson insisted on an authorizing vote by the Organization of American States – even if the vote came after troops had already landed and even if most of the OAS members were themselves dictatorships – a case of intervention, as Russ put it, “being legitimized by an undemocratic multilateral body.”

In the Grenada intervention of 1983 Russ challenges the conventional journalist and historian view (my own included) that this was a case of easy pickings and a much needed diversion from the tragic debacle of Hezbollah’s destruction of the Marine barracks in Beirut. Russ said his own research supports the memoirs of key Reagan administration officials, that the invasion took place over Pentagon objections and at the insistence of other island countries and that the result – the appreciation of Grenada’s people and the restoration of democratic institutions – was more important in the long run than the UN General Assembly’s overwhelming vote condemning the invasion.

Russ said the third case, that of Panama in 1989, was the most dubious of all in terms of legality or international legitimacy – and perhaps more indicative, in my opinion, of more recent U.S. policy priorities.

The General Assembly condemned the Panama action, as did many Democrats, calling it a violation of national sovereignty. The Democrats of the Clinton administration, he noted, had no such scruples when it came to Haiti or Kosovo. When State Department lawyers told then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that the air campaign against Serbia was against international law, Albright’s breezy response was “get me new lawyers.” The Bush administration adopted much the same approach when the Security Council balked at approving the invasion of Iraq, with rather more problematic results.

Former Liberian Ambassador Lafayette Diggs gave us a very useful African perspective on UN actions across the decades, drawing on his own experience at the UN in the 1960s and 1970s and his observations of the UN role in addressing his own country’s long civil war. He also made the case for something most of us haven’t considered – shifting the United Nations out of New York, perhaps to the Presidio in San Francisco, to make it more amenable -- and affordable -- for delegates from many developing countries.

Jeffrey Laurenti of the Century Foundation surveyed what the United Nations could be – and how our own government has too often undercut its potential. And it’s not just Republicans, Jeff said. It’s the American “public and political class as a whole” that is now reappraising our relationship to the rest of the world, and whether in fact we still buy the whole UN charter idea, of a world based on rule of law and shared political values and interests.

Jeff called the war on Iraq, in defiance of the UN Security Council, one of the major transformative moments of the past century – a conscious decision by the world’s sole remaining superpower to break free from the web of restraints and laws of which the UN itself is

prime example and instrument. Experience since showed the limits of such unilateralism, and demonstrated to many the necessity for effective UN mechanisms – and yet efforts at reform such as Kofi Annan’s high-level panel has mostly been exercises in frustration. The Bush administration has focused on such politically potent but less significant issues as membership on the human rights commission and the so-called oil for food scandal, for example, while largely ignoring critically important reforms such as creation of a standing rapid-deployment force or the assurance of more reliable financing for basic UN programs.

Jeff draws some hope from indications of shifting public opinion, citing a New York Times poll indicating that by a margin of 59 to 39 percent Americans now say the United States shouldn’t take the lead in solving international problems. This isn’t neo-isolationism, Jeff insists. It’s anti-interventionism, and “a rejection of the isolationism we’re witnessing in Washington today, which isolates Washington from the rest of the world.”

We can only imagine the reaction to such machinations from someone like Eleanor Roosevelt – no stranger to compromise and yet as Kem Sawyer describes her, in her talk Saturday night as in her biography, she was an individual simply incapable of pursuing her goals through devious means or at the cost of undercutting those whose support she might later need. Persistent, yes, and even dogged, but what makes the story of her work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights so inspiring is her insistent focus through the long months of negotiation on the goal at hand.

Kem quoted the wonderful prayer, Eleanor’s favorite, to “draw us from base content and set our eyes on far-off goals. Keep us at tasks too hard for us that we may be driven to Thee for strength ... Open our eyes to simple beauty all around us and our hearts to the loveliness men hide from us because we do not try to understand them. Save us from ourselves and show us a vision of a world made new.”

Can you imagine Eleanor Roosevelt refusing as a matter of policy and principle to talk with Hezbollah – or for that matter with Syria, Iran or even al Qaida?

The Declaration on Human Rights approved in December 1948 fell short of Eleanor’s dream, lacking as it did a mechanism for enforcing the rights enshrined within. But never in history had the assembled nations of the world acknowledged such rights at all – the dignity of the individual human person, the equality of men and women, the right to life, liberty and personal security and to specific economic guarantees such as access to adequate food, housing, medical care and education.

Kem also had a message for those of us who long for the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt again – that becoming Eleanor was a long journey for Eleanor herself, from the rich but orphaned child, uncertain of her strengths, tested by her husband’s infidelity and then by his polio and then the extraordinary challenges of their joint political life and her many activities after Franklin Roosevelt’s death.

“Stand up and be counted,” Eleanor counseled, “even when it makes one unpopular.” Or as she put it in one of her memoirs, “Surely, in the light of history, it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than not to try. For one thing we know beyond all doubt: nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says ‘It can’t be done.’”

Ginger Stillman doesn’t strike me as a “can’t be done” sort of person. She told us about the amazing, innovative achievements of the Westchester County, NY United Nations Association chapter – from working with the schools to community art projects and literally dozens of video projects, bringing the words of people like UN Deputy Secretary General Mark Malloch Brown and former UN Assistant Secretary General Gillian Sorenson to audiences not just locally but all around the country and world. For those of you who haven’t heard it in full, I especially recommend the speech by Malloch Brown, warning of what he called “the serious consequences of the decades-long tendency by U.S. administrations of both parties to engage only fitfully with the United Nations.”

Ginger talked about the importance of reaching new audiences in new ways, something that struck close to home for me because it’s also a key element in the new non-profit journalism center we created earlier this year, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

We fund reporting around the world, with the aim of improving both the quantity and quality of reporting on international affairs in the mainstream American media. The travel grants are open to Americans and non-Americans alike, to staff journalists and to free lancers. We’ve already commissioned projects on five different continents; the work has appeared in newspapers like the Los Angeles Times and the Christian Science Monitor, the Baltimore Sun and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; on NPR and local radio and on public television.

We have strived in particular to reach across media to promote more public debate. Like Ginger we’re thinking video – in our case both longer-form documentaries, such as the one I produced in Darfur last January, and also shorter, five-minute versions of the sort we’ve done for the public television program “Foreign Exchange with Fareed Zakaria,” a weekly current affairs program that reaches some 70 percent of the U.S. market – but not enough of North Carolina!

I hope you’ll take a look at our website, <http://pulitzercenter.org>, to learn more about the work we’re doing. We would also welcome your financial support, to do even more of this reporting in the months and years to come.

The last project I did for the Post-Dispatch was a series on Muslim communities. As part of that work I spent a week last fall in Beirut, at a workshop with Middle Eastern journalists. We met with Hamas and Hezbollah leaders. We toured the Hezbollah fortifications on the Israeli border. We visited the UN observation post at Khiam, the one where four UN observers died earlier this month in Israeli shelling.

I wish that some of our policy makers – the ones so stunned by the Hamas victory in Palestinian elections, or the similar triumph by sectarian Shiite parties in the Iraqi election – had been with us in Beirut. I wish they had listened to people like my Middle Eastern colleagues, those who said that Hamas and Shiite leaders like Moktada al Sadr in Iraq were simply repeating what Hezbollah had done in Lebanon over the course of the past two decades: seize the moral high ground, at least as perceived by the local population, by leading resistance against an occupying force (the Israelis in Lebanon and in the West Bank, the Americans in Iraq), while at same time providing highly visible social services to the most vulnerable and needy. I tried to make the case that this is a large part of why each of these movements has now been elected, democratically, to positions of government authority – and why it doesn't serve much purpose for us to assail them as terrorists beyond the pale of international discourse.

This summer I spent a month in Russia and the Caucasus, gathering material for a new project aimed at showing some of the spillover effects should the U.S. confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program end in war. My hope was to alert Americans to the many unresolved conflicts in that highly volatile region, where Iran's immediate neighbors Armenia and Azerbaijan remain in a state of suspended war and where Georgia is relying on American help to stoke its conflict with Russia. In that region Iran is regarded as a force for stability, critical for trade and energy. I met no one, government official or citizen, who viewed a U.S.-Iran war as anything but a catastrophe for them. I hoped to bring this perspective to American readers and policy-makers – to warn of potential unintended consequences much like those that followed our invasion of Baghdad.

What I didn't foresee as I traveled the Caucasus was that Israel would seize on a Hezbollah provocation as the opportunity to deal that organization a death blow – and that our government would seize that same opportunity, apparently in the belief that lashing out at Hezbollah is key to weakening Iran, and that if we kill enough of this latest batch of “evil-doers” we will yet prevail in the war on terrorism.

In my view nothing could be more mistaken. We are more likely in fact to achieve the opposite of our desire – more Arab support for Hezbollah, even greater identification of America with Israel, more incitement to terrorism, and the strengthening of Iran's hand – in Lebanon, in Iraq next door and in the broader Middle East. And meanwhile we find ourselves more isolated than ever – spurned by our allies, refusing to meet with our adversaries.

One of the more discouraging things to me about this summer's crisis has been the silence from Democrats. Not silence, actually, but in fact a sort of piling on. We saw it last week with the visit to Washington by the embattled Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, who had the temerity to question the ferocity of Israel's attacks on Lebanon. It's not a very surprising position, really, for the leader of a Shiite party. Yet the Democratic leaders of the House and Senate denounced it all the same, declaring that Maliki's “failure to condemn Hezbollah's aggression and recognize Israel's right to defend itself” raised “serious questions” about his leadership and about Bush administration support for him.

I do not believe we are likely to find our way out of our current difficulties in the absence of serious debate, and of an opposition party willing to play that role. The vacuum on the Democratic side makes people like Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland – people whose specialty is not propaganda but facts on the ground, and a broad perspective -- all the more important. We are lucky to have had him with us again this morning.

You remember the story Ralph Levering told, about the misunderstandings rife in the world? It was at the opening of a UN session, he said, and the delegations were asked to give their honest opinion about the solution to food shortages in the rest of the world. The debate that followed, Ralph said, was complete chaos. The West Europeans didn't know what "shortage" meant. The East Europeans didn't know what "opinion" meant. Some of the delegations had trouble with "honest." And the Americans? They didn't know what "rest of the world" meant.

I thought of that listening to Shibley's account of just how badly the Bush administration has misread reality, in the rest of the world and especially in the Middle East.

The polls he has done this past year, pre Lebanon, show that in Arab and Muslim countries some 70 percent of the people regard the United States and Israel as the central threats facing them today, as compared to just 6 percent who agree with the U.S. position that it is Iran we most should fear. Shibley hasn't polled since the start of the Lebanon war but he is quite confident – as I am – that any fair poll today would show that the most popular leader in the region by far is Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah.

Arabs are already calling this the Sixth War, the sixth in the line of major Arab-Israeli conflicts stretching back to 1948, he said. The major difference this time is that most Arabs – most non-Americans, in fact – see this conflict as at the least a U.S./Israeli partnership, if not in fact the latest war of choice by a U.S. government still enamored of the fabled knock-out punch that will somehow solve all our problems at once.

I'm grateful to Shibley also because, again unlike the national Democrats, he gave us a vision of how we might pick up the pieces and start again, once we have come to our collective senses and discarded the group think that has served us so poorly.

It starts with acknowledging that force is not the answer to political disagreements, that we have to negotiate with our adversaries and strike deals that both sides can honor. We have to abandon – and persuade the Israelis to abandon – the fallacy that says security can be found in separation or walls or unilateral steps. Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon six years ago, Shibley reminded us; it withdrew unilaterally from Gaza; it is in the process of unilaterally creating a security wall in the West Bank. Nowhere did it attempt a comprehensive agreement with the other side; nowhere has it achieved anything like security.

Second, we have to acknowledge that the rise of non-state actors, like Hezbollah, requires an approach more sophisticated than the threat of massive military retaliation. The latter may have worked against states; arguably it did for the United States with the old Soviet Union, or for Israel with some of its Arab state adversaries. It is not working now – and in fact the massive assaults on Gaza and in Lebanon have only served to undermine the very state actors (the Palestinian Authority and the Lebanese government) that Israel and the U.S. desperately need as partners in reaching any comprehensive settlement.

And third, most important of all, we have got to put diplomacy front and center once again. On that score Shibley left us with an arresting thought: that there has been only one decade since Israel's creation which did not witness a major Arab-Israeli war. That was the decade of the 1990s, when first the Bush administration and then Clinton's made Middle East diplomacy a central preoccupation of Washington policy. We were better off for their labors. We need to return to something of its kind today.

I don't want to end on such a negative note and luckily, thanks to Eleanor Roosevelt, I don't have to. I would like instead to repeat again those great words Kem quoted last night, Eleanor's admonition to us all, to "stand up and be counted -- even when it makes one unpopular."

Because "surely," she said, "it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than not to try. For one thing we know beyond all doubt: nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says 'It can't be done.'"

Thanks to you all for another great conference. Let's look forward to better days in the months ahead.