

# The U.S. Relationship with the United Nations

ROUNDTABLE WITH

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The *Yale Journal of International Affairs* recently spoke with three leading voices on the future relationship between the United States and the United Nations. Carol Bellamy served as Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) from 1995 to 2005, and is currently the President and CEO of the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. David Morrison is currently the Director of Communications for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). U.S. Representative Christopher Shays has served as a Republican congressman representing the fourth district of Connecticut since 1974. He is the Vice-Chair of the House Committee on Government Reform. This roundtable is adapted from a forum at Yale Law School sponsored by Americans for Informed Democracy.

■ **How would you characterize the current relationship between the United States and the United Nations?**

**Carol Bellamy:** *The relationship is strained, but common interests provide reason for hope*

The relationship between the United States and the UN has deteriorated in the last decade. The relationship is especially strained because in the United States the public focus is almost entirely on the political half of the UN organization, where many of the more contentious issues arise. It is important to take into consideration the broader dimensions of the United Nations, which

range from confronting the various health emergencies of the moment to addressing problems in the environment and global poverty.

Ultimately, if the United States and the UN both look at themselves in the mirror, areas such as security, health, and the environment provide a great deal of room for them to work together to achieve common goals. Building a safer and more secure world is one common goal, and I hope both the U.S. and the UN will work together to institutionalize the international fight on terrorism, build a multilateral nuclear non-proliferation effort, and uphold the Geneva Conventions. The Millennium Development Goals provide another area where there ought to be a common agenda. Reducing poverty; fighting the challenges of AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria; and improving the environment are other issues where there is room for cooperation. I don't come to this discussion with rose-colored glasses, but I believe there are commonalities that supersede the differences.

**David Morrison:** *The current relationship between the United States and the UN is stronger than most people think*

The UN-U.S. relationship is critical. It is critical for the United States as a global power with global interests because a productive relationship with the United Nations can allow the United States to pursue those interests more effectively than it could do acting on its own. And the relationship is certainly critical from the UN's point of view because the United States is the organization's largest shareholder. It is the only superpower in the world and this means it matters within the UN. So getting the relationship right is vital.

I was at the UN in New York when the new U.S. ambassador, John Bolton, arrived, and the point I want to make is that the Americans are currently fully engaged in the UN. And that is much better than the alternative, which would have been for the U.S. to send a lightweight representative to the UN, or someone who did not engage seriously with the organization. Whatever one thinks of Ambassador Bolton or his position on any particular issue, the fact is that the Americans are fully engaged in the UN, and that is a positive thing.

We also shouldn't forget that the United Nations is rooted in U.S. values. The UN's core values are rooted in what Franklin Roosevelt called the "four freedoms" in his 1941 State of the Union Address. Those four freedoms—freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of expression, and freedom of worship—formed the basis of the UN Charter when it took shape several

years later in San Francisco. And the four freedoms are evident today in the work the UN is doing around the world. The commitment to freedom from fear is evident in the UN peace and security agenda; and freedom from want is clear in the development agenda, which has recently been restated in the Millennium Development Goals.

So at its core, the UN is deeply tied to this country and to American values. But there is another strand in American foreign policy, which is American “exceptionalism.” The most well-known example of this is the United States’ position on the International Criminal Court, where the United States is really way out on its own. I think we have to accept that there are issues where the U.S. simply sees itself as different from the rest of the world and that in such cases the U.S. position is likely to diverge from that of the wider UN.

**Rep. Christopher Shays:** *The UN must adapt to the post-September 11 era to stay relevant*

The UN is absolutely vital, but I’m in the camp that believes that John Bolton happens to be right. The world is a much more dangerous place since the end of the Cold War, and the old strategies of containment, reaction, and mutually assured destruction are no longer relevant. Terrorism is the biggest issue we face today, and much of the world seems unwilling to confront it. And frankly, some of the very members of the UN were condoning this terrorism. That’s the world that I see this country having to deal with.

For too long, the UN has revolved around the principle of comity, where countries agree simply for the sake of reaching agreement. And comity is useless if in the end what continues is what has continued for thirty years. But if you think, as I do, that comity led to the type of world that allowed the attacks of September 11, 2001, then you will agree that we need to force the UN to become relevant, or unilateralism will be the only reasonable policy choice. In the world today, where a small group of dedicated scientists can create an altered biological agent that can wipe out humanity, the United States cannot always wait for the UN to act. We are not going to wait for France, Russia, or any other country to act to protect the security of the United States.

What we need is to have a frank and very vocal dialogue about what works and doesn’t work. There are all sorts of issues that the UN is simply avoiding, and this needs to change. To think the UN would vote not to deal with Darfur blows me away. It makes you wonder then, who will deal with these

issues? My view is that the days of comity have ended. They ended on September 11. And confrontation has to take place—if confrontation is honest dialogue.

### ■ What are the prospects for serious reform within the UN?

**David Morrison:** *Management reform and the creation of specific new bodies such as the Human Rights Council seem most likely*

I believe the United States and the UN will eventually come together on the issue of improving the efficiency of the UN because it is in their mutual interests to do so. Many people would be shocked to learn that the UN is not already run along lines that would be standard for almost any public institution in Europe or North America. For example the secretary general currently does not have the authority to shift resources from low priority areas to areas of emerging or higher priority. The world is expecting him to lead an organization that can respond to global challenges, but the structures currently in place do not allow him to deploy people and resources effectively to meet those challenges. Clearly this needs to change.

The United States and the Europeans are firmly behind the management reform proposals, but some of these are opposed by the G-77, which is the grouping of developing nations. At their core, many of these issues are fundamentally about how power is shared within the United Nations. Some of the current management reform proposals tend to concentrate power in the Security Council and the Secretariat, where the United States and Europe have more influence, while many of the developing countries would like to keep power in the General Assembly, where they have more influence because it is one country, one vote.

Within the individual agencies of the UN family, a lot of progress is already being made on managerial reforms. I left UNDP in 2000 and came back in 2005 to a dramatically different organization. So progress is possible, especially in the non-political organizations that work on specific issues such as gender, poverty, the environment, and health.

In addition to the push for management reforms, the United States has led the charge to replace the existing Commission on Human Rights with a smaller and more effective Human Rights Council, and to establish a Peace Building Commission. There was also another piece of good news

coming out of the recent UN summit in New York, where member states agreed to something called the “responsibility to protect,” which says for the first time that state sovereignty is not above the responsibility of the international community to intervene when genocide is taking place. This should help the world avoid more tragedies such as the one in Darfur.

**Carol Bellamy:** *Major reforms will be difficult, but important changes around the edges are possible*

Everyone acknowledges that the UN needs to adapt, but member states disagree strongly about what kind of changes need to be made. The secretary general certainly has set out a relatively ambitious agenda in the context of how difficult it is to move things through the member states themselves. There is a widespread perception that the UN can control its destiny, when indeed the UN is a creature of the member states. Frankly, if the member states want something to happen, it happens—and if they don’t want something to happen, it doesn’t.

That being said, there are changes around the edges that are within the control and jurisdiction of the secretary general and the infrastructure of the UN, and those changes seem most likely to be adopted. One of the biggest problems is the bureaucracy within the UN system. Some of the UN agencies allow decision making at the local level and others do not, and this creates a lot of confusion. One important step would be giving more authority to regional directors and people operating on the ground.

### ■ What is the biggest mistake the UN has made in recent years?

**Rep. Christopher Shays:** *The UN has often undermined its own credibility*

Much of the responsibility for the bad relationship between the United States and the UN rests with the UN itself. When the UN equated Zionism with racism, it basically forced Americans to turn away from the UN. And when Libya headed the Commission on Human Rights, it undermined the credibility of the entire organization.

I have always believed that America should pay our UN dues, and I was one of the members of Congress who championed restoring those dollars and spoke out against the amendment that said that if major reforms didn’t take place, then we would take away 50 percent of our dollars. But this good faith on our part needs to be matched with action from the UN.

For many countries, the UN is a place where they make commitments that they don't keep. Russia, France, and China agreed to uphold the sanctions against Saddam Hussein, but those countries then allowed their companies to give massive kickbacks to the Iraqi regime through the oil-for-food program. The challenge for the United States is that if we agree to something, we have to abide by it. In our legal system, lawsuits are allowed by the public, so if we make a commitment, we are required to keep it.

**David Morrison:** *The oil-for-food scandal in Iraq is an example of the UN taking on a responsibility it was not prepared to handle*

In the words of the secretary general's chief of staff, Mark Malloch Brown, the UN is often under-resourced and, at the same time, over-supervised. When the UN member states come across a problem they cannot handle, the tendency is for them to punt the issue to the UN Secretariat. But they often do not then follow through with enough resources to do the job properly.

The oil-for-food program was a typical example of UN mismanagement of an issue it was unprepared to handle. All of a sudden, the UN was called upon to manage tens of billions of dollars with no experience in doing that sort of thing. The UN is an organization that until relatively recently has focused on producing publications and hosting conferences and the like. It is now being asked to take on mandates for which, frankly, it doesn't have the experience or the staff to pull off the job.

This is why, seen from one perspective, many of the reforms that the secretary general has proposed are really a kind of plea to give the Secretariat more authority to deliver, while still holding it accountable for results, much as would be expected in a private-sector organization.

■ **What does the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon suggest about the role of the United States and the UN in promoting democracy in the Middle East?**

**Rep. Christopher Shays:** *The Syrian withdrawal was largely a result of U.S. policy in Iraq*

It was stunning that Syria left Lebanon. For years, Israeli leaders have been telling me it would never happen—but it did happen. And it happened largely because of the U.S. presence in Iraq. The fact is that just the fear of our presence meant we did not have to utilize our military. That's why you always want that question mark. We don't want to use military force, and

we shouldn't, but that question mark gives the United States a very potent ability to change the action of another country in a positive way.

I think historians will look at President Bush's second inaugural address as a moment marking a major shift in U.S. foreign policy. The time when short-term stability trumped long-term democracy is over. This president has totally reversed what he ran on, and he is basically saying that democracy trumps stability.

**Carol Bellamy:** *I hope the situation in Syria will set a precedent for UN support for democratization in the Middle East*

The UN played a major role in the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, and I hope that the UN will continue to support democracy in the future. To a large extent, the success of UN efforts to promote democracy depends on the quality of the representatives the secretary general sends to deal with these types of situations, and it is a mixed bunch sometimes.

Frankly, I don't think any military should be involved in building democracy. The military should be about the military. If anything, one of the most worrying trends I have seen in recent years is the blurring of lines between the military and humanitarian efforts in the world today. I think it is time to go back and restore humanitarian principles of impartiality and to get the military out of the business of building democracies. The military is not a substitute for humanitarian or development assistance.

#### ■ What are the biggest challenges facing the UN today?

**Rep. Christopher Shays:** *Controlling weapons of mass destruction and scaling up humanitarian activities*

Looking ahead, one of the biggest challenges the UN faces is securing the enormous amount of weapons-grade nuclear material that is free in the world. The U.S. Nunn-Lugar law has provided some funding to contain this dangerous material, but there is still a distressingly large amount of nuclear material that is available for terrorists to exploit.

The humanitarian agencies are the biggest success of the UN and we need to support them. For instance, the World Health Organization is one of the most important agencies the world has. It is under-funded, and we need to do more to support it. UNICEF and the refugee agency also do essential work, and we need to support them.

**Carol Bellamy:** *The UN needs to modernize to function in the twenty-first century*

The UN is not an easy place to talk about. It is made up of 191 member states, and they do crazy things sometimes. The General Assembly really has so little power these days, and no one can be sure how the proposed reforms to the Security Council and the Secretariat will turn out.

In many ways, the challenges the UN faces today are fundamentally different from the challenges that existed when it was founded. If you think about the changing nature of war, fifty of fifty-five wars since 1990 have been within the boundaries of a country, rather than between countries. But the conflict resolution mechanisms in the UN charter assume that two countries are involved. This doesn't help in situations like Darfur or Rwanda, where sovereignty has been used over and over to preclude recognizing excessive human rights abuses. The secretary general has been very courageous in saying that you can't ignore huge rights abuses through the fog of sovereignty, but this is an issue that urgently needs to be addressed.

The last decade has seen a widening gap between the United States and the UN on many issues, ranging from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, where the United States is one of only two countries in the world that have not ratified the treaty, to the International Criminal Court. And yet the United States remains the largest contributor to the refugee agency, to the World Food Programme, and to the World Health Organization. So, while the UN has to modify itself to be a competitive, compelling organization in the twenty-first century, the United States also has to think about how it modifies itself to be a compelling, competitive nation in the twenty-first century. ■