

Waking Up from World Order Amnesia

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In 1946, the Roper polling service asked what people in the United States thought about the possibility of moving beyond nationalism. One of the key questions was this:

“If every other country in the world would elect representatives to a world congress and let all problems between countries be decided by this congress, with a strict provision that all countries have to abide by the decisions whether they like them or not, would you be willing to have the United States go along on this?”

Any pollster who suggested that question today would probably either be called a socialist or given a reality check by management. Nevertheless, at the end of World War II an impressive 62.8 percent answered yes to the question. Only 19.8 percent gave a definite no; 17.8 apparently didn't know what to think.

Going further, the poll also asked, “If every other country in the world would give up its armies and navies and instead just contribute its share of men and materials to an international police force, would you be willing for the United States to go along with this?”

Maybe it was post-war stress disorder, but 52.2 percent said they wanted national disarmament and a global military, 32.7 percent said no thanks, and the remaining 15.1 percent were basically clueless. In other words, almost 70 years ago most Americans were ready to move beyond the nation-state and handle global problems by electing a world parliament.

It's certainly a grim testament to the power of propaganda and Cold War paranoia that this emerging consensus, expressed just as the UN was launched, was so effectively undermined, reversed and erased over the next years.

Today, on the Left and Right, mention global governance – even a modest expansion of the UN's authority – and you'll spark cynical dismissal, and probably a current “conspiracy theory.” At the same time, however, a corporate-friendly global administration, managed by a web of unaccountable bodies, has moved from the drawing board to the boardrooms through multi-lateral agreements and other tools of the current “world order.”

Disillusioned about government's ability to meet basic needs or get anything done, many have been persuaded by reactive, anti-government, and often isolationist appeals. Of course, most people are also painfully aware that no single country, especially a disoriented superpower, can control inter- or intra-state violence, reverse the environmental damage underway, or protect human rights around the world. Yet too many have accepted the assumption that any form of “global management” is either a utopian dream or a dystopian

scheme that will only make matters worse.

It's basically a case of denial; an inability to acknowledge the shape of the existing "new world order," acknowledged publicly by George H.W. Bush after his election as president. By that time the emergence of regional economic blocs, along with the diverse activities of the UN and the influence of quasi-governmental structures and private institutions had already begun usurping many powers of nations, raising profound questions about sovereignty, self-determination, and the impact of global dynamics on local realities.

How did we get from there to here? And what can be done to begin moving beyond a global regime based on profit and consumerism to a process of globalization from below that puts people and the natural world first?

To begin, consider how earlier, post-nationalist instincts were manipulated. The process began at the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference, when the winners of World War II - the US, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union - decided to impose a primitive form of "unification" on the rest of the planet. But the confederation they envisioned would have little to actually administer and no effective enforcement power. Their fateful approach spurred the development of rival blocs and an intensive arms race.

Throughout 1945, events crowded upon one another- the death of President Roosevelt in April, the opening of the UN founding conference less than two weeks later, the end of the war in Europe, and then, on August 6, the leveling of Hiroshima with an atomic bomb. By then the winners of the war had already forced their UN plan on more than 40 other nations who sent delegates to San Francisco. Only the Dumbarton Oaks proposals were discussed, and although a few delegates, notably Cuba, called for a union of all peoples, no one had the nerve to defy the dominant nations known as the Big Five.

There were some discussions of a constituent assembly, as well as proposals to make international court jurisdiction compulsory and turn the General Assembly into a world legislature with real authority. During heated debate about the veto power of the Security Council's five permanent members, many countries protested that this contradicted the principle of national equality. The Australian delegate reminded the US that its Bill of Rights might never have been passed if five states had been granted the right to veto. But the Big Five — the US, UK, France, Russia, and China — refused to compromise: no veto power meant no Charter. In the end, 15 nations abstained from voting on the issue; Cuba and Colombia opposed it outright.

Outside the Conference, meanwhile, signs welcoming "world citizens" were on display, much to the displeasure of the US State Department, which eventually had them removed. Thousands of people signed petitions calling for a world legislature, elected by the people of all member nations. "The sovereignty which belongs to us," the petition stated, "we now wish to re-divide, giving to a higher world level of government — which we continue to control through our representatives — the power to decide questions of world-wide concern."

As the 1946 Roper Poll suggested, this was a sentiment with broad support at the time. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed said they favored a world congress, an idea supported by all age groups, both sexes, and across the country. Elmo Roper concluded, "These figures leave little doubt that a majority of Americans still believe in a strong world organization.

Not only do they approve, in principle, of such a plan, but they are willing to take some of the practical steps by which such a plan might be assured.”

However, Roper also predicted that certain developments might change this situation, particularly “a distrust of Russia’s motives in regard to world domination.” He also might have mentioned the ineffectiveness of the UN approach to confederation, the manipulation of post-War military tribunals by the victors, and the squelching of demands by scientists that development of atomic energy be controlled by a world authority.

As the 1940s ended, a modest movement for world government struggled on. At first, many groups merged into the United World Federalists, then splintered into a rainbow of assemblies, coalitions, and would-be world government bodies. A hard-hitting evangelical treatise on global governance by Emery Reves, *The Anatomy of Peace*, appeared in over 20 countries. Organizational blueprints proliferated, including a University of Chicago study of a possible World Constitution. For many people, the threat of nuclear weapons provided more proof that world government was a necessity.

Yet, as Roper predicted, the Cold War made any serious consideration impossible for the next half century. In the authoritative anthology, *United Nations, Divided World*, Michael Howard concludes that the UN security system itself “collapsed almost before it was put to the test.” Action against aggression could be taken only if the two “great powers,” then the US and USSR, chose not to object. Although the General Assembly might occasionally “unite for peace,” it was basically impotent.

As years passed and opportunities were wasted, the UN Secretary-General became a popular scapegoat, and the organization as a whole was increasingly viewed as pathetic, irrelevant, and possibly even a corrupt bureaucracy. In the US, it was widely portrayed in the media as a forum for “third world” rhetoric and “anti-American” outbursts.

Despite its post-Cold War rehabilitation, the UN is still far from being, as its Charter originally proposed, “a center for harmonizing the actions of nations.” And even if this modest goal is achieved someday, the conspiracy-oriented have little to fear. The UN will not soon, if ever, evolve into a world legislature with binding authority. Rather than watching for black UN helicopters, those worried about a global dictatorship might be better advised to focus on World Bank headquarters and other branch offices of the actual “world government,” which have been pursuing the “structural adjustment” for decades.

Throughout the history of the UN a few powerful nations have manipulated its institutional framework and policies, often using a “financial whip” to impose their will. Alternately neglected and undermined, it has struggled with countless humanitarian emergencies, often while its dominant members worked to limit its scope or “roll back” programs worldwide.

The vision of democratic global governance has always faced strong resistance. For example, the decision to keep the so-called Bretton Wood Institutions (BWIs) — the World Bank and International Monetary fund — as well as the GATT and WTO separate from the UN has limited public participation in economic decisions. Although the UN provided a forum for decolonization efforts during its early years, demands for economic justice have been routinely sidetracked. From 1980 onward, the disaffection of dominant players, along with a global economic downturn during that decade, produced a chronic UN funding and identity crisis.

Manipulation and restriction of the UN has taken the form of refusal to make promised financial contributions, pressure on various secretary-generals, and arm-twisting directed at specific countries. On the other hand, few constraints have been placed on the World Bank, which has used funding to impose draconian policies on the South. Beyond public control, unaccountable institutions have become instruments for imposing domestic policies, requiring programs that tend to reduce living standards, dismantle state-run agencies, and distort development.

The UN is commonly called inefficient, bureaucratic, and compromised. Its deliberations, except when they serve the short-term political objectives of the Big Five, are portrayed as largely hot air. This makes it easy to write off the UN as a place where important policies could be made. Yet that was part of the original vision. The UN Charter pointed directly toward work to promote “higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social programs...”

One essential step is therefore to put international financial institutions under democratic control, and, at the very least, make their policies consistent with the UN’s long-term agenda.

In his Agenda for Development, former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali outlined a pragmatic strategy, including “better coordination” with the BWIs. The same conclusion was reached at the 1997 Social Summit. As critics of corporate capitalism often note, allowing the “hidden hand” of economic globalization to run its course only widens the gap between the haves and have-nots. By the end of the 20th century, for instance, 70 percent of all foreign investment in the developing world was going to only 10 countries, hardly an equitable situation.

Agenda for Development made three main points: development must include equity and more employment, the present framework for international cooperation isn’t working, and the UN should become a powerful force. Issues such as debt management, structural adjustment, and access to money and technology should not be off-limits. Beyond such specifics, it is time to consider alternatives that move us beyond nationalism and corporate rule, time to question basic assumptions, to come to grips with the world as it is, and imagine where we can go from here.

Greg Guma’s second novel, [*Dons of Time*](#), will be published in October by Fomite Press.

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