

“What Happened to the Idea of World Government?”

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Le machin is what Charles de Gaulle called the United Nations, thereby dismissing multilateral cooperation as frivolous in comparison with the real red meat of international affairs, national interests and *Realpolitik*. He conveniently ignored that the formal birth of “the thing” was not the signing of the UN Charter in June 1945, but rather the adoption of the “Declaration by the United Nations” in Washington, DC, in January 1942. The twenty-six countries that defeated Fascism and by the way saved France also anticipated the formal establishment of a world organization as an essential extension of their war-time commitments. These were not pie-in-the-sky idealists. The UN system was not viewed as a liberal plaything to be tossed aside when the going got rough but rather a vital necessity for post-war order and prosperity.

Numerous other politicians and pundits since have made careers by questioning the organization’s relevance and calling for its dismantlement, whereas my own has revolved around strengthening the United Nations; and some professional energy has gone into nurturing the IO section of ISA and the Academic Council on the UN System. This 50th ISA session in New York provides me the opportunity to examine the world organization from a particular angle, namely the desperate need for a third generation of intergovernmental organizations to move beyond the “anarchy” that Hedley Bull and all ISA members take as a point of departure for international studies.

My own research interests are not idiosyncratic among past presidents of this association. One-quarter of my 48 distinguished predecessors have written at least a book and several major articles about the UN system. Among past ISA presidents of the last few decades who have devoted substantial analytical energies to international organization in general and the UN in particular and from whose work I have benefited are my dear friend Craig Murphy, the late Hayward Alker, Bob Keohane, David Singer, Jim Rosenau, Bruce Russett, the late Harold Jacobson, and Chad Alger.

Will it take a calamity on the scale of World War Two to demonstrate the abject poverty of our current thinking? Is such a disaster required to catalyze a transformation of the current feeble system of what many of us now call “global governance”—the patchwork of formal and informal arrangements among states, international agencies, and public-private partnerships—into something with at least some of the attributes of a world government?

There I have uttered the four-letter word; and colleagues will no doubt have additional evidence that I have officially entered my dotage because students of all ages have totally abandoned the idea of overarching central authority. Once a staple of informed debate on

international affairs—and as hard as it is to believe, especially in the United States—“world government” is a term no longer used in polite company, unless as my Graduate Center colleague Rob Jenkins states, “it is to dismiss those who advocate the idea as hopelessly naïve, or to demonize those suspected of secretly plotting the creation of a global leviathan.”

My purpose this evening is to trace what has happened to the idea of a world government and its replacement by “global governance” as well as the pluses and minuses of that development.

Some Background

The current British minister with a portfolio for the UN was the former deputy-secretary-general and UNDP administrator. And Mark Malloch Brown quips that the UN is the only organization on earth where over coffee or around water coolers structural reform is a more popular topic than sex.

In spite of continual talk of drastic institutional overhaul, which reached a feverish pace for the 2005 World Summit on the occasion of the UN’s 60th anniversary, the world organization continues to limp along much as it has since its establishment. Unlike earlier cataclysms, recent narrow misses have not yet led to any transformation or even to a serious conversation about one.

Of course there have been major changes since 1945. Almost 150 new member states and such new topics as global warming, HIV/AIDS, and gender inequality are now front and center whereas earlier they were not even on the international agenda. But were they with us this evening, the UN’s founders would recognize the familiar state-centric and decentralized institutional approach to problem-solving on First Avenue in what remains a formidable bastion of state sovereignty.

In fact, Rube Goldberg could not have come up with a better design for futile complexity than the current array of UN agencies each focusing on a substantive area often located in a different city or different continent from relevant partners and with a separate budget, governing board, organizational culture, and independent executive head. In 1969 Sir Robert Jackson was asked to examine the development system and began the *Capacity Study* by comparing the UN to “some prehistoric monster.” Jackson’s lumbering dinosaur is now forty years older and not any better adapted to the 21st century’s climate.

The usual explanation for this reality is great power politics, the lack of political will, and collective action problems; but the blame also goes to us scholars for our lack of imagination. A few years back a dear friend and pillar of ISA, Elise Boulding, reminded me what her late husband and former ISA president Ken Boulding said, “We are where we are because we got there.”

In trying to write a conclusion for *What’s Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It*, Ken Boulding’s words made me uncomfortable about our loss of appetite for big and idealistic plans. I was describing gigantic problems and pygmy solutions. Because the Concert of Europe flopped, because Tsar Alexander’s Hague conferences failed to end war, because the Kellogg-Briand Pact was never a serious proposition, and because Immanuel Kant’s and Woodrow Wilson’s collective security visions were incorporated in the moribund League of Nations and were still-born in the ineffective United Nations, we no longer see our scholarly role as including thinking about drastically different world orders.

When interdependence was less and actors were fewer and states could actually solve or attenuate most international problems, the idea of a world government was not far from the mainstream. Paradoxically, now when states visibly cannot address a growing number of threats from WMDs to climate change, from terrorism to the current financial crisis, world government is unimaginable.

Global Governance

Over the ISA's lifetime, mainstream thinking about international cooperation has shifted decidedly away from beefing up the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations and toward what many of us now call "global governance." My good friend and colleague Ramesh Thakur and I have struggled to understand the origins and itinerary of this idea for a forthcoming book in the United Nations Intellectual History Project, which I have had the pleasure of directing with my colleagues Richard Jolly and Louis Emmerij since 1999 at The CUNY Graduate Center.

While many urged us to go back to the Garden of Eden, or at least to 1945, Ramesh and I trace the term to an offspring of a marriage between academic theory and practical policy in the 1990s. Rosenau and Czempiel published their highly theoretical *Governance without Government* in 1992, just about when Sweden launched the policy-oriented Commission on Global Governance under the chairmanship of Sonny Ramphal and Ingmar Carlsson. The 1995 publication of its report, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, coincided with the first issue of the journal published by Lynne Rienner, another pillar of ISA, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organization*, a project of the Academic Council of the United Nations System. Now of course there is a veritable cottage industry.

"Governance" represents of course the range of both informal *and* formal values, norms, practices, and institutions. It is most useful to think of global governance at any moment as reflecting the capacity of the international system to provide government-like services in the absence of a world government.

However, applying the notion of "governance" to the planet is fundamentally misleading. It captures the gamut of interdependent relations in the *absence* of any overarching political authority and with institutions that exert little or no effective control. Quite a distinction exists, then, between the national and international species of governance. Within a country, we have governance *plus* government which, whatever its shortcomings in Mexico or the United States, usually and predictably ensures effective authority and control. At the international level, governance is the whole story. We have governance *minus* government, which means virtually no capacity to ensure compliance with collective decisions.

And so why did the concept emerge? Why are we so enamored with it?

In my view, "global governance" emerged for three reasons. First, beginning in the 1970s, interdependence and rapid technological advances fostered recognition that certain problems defy solutions by a single state or a coalition of the willing. Other examples surround us, but the development of a consciousness about the human environment, which was made visible especially at the 1972 and 1992 UN conferences in Stockholm and Rio, is an especially pertinent illustration of how we're all in the same listing boat.

Second, the growing interest in global governance reflected the need to get an analytical handle on the sheer expansion in numbers and importance of non-state actors. Intergovernmental organizations like the UN no longer occupy center stage for students of international organization. They share the crowded governance stage with both civil society and corporations, and it was necessary to reflect this reality in analytical perspectives.

The combination of intensifying interdependence, technological advances, and a proliferation of actors results in, to borrow an image from Jim Rosenau, a “crazy quilt” of authority, with a patchwork of institutional elements that varies by sector and over time. Other images from non-scholars might be more apt, including Gertrude Stein’s characterization of Oakland—“there’s no there, there”—or perhaps better still the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, a grinning head floating without a body or substance.

This brings me to the third reason for the emergence of global governance and my central objective this evening, namely too many of us are embarrassed with the seemingly overly idealistic notion of supra-nationality. While Europe proceeds apace to move, in the late Ernie Haas’s formulation, “beyond the nation-state,” apparently the planet is different. A world federal government or even elements of one is not only old-fashioned, it is commonly thought to be the preserve of lunatics.

What Happened to the Idea of World Government?

Amazingly, it once was a staple of informed debate—and as hard as it is to believe, this tendency was especially pronounced in the United States.

By “earlier” we need not go back to Dante’s *Monarchia* in the 14th century, or Hugo Grotius’s work in the 17th century, or Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* in the late 18th century. The late Harold Jacobson’s 1984 *Networks of Interdependence* commented that the march toward a world government was woven into in the tapestries decorating the walls of the *Palais des Nations* in Geneva—now the UN’s European Office but once the headquarters of the League of Nations. Jake observed that they “picture the process of humanity combining into ever larger and more stable units for the purpose of governance—first the family, then the tribe, then the city-state, and then the nation—a process which presumably would eventually culminate in the entire world being combined in one political unit.”

Imagine a United States in which a serious conversation about the process depicted in that tapestry were possible. Could there really once have been a sizable group of prominent Americans from every walk of life, including politicians who passed resolutions in 30 of 48 state legislatures, who supported pooling American sovereignty with that of other countries?

One now requires unknown powers of imagination to envision a Washington, DC, where the idea of world government was a staple of public policy analysis. Yet 50 years ago, a 1949 sense of Congress resolution argued for “a fundamental objective of the foreign policy of the United States to support and strengthen the United Nations and to seek its development into a world federation.” It was sponsored by 111 representatives, including two future presidents, John F. Kennedy and Gerald Ford, as well as the likes of such softies as Mike Mansfield, Henry Cabot Lodge, Christian Herter, “Scoop” Jackson, and Jacob Javits.

In fact in the 1940s, it was impossible in the United States to read periodicals, listen to the radio, or watch newsreels and not encounter the idea of world government. No one of course persuaded the Roosevelt administration to include the idea of world government in American proposals in San Francisco, but peace movements of various stripes certainly raised the profile of supra-nationality. The cause had an unusual hero, the defeated 1940 Republican candidate for president Wendell Wilkie, who published a 1943 unlikely best-seller (what would any of us do if we sold 2 million copies?) called *One World* that attenuated the Republican Party's isolationism and helped secure bipartisan approval of the United Nations.

The June 1945 signing of the world organization's Charter in San Francisco, shortly before the nuclear age began, diminished the leverage and influence of those pushing for a world federation. Yet one legacy was the United World Federalists (UWF), whose members were inspired by another best-seller, Emery Reves's *The Anatomy of Peace*, which was serialized in *Reader's Digest* and argued that the United Nations of member states had to be replaced by worldwide law. Grenville Clark, a Wall Street lawyer and friend of Roosevelt, teamed up with Harvard Law Professor Louis Sohn to burnish these ideas in what later became their classic *World Peace through World Law*. Simultaneously, financier Bernard Baruch devised a visionary plan to place the nuclear fuel cycle under the United Nations at a time when the United States still enjoyed the atomic monopoly. Led by its president Robert M. Hutchins, the University of Chicago from 1945 to 1951 sponsored a prominent group of scholars in the Committee to Frame a World Constitution.

The movement was not a fringe group of the academy. It included not only Nobel laureates and a scientific luminary like Albert Einstein but also from such visible entertainers as Ronald Reagan, E.B. White, and Oscar Hammerstein. Future Senators Alan Cranston and Harris Wofford sought to spread the message of world federalism among university students, and the Student Federalists became the largest non-partisan political organization in the country. Other prominent individuals associated with the world government idea included, at one time or another, Kurt Vonnegut, Walter Cronkite, H. G. Wells, Peter Ustinov, Supreme Court Justices William Douglas and Owen Roberts, Senator Estes Kefauver and Senator and future Vice-President Hubert Humphrey. And the list goes on.

This all evaporated by the early 1950s, when the world government idea was hidden by the Iron Curtain, overshadowed by the Cold War, and eclipsed by Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt. On the right wing, this jump-started the engines of the black helicopters that are still whirling and fostered labeling advocates for world government as communist fellow travelers; and on the left wing, the idea has encountered fears of top-down tyranny in a dystopia.

Most European intellectuals focused on the continent's reconstruction although a few pursued the universal federal idea, including Arnold Toynbee, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, and John Boyd Orr (the first head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and 1949 Nobel Peace Prize laureate). Led by the French banker Jean Monnet, Europeans intellectuals pursued a federal idea for the continent rather than one for the globe.

Most of the countries in what we now call the "global South" were still colonies, and local independence struggles were far more pressing than thinking through distant world orders. Nonetheless, aspirations about a world federal government were not absent from public discourse in, for example, newly independent India. In an address to the UN General Assembly as late as

December 1956, Jawaharlal Nehru argued: “The only way to look ahead assuredly is for some kind of world order, One World, to emerge.”

The short answer to the question asked in the title to this lecture is: the United States became obsessed with anti-communism; Europe focused on the construction of a regional economic and political federation; the burgeoning number of post-colonial countries shifted their preoccupations toward non-alignment and Third World solidarity; and scholars got out of the business.

This ancient history now seems quaint. ISA members thinking about world government are almost extinct. From time to time an international relations theorist like Alexander Wendt suggests that “a world state is inevitable,” or Dan Deudney wishes that it were because war is so dangerous, or an international lawyer like Richard Falk calls for an irrevocable transfer of sovereignty upwards.

But the idea of world government has been banned in sober discussions and is absent from classrooms. In fact, I cannot recall a single under-graduate’s or graduate student’s inquiring about the theoretical possibility of a central political authority exercising elements of universal legal jurisdiction. Certainly no younger scholar would wish to cut short her career by writing a dissertation about it.

Occasionally the term still is uttered by a mainstream academic for one of two reasons. First, the author wishes to demonstrate her realism and her scholarly *bona fides* and spell-out clearly what she is *not* doing. Anne-Marie Slaughter began her insightful book, *A New World Order*, by stressing that “world government is both infeasible and undesirable.” No reader would have mistaken her viewpoint without such a disclaimer, but she or her publisher or both felt compelled apparently to formally distance the book from the discredited world government. Second, the term may be invoked as a functional equivalent of something else, usually Pax Americana—for instance, Michael Mandelbaum’s book on US hegemony, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts As the World’s Government in the Twenty-first Century* or Niall Ferguson’s paean to American Empire in his *Colossus*.

To go back a moment, global governance is a useful analytical tool—if I were choosing an expensive word, I would say a good “heuristic” device—to understand what is happening. But it has no prescriptive power about where we should be headed and what we should be doing. Agency and accountability are absent. It is a hodge-podge including any stakeholder with an interest in whatever topic is at hand.

Global governance certainly is not the continuation of traditional power politics. But it also certainly does not reflect an evolutionary process leading to constructing institutional structures able to provide global public goods and to address contemporary or future global threats. Scott Barrett’s insightful book, *Why Cooperate?*, puts it well: global governance is “organized volunteerism.”

In this regard, we have definitely gone overboard in our enthusiasm for non-state actors and informal processes. Not to put too fine a point on it, NGOs and transnational networks, corporations and activists crossing borders will not eliminate poverty, reverse global warming, or halt murder in Darfur.

Conclusion

Returning to Ken Boulding's observation, we will remain where we are without an alternative vision, without an ideal for which to strive.

The current global economic and financial meltdown, in addition to postponing indefinitely my retirement and decimating your 401(K) plans, should also have but not yet has brought home the need for more ambitious visions. Piecemeal individual governments have spent trillions of dollars, Euros, and pounds to paper over the obvious cracks in the international system, and meanwhile international institutions have been largely invisible. It is unsettling to recall how feeble our academic expectations have become in comparison with earlier generations of analysts who did not shy away from elements of world government and robust intergovernmental organizations. At Bretton Woods, for example, John Maynard Keynes proposed a monetary fund with resources equivalent to 50% of world imports. The International Monetary Fund's traditionally have amounted to less than 2%.

And so Gordon Brown, Nicolas Sarkozy, and some talking heads mention a "new Bretton Woods," perhaps to be discussed in April by the G-20, but what about the old one debated in 1944? The New Hampshire resort has recently had a \$50 million facelift, which helped exorcise Keynes's ghost. What happened to the aspirations expressed by the twentieth century's most famous economist? An institution with 1/25th of what the 20th century's most famous economist proposed is seen by some as too powerful and in any case has been AWOL in the current crisis. Is it really so far-fetched to imagine the global advance of inter-governmental economic agreements along the lines that Europe has nurtured since the Second World War, including a global currency? Is it really so beyond the pale to imagine a third generation of international political organizations with some supranational features?

We are not at a Copernican moment for state sovereignty because anarchy still predicts much of international relations. Like Copernicus, however, we could look at the same sun and planets that others have seen since 1648 but reframe the relations among them. My Graduate Center colleague, the American historian David Nasaw, reminded me that the weak 13 original colonies during the American Revolution were operating under a contested and awkward Articles of Confederation, but they then sought a "more perfect union" in 1787 in Philadelphia. The world and the weak confederation of 192 UN member states require a "Philadelphia moment."

We need a big international vision from the Obama administration. In nominating his confidante Susan Rice as ambassador to the United Nations and by restoring the post's cabinet status, Obama not only announced that the United States has rejoined the world and is ready to re-engage with all member states, but also he acknowledged what is evident to most people on the planet who were not in the ideological bubble of the Bush administration, namely "that the global challenges we face demand global institutions that work."

The new president excels in political imagination and his ability to address the need for meaningful change. He should draw on his considerable communications skills to help overcome what can only be described as the appalling public ignorance, including among members of Congress, about why the UN agglomeration works the way that it does. Why, despite its weaknesses, does it have a presence in every trouble spot and in every emerging issue that anyone can spot? In the contemporary world, U.S. diplomats as well as the public need to understand the usefulness of setting global goals, seeking cooperative global programs (even those that are

executed imperfectly), and thinking in terms of global policies as a better way of keeping alive than trotting out the tanks.

There remain of course many American members of the contemporary flat-earth society, the John Bolton's and John Yoo's who dismissed even "the benignly labeled 'global governance'" in a recent *NY Times* op-ed. At the beginning of a new administration, a reference to Dean Acheson's autobiography is apt because Washington was not only present at the creation of but actually led the post-World War II effort to construct a second generation of international organizations after the collapse of the first, the League of Nations. Looking back on that remarkable group of American leaders and public servants, Sir Brian Urquhart reminds us that "They were pragmatic idealists more concerned about the future of humanity than the outcome of the next election."

There are of course far too many things on the new president's plate. But could that same far-sighted political commitment of 1945 dawn again under the Obama administration, if not in 2009 at least by the end of a second term?

Thank you.