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## Real Reform at the United Nations

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My first-hand experience with the U.N. actually goes back several decades. In 1983, I was the U.S. Delegate, with the rank of Ambassador, to the United Nations' Second Special Session on Disarmament. Ronald Reagan was the American President at the time, and his popularity was higher—but only slightly higher—than George W. Bush's is today.

My tenure at the United Nations at that time involved serious negotiations with the five permanent members of the Security Council and all of the serious members and participants in issues of disarmament. I had the distinction of delivering the final address to the assembled members of the Second Special Session on Disarmament—SSOD-2, as it became known in U.N. jargon. When I mounted that impressive podium, I suddenly realized that, with the U.N.'s regular procedure of moving member state delegations through the Assembly seats in alphabetical order, Iran, Iraq, and Libya were seated immediately in front of me. My reception was not particularly warm and fuzzy—that is, unless you consider catcalls and hisses friendly.

But my tenure at the U.N. showed me, up close and no holds barred, what the potential for the U.N. system was. It was an effective and useful forum to exchange views, to listen and to learn, but when it came to make decisions, it certainly left much to be desired.

Fast forward more than 20 years, and I was nominated to serve with representatives of other think tanks, American universities, and former senior elected officials of both parties as a member of the bipartisan Gingrich–Mitchell Congressional Task Force on

### Talking Points

- The best friend of the U.N. is the honest critic who takes its stated objectives seriously and insists that the U.N. live up to its promise. The last thing the U.N. needs is friends who paper over its problems and cynically look the other way when it falls short.
- Needed U.N. reforms include refocusing the Secretary-General on administrative responsibilities, balancing financial contributions and influence in the budgetary process, and reducing redundancy and ineffectiveness in mandates and moving portions of the regular budget from assessed funding toward voluntary funding.
- Other needed reforms include a zero tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse by U.N. personnel, enlarged the resources and capacity for the OIOS examining office, stronger oversight and auditing mechanisms, and a staff buyout for those who lack the skills or motivation to perform their duties or whose duties are no longer necessary.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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United Nations Reform. Again, I learned a great deal, and I hope that my experience will be instructive to all of you this evening.

My own premise is that whether you belong to Labour, to the Liberal Democrats, or to the Tories; whether you are a Democrat or a Republican; an American, a European, an African, or an Asian, an effective United Nations is in all of our interests. And yet, today, I believe we all agree the United Nations is in need of serious reform.

For we are all part of a greater affiliation—that of humankind. We all aspire to be free and to live peaceful, productive and abundant lives. And we all face the same threats from totalitarianism, terrorism, and genocide, whether in the form of North Korean nuclear aggression, al-Qaeda's brand of Islamic extremism, or the mass slaughter of refugees in Darfur. The free world must be united in standing up to rogue regimes, terrorist networks, and state sponsors of ethnic cleansing.

### **The Vision of the Founders of the United Nations**

The world at the end of the Second World War was not indifferent to evil. The free world united, fought, and eventually triumphed over the aggression of those who would see freedom banished. Upon this victory, the leaders of the world's great nations gathered in San Francisco to ensure that "never again" should future generations have to witness such death and destruction—and so formed the United Nations.

With 96 powerful words, they expressed the great purpose of this world body:

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, even a known critic of the United Nations like me believes in the goals and aspirations of the organization. I am for saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war; I am for upholding and expanding human rights; I am for justice and freedom; and so I am for a United Nations that can help achieve the objectives laid out in its charter.

I believe that the best friend of the U.N. is the honest critic who takes its stated objectives seriously and insists that the U.N. live up to its promise. The last thing the U.N. needs is friends who paper over its problems and cynically look the other way when it falls short.

### **The Reality of the United Nations Today**

With this purpose in mind, I can reach only one conclusion: that the United Nations is not meeting these objectives. On the contrary, the United Nations has often proven incapable of confronting major threats to international peace and security; it has all too often been indifferent to gross human rights abuses, and it has been too slow to condemn and correct injustice and repression.

The secretariats and agencies of the United Nations of the 21st century are riddled with scandal and corruption; its bureaucracies and decision-making processes are inefficient, ineffective, and often incoherent.

Instead of reaffirming "fundamental human rights," the United Nations—particularly the General Assembly and the newly created Human Rights Council—serve as a safe haven for the worst human rights abusers. For example, in the face of rape, pillage, and nearly two thousand deaths in Darfur, the U.N. Security Council has still been unable to respond to the calls of the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries to establish a peacekeeping presence to stop the genocide.

And even though many thought it impossible that the new U.N. human rights body—the Human Rights Council in Geneva—could be worse than the old Commission, this is in fact what has happened. Despite genocide in Darfur, jihadist terrorism throughout the world, and countless other atrocities, the Council's main focus of action has been to condemn Israel.

In the face of the greatest evils of our day—genocide and terrorism—the United Nations has, through inaction, allowed them to grow worse. In light of so many failures, as responsible citizens of humanity, we must ask why? Why is the United Nations failing?

To answer these questions, we must drop all pretenses and be candid and honest with one another. We cannot think in terms of what we want the United Nations to be, but rather what it is and what it can actually do. We must realize and accept its many limitations instead of stubbornly forcing it to be something that it can never be.

A large part of the reason that the United Nations is failing, in my opinion, is that it is stretched beyond its competencies. The sheer structure and membership of a world body containing 192 countries, when over half are rated politically and economically un-free, is inherently going to limit what it can accomplish.

Yes, according to Freedom House, less than half of the U.N. membership is politically free. The 2006 edition of *Freedom in the World* lists only 89 countries that are considered free in terms of political rights and civil liberties. Even worse, “six of the eighteen most repressive governments—those of China, Cuba, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe—were members of the Commission on Human Rights.”

Similarly, according to the 2006 *Index of Economic Freedom*, published by The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal*, less than half of the U.N. membership is economically free or mostly free. The *Index* lists only 20 of 161 countries as economically free. Even including mostly free countries, there are only 72 countries in the top two categories of economic freedom. Well over half of the 2005 CHR membership were economically mostly unfree or repressed according to the 2006 *Index*.

As the late U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles acknowledged, “The United Nations was not set up to be a reformatory. It was assumed that you would be good before you got in, and not that being in would make you good.”

I agree with that sentiment. The United Nations will always be a mirror of the international commu-

nity it represents. Its limitations are the world’s limitations. It can sometimes rise above them—indeed that was the hope and expectation of its framers—but it also is constrained by them.

While I am an optimist, I am also very much a realist. While pushing for an ideal United Nations, we must also work with the reality of what we have—a body which will not in the foreseeable future advance the cause of liberty—and we should focus on what the United Nations can do well and what it cannot.

I know I’ll probably ruffle some feathers in the room tonight, so let me at least mention that the U.N. does some things well. The World Health Organization does some good work, and we need a body like that to prevent and control the spread of major threats to human health.

Even then, there are real political problems with the WHO. Who can justify the fact that China can veto Taiwan’s observer status at the WHO when (1) Taiwan has a population of 23 million people and (2) Asia has been afflicted with an infectious disease (SARS) which has spread to both sides of the Taiwan Strait? Recent decisions within the WHO on intellectual property issues, pharmaceutical availability, and other questions are danger signs of a further politicization of this entity.

Additionally, U.N. peacekeepers have contributed well to maintaining peace in some troubled areas of the world such as El Salvador, East Timor (after a slow start), and Angola.

But it is essential to start a frank dialogue among free nations and thoughtful individuals as to what the United Nations is and what it is not. So let us dialogue.

### **What the United Nations Is and What It Isn’t**

First, the United Nations is not a peacemaker. It is a peacekeeper.

The United Nations is unable to address the three most urgent threats to international peace and security today—intrastate conflicts, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The United Nations is severely limited in its ability to intervene in internal conflicts; the world

body cannot agree on a definition for terrorism because it has terrorism-sponsoring states and allies among its membership; and many member states protect states that are seeking nuclear weapons, such as Iran.

Despite the goal of “saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” there have been approximately 300 wars since 1945, resulting in over 22 million deaths. The United Nations has authorized military action to counter aggression just twice: North Korea’s invasion of South Korea and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. In all other cases, either the U.N. waited for NATO or some other coalition to act, or it did nothing.

Additionally, the United Nations has failed to stop the mass slaughter of human beings too many times—Rwanda, Srebrenica, and now Darfur. How long do we turn a deaf ear on hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters being slaughtered?

Because of failed United Nations efforts, freedom-loving democracies are often forced to act in defense of their own strategic interests—as we have seen in Iraq, Lebanon, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. I believe that the United States and other nations will continue to act with or without the help of the United Nations if deemed necessary. The U.N. Charter wisely put the right to self-defense outside the purview of the United Nations Security Council, leaving that body’s jurisdiction solely for acts of aggression and flagrant violations of international law.

Given its limitations, the United Nations Security Council simply cannot and should not be granted sole authority over decisions to use force or be tasked with the responsibility of making peace in the world—and anyone believing that interventions need the U.N.’s rubber stamp of approval are greatly deceived.

Second, the United Nations is not a binding authority on human rights. It is a forum where human rights should be discussed.

How can an organization whose membership harbors some of the worst human rights abusers uphold human rights? Such was the case of the Human Rights Commission. You all know the details, so I will not rehash them. After an atrocious

record, it was replaced by the Human Rights Council. Unfortunately, however, the Council did not address a fundamental problem, namely, the eligibility requirements for membership. Therefore, the United States was one of four countries that voted against the new Council, and we were clearly right to do so.

As most observers of the United Nations could have predicted, the newly elected members of the Human Rights Council continue to be some of the worst human rights abusers in the world—including China, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba—and their priorities remain clear. Instead of addressing the evils of Darfur, massacres in Uzbekistan, and other human rights violations around the world, these members obsessively focus on condemning Israel.

As much as I hope for an effective human rights body within the United Nations, if we are honest with ourselves, we know it will never be. The United Nations will never be able to speak and act clearly on human rights so long as so many member states themselves do not respect human rights.

Where there are agreed international human rights norms, the United Nations should endorse them and seek to bolster them. In cases of obvious violations of human rights, the body should act if possible. But to expect the member states to empower the U.N. to police their actions or scrutinize their policies is, unfortunately, unrealistic.

If the balance of United Nations member states should shift in favor of freedom and observance of human rights, then it would be prudent to set higher expectations. In the meantime, freedom-loving states should work together inside the United Nations to promote fundamental human rights but should not feel bound to act only within that body.

To eventually replace this effort, we should seek to form a respectable body consisting of member nations with clean human rights records. This body, outside of the formal United Nations structure, will be able to consider, debate, and discuss major human rights violations in nations around the world. This body should set objective and tough standards for membership, including adherence to the rule of law, democratic elections, and a clear

commitment to upholding the dignity of the human person, respect for the rule of law, and representative government in the home member country.

Some may complain that this body will merely be a Western club that excludes the abusers from the table. To that I ask, what is the alternative? To compromise our principles of human rights, thereby giving the abusers legitimacy?

We should not fool ourselves. That is precisely what the Cubas, the Belaruses, and other abusers want from the U.N.—just enough moral confusion to protect their regimes from censure and enable them to continue their practice of abuse. If that is the game nations want to play, then so be it. But then call it for what it is, and do not pretend it is advancing the cause of human rights.

Third, and finally, the United Nations is not a panacea for every issue. It is one tool of many to address concerns of the world's nations. Therefore, the United Nations needs a focused Secretariat to function. It does not need a Secretariat that is as large, inefficient, unaccountable, and unfocused as the Secretariat is today.

As my 11 colleagues and I learned in our investigations on the Gingrich–Mitchell Task Force, the United Nations is a bureaucratic quagmire. Far too many employees—hired on the basis of national patronage—are unqualified for the work they do.

Mandates from the General Assembly are too numerous, and inefficient programs at the United Nations lack the sunset provisions to end them. Frankly, the rule “If everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority” applies to many of the activities of the entire United Nations system.

Additionally, fraud, waste, and abuse are rampant. From Oil for Food, to procurement scandals, to peacekeepers raping the people they are supposed to help, the United Nations culture of corruption extends to all corners of the globe.

These are the issues that sadden me and so many of my friends and colleagues the most. I would be willing to work with a bureaucracy—since I already work with the U.S. government daily—but such rampant and uncontrolled corruption and abuse is simply intolerable and unacceptable.

- I hate reading in the paper that women and girls as young as 12 years old in the Congo have to prostitute themselves to U.N. blue-helmeted “peacekeepers” to receive miserly portions of food aid.
- I hate reading about U.N. procurement officers getting free New York City apartments in exchange for U.N. contracts.
- I hate reading about the Oil for Food scandal—the largest-scale example of corruption in the history of the world, now estimated to total more than \$11 billion of misappropriated funds. And yet today, only *one* former United Nations official has been convicted of any inappropriate actions in this massive scandal.
- And I hate hearing the many accounts of other U.N. corruption that are often overlooked because of a weak internal justice system and impunity.

These problems must be addressed if the body is to earn the legitimacy and responsibilities many are eager to grant the organization.

## Calls for Reform

Calls for reforming the United Nations system are nothing new. In 1947, just two years after the creation of the U.N., the U.S. Senate launched a study that found serious problems of overlap, duplication of effort, weak coordination, and overly generous compensation of staff.

But achieving real reform is exceedingly difficult. Over the past six decades of its existence, governments, think tanks, NGOs, and international groups of “wise men and women” have tried to reform the United Nations on numerous occasions. Although these reform efforts have seen rare successes, for the most part, they have failed to make any substantial difference.

In large part, this lack of progress is due to the entrenched resistance by a significant number of key member states, particularly those leading the G-77 group of developing countries and the so-called Non-Aligned Movement. These nations—about 131 of the 192 member states of the United Nations—tend to see the reform agenda as an assault on their authority. They articulate the viewpoint that the

wealthy developed nations are imposing new rules on poorer less-developed nations.

We see this especially in calls to enlarge the Security Council. When viewed practically, enlarging a body that is already divided and therefore often unable to act makes no sense. But even the apolitical aspects of reform, such as proposals to accelerate personnel recruitment and grant the Secretary-General the ability to shift staff resources to meet urgent priorities, have met substantial resistance.

To the extent that Britain, the United States, and our allies want to see real reform in the United Nations, I believe that we must use alternative means to demand reform—including financial leverage. I know this is not a popular option. However, I believe it is the only way to achieve real reform, and real reform is the only way for the United Nations to be effective in the world of today and tomorrow.

The reality is that the most successful reforms have been accompanied by financial leverage. This occurred in the 1980s when U.S. withholding resulted in consensus-based budgeting that greatly constrained growth in the U.N. regular budget. It also worked in 1994 when the U.S. withheld funds until the U.N. created an inspector general. The result was the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS). It also worked in the late 1990s with the conditional payment of U.S. arrears to the United Nations.

Remember that the top 10 contributors to the United Nations pay 80 percent of the entire budget, while the lowest 130 countries contribute a total of less than 1 percent of the budget at \$19,000 annual dues per country. We should not be ashamed to use it; those opposed to reform are not ashamed to press their numerical advantage in votes to stop it.

Regardless of whether or not real reform occurs within the United Nations system, nations that adhere to the rule of law and advance freedom, democracy, and prosperity must protect their own interests—and I do not believe that these are selfish interests. We have to believe that given the choice between oppression and freedom, people will choose freedom. We believe that given the choice between rule of law and injustice, people will choose rule of law.

## **A Model of Freedom: The Global Free Trade Alliance**

Again, given the *choice*, people choose freedom. How are they to know the benefits of a free society unless they can see it first hand?

The world needs an example to follow. Even though freedom is, I believe, a God-given right to all people, it is not inevitable that all people will be free. As President Ronald Reagan reminded us, “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.” We must hand it down to successor generations so that they, too, will know the exhilaration of living as free men and women. This same argument applies to freedom around the world.

The world needs a body that models the link between freedom and prosperity. It needs an example, a goal to strive for, something to hope for. For 13 years, The Heritage Foundation has published our *Index of Economic Freedom*. One of the clearest findings we’ve discovered is the true link between the amount of economic freedom in a country and each citizen’s wealth. The more free and open a country is, the more prosperous its citizens are.

That is why The Heritage Foundation and I have been advocating for the creation of a Global Free Trade Alliance for many years. This alliance would be open to all countries that, by objective standards, are open to trade and investment and maintain a secure rule of law with low levels of regulation. Any country that meets these standards would be eligible for membership.

This alliance would strengthen the world’s economy, promote peace and security, and act as an example of the power of free societies working together and trading together. And it would complement the stalled Doha Round of international trade talks by encouraging nations to “get their acts together” to join the alliance.

In order for these dreams to become realities, however, they require the support of Britain and other strategic allies. I hope you will take the time to read The Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* on a Global Free Trade Alliance and consider what you can do in the academy and elsewhere to debate ideas like this and other innovative solutions for peace and global security.

## Practical Suggestions for Freedom

I have dwelled on the deficiencies of the Human Rights Commission, which the Gingrich–Mitchell Task Force noted as a major challenge for reform, but we also made a series of additional recommendations for reform:

- **Refocus** the Secretary-General on his administrative responsibilities.
- **Balance** financial contributions and influence in the United Nations budgetary process.
- **Reduce** redundancy and ineffectiveness in U.N. mandates.
- **Move** portions of the U.N. regular budget from assessed funding toward voluntary funding.
- **Enact** a zero tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse by U.N. personnel.
- **Enlarge** the resources and capacity of the OIOS examining office.
- **Strengthen** the oversight and auditing mechanisms.
- **Institute** a staff buyout for those who lack the skills or the motivation to perform their duties or whose duties are no longer necessary.

All of these recommendations and many others that we suggested more than one and a half years ago have been either ignored or turned down by various decision-making bodies within the United Nations system.

## Conclusion

We must understand that the United Nations is one tool among many that can aid free men and women, wherever we live, in our efforts to protect and to advance freedom. We must wisely discern when it is best to work through the United Nations, or alongside the United Nations, or apart from the

United Nations in other international arrangements among freedom-loving countries that choose to support each other in their decisions.

I think we would all agree, that in this present day, we should strive to have an effective world body that champions freedom—and does not fight it. We need a world body that honors human rights—instead of ignoring them. We need a world body that loves justice—rather than sheltering its violators. We need a world body that spreads prosperity—instead of shackling it.

I believe that the question “The United Nations, a Relic or Relevant?” is not, first and foremost, a choice that is ours. Rather, it is the choice of those who lead and make up the United Nations system. To the extent that it can fulfill its charter, it will be rewarded and regarded with relevance. But if it continues on its current path, it will soon be left behind and replaced by other international institutions such as those I have outlined tonight.

Either way, I do not believe that the United States will be caught off guard. We will use appropriate means to uphold our values in the world. Our children depend on our clear-sighted vision. Our grandchildren depend on our clear-sighted vision. And so does all of humankind.

For the sake of humanity, we cannot be indifferent. We cannot stand idly on the side while acts of evil are committed by totalitarian regimes and terrorist groups sometimes with the complicity of the formal United Nations structure. We can do better. We must do better. And with your help, we shall do better.

—Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is President of The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered at the London School of Economics, London, England, on November 30, 2006, as part of the LSE’s “The UN at 60, Relevant or Relic Lecture Series.”