

UNDERSTANDING AMERICA



How Should Americans Think About International Organizations?



Brett D. Schaefer

The *Understanding America* series is founded on the belief that **America is an exceptional nation**. America is exceptional, not for what it has achieved or accomplished, but because, unlike any other nation, it is dedicated to the principles of human liberty, grounded on the truths expressed in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and endowed with equal rights. As Abraham Lincoln once said, these permanent truths are “applicable to all men and all times.” The series explores these principles and explains how they must govern America’s policies, at home and abroad.

About This Cover

International organizations are one way for the U.S. to defend its interests and to work collaboratively with other nations to address common problems. The United States should not adopt a default position of permanent membership in these organizations. It should instead base its participation and support on whether an organization works effectively, whether its goals are attainable, and whether it advances U.S. interests.

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How Should Americans Think About International Organizations?

Because international organizations are a relatively modern invention, the Founding Fathers did not discuss explicitly how the United States should relate to them. But international organizations can be another way for the U.S. to address diplomatic concerns with other nations. The Founders practiced diplomacy during the American Revolution and established the principles that guide and the institutions that control American diplomacy today. Inspired by this legacy, how should Americans think about international organizations?



Maintaining international peace and security is one of the United Nations' primary responsibilities. Between its peacekeeping, peace-building, and political operations, the U.N. is currently overseeing the deployment of more uniformed personnel than any single nation except the United States has deployed outside of its borders. As a result, U.N. peacekeeping is being conducted with unprecedented pace and scope, revealing a number of flaws stemming, in part, from the conflicting interests and values of the organization's member states.



The Founders believed that nations should seek to work amicably toward common goals and in defense of mutual interests. As George Washington advised Americans in his Farewell Address, “Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all.”

But the Founding Fathers also knew that nations had competing priorities, and that, as new concerns emerged, the pull of shared goals and interests could weaken or disappear. Alliances were therefore naturally impermanent. As Alexander Hamilton observed:

There is nothing absurd or impracticable in the idea of a league or alliance between independent nations for certain defined purposes precisely stated in a treaty regulating all the details of time, place, circumstance, and quantity; leaving nothing to future discretion; and depending for its execution on the good faith of the parties.

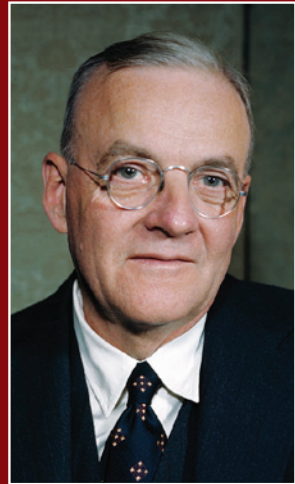
Hamilton, like the other Founders, believed an alliance was like a contract: it was made between particular states for a definite purpose. The Founders were not opposed to alliances. On the

contrary, they valued alliances when they were advantageous, as evidenced by the Treaty of Alliance they negotiated with France in 1778. But, again like a contract, the provisions of the alliance had to be explicit. Hamilton warned that a vague treaty with unrealistic objectives is not enforceable and encourages signatories to violate it.

In the early part of the present century there was an epidemical rage in Europe for this species of compacts, from which the politicians of the times fondly hoped for benefits which were never realized. With a view to establishing ... the peace of that part of the world, all the resources of negotiation were exhausted, and triple and quadruple alliances were formed; but they were scarcely formed before they were broken, giving an instructive but afflicting lesson to mankind, how little dependence is to be placed on treaties which have no other sanction than the obligations of good faith, and which oppose general considerations of peace and justice to the impulse of any immediate interest or passion.

The war between Britain and France in the 1790s, and the complications this created for America because of its Treaty of Alliance with France, led the Founders to be wary about alliances

“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.”



—John Foster Dulles
*U.S. Secretary of State,
July 19, 1954*



The United States belongs to more than 50 international organizations, including the World Trade Organization (WTO), which supervises free and open trade between its member nations. Participation in organizations like the WTO that effectively address global problems without infringing upon its members' sovereignty is a valuable tool in defending and advancing America's interests.

that pretend to be binding for all time. In 1798, Congress annulled the Treaty of Alliance with France. Washington later criticized the Treaty in his Farewell Address, cautioning that

nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded. ... Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

Washington did not call for America to withdraw from the world, but he cautioned against *permanent* connections and alliances.



Hamilton believed that successful cooperation occurs when there are mutual benefits, and when a failure to cooperate would hurt all parties. Unfortunately, most international organizations suffer from the problems that Hamilton ascribed to unrealistic compacts.

Like an alliance, international organizations are usually established by a treaty. But unlike an alliance, they are presumed to be permanent, and cannot be annulled by the United States. They are composed of states with conflicting interests and frequently have ill-defined purposes and vague responsibilities. The work of international organizations often depends principally on the “good faith” that Hamilton regarded as unreliable. The costs of violating that good faith are generally minimal.

The international organization most familiar to Americans is the United Nations, but it is far from the only one. The United States belongs to over 50 international organizations, ranging from largely technical institutions like the International Bureau of Weights and Measures, to regional diplomatic organizations like the Organization of American States, to financial institutions like the World Bank.

While most international organizations were created after 1945, there are older ones, such as the International Telecommunication Union established in 1865, which sets standards to facilitate electronic communications. The older organizations typically have a limited scope, which helps them resist politicization, and they create tangible benefits that give nations an incentive to participate in their work and abide by their agreements.

Contrast this with the United Nations. The United States was instrumental in the founding of the U.N., and the preamble of the U.N. Charter echoes the Declaration of Independence. Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman saw the establishment of the United Nations as a way to disseminate uniquely American ideals to other nations.

But as Hamilton could have predicted, the U.N.'s aspirations have often foundered on the shoals of conflicting national interests. Despite the political and financial support the U.N. has received from the U.S., and its influential position as a permanent, veto-wielding member of the U.N. Security Council, the United States has often been disappointed by the U.N.'s fractiousness and by the fact that many of its member states do not live up to the principles espoused in the U.N. Charter. Indeed, the founding purposes of the U.N. are all too often forgotten in a hurry to address, in Hamilton's words, "any immediate interest or passion."

As President Ronald Reagan observed in his 1985 address to the U.N. General Assembly:

The vision of the U.N. Charter—to spare succeeding generations this scourge of war—remains real. It still stirs our soul

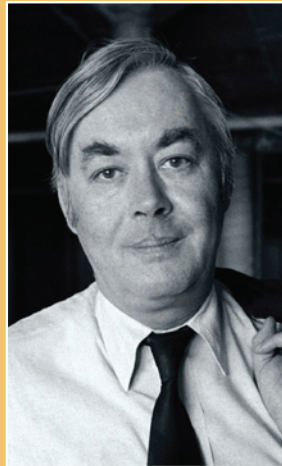
and warms our hearts, but it also demands of us a realism that is rock hard, clear-eyed, steady, and sure—a realism that understands the nations of the United Nations are not united.

Undoubtedly, the U.N. does some good. Certainly, it could address more problems if its member nations were truly united. But the mere act of establishing an international organization and asserting that its membership shares common aims and goals does not make this a reality.

Conflicting interests and values among nations will always impede collective action to address international peace and security, advance human rights, or facilitate better standards of life. Worse, member states often misuse international organizations to undermine peace and freedom, and the organizations themselves increasingly seek to infringe on national sovereignty, which is an assault on the rights of the people in democratic nations around the world.

Supporting international organizations is not without consequence. It is a burden, albeit sometimes a burden worth bearing. But refusing to recognize the limitations of international organizations and their potential to cause harm does a disservice to the American people, who often pay for the largest share of the activities of international organizations, both beneficial and detrimental.

“Every day at the U.N.,
on every side, we are
assailed because we
are a democracy. ...
Nothing so unites [the
dictatorships] as the
conviction
that their
success
ultimately
depends on
our failure.”



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– Daniel Patrick Moynihan,
U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations,
October 20, 1975



Member states often misuse international organizations to undermine freedom and security. Countries with deplorable or questionable human rights records seek and win seats on the Human Rights Council through annual elections in the U.N. Since the Council was established in 2006, the number of countries observing and protecting human rights on it has gradually declined, while repressive states, which should be the targets of the Council's scrutiny, have expanded their number and influence.



If the United States is not to undermine its interests, it must abandon its default position of supporting and engaging with international organizations regardless of their performance. Instead, the U.S. must assess honestly whether each organization works, whether its mission is focused and attainable and not dependent on “good faith” that does not exist, and whether it advances U.S. interests.

This evaluation is not a violation of America’s obligations, a rejection of diplomacy, or a manifestation of isolationism. It is a fundamental privilege and responsibility of a sovereign and democratic government. As Senator Jesse Helms vividly put it to the U.N. Security Council:

[All] of us want a more effective United Nations. But if the United Nations is to be “effective” it must be an institution that is needed by the great democratic powers of the world. ... The American people want the U.N. to serve the purpose for which it was designed: they want it to help sovereign states coordinate collective action ... they want it to provide a forum where diplomats can meet and keep open channels of

communications in times of crisis; they want it to provide to the peoples of the world important services, such as peace-keeping, weapons inspections and humanitarian relief. ...

But if the U.N ... seeks to impose the U.N.'s power and authority over nation-states, I guarantee that the United Nations will meet stiff resistance from the American people. ... The U.N. must respect national sovereignty. The U.N. serves nation-states, not the other way around. This principle is central to the legitimacy and ultimate survival of the United Nations, and it is a principle that must be protected.

International organizations are a tool to attain a goal, not an end in themselves. They are one way for the U.S. to defend its interests and to seek to address problems in concert with other nations. But they are not the only option, and their strengths and weaknesses should be clearly understood.

The United States should not participate in an international organization simply because it exists. If an international organization is effectively addressing a problem and unmistakably advances American interests, the U.S. should support it. But if the organization is irrelevant, badly flawed, or opposed to U.S. interests, the United States should not reward that organization with financial

support or participation, which would lend it prestige and credibility it does not deserve.

While the American Founders did not live in an age of international organizations, they wanted the U.S. to govern itself, to practice diplomacy, and to seek to live in amity with other nations. As long as international organizations contribute to these ends, they are valuable. If they do not, they are destructive, and the American people should seek to modify or withdraw from them and, if necessary, found new organizations that will contribute more effectively to our safety and happiness.



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Enduring Truths

For links to these titles, go to heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica.

- **Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place*, 1978.**

Moynihan, an icon of the liberal establishment, was one of the most controversial and unapologetic U.S. ambassadors ever appointed to the United Nations. In this memoir from the 1970s, he excoriates the U.N. as corrupt and manipulated by despots, and rebukes U.S. diplomats for failing to defend American interests and confront the U.N.'s problems.

- **Senator Jesse Helms, Address to the United Nations Security Council, January 20, 2000.**

Senator Helms was the first legislator from a member state to address the U.N. Security Council. Coming after the U.S. adopted the Helms-Biden legislation in 1999, which offered to pay the U.S.'s bill to the U.N. if the U.N. adopted specified reforms, Helms delivered a frank expression of American skepticism about the U.N. and a warning to it not to take American support for granted.

- **Ambassador John Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations, 2007.***

This memoir focuses on Bolton's sixteen months as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in 2005 and 2006. Bolton offers insight into the workings of the U.N. and the U.S. State Department, illustrates the weaknesses of the U.N., and explains why the U.S. is seemingly so ineffective in advancing its interests in the U.N.

Current Issues

For links to these reports, go to heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica.

- **U.N. REFORM. Brett D. Schaefer, *ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives, September 2009.***

The U.N. has been charged with addressing some of the most serious problems facing the world, including peace and security, terrorism, human rights, poverty, and pandemics. This collection of essays examines the record of the organization in addressing those concerns, and discusses ways to reform the current system

to improve its ability to address global problems and advance U.S. interests.

- **MULTILATERALISM. Kim Holmes, “Smart Multilateralism: When and When Not to Rely on the United Nations,” September 21, 2010.**

Holmes argues that involvement in international organizations like the U.N. is simply one of the many foreign policy tools the U.S. should employ. If this involvement is not in America’s interests, and does not advance liberty, the U.S. should find ways to work around the U.N. system.

- **MULTILATERALISM. Brett D. Schaefer, “The Role and Relevance of Multilateral Diplomacy in U.S. Foreign Policy,” February 14, 2011.**

Schaefer argues that, while policies and venues may change, the role of diplomacy—to advance the foreign policy objectives of the United States—is constant, whether the diplomacy is multilateral or bilateral. America needs to focus on the battles that matter, to take a fresh look at the U.N. system, and to ask fundamental

questions about how to reduce its budget, eliminate its extraneous activities, and increase its accountability.

Endnotes

- 1 President George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address,” 1796, at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.
- 2 Alexander Hamilton, “The Insufficiency of the Present Confederation to Preserve the Union,” *Federalist* No. 15, at <http://www.foundingfathers.info/federalistpapers/fed15.htm>.
- 3 Ronald Reagan, address to the U.N. General Assembly, October 24, 1985, at www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/102485a.htm.
- 4 Address by Senator Jesse Helms Chairman, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations before The United Nations Security Council, January 20, 2000, at <http://www.jessehelmscenter.org/jessehelms/documents/AddressbySenatorJesseHelmstoUNSecurityCouncil.pdf>.

About *Understanding America*

AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED that this nation, founded on the idea of freedom, has a vital responsibility to the rest of the world. As George Washington first recognized, the “preservation of the sacred fire of liberty” depended on the American people. These words remain true today.

Understanding America explores how the United States’ commitment to the universal truths of human equality and the right to self-government—as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—requires a vigilant defense of the cause of liberty, both at home and abroad.

Other volumes in the series:

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“[The Founders] wanted the U.S. to govern itself, to practice diplomacy, and to seek to live in amity with other nations.”

While America’s Founders did not live in an era of international organizations, their intentions for the nation were clear. The preeminent mission of American diplomacy should be to advance the nation’s interests and goals. This volume in the *Understanding America* series explains the criteria that make an international organization valuable and examines the role international organizations should play in advancing American goals and protecting America’s interests around the globe.

