The UN Is Beyond Reform

January 10, 2017

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Frontpage Mag

<http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/265375/un-beyond-reform-bruce-thornton>

President-elect Donald Trump has promised to get tough with the UN, a corrupt, bloated bureaucracy that for seven decades has existed to provide cushy jobs for international deadbeats, and to promote the interests of tyrannical regimes and anti-American pygmy states. Recognizing the UN’s failures and corruption, some commentators are calling for targeted reductions of the estimated $8-10 billion a year we spend on the UN and its 15 affiliated organizations, thus prodding Turtle Bay to reform. But the better argument is to withdraw completely. Changing the shade of lipstick on this multinational pig is not going to keep it from acting like a pig.

Indeed, “reforming” the UN is a mantra politicians periodically repeat in order to avoid doing what’s necessary to make significant changes. Remember the old UN Human Rights Commission? It was completely ineffective because it regularly seated some of the world’s worst human rights violators, including China, [Zimbabwe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zimbabwe), [Russia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia), [Saudi Arabia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saudi_Arabia), [Pakistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan), [Algeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algeria), [Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria), [Libya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libya), [Uganda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uganda) and [Vietnam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam). At the same time, as stalwart UN critic Ann Bayefsky wrote in 2002, “Commission members seek to avoid directly criticizing states with human rights problems, frequently by focusing on Israel, a state that, according to analysis of summary records, has for over 30 years occupied 15 percent of commission time and has been the subject of a third of country-specific resolutions.” To add insult to the injury, that same year the Commission passed a resolution giving the Palestinian Arabs the de facto “legitimate right” to use terrorism against Israel.

The serial ignoring of Sudan’s responsibility for the human rights disaster unfolding in Darfur, and the election of Sudan to the Commission finally put an end to the UNHRC, which was replaced in 2006 with the “reformed” UN Human Rights Council. After ten years it’s obvious that the change was cosmetic, as the Council has repeated the same sins of its predecessor. It continues to seat members from nations like current members China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, all notorious for violating human rights. And it continues its chronic demonization of Israel, which it has condemned five times more than any other country. Nor is this vicious bigotry confined to the Council: last March, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) condemned only one nation, Israel, for violating women’s rights.

So much for “reform.”

This gross hypocrisy and serial failure should not be surprising. Like all multinational institutions, the UN exists to serve the interests of its members, no matter how corrupt or brutal they are. Moreover, the UN’s foundational ideal––that it would resolve conflict through diplomacy, promote democracy, and foster human rights––assumed that the whole world was sincerely interested in these Western goods. More important, it also ignored the necessity for lethal violence to back up its lofty principles and punish the violators of them. Indeed, without a means of enforcing its ideals, the UN has ended up serving as an instrument of illiberal and totalitarian states for furthering their interests and supporting their aggression against their enemies and often their own citizens.

The idealists behind the creation of the UN can’t say they weren’t warned. The sorry history of the League of Nations should have been a deterrent. The League failed to stop the interwar aggression of Italy and Japan, and Germany’s serial violations of the Versailles Treaty, all of which culminated in the carnage of World War II.

In fact, the League was only three years old when its weakness and fecklessness were exposed. In 1923 Mussolini used the murder of some Italian diplomats in Greece as a pretext for advancing his designs on Albania by taking over the Greek island of Corfu. His fleet sailed into the harbor and bombarded a fortress, killing 15 refugees. Greece went to the League for justice.

British diplomat Harold Nicolson recognized that this incident was a test of the League’s viability. “Should the League fail, in such flagrant circumstances, to enforce obedience to [its] Covenant, it was realized that the authority of the League would be forever impaired.” Secretary General of the League Sir Eric Drummond agreed with Nicolson on the importance of the League’s enforcement of its rules: “This challenge has brought into question the fundamental principles which lie at the root of the public law of the new world order established by the League.” In the end, the League did fail and exposed its lack of credibility. Its Council of Ambassadors made Greece pay Italy reparations as the price of Italian withdrawal.

If that history is too ancient, the fledgling UN was faced with a similar challenge to which it too failed to rise. A mere three years after the UN’s creation, five Arab nations, including four members of the UN, violated UN Resolution 181 establishing the state of Israel, and attacked the new country created by international law. Rather than using force to punish the violators of the UN Charter, the UN did nothing to help the beleaguered country, and Israel had to defend itself with aid from a few sympathetic nations like Czechoslovakia.

But like the League, the UN didn’t have and still doesn’t have a credible military capacity to enforce its terms and resolutions by punishing violators. Partly that’s because there is neither agreement on the principles that would legitimize the use of force, nor a harmony of national interests that would induce member states to contribute soldiers and resources to such a force unless their own interests or security were endangered. Obviously the Arab states that invaded Israel had quite different principles and interests, which trumped those ideals of the UN Charter they had signed.

The lesson still hasn’t been learned. Fast-forward to 2002. Saddam Hussein had violated with impunity 16 UN Security Council Resolutions regarding his long record of murder, invasion, aggression, and active pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. But after George W. Bush spent months seeking another resolution approving the Iraq War, the UN refused––not because of principle, but because of the various national interests of Security Council members like France and Germany. Thus they squandered an opportunity to show that violators of UNSC resolutions would be punished, creating a deterrent to future violators.

This long history shows that “covenants without swords” will not create security or peace, as proven by the some 50 million murdered since World War II in genocides, ethnic cleansing, invasions, and annexations like Tibet and Northern Cyprus, all of which happened on the UN’s watch, and some of which––like in Rwanda and Bosnia––took place in sight of the Orwellian named “UN Peacekeepers.”

Trying to reform the UN is like redecorating a house whose foundations are not just built on sand, but rotten through and through. Half-measures like selected and temporary cut-offs of funding won’t work. A total withdrawal of U.S. funds until serious reforms take place offer the best hope, but it is a slim one. Getting out of the UN and creating a new confederation of democracies with proven records of adherence to human rights might work, but the checkered history of NATO suggests that is a problematic solution as well, given the primacy of national interests for sovereign states, and the problem of free-riders and the selective adherence to the principles and terms of a treaty.

Perhaps it’s time to recognize that idealistic internationalism has failed, and that we can advance our interests and protect our security by relying on our own political order of electoral audit, free and open debate, and ballot-box accountability, and by making alliances with those nations that serve our interests rather than, like most of the UN member states, actively subvert them. D.C. isn’t the only swamp our new president needs to drain.