The United Nations was born out of the harsh experience of World War II. Shaped in large measure by the vision of President Franklin Roosevelt (with strong bipartisan support), it was first and foremost designed to be an organization, led collectively by the five great powers of that era (the United Kingdom, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China), to preserve the peace. It has had many ups and downs during its 51-year roller-coaster existence.

The UN has grown dramatically in terms of membership (from an initial 50 states to 185) as well as the varied services it renders to the world's people. It has also grown in terms of its budget and workforce, though neither of these measures is anywhere near as large as "conventional wisdom" claims.

In 1950, as the cold war deepened, the "police action" in Korea became the UN's first major test. President Harry Truman was able to use the aegis of the UN to further U.S. foreign policy aims only because the Soviet Union had the ill grace and bad timing to be boycotting the Security Council when the United States made its request to Secretary General Trygve Lie, who responded with alacrity. The Soviets had shot themselves in the foot, not for the first time and certainly not the last.

Over the years, the United Nations took on many other roles in keeping the peace, or at least reducing the carnage, in such diverse venues as the Congo, Cyprus, Cambodia, El Salvador, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Haiti, and elsewhere. It has had its setbacks as well, most recently in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. On balance, however, the world has been a less threatening place because of the UN.

But all too often we tend to think of the United Nations only in terms of the Security Council and its occasionally frustrating peacekeeping efforts, and the General Assembly, with its seemingly endless and sometimes outrageous debates, which has earned from its detractors the label of the "big wind tunnel on the East River."

In reality, the work of the UN's component agencies largely focuses on such substantive issues as refugees (the UN High Commissioner for Refugees), aid for children (the UN Children's Fund), food security (the World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization), health (the World Health Organization), economic development (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the UN Development Program), international business and labor (the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the International Labor Organization), international postal and telecommunications services (the Universal Postal Union and the International Telecommunication Union), education (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), and jurisprudence (the International Court of Justice). These organizations provide valuable services for billions worldwide, including, as surprising as it may seem to many, people living in the United States. Several of these entities have been awarded Nobel Peace Prizes. Their work is absolutely vital for much of the Third World's citizenry. For the First World, they help to establish a reasonably sane and orderly environment in which we can carry out our economic and social relations with other parts of the globe. To try to retreat to our own shores and abandon these UN bodies would entangle us in inevitable and costly chaos.

In the 1970s, following a decade of involvement in Vietnam, the United States began to look inward to some degree, as if to say to the world, "Well, if you didn't appreciate what we were trying to do in Vietnam, we will take our ball and go
home.” We withdrew for a time from UNESCO, and partially from the ILO and other organizations, and we were clearly less than happy with the UN as a whole. But we discovered, once again, that it was probably better to be inside the tent looking out (and trying to fix whatever was broken) than to be outside the tent looking in. And despite persistent cries that the UN is somehow determined to usurp its control of the impressive U.S. military machine. As a bonus, President Bush somehow persuaded the buyers of Middle Eastern petroleum to pay for it all.

The second half of 1991 was also a heady time at UN Plaza in New York. President Bush spoke optimistically of a “New World Order,” which almost everyone assumed would be led by the United States (the sole surviving superpower), using the machinery of the United Nations to do the heavy lifting. Many at UN Plaza began to see an exciting and perhaps expanded mission for themselves and to look for a new secretary general to lead them into the New World Order, to replace a retiring Secretary General Perez de Cuellar, who would be completing the last of his customary two terms at the end of the year.

Much of the “insider” attention soon began to focus on the little known (in the United States) but ambitious, intelligent, well-educated, competent, and strong-willed Egyptian deputy prime minister for foreign affairs, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. This centering of attention was in no small measure due to the tireless and politically skillful efforts of Boutros-Ghali himself.

For reasons that still remain somewhat obscure, President Bush wasn’t paying much attention as Boutros-Ghali toured the world campaigning for the position of secretary general. The U.S. president certainly had other things to worry about, and the UN, after all, had just shown how cooperative it could be concerning U.S. foreign policy interests. By the time the White House got around to focusing on this leadership issue, the game was over. Boutros-Ghali had managed to wrap up the support of France, Russia, and China on the Security Council, and he was the favorite of the majority of the General Assembly. Moreover, it was Africa’s unofficial “turn” to take over the job. How could Washington challenge the selection of Boutros-Ghali—a senior and respected member of an Arab (and African) government, a Christian (with a Jewish wife), with a superb French education, years of distinguished

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international experience, and a long record of support for responsible Third World causes?

Despite all of these factors, President Bush and knowledgeable members of the Washington foreign policy establishment had some lingering doubts. Perhaps the Egyptian was a shade too independent and outspoken to be in charge of the United Nations during the coming construction of a U.S.-led New World Order. Unless the United States were to do the unthinkable and veto the selection, however, it faced a fait accompli. Boutros-Ghali was voted into the usual five-year term of office in December 1991 and took his seat as the sixth secretary general on January 1, 1992. Life at UN Plaza—and in Washington—has not been the same since.

**U.S.-UN Relations Begin to Unravel**

For most of 1992, as Boutros-Ghali settled into his new job and President Bush started campaigning for a second term, relations between the U.S. government and the new secretary general were proper, if not altogether cordial. Conservatives in the U.S. Congress, the Republican party, and the media continued the time-honored tradition of sniping at the United Nations as being extravagantly wasteful of U.S. taxpayers' money, overstuffed with arrogant and overpaid bureaucrats, and somehow intent upon usurping U.S. sovereignty. But there were no public outbursts of irritation by the Bush administration, which continued a low-key support of the UN, if only as an unfortunately necessary piece of extra baggage.

In 1993, following the inauguration of President Clinton, Republican critics were free to vent their full spleen on Boutros-Ghali. The attacks were often led, almost gleefully, by former U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick and by Senator Jesse Helms (now chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee), with the help of a growing number of vocal foot soldiers in the Republican Party leadership, Congress, and all across the U.S. hinterland. After the November 1994 election of conservative Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, the mantras of anti-UN rhetoric became so commonplace that even the pragmatic and moderate Senator Majority Leader Bob Dole was making derisive references to "Bootros-Bootros." Dole continued the sniping in his prime-time presidential nomination acceptance speech at the 1996 Republican National Convention, and Senator Jesse Helms has taken up the attack once more in full battle cry.

Meanwhile, the Clinton administration, while defending the UN as necessary to the maintenance of world peace and social stability, had tacitly joined at least the fringes of the Republican onslaught by calling for the UN to reform its management and spending habits. The secretary general responded with some modest but serious programs to make the UN leaner and more efficient, but this did not resolve the discord between the Clinton and Boutros-Ghali camps.

When he entered office, President Clinton had inherited a nasty little mess in Somalia from President Bush, who had decided to send in the U.S. military after the 1991 collapse of the Siad Barre regime, as part of a UN-led humanitarian “feeding” program to save the Somali people from the twin ravages of civil war and drought. As it turned out (some would say predictably), the Somali political leaders were not all that much concerned with the drought, but they were quite enthusiastic about pursuing the civil war. The Americans, caught in the middle of the conflict, began (not surprisingly) to try to sort out the "good guys," who seemed not much in evidence, from the "bad guys." They settled upon the local Mogadishu clan leader General Mohamed Farah Aideed as perhaps the "baddest man in town" and went after him with helicopters and 400 Rangers. The result: No General Aideed, but a protracted firefight in October 1993 that killed 18 Rangers, followed by endless television coverage of the mobs dragging an American body through the streets and terrorizing a young U.S. pilot. Somewhat belatedly, President Clinton pulled the plug on this humanitarian fiasco and brought the boys home. The drought went away (for now, as Somali droughts will do), the fighting between the clans continues to ebb and flow, in the tradition of Somali politics. (See "Governance and Economic Survival in Postintervention Somalia" by Ken Menkhaus and John Prendergast, CSIS Africa News issue number 172, May 1995.) The resulting damage to U.S.-UN relations has been more lasting.

President Clinton made no direct attempt to place the blame for the disaster on Boutros-Ghali, but neither did he do much to dissuade the U.S. media from holding the UN responsible. Hardly anyone bothered to note that the original initiative to bring the UN to its humanitarian mission in Somalia was led by the Americans (under President Bush), and there was even less interest in pointing out that the attack that ended in disaster was a U.S. initiative carried out under the direct command and control of the Pentagon—completely separate from the United Nations. The hue and cry went up to “never again put U.S. soldiers under UN command.” The UN was left to take the heat, and the irritability quotient between U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Madeleine Albright and the secretary general was ratcheted up another notch.

Next came Bosnia. More heartburn. In 1994 and 1995, many in the Clinton administration (including Ambassador Albright) were appalled at the growing Serbian aggression directed at the Bosnian Muslims, and many wanted to help defend them, or at least remove the international arms embargo so that the Muslims could buy arms to defend themselves. The UN “peacekeeping” and refugee program was on the ground in Bosnia, mostly staffed by French and British military personnel. The United States declined to put troops on the ground, but seemed quite eager to lead NATO air strikes against the Serbs to discourage their ugly "ethnic cleansing" of the Muslim areas in Bosnia. Boutros-Ghali, responding to direct pressure from Paris and London, held back on calls for serious air strikes, which the French and British felt would invite Serbian retaliation against their
The June 1996 Shoot-Out

On June 19, Secretary General Boutros-Ghali was traveling in Europe, and some might speculate that he was on the informal campaign trail for his December reelection to a "normal" second five-year term. He apparently got word that the Clinton administration was about to lower the boom on him. He quickly decided to mount a preemptive strike by formally announcing his intention to run for a second term, saying that he had found a groundswell of support around the world. Not much of a surprise.

The surprise came the next day, June 20, when spokesmen for both the White House and the Department of State took the unprecedented step (for the United States) of announcing publicly that the U.S. government would oppose the reelection of Boutros-Ghali and would use the veto, if necessary, to prevent the Security Council from proposing his name to the General Assembly (which would normally vote him back into office on the advice of the Security Council). No alternate candidate was suggested. This was clearly several steps beyond a powder puff toss or a team javelin throw. The Clinton administration had sent out not one but two gunslingers to make the point.

Most of the world listened in silent shock. This just wasn't done—at least not for the last 46 years, and never by the United States. The rough and tumble Soviet Union had pulled such a stunt in 1990, to block the second term of Norway's Trygve Lie, but that was ancient cold war history. Now, the immediate international reaction ranged from disbelief to perplexity to irritation to anger.

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The ambassador felt "betrayed" by the secretary general's failure to live up to an arrangement for handling a UN report on the Bosnian situation and issued a public statement saying that the secretary general was making a "grave mistake." Boutros-Ghali in turn told the Security Council that he was shocked by the "vulgarity" of the ambassador's statement. (Perhaps something was lost in translation here. The ambassador is not known for using vulgar language in public.) In any case, Ambassador Albright, in turn termed the secretary general's comments "unacceptable." Rough talk, by UN standards.

It seemed that the traditional UN combat of powder puffs at 10 paces had given way to a game of team javelin-tosses. And further rapid changes were in store. By March 1996, the United States administration was about to lower the boom on Boutros-Ghali and would use the veto, if necessary, to prevent the Security Council from proposing his name to the General Assembly (which would normally vote him back into office on the advice of the Security Council). No alternate candidate was suggested. This was clearly several steps beyond a powder puff toss or a team javelin throw. The Clinton administration had sent out not one but two gunslingers to make the point.

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Some Compromise Options

How can the looming gunfight over Boutros-Ghali be averted?

First, there is considerable speculation that the European (and other) leadership in the Security Council may quietly attempt to engineer a face-saving truncated second term for Boutros-Ghali, in the same manner that the United States did for Trygve Lie in 1950 (by letting the General Assembly vote to extend the present term for one or two years, without recommendation from the Security Council, thus avoiding the issue of an appointment for a new five-year term).

Doubtful logic, perhaps, but it worked like a charm for the United States 46 years ago. Another relevant analogy is the maneuvering that followed the 1961 death of Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold in a plane crash in Africa during the Congo crisis. The Soviets tried to force the establishment of a three-man committee to head the Secretariat (the infamous troika proposal), but the United States persuaded the General Assembly to vote for the
interim appointment of Burma’s U Thant, without action by the Security Council. These Washington-orchestrated precedents may rise to haunt whoever wins the U.S. presidential election. Given the present U.S. political climate, however, it seems unlikely that the process of extending Boutros-Ghali’s term would be smooth.

Second, a search is clearly under way for an acceptable alternative candidate, on the dubious assumption that somehow Boutros-Ghali can be persuaded, at the end of the day, to step aside. Often mentioned is Kofi Annan of Ghana, the respected UN under secretary general for peacekeeping operations, who has a following in the U.S. military establishment. This choice would presumably satisfy the informal “claim” the African nations have on the position of secretary general through the end of what would have been Boutros-Ghali’s second term. Other names that have surfaced include Richard Goldstone, also an African (albeit a white South African), currently the prosecutor at the Bosnian war crimes trials; Vaclav Havel, who led Czechoslovakia to freedom from Soviet domination and is said to be close to Ambassador Albright; Irish President Mary Robinson (a friend of Senator Ted Kennedy); and Sadako Ogata of Japan, the head of the UN’s refugee program (a friend of Senator Nancy Kassebaum).

There is obviously no shortage of good candidates. But Boutros-Ghali has shown no inclination to go quietly into oblivion without a fight. He will probably try to sit tight through the U.S. elections in November and deal with whatever new political realities emerge thereafter.

**In Sum**

Does the United States really want to inflict serious injury on the UN system? Probably not. A modest bit of reform would seem to be the better course. Perhaps Mr. Boutros-Ghali could be spared the axe for now. If it becomes clear that a nasty shoot-out would bring an inordinate amount of damage to the system, exceeding any rationally expectable benefits, if we were to succeed in pushing the UN into a self-induced collapse, taking it off the familiar roller-coaster track and onto a downward path to oblivion, we would probably soon find ourselves scurrying around trying to repair the damage and looking back with nostalgia to the good old roller-coaster days, frustrations and all.
Major Components of the United Nations System

General Assembly

Security Council
Peacekeeping operations

Secretariat

Trusteeship Council

International Court of Justice

Economic and Social Council
UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
UN Development Program (UNDP)
UN Environment Program (UNEP)
UN Population Fund (UNFPA)
Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)
World Food Program (WFP)
Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
International Labor Organization (ILO)
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
World Health Organization (WHO)

World Bank Group
  International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)
  International Development Association (IDA)
  International Finance Corporation (IFC)
  Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA)
International Monetary Fund (IMF)
International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)
Universal Postal Union (UPU)
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
International Maritime Organization (IMO)
World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
World Trade Organization (WTO)

For further details, see United Nations Development Program
(Internet address: gopher://gopher.undp.org:70/00/unearth/unsystem/11).