

United Nations, the fatal conceit of our times

Autor(en): **Mingardi, Alberto**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Schweizer Monatshefte : Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur**

Band (Jahr): **82 (2002)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **09.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-166661>

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UNITED NATIONS, THE FATAL CONCEIT OF OUR TIMES

Alberto Mingardi, is a visiting fellow with the Atlas Economic Research Foundation (Fairfax, VA – USA). He is a regular columnist with the Italian national daily «Liberio» (Milan), and he also contributes to a number of Italian journals. He contributed too to the Wall Street Journal Europe (Bruxelles), the National Review (New York), the European Journal (London) and Right Now (London). He is a member of the scientific board of the «Fondazione Liberal», a classical liberal think-tank located in Rome (Italy).

After September 11 Big Government strikes back, but in a totally new way: nobody is still clamouring for bigger government on national size, with the notable exception of a few right-winger radicals. There's now a totally new claim, which has been extensively legitimated by the phantom menace of global terrorism: this is for global government, what Frank Chodorov more appropriately called «one worldism»¹.

Only our children, and perhaps our children's children, will someday figure out what happened on September 11, 2001. Of course, all of us have seen that astonishing image, the Twin Towers collapsing after a terrorist attack – something that was pure fiction just the day before. But this is not a movie, this is real life, and unfortunately we must admit that what happened has definitely changed our lives – and not in a better direction. This is especially true for the classical liberal community, whose aspiration for peace and free trade probably crashed with the suicidal Boeings.

I think that Chodorov's great essay on this topic deserves to be better appreciated. It was written more than fifty years ago, but still sounds topical. «Five years ago the organization of the United Nations was ushered into the world as the guarantor of peace. It failed.» This is Chodorov's first statement, and it describes something that I think is even more evident right now.

Never in the history of the human race have people fought more tremendous, self-destructive wars than in the last not five, but fifty years. It is a historical period in which the United Nations have been actually involved in «guaranting peace». Thomas Sowell has showed that reality is slightly different: «There is some vague notion abroad that the United Nations is a force of peace», he says, adding «if you judge by rhetoric, that may sound plausible. But if you judge by realities, the United Nations is more of a force for war. While there is much talk about the danger that war may occur inadvertently, most wars are deliberate, calculated risk. How does the United Nations affect such calculations? It reduces the risk to an aggressor.²»

Sowell also remarks that the U.N. has made «aggression a game of heads-I-win and tails-we-tie. When the aggression succeeds, the aggressor carries it as far as he wants to. But when he encounters more resistance than he bargained for, the United Nations cuts his losses for him.» There's something quite true in this sentence, if you briefly examine the history of some of the wars that we have seen during the last fifty years – notably, the neverending Israel-Palestinian conflict.

However, as Chodorov remarked fifty years ago, «despite that obvious fact (the fact the U.N. has failed in providing peace for all the world), there are many whose faith in some sort of a superstate as an instrument of peace is unshaken, and who lay the failure of the U.N. to the limitation put upon it by the autonomy of its members. That is to say, they believe in peace through authoritarianism: the more authoritarian, the more peace.»

This is what is happening in Switzerland now: the Swiss people have been asked to join the U.N., and now they're waiting for a referendum. It's easy to forecast that public pressure, including that of national papers and influential opinion-makers, is going to make the Swiss become more and more U.N.-friendly.

Nation-state has failed

This is because of what happened on September 11, 2001: everybody noticed that the nation-state, as a provider of so called «national security», has failed its own mission. The nation state is not an efficient producer of security, and that's that. But unfortunately, the largest majority of the public now believe that somehow a super-

¹ Franck Chodorov, *One Worldism*, in: *analysis*, New York, US, December 1950. Now in: Charles H. Hamilton ed., *Fugitive Essays – Selected Writings of Frank Chodorov*, Liberty-Press, Indianapolis, US, 1980.

² Thomas Sowell, *The U.N. Promotes War – Not Peace*, September 29 1983, now in: Thomas Sowell, *Compassion Versus Guilt and Other Essays*, William Morrow and Company, New York, US, 1987.

state could be more efficient, that what we have to change is not the quality of the defense production, just the size.

This is utopia, and even worse: this is a general misunderstanding, due to the illusion that you can achieve peace using political means, using coercion. Logically, it is by definition false and impossible: if you use coercion, so you use violence, and you can't achieve peace through violence.

Frank Chodorov again put it in the best way: «*The highest moral purpose written into the charter of the UN charter is but a fairy tale. World peace is not to be achieved through this monstrosity. Like the League of Nations, which it succeeded, or the Holy Roman Empire, or any of the political coalitions in the history of the world, the UN is incapable of giving the world peace simply because it rests on the unsound assumption that peace is a function of politics. The fact is that peace and politics are antithetical.*» This is pretty clear if you look at the means the anti-terrorism international coalition is using to fight the enemy, to «restore justice» (according to the propaganda).

As Richard Ebeling noted³, «*bombing campaigns and use of ground troops in a place like Afghanistan is not likely to produce justice or achieve victory*». Especially because Afghanistan has already been destroyed over the last 20 years with 10 years of Soviet occupation and another decade

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³ Richard Ebeling, *Freedom, Security and the Roots of Terrorism against the United States*, <http://www.fff.org>.

⁴ Ralph Raico, Harry S. Truman: Advancing the Revolution, in: John V. Denson ed., *Reassessing the Presidency*, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn AL, US, 2001.

of civil war that has brought the Taliban to power in Kabul. «*Bombings would only reduce the already wretched lives of millions of innocent Afghans*», Ebeling wrote a few days after the Twin Towers collapsed.

Furthermore, it looks quite obvious to me that a military course of action may well end up generating a backlash among Islamic fundamentalists throughout the Middle East and North Africa that would succeed only in producing additional recruits for terrorist acts in the future.

Of course, this time – and this is the big difference between what's happening now and so called «peace-keeping» operations in such places like Serbia – the U.S. is declaring war with its flag and with its army, and not asking for U.N. bluecops for help in taking revenge. But they must wait for a United Nations' placet.

Nothing new under the sun

In a thought-provoking and seminal essay, *Ralph Raico*⁴ reminds us that «*the Truman administration sometimes alluded to the vote of the U.N. Security Council approving military action in Korea as furnishing the necessary authority*». Of course it didn't, but this claim was apparently enough to turn public opinion in a direction more favorable to *Truman* – the first President, according to Raico, whose «*position really was*



that a president may plunge the country into war simply on his own say-so».

The relationship between the U.N. and the U.S. is too strict to be underscored: we must always keep in mind that the United Nations are somehow an obedient servant of the White House. And it must be, for a lot of different reasons. But also, and even worse, the United States has been heavily changed by the existence of the U.N. – this *liaison dangereuse* has made it more an Empire than a Republic, to use the famous expression of *Pat Buchanan*.

Of course the proponents of an even more UN-regulated international scenario would reply that they are actually acting consistently with the classical liberal position. They're trying to achieve justice and peace for everybody. This is just rhetoric. This is not consistent with any classical liberal tradition. The theory of the just war and, so, of a just international order was developed by the Catholic Scholastics (notably the 16th-century Spanish *Vitoria* and *Suarez*), and then by the Dutch Protestant Scholast *Grotius* and then by 18th and 19th century classical liberals.

Closer to us, the late *Murray Rothbard*, a scholar deeply rooted in this tradition, has left us a summary of this theory⁵: «a just war exists when a people tries to ward off the threat of coercive domination by another people, or to overthrow an already-existing domination. A war is unjust when a people try to impose domination on another people, or try to retain an already-existing coercive rule over them».

Rothbard goes ahead in explaining what were the two outstanding ideas concerning the «just war» developed by the classical international lawyers.

First, «above all, don't target civilians. If you must fight, let the rulers and their loyal or hired retainers slug it out, but keep civilians on both sides out of it, as much as possible. The growth of democracy, the identification of citizens with the State, conscription, and the idea of a «nation in arms», all whittled away this excellent tenet of international law».

Second, «preserve the rights of neutral states and nations. In the modern corruption of international law that has prevailed since 1914, neutrality has been treated as somehow deeply immoral». It is true, especially now, and especially in this so called war

United Nations/United States, this liaison dangereuse has made it more an Empire than a Republic.

against terrorism. «Nowadays, if countries A and B get into a fight, it becomes every nation's moral obligation to figure out, quickly, which country is the «bad guy», and then if, say, A is condemned as the bad guy, to rush in and pummel A in defense of the alleged good guy B. Classical international law (...) was virtually the opposite. In a theory which tried to limit war, neutrality was considered not only justifiable but a positive virtue.»

This is not only a point in favour of the Swiss tradition, but the point against the contemporary view of international relationships, successfully implemented by U.N. propaganda into civil society. If we want to limit war, Rothbard suggests, we must try to spread neutrality, to have as many neutral states as possible: this would mean that we'll have extremely localized conflicts, so less dangerous ones.

Instead, as President *Bush* said, now it is a matter of «with us or against us»: a very simple, a very appealing claim, but one whose result will be to lead all of us in a total war instead of trying to limit the impact of conflicts. If you examine the U.N.'s history carefully, you can see that no one U.N. policy fits the standards set by *Vitoria*, *Suarez*, *Grotius* and, more recently, Rothbard of being a «just war». Literally, not one.

Episodes like the «humanitarian interventions» in Kosovo were just imposing a new coercive rule upon the population – in spite of the fact they were presented as a way to help freedom-fighters there. It seems to me that, especially in these days, we need first of all to examine the reasons which brought the Twin Towers attack, and then to go back to our true tradition. Why it is that America is the constant target for terrorist attacks around the world and now at home? It is a question we can't avoid.

Some commentators and public officials say it is because America stands for capitalism and the free society, which are supposedly anathema to Muslim faith and culture. But the commercial society prevails in Switzerland and Denmark, too. And the secular «decadence» of the open society prevails far more in most parts of Europe than in the United States. Yet those and other countries are not made the target of terrorist attacks, except insofar as they offer targets of Americans working or residing there, as was seen with the bombing of the U.S. embassies in

5 Murray Newton Rothbard, *America's Two Just Wars: 1775 and 1861*, in: John V. Denson ed., *The Costs of War*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick NJ, 1999.

Kenya and Tanzania and the USS Cole in the port of Aden in Yemen.

United States – the Global Policeman

The fact is that America has aroused the anger of these terrorists and others like them who are waiting in the wings because of American political and military intervention around the world. Since World War II, the U.S. government has taken it upon itself to serve as the global policeman and social engineer – the United Nations' sparring partner, as we saw. But being a global policeman requires the U.S. government to decide in each country into which it intervenes who the «good guys» are and who the «bad guys» are. The United States has taken sides in the domestic political, ideological, and economic conflicts in these other lands. This inevitably means that some part of the population in each of those countries comes to view the United States as the ally of their domestic opponents and therefore as their enemy.

Every foreign intervention undertaken by the U.S. government, therefore, produces a potential underground army of terrorists who now believe that winning their domestic battles requires defeating the foreign interventionist power. This is the reason why the attack on World Trade Center happened. It doesn't mean there is not a moral duty to figure out the responsibilities behind that attack – but we have to understand the institutional framework that made it possible. It could be avoided if only the U.S. were less U.N.-friendly, and more strict in honouring its claim to embody the classical liberal ideal.

The radical liberals of the 19th century, the so called «Manchester men», were hostile to war and highly skeptical of the arguments for large military establishments and colonial adventures. This was the position of *Richard Cobden* and *John Bright*, and later of *Herbert Spencer*, in Britain; of *Benjamin Constant*, *Jean-Baptiste Say* and *Frédéric Bastiat* in France; of *Vilfredo Pareto*, the great Italian founder of the Lausanne school of economics; of *Eugen Richter* in Germany.

The great ideal of these men was «peace through freedom». All of them were convinced that, as *Randolph Bourne* put it later, war is «the health of the State». This is what's happening now: the States is more

«Political integration (centralization) and economic (market) are two completely different phenomena.»

wealthy than just a few months ago, people are asking for control, and especially for global control.

The bureaucrats' dream of an international Superstate

This dream has finally got a kind of popular legitimization – they are finally engaged in building a «political architecture» for the process of market globalization we have all highly benefited from.

Since, as *Hans-Hermann Hoppe* remarked⁶, «*political integration (centralization) and economic (market) are two completely different phenomena*», I'm afraid that the time of an increasing economic integration seems to have ended – now the trend is towards a political integration, which happens to be the most illiberal thing that governments can pursue.

Let me quote again Frank Chodorov: «*One worldism is not an impossible ideal; but, it is not attainable through the medium of political power. On the contrary, the organization of the world into a single society can be accomplished only if people can rid themselves of the fetish of authoritarianism. (...) It is not necessary to plan or build a world society; it is only necessary to remove the obstructions to its growth, all of which are political and all of which stem from faith in authoritarianism.*»

This is the classical liberal dream of a world without trade barriers, with a perfect integration of different economies and societies. This is what the tradition of *laissez-faire* always pursued as the ideal of a free society. Peace through free trade: because liberalism, as *Ludwig von Mises* pointed out, is the philosophy of peace. This is the opposite of the philosophy carried out, now, by the U.N. and by the government members of Nato. They aim for more control, for bigger government, for more interventionism in the economy and abroad.

Switzerland could remain a Fort Alamo of freedom for the coming decades, if my forecasts are right (I sincerely hope they aren't) and so-called Western civilization is evolving in such a way. But if even Swiss citizens become convinced by the propaganda, and accept joining the U.N. and, sooner or later Nato, I am afraid to say that perhaps the dream of freedom is lost. Maybe not for ever, but for the here and now. ♦

⁶ *Hans Hermann Hoppe, Democracy: The God That Failed, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick NJ, 2001, chap. V.*