

United We Stand, Divided We Fall

(For United Nations Sunday)

By

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The year was 1971. The place was the panhandle of the great state of Texas. The leading character in this little drama was...me! An undergraduate student at Texas Christian University in Ft. Worth, I was speeding down the highway, traveling some 400 miles, to take up my job as the Ministerial Intern and Associate Minister for a congregation in the little town of Borger, Texas.

This was my third such internship, and I was more than just a little excited because I knew that I had in store a wonderful time filled with preaching and teaching, with marrying and burying, with church camps and hay rides, and all manner of surprises and learning experiences. It was both a joy and a privilege to have been selected to fill the position I was going to assume. I knew that I would come away afterward with many wonderful memories. Little did I realize just how “special” some of those memories would be!

First of all, there was my mentor and boss, the Rev. Kenneth Jones. A fine minister, he turned out to be the lone liberal amidst a gaggle of conservative clergy. He was regularly pilloried as some kind of pinko communist sympathizer by the local John Birch-affiliated newspaper. The driver of a blaze orange Dodge sedan that would have made the old T.V. cops Starsky and Hutch turn green with envy, Ken was always easy to find around town. With a love of speed that would have delighted test pilot Chuck Yeager, Ken could make anyone who rode with him have a true religious experience when, while zooming down the highway at over 100 miles per hour, he would recount how he had so far survived three massive heart attacks and was expecting another at any moment!

Then, there was my lodging. While most interns in most other cities were enjoying living with one of their congregation’s families, Borger offered me something different: my own room in a dormitory, and not just any dormitory, either, but one which in former years had housed hundreds of oil refinery workers--for Borger was a town owned lock, stock, and oil barrel by Phillips Petroleum Company. There was no private property anywhere, but there were pumping oil wells in every back yard, schoolyard, churchyard and parking lot. I was told that now the dormitory was totally abandoned and empty except for me and one other intern who happened to be serving another one of the local churches. When Ken mentioned that the dormitory was also located just outside the city limits in a long narrow canyon, everything seemed almost idyllic. I wondered, however, why he suggested that we put off moving me in until night. He said he wanted to show me the city in the daylight. But I soon found out that what he really wanted to do was see the look on my face when we approached the canyon in the dark! So, later that night, in the middle of a jet-black sky, the horizon toward which we were moving suddenly took on an orange glow as if Armageddon and World War III were competing for our attention! The closer we got to the canyon’s rim, the brighter the blaze became. All at once, there it was: an entire canyon on fire with over 300 poison-gas burn-off pipes all blazing like the bonfires of Hell! The noise was thunderous, the heat was palpable, and right there in the middle of it all was a long, white dormitory just waiting for me to move in.

Now I’m not telling you about all of these exotic characteristics of Borger just to inspire you to take your next vacation in the panhandle of Texas! No, indeed. There’s a point to all of this that has to do with this being United Nations Sunday. For you see, on either end of the state highway which ran through the center of Borger, there were, right beside the city limits markers, two huge billboards that clearly expressed the majority local opinion on two of the major topics of the day.

Each sign was double-sided, and each one proclaimed the same message. With the letters “U” and “N” painted blood-red and greatly enlarged in every word in which they appeared, the billboards said, on one side:

**Get us out of the UNgodly CommUNist
World CoUNCil of Churches!**

And on the other side they said,

**Get the U.S. out of the UNgodly CommUNist
United Nations!**

To the people of Borger in those days, even someone like Rush Limbaugh would have seemed just a little bit too left wing! Imagine, if you will, how difficult it was for card-carrying “liberals” like Ken and me to preach any good news at all to that congregation!

Today, of course, my situation is totally reversed. Before me now there sit people who write letters to the editor which say things such as this:

It’s not such a long time since Harry Truman and world leaders met in San Francisco and established the United Nations....

Let’s not be weary of well-doing. Don’t be ashamed to speak out and support efforts for peace, brotherhood, health, education and environmental protection. Let us speak up for all of our brothers and sisters... [Fox]

Today, I stand before a congregation which affirms as the sixth of its U.U. Principles “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” [Singing, ix] For that reason, I am, for the most part, merely “preaching to the choir” of the already converted when I come before you now to say something positive about the United Nations.

It is for that reason, also, that I need not offer any elaborate defense or justification for the United Nations here in this place. Instead, I shall recall to our minds some of the basic facts and ideals which are associated with this remarkable institution.

As *you* probably remember, but as your *children* or *grandchildren* may not know, the name, “United Nations,” was coined by U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941 to describe the countries fighting against the Axis powers. [UN/Columbia, 2830; and for what follows] It was used officially for the first time on January 1, 1942, when 26 states joined in a “Declaration,” pledging themselves to continue their joint war effort and not to make peace separately.

The need for some international organization to replace the faltering League of Nations was then first stated officially on October 30, 1943, in the Moscow Declaration issued by China, Great Britain, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Further steps were taken toward creating such a new organization at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference in 1944 and at the Yalta Conference early in 1945. All the states that had ultimately adhered to the 1942 Declaration and that had declared war on Germany or Japan by March 1, 1945 were then called to the founding conference in San Francisco held from April through June of 1945. A governing treaty or Charter was drafted and then signed. When ratification of the Charter was completed on October 24th, that date became the official “United Nations Day.”

Hear again these words from the Preamble to the U.N. Charter, and feel once more their power, their urgency, and their hope:

We the peoples of the United Nations determined 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 of 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 for these ends

To practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and

To unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and

To insure by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed forces shall not be used, save in the common interest, and

To employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.

Accordingly, our respective governments, through representatives...do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations. [Seldes, 469; Preamble, 300]

The U.N. Charter provided for six principal subdivisions of the organization. They were: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice and the Secretariat.

Numerous other secondary agencies and related bodies were established as well. [UN/Columbia, 2830]

Then, on January 10, 1946 the U.N. General Assembly met for the first time in London; and one week later the Security Council held its first meeting. A decision was soon reached to locate the U.N.'s headquarters in the eastern United States, at which point John D. Rockefeller donated \$8.5 million toward the purchase of land in New York City. By 1952, the major buildings of the U.N. had been completed. [*Ibid.*]

At its founding, the U.N. had 51 member nations. [UN/American, 1277] They were primarily the Allies of World War II consisting mainly of European countries, British Commonwealth countries, and the nations of the Americas. [UN/Columbia, 2831] Today, U.N. membership has expanded to include 192 nations, the majority of which are underdeveloped African, Asian, and Arab countries of the Third World. [Columbia Encyclopedia: http://www.referencecenter.com/ref/reference/UN/United_Nations?invocationType=ar1clk&flv=1 as of October 18, 2010.]

In the beginning, the U.N. had five official languages: Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Today, it has at least six: one of the most important recent additions being Arabic. [UN/Columbia, 2831; Bernstein, 929]

With offices scattered throughout the world, the United Nations currently maintains a staff of over 40,000 employees ["UN At a Glance"; down from over 53,000 a few years ago: UN/World, 843], and has an operating budget of \$4.1 billion. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations, 10/18/10.] In recent years the overdue payment of member dues by several countries—including the United States—has created cash-flow problems for the U.N. It has had to borrow from its peacekeeping budget just to meet its day-to-day operational needs. Such borrowing has often left the U.N. with insufficient funds to repay those countries which have deployed troops for U.N. peacekeeping initiatives and that in turn has tended to dull those countries' incentive to participate in such future military activities. [*Ibid.*]

Historians point out that over the years the United Nations "has not evolved as was first envisaged" by those who created its charter [UN/Columbia, 2831] That is not so much a criticism as an observation of fact. The kind of close cooperation expected among its initial members suffered under the impact of the Cold War, through the repeated use of the veto power by the Big Five members in the Security Council and because of the differing priorities held by the so-called "have" and "have not" member countries. Moreover the existence and activities of such entities as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization of American

States (OAS), the S.E. Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the Warsaw Treaty Organization “have to an extent bypassed the U.N. System.” [*Ibid.*] One of the results of this has been that some conflicts (including the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973, the India-Pakistan War of 1971, and the Viet Nam War) have been less influenced by the peacekeeping efforts of the United Nations than perhaps should have been the case. [*Ibid.*, 2832]

On another front, partly as a result of the often veto-deadlocked Security Council, the General Assembly and the role of the Secretary General have both taken on more and different powers—especially politically—than were originally anticipated. [*Ibid.*, 2831-2] Issues arising out of perceived U.N. impingements upon member nations’ national sovereignty particularly in the area of the command and control of military troops in multi-national armies, and disputes over just when and where the U.N. is justified in intervening in apparently domestic situations within various countries—all these and other such problems have made several nations—including the U.S.—withhold payment of their U.N. Dues and sometimes even boycott various U.N. proceedings.

So, it hasn’t always been smooth sailing for the United Nations.

On the other hand, there have been several notable success stories, at least six of which have been recognized by the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize: In 1954 the U.N.’s Office of High Commissioner for Refugees received the prize for its work in aiding millions of displaced persons after the Second World War. [UN/Columbia, 2832] In 1961 Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold was awarded the prize, posthumously, for his work during the crisis in the Congo. [Magnusson, 658] In 1965 the United Nation’s Children’s Fund, known as UNICEF, received the prize for its efforts at improving the lives of children in devastated areas and in developing countries. [UN/Columbia, 2832] In 1981, the prize went to UNESCO, the United Nation’s Scientific and Cultural Organization which specializes in promoting collaboration among countries in education, the natural and social sciences, communications, and culture. [UN/American, 1277f.] In 1988, it was the U.N. peace-keeping forces who were awarded the prize, and in 2001 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in two equal portions, to the United Nations and to its then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, for their work for a better organized and more peaceful world. [In Focus]

(Along with these awards, I think there could also be mentioned the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize which was presented to Amnesty International. Although that organization is not directly connected to the United Nations, it is certainly inspired by and works in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948. If you have never read this magnificent document, you should make the effort to do so, for it is one of the grandest visions of human worth and dignity ever to be put on paper.)

Paul Henri Spaak (1899-1972) was the President of the first General Assembly of the United Nations in 1946. When that history-making, groundbreaking meeting was drawing to its close, he told the many representatives seated before him: “Our agenda is now exhausted. The Secretary General is exhausted. All of you are exhausted. I find it comforting that, beginning with our very first day, we find ourselves in such complete unanimity!” [Fadiman, 517]

Never since that moment has there been anything even approaching the kind of total agreement those individuals felt in their tired bones and aching joints. Often there has been strife and dissension. But just as frequently there has been tedium.

The United States’ delegate to the United Nations from 1947 to 1953 was Warren Robinson Austin (1877-1962). When someone asked him whether or not he ever became tired during the interminable debates at the U.N., he replied: “Yes, I do.” Then he added: “But it is better for aged diplomats to be bored than for young [soldiers] to die.”[Fadiman, 29; sexism removed]

That, I think, is what we ought to remember each year as we pause to celebrate United Nations Sunday.

What was true for our colonial ancestors during the days of the American Revolution remains just as true for us in our modern age of multi-national corporations, global teleconferencing, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and international terrorism: “United, we stand! Divided, we fall!”

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