

Fordham International Law Journal

Volume 20, Issue 5

1996

Article 1

The United Nations, the United States, and U.S. Foreign Policy

William B. Richardson*

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Abstract

I am doing three things in my mission as Ambassador to the United Nations. First, and here is where I need your help, the United States needs to pay its bills to the United Nations. We owe US\$ 1 billion, give a few or so million. Second, together we have to do something positive in the area of U.N. reform - and that is happening. There is no reason why the United Nations cannot run more efficiently with fewer people - more consolidated with respect to general functions. There is no reason why we cannot say that we should ask those tough questions on peacekeeping missions, like: "How much is it going to cost? What is the mandate? What is the agenda? When are we going to get out?"

ADDRESS

THE UNITED NATIONS, THE UNITED STATES, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY*

*Ambassador William B. Richardson***

I am doing three things in my mission as Ambassador to the United Nations. First, and here is where I need your help, the United States needs to pay its bills to the United Nations. We owe US\$1 billion, give a few or so million. Second, together we have to do something positive in the area of U.N. reform—and that is happening. There is no reason why the United Nations cannot run more efficiently with fewer people—more consolidated with respect to general functions. There is no reason why we cannot say that we should ask those tough questions on peacekeeping missions, like: “How much is it going to cost? What is the mandate? What is the agenda? When are we going to get out?”

There is no reason why the United States should continue to be assessed at thirty-one percent for peacekeeping and twenty-five percent for the U.N. regular budget. The world has changed. There is a different economy. We need a more equitably distributed assessment rate. That does not mean the United States should shirk its responsibility. Our proposal would reduce our peacekeeping assessment to twenty-five percent and our U.N. regular budget assessment to twenty percent. So the second big agenda item is reform.

We have a Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who is a reformer, who is moving in the right direction. One of the big jobs that I have is to negotiate a package with the Congress that deals with the arrears issue—a package that perhaps over three years pays them off; continues our contributions to the United Nations at a reduced assessment rate; and introduces strong management reform. A more efficient United Nations can deliver better services for those continents, like Africa, that are,

* This Address was presented at Fordham University School of Law on April 10, 1997.

** U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

right now, under strife, and other refugee, human rights, democratization, and peacekeeping functions that the United Nations does so well. And reform is not just a U.S. issue. The Europeans are for it. The Argentines are for it. The Latin Americans are for it. It is something that we need to approach as a U.N. problem, not just a U.S. issue.

The third agenda item that I have since coming into the job is to convince the American people that the United Nations is important to U.S. interests. The U.N. has a public image problem in the United States. When I was a New Mexico Congressman, being an internationalist and voting as an internationalist, I used to get questions: "Isn't the United Nations an entity of world government? What about those black helicopters that come in? What about that the United Nations that always votes against us? Why is it that Africa and Asia and many other nations have very bad voting records with U.S. interests at the United Nations?"

That is a fallacious argument. The Ambassador from Argentina sent me a note that showed how Argentina is in the 1990s supporting U.S. issues at the United Nations, which is the case with many other countries in the Third World that basically on a composite scale support our basic interests.

The agenda that I am trying to pursue is that the United Nations is important to U.S. interests; we should pay our bills and get on with it. The United Nations is important because, simply, it is an institution whereby we can build coalitions and foreign policy support among many nations for our goals. Therefore, we can protect our interests, costing less for U.S. taxpayers, and advance our foreign policy agenda in support of democratization, human rights, peacekeeping, sustainable development, and the rights of women around the world, and ensure that we have an arena where we can deal with the big problems affecting the world.

What are the big problems in the next ten years for the United States and challenges for the rest of the world? Nuclear proliferation; international terrorism; the spread of narcotics; environmental degradation; problems and tensions relating from economic competition; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism; and regional conflicts from tribal ethnic hatred. The answer is that the United Nations dealing with these issues multilaterally,

and in a multinational, concerted fashion serves our interests, and we can deal with those problems better. That is the message that I am spreading across our country.

It was through the United Nations that the United States was able to achieve collective action against Iraq when it was invading Kuwait, and broad international support was initiated for some U.S. broad foreign policy goals in that region, along with North Korea, particularly the freezing of North Korea's nuclear development. Because of the threat of U.N. sanction, North Korea reached an agreement with the United States to freeze its nuclear development.

If you look at the major peacekeeping initiatives and problems around the world, it is the United Nations that has either peacekeepers or has a broad array of peacemaking functions with special envoys. It is the United Nations that is active today giving a blessing to a series of countries dealing with a crisis in Albania, in Macedonia, in Bosnia, in Haiti, in Guatemala—having resolved that problem basically with a historic peace agreement between the rebels and the Government that would bring stability to that region—going as far as Burundi and Rwanda, where we are trying to do the right thing to alleviate the human suffering there.

If you come to New York and go to the United Nations, you will see men and women fighting for rights of women, fifty percent of the population, including a number of issues affecting abuse (both child abuse and sexual abuse), worker rights among women, genital mutilation, and child prostitution. Here is an entity, the United Nations, that is trying to deal with problems, and it is in our interest to be part of it and to back it and to be supportive.

QUESTION: What is the future of the relations between Turkey and Greece?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: Right now, through the United Nations, which has a special envoy, and through an initiative that we hope to undertake in the United States—perhaps a special envoy there—it is our view that we need to address the tensions arising from the Aegean dispute, which is basically a territorial dispute between Greece and Turkey; the Cyprus question, which has bedeviled many administrations and that we have not resolved; the issues relating to the importance of the military

relationship that the United States has with both Greece and Turkey and how we deal with the competing interests between the two; and lastly, ways in which the United States deals with one of its long-time allies, Turkey, that has basically right now a fundamentalist administration.

This is a very sensitive strategic area. But the cornerstone of the policy in Turkey is support for a U.N. operation that we have in Cyprus that has kept things relatively cool in terms of the border. It is also launching a peace initiative this year, either through continued support for U.N. mediation or a U.S. special envoy, to try to deal with some of the issues there.

QUESTION: What specific reforms does the Ambassador have in mind for the United Nations and how can they be implemented by the Secretary General?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: The first reform is that the United Nations live under a budget cap, which it normally has not, and which for the last biennium it has—US\$2.6 billion. That budget cap should gradually decrease over the years. That is happening and is projected for the next biennium. That is number one.

Number two is staff cuts. There are too many people at the United Nations; there are 10,000 in the Secretariat. The Secretary General has pressed for 1000 staff cuts in the offices around the Secretariat. We think that is good. We want to make them permanent staff cuts. The Secretary General is doing that. We have pushed for that in the last couple of years. That is an important initiative. Do we need that many people?

Number three is to cut Inspector General functions within the United Nations. If there is waste, fraud, and abuse, we need to protect whistle blowers. We should find ways to make functions within the U.N. bureaucracy more effective. Recently, the Inspector General's Office ("OIOS") found some real problems in the Rwanda Tribunal which dealt with justice—or lack of justice—in war crimes there. Officials were dismissed. That is the work that we want it to do.

Number four is assessments. This is a big one for us. Pay less, in terms of what we believe the United Nations does in terms of its functions and big power relationships. We are proposing a reduction from thirty-one percent to twenty-five percent in peacekeeping for the United States and twenty-five per-

cent to twenty percent in U.N. dues. We are also saying that other countries, the “tigers”—Singapore, South Korea, and China (China pays 0.7 percent)—should pay three percent. They do not agree. But that is an issue that involves significant reform with nations paying, in our judgment, a more equitable rate.

Number five is consolidation. Kofi Annan should be commended for consolidating three different development agencies into one. There is no reason why that cannot happen more.

Number six, a significant one for us and some of the Western nations, is peacekeeping. We made some mistakes in the past, such as Somalia. We learned from those mistakes, that when you go into a peacekeeping mission you need to ask the tough questions, like: “When are we going to get out? What is the purpose? How much is it going to cost? What is command and control?” A lot of Americans do not like the idea of U.S. troops being under foreign control. Be specific about how we resolve that. “What is the mandate of the peacekeeping mission? The rules of engagement?”

Every time there is a peacekeeping mission—and we deal with those on a daily basis at the Security Council—those tough questions are asked. A more modernized, efficient peacekeeping function involving several countries is needed with command and control structures within the United Nations.

That is the kind of specific reforms we are looking for, and those reforms are happening.

QUESTION: What can the United States do to the United Nations to promote human rights in China, and, in the case of Bosnia, to bring those who are guilty to justice?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: Number one, we can strengthen the United Nations as an entity of human rights. A new position has opened up, the head of the Human Rights Commission, based in Geneva. It is a high level position. The director who formerly was there from Ecuador left. We need a strong replacement.

Number two, we cannot influence the votes of many countries at the United Nations on human rights issues, but we can work it hard. Now, I was personally in Geneva last week pushing for a strong human rights resolution on China. Yes, China is important to us strategically and commercially, but we had set

up some benchmarks that said there is going to have to be some significant improvements in human rights if we, the United States, are not going to raise that as the most important agenda item at this U.N. Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva.

We have done that. We are supporting a strong resolution sponsored by Denmark. But our first task is to make sure that a Chinese effort for what is called the “no action” motion—so that a vote does not take place—is defeated. That is going to be a very, very narrow vote, and we are working very hard on that.

We are also pushing for some new initiatives on Burma. If you want to get educated about a human rights violator, learn about Burma. There is a very courageous woman by the name of Aung San Suu Kyi. I hope you learn about her. Nelson Mandela, a heroic figure, got all the attention, but this woman is equally as strong and determined and deserving of support from the international community.

You are right on the issue of Bosnia. We need to find ways to implement and make that War Tribunals work. We are not just talking about what you mentioned, but also making sure that after you convict somebody that justice is taken care of, that the people who run this institution are properly trained. We are working on that. Do not lose hope on that. Be patient.

QUESTION: Should the United States pay its dues before U.N. reform?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: We should pay our bills, there is no question about it, but it should not be that we pay our bills and then reform. I think we have to do both together because I think the institution is served well.

For those who do not think there is reform at the United Nations, that is not the case. It is a good institution. It can contribute to world peace. But if it ran better we could have responded more efficiently and effectively to the Great Lakes crisis in Africa and many other problems that have existed. The question is going to be: Can the U.S. Congress agree to such a package? I am hopeful they can.

QUESTION: There has been a lot talk about what the Secretary General can do to reform the United Nations. The Secretary General, however, only controls fifty percent of the budget. What can be done to reform the other fifty percent?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: Well, first of all, the

United Nations is controlled by the 185 member states. We are talking about a lot of unaffiliated agencies within the United Nations and international organizations that have to be part of this effort. The question is how do you deal with them too?

The Secretary General is a big player. Maybe he only controls the Secretariat, but there is the power of the pulpit. And then, the United States is a big player, as are many nations that are contributors on a voluntary basis—in some branches of the United Nations you contribute on a voluntary basis to these institutions.

We think that the outlook is not as glum as you may have painted. I think there is a European Union initiative on reform that differs a little bit from ours. Quite frankly, some of the problems in some of the extensive reforms that we wanted have come from the G-77, many Third World countries that see the United Nations as their voice. They do not want it to change. It has been difficult getting their total support. Because you are being frank, I am being frank.

But we think if we can show that the funds from these reforms—and this is something that the United States is pushing and that the Secretary General is pushing—were to shift to development, to people programs, and were to work efficiently through a good consolidated system, they would approve these reforms. We are trying to ensure that the main U.N. purpose in the areas of, not just peace and security, but human rights and development are achieved.

Yes. There have been problems. Yes. We share in those problems. But, I believe right now all of us, as Americans, must view the United Nations as a good tool in our foreign policy, and dumping on it, being negative, and not paying our arrears cost us. U.S. influence is lessened there. So, there is a direct loss of benefits for our country.

The head of UNDP, the development program, is an American; the world food program, an American; the Under Secretary of Management, an American; and many other agencies are headed by Americans. Do not think that there have not been threats that these positions in the future, because we do not pay our dues, will not go to Americans.

QUESTION: Why did the United States, the remaining su-

perpower, vote alone in not condemning Israel in the recent Israeli housing issue?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: First of all, we were not alone. It was the United States and Israel. The Marshall Islands abstained also. But we took a whipping, 138–2. I am not minimizing what you said.

Here is our position: we believe that issues related to the Middle East peace process should not be handled at the United Nations, where Israel is grossly out-numbered, and the issues that deal with Har Homa, final status issues, and Jerusalem, should be dealt with by the parties themselves. We, the United States, are the honest broker. As you said we are the superpower. We are trying to bring both sides together. There are problems out there. There is loss of trust. We think the Har Homa decision was a mistake, it should not have happened.

QUESTIONER: If the Har Homa decision was a mistake, why did the United States refrain from condemning it?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: Because in our view this was an inflammatory resolution—if you read the language of that resolution, it said Har Homa was illegal. Our position is this is a dispute that the parties themselves need to resolve.

There is a political aspect, too. That is, if you look at the Oslo Accords, the Camp David Accords, the negotiations call for some very, very sensitive stages among the parties themselves. When you go to the United Nations, there are an overwhelming number of votes which are used to bash Israel—and I do not mind saying this—in a fashion that does not build trust between the parties. We should not be dealing with this at the United Nations. There are some areas the United Nations should not be dealing with— for example, NATO enlargement, and arms control issues. These are bilateral issues among major powers that are best dealt with through regional organizations, and through other accords.

It does not mean the United Nations is the answer to every issue, but it is important. We do think that the best thing for these talks right now, which are at a very sensitive and difficult stage, is not to inflame things. They are sensitive issues, I know that, but we should get the parties themselves to resolve them.

QUESTION: U.N. activity is aided by cooperation with the commercial sector. The United Nations has had a difficult his-

tory dealing with multinational corporations and, on occasion, the World Bank. What are your thoughts on improved interactions with these institutions?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: The United Nations can run more businesslike. It can have more contact with corporations, the IMF, and World Bank. The Japanese Government has a very good idea. In development issues, issues that deal and relate to economic growth among countries—instead of having a World Bank, an Inter-American Development Bank, Asian Bank, bilateral aid programs, Export/Import Bank, and Overseas Private Investment Corporation—we should have an international integrated approach to development issues based on private sector concepts. You know as well as I do that training people and giving loans are going to do a lot more than direct handouts.

QUESTION: Was there a defining moment when you realized that you were good at negotiating?

AMBASSADOR RICHARDSON: You know, when it happened, I was in Baghdad, Iraq, and my hands were sweating because Saddam Hussein had walked in with about fourteen of his revolutionary guards with pistols. We sat down. I was trying to get two U.S. pilots out. I had never been to Iraq. I had no cards in my pocket. I was trying to persuade him to let these two individuals go that were wrongfully imprisoned. They had crossed the border illegally, but they did not deserve seven year sentences. I was trying to bring them back as a humanitarian gesture.

I made a terrible mistake when I sat down to negotiate, to try to persuade him. The very first thing I did was I crossed my feet and showed him the balls of my sole. To an Arab that is the ultimate insult. Saddam Hussein walked out of the meeting. I had an interpreter with me, an Iraqi, and I said, "Am I toast? Is this meeting over?" He said, "No, he'll be back, but you've insulted him." I had to decide whether to apologize when he comes back and start groveling or just continue the discussion and move on. Even though I made that cultural mistake, I had in my briefing book and in discussions with Arab scholars the warning, "Saddam is going to try to intimidate you. You have to be strong."

I gambled. When he returned, instead of groveling and say-

ing, "Mr. President, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have crossed my legs," I went on. During the next twenty seconds, when I did not apologize, I could see his face turning from anger into a little bit of respect.

At the end of the meeting what simply happened is two people connected. I appealed on humanitarian grounds, we did not reach an agreement on policy issues, and I got these two Americans out. Then I knew that maybe, if you find a way to show respect, connect with people, appreciate their culture, listen, take abuse—as I did from Saddam for two hours on policy—that somehow, maybe, this negotiating business was something that I would like to do. That led to other missions.

But you ask what the defining moment was. I think that is: when I made a mistake and reacted, I gambled, and the gamble seems to have paid off.