

Bolton Appointment Provides New Opportunities

By John Gershman | August 5, 2005

President Bush's recess appointment of John Bolton as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations—the first time ever for the post—represents a sad irony in this year, the 60th anniversary of the signing of the San Francisco charter on June, 26 1945 and the ratification of the charter by the 5 permanent members of the Security Council and the majority of the signatories to the San Francisco Charter, on October 24, 1945.

The nomination places a Bush administration loyalist and assertive nationalist in a position that demands a skilled diplomat. Since the 1970s Bolton has aggressively and stridently attacked multilateral institutions and international treaties other than those the United States could control. While serving in the State Department he actively worked to undermine the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Biological Weapons Convention and other international arms control and nonproliferation efforts. He worked to suppress dissenting intelligence on Iraq to support the Bush administration's plan to invade Iraq, and led the Bush administration's opposition to the International Criminal Court.

Bolton's approach to the United Nations was outlined in a chapter to a Cato Institute book on the United Nations, *Delusions of Grandeur: The United Nations and Global Intervention* (1997). In the chapter he outlined what could be part of his policy agenda *circa* 2005: focus on management and financial reforms, oppose an expansion of the UN Security Council (beyond Japan), reorient the UN to humanitarian relief and away from nation-building. Some of this is clearly a UN-defunding agenda posing as reform, but other parts of the agenda he outlines here (and other issues such as restructuring the UN Human Rights Commission) *can* be positive reforms if the new institutions are given the financial and political resources necessary for them to be effective.

As a recent *New York Times* article noted, some of this reform agenda is supported by other countries and Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Other parts are more controversial (i.e., the membership of the Security Council). In any event, constructive reforms (those which actually aim at enhancing and not dismembering the UN system) will require sustained diplomatic energy to make work. There is little evidence in Bolton's past that he holds such skills, but one always holds open the possibility. More significant will be Bolton's

efforts to use the UN to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives, much the way the Bush administration attempted to use it as a multilateral fig-leaf on its unilateral decision to invade Iraq. As he noted in the Cato book:

The UN should be used when and where we choose to use it to advance American national interests, not to validate academic theories and abstract models. But the UN is only a tool, not a theology. It is one of several options we have, and it is certainly not invariably the most important one.

As an assertive nationalist in the mold of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Bolton views international law as an undesirable constraint on the exercise of U.S. power. Bolton noted,

It is a big mistake for us to grant any validity to international law even when it may seem in our short-term interest to do so—because, over the long term, the goal of those who think that international law really means anything are those who want to constrict the United States.

Bolton led the fight to unsign the United States from the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court (ICC), the occasion of which he claims as the greatest day of his life. But the creation of the ICC represents in many ways the logical evolution of the framework of international law. By rejecting the ICC, international law, and the vision of collective security represented by the UN, John Bolton offers a rejection of an important, albeit embattled tradition of U.S. foreign policy.

New Opportunities

But Bolton's appointment offers new opportunities. Let me mention only four.

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First, his nomination exposed crucial fault-lines in the Republican Party, both within his administration—Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was a less than enthusiastic supporter of Bolton’s—and a number of Republican senators were opposed to the nomination, even those that eventually voted for him. These fault-lines suggest pressure points within the Bush administration that can and should be exploited as we endeavor to strengthen constituencies for constructive reform of the United Nations, and work to mitigate the most destructive aspects of Bush administration foreign policy, while pushing for more robust forms of genuine international cooperation.

A key question will be whether Rice will actually be his boss or if Bolton will serve as an agent of the less realist and more aggressively unilateralist current in the Bush administration as he did during Colin Powell’s tenure as secretary of state.

Second, Bolton’s performance will be examined as if under a microscope and we should be unyielding and aggressive in monitoring his role and holding him accountable. This will provide us with unending opportunities for education in the importance of international law and the UN.

Third, his nomination battle and subsequent appointment have made the United Nations, if not exactly dinner table discussion material, at least a more familiar institution. Yet, it’s still an institution about which many people are ignorant (for example, many people consistently overestimate the size of the UN’s budget), and we should use the occasion of the anniversary, the Millennium Summit, and Bolton’s nomination, to do just that. Polls repeatedly find that Americans across the spectrum support strengthening the UN. A recent poll by Public Agenda and Foreign Affairs (*The Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index*) found that

two-thirds of respondents agreed that “showing more respect for the views and needs of other countries would enhance our security” either somewhat (38%) or a great deal (49%). This is the common-sense basis upon which to forge an approach to the UN and collective security that foregrounds international cooperation.

Fourth, the celebrations around the 60th anniversary of the United Nations allow us to remind people that the creation of the United Nations is integral, not alien, to U.S. political tradition and culture. It recalls a time when the United States chose to use its hegemonic power for a vision of collective benefit. It’s time to shift the debate over the UN and international law from one about whether foreigners or Americans determine U.S. national interests and U.S. foreign policy, to a debate about which *American* tradition of foreign policy we will use to define and pursue our national interests.

The United Nations was not founded by saintly altruists, but by hard-headed assessments that the interdependence of the modern world demanded collective security. The institutions that emerged were not, and are not, without fault. But that vision of collective security, of international cooperation to address common challenges, of a world which constrains the exercise of power by values embodied in international law, these are visions that are part of an American tradition. They are visions animated by the ethic of a good neighbor, not a bully. They demand to be defended and promoted with or without Mr. Bolton. Those who fought for them deserve no less.

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