United Nations: Time for a New “Inquiry”?  

MICHAEL J. GLENNON*

In the best of times it is no easy task for American foreign policy-makers to look into the world of the future, anticipate its wants and needs, and think through a robust and coherent vision of America’s role in it. Beset by an unending stream of “front-burner” crises, most are forced by the press of daily events to push long-range planning to the back-burner. The system encourages deferral just as it discourages re-thinking. Noisy constituencies react to today’s headlines and expect policy-makers to do the same. Most of those constituencies push to maintain the status quo. Little wonder, then, that the substance of the “new world order” – and its meaning for the United States – remains as vague and undefined as when the first President Bush first uttered those words thirteen years ago.

It’s too bad, because as the UN General Assembly convened on September 16, the rest of the world may have been getting ready to move – with or without the United States. In an extraordinary press conference on July 30, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned that “we are living through a crisis of the international system.” We must, he said, “ask ourselves whether the institutions and methods we are accustomed to are really adequate to deal with all the stresses of the last couple of years.” Perhaps “they are in need of radical reform.” Annan’s remarks reflected a growing sense among Security Council members that things are amiss. The Financial Times had earlier reported a growing “behind-the-scenes debate on the UN’s future.” “An increasing number of diplomats are asking,” it said on July 10, “whether it is not time for the UN to stop fooling itself, and admit the old way of doing things must be overhauled.” These concerns extend beyond the structure of the United Nations alone: the whole network of alliances, rules and institutions that dominated life in the 20th century seems suddenly outdated.

This is not the first time that the United States has risked being caught short in the rush of history. Indeed, today’s “old world order” was itself once new, having emerged from the bloodiest conflict in history, which confronted another President who had been elected without knowledge or experience in foreign affairs. That global system was shaped by the United States only when it became clear that other powers were rushing to take the lead. The American response was the gov-

* Professor of International Law at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, and the author, most recently, of Limits of Law, Prerogatives of Power: Interventionism after Kosovo.

ernment’s first real Manhattan Project – directed not at developing an atomic bomb but at devising a new world order. The object and methods of that initiative are instructive.

The year was 1917. The President was Woodrow Wilson. Elected President from a governorship, Wilson was by inclination and training ill prepared to lead the United States in its first European war – or in the making of the peace, which required detailed knowledge of a world far off and little known to Americans. Yet if this was truly to be a “war to end all wars,” as Wilson had promised the American people, he would need comprehensive plans to turn his rhetoric into reality. And he would need them quickly: Felix Frankfurter, then in Paris as a special assistant to the Secretary of War, warned Secretary of State Robert Lansing that “France was at work, through committees, in preparation” for the diplomatic turmoil that all knew would follow the war. “We should equip ourselves with like knowledge,” he advised, or the French would dominate the process. Full-time officials in the State and War departments, however, were consumed with the war; a young Allen Dulles, attached to the American Legation in Berne, Switzerland, complained that he and his colleagues had little time to study the problems that they knew would have to be addressed when the war ended. “[W]e are barely able to keep up with political developments in Germany . . .,” Dulles wrote Lansing. Some sort of “outreach” program was clearly called for – long before the concept became accepted.

While the war still raged, Wilson acted. In September, 1917, only four months after the United States had entered the war, Wilson established what would become known as the “Inquiry.” The Inquiry was a group of advisers assembled to prepare American diplomats for what all knew would be a critical post-war peace conference.¹ In so doing it would be necessary to address the myriad issues, large and small, from arms control to economics to the implications of self-determination, which when resolved would yield a new global system.

The Inquiry was assembled under the direction of Wilson’s trusted adviser, Col. Edward M. House. The group consisted of about 150 academicians and a smaller paid staff. Its participants and advisers were both Democrats and Republicans, though all were selected with an eye to their general agreement with the President’s program and ideas. Some were, or would later become, household names in American arts and letters, including Walter Lippmann, Samuel Eliot Morison, Edward