On October 21, 1944, campaigning for his fourth term as President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to the Foreign Policy Association dinner in New York and spoke by radio to the nation. His talk was about creating the United Nations. The war was in its last phase but terrible fighting in Europe and the Far East continued. The President said:

“When the first World War ended, I believed – and I believe now – that enduring peace in the world does not have a chance unless this nation – our America – is willing to cooperate in winning it and maintaining it… We have to back our American words with American deeds…”

FDR confronted the isolationist leadership of the Republican Party directly, and by name. At the same time, he acknowledged Republicans like Henry Stimson (who attended the FPA dinner with him) who understood the bipartisan necessity in planning the United Nations organization. “Peace, like war,” the President said, “can succeed only where there is a will to enforce it, and where there is available power to enforce it…”

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President Roosevelt acknowledged that the task ahead would be as difficult and complex as any that had faced our nation, nor did he pretend to know how all the unforeseeable difficulties would be met but “I have unlimited faith that we can do it”. “We are not looking for a utopia,” he said. “The task of building the United Nations will need the judgment of a seasoned and a mature people and this the American people have become.” In concluding, President Roosevelt said: “We shall not again be thwarted in our will to live as a mature nation, confronting limitless horizons. We shall bear our full responsibility, exercise our full influence, and bring our full help and encouragement to all who aspire to peace and freedom.” It was a great and important speech. I am honored to come before the Foreign Policy Association fifty-nine years after FDR’s appearance to recall the message of that evening.

To understand what the United Nations is and what it does and what it can do is fundamental to any discussion of its purposes. The Secretary-General almost always includes a basic educational statement relating to these questions in his public speeches. In the closing session of the Millennium Summit on September 8, 2000, 160 Chiefs of State and heads of governments had unanimously adopted a Declaration pledging themselves and the UN to stopping violence and brutal conflict. The Declaration reaffirmed the importance of international law, and pledged economic aid to redress the anguish of poverty and disease that is the shame of civilized society. Kofi Annan spoke these words:

“You are yourselves the United Nations. It lies in your power, and therefore it is your responsibility, to reach the goals you have defined. Only you can determine whether the United Nations rises to the challenge…”

Last week in Pittsburgh, Kofi Annan restated that message, reminding us that the United Nations is an association of sovereign states, one of which is the United States. Because the United States is the strongest economic, military and cultural force in the world, he said, it has a unique position – “the idea that a peaceful and prosperous world can be
organized without the active engagement and leadership of the United States is not credible.”

Our good friend and colleague, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, now the Representative of the United Kingdom in Iraq, said it in different words when he arrived in Baghdad: “The UN does not have power unless those who have power switch it through the UN as a matter of choice.”

Clearly, one enemy of the United Nations is ignorance – ignorance of its history, of what it is, of how it operates, and of what it can do. The Charter of the UN was adopted 58 years ago because Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman organized a campaign to educate the American people as to the need for the United Nations and how it would serve the purposes of the United States. The momentum resulting from that effort gave the support that Republican leaders like Arthur Vandenberg and John Foster Dulles needed to deliver a practically unanimous vote in the Senate for ratification. Today, instead of an educational campaign by the White House to explain our national interests in the UN, we have a massive disinformation campaign carried out by well-funded, powerful rightwing groups determined to undermine the UN.

To those who have honest concerns, we should state and then repeat a basic lesson over and over again. The UN is not a sovereign entity. It is an association of sovereign member states. The United Nations is not a government. It is not an executive, it is not a legislature that can command the peoples of the world. It is not a Court that can adjudicate and then enforce its decisions. It has no standing army, no air force; no, not even arsenals kept ready to support it missions.

The United Nations is a mirror of a very imperfect world; it can only do what its 191 members permit it to do. The national interests of the United States can be advanced if our government has the will and skill to do so but, because of our veto and our power, nothing significant can happen in the UN that adversely affects us.
Now that is the reality. Many groups such as the United Nations Association are constantly teaching and reminding us of that reality, but the sinister forces of deliberate or feigned ignorance – from those who see UN helicopters hovering ominously over our land or allege that secret training bases are preparing a UN army to confront us – to those sophisticated pundits who conceal their ideological agendas in misinformation and distortions, these are among the enemies of the UN. Most Americans are fair-minded and willing to listen and learn but in the complicated field of international relations where the President has primary power, it is the President and his spokesmen who must explain American interests in the founding and success of the UN. Absent that powerful advocacy – and it has long been absent – the enemies of the UN, well financed, well organized and unencumbered by any need, desire, or responsibility to make balanced presentations to their audiences have changed the political landscape of our country.

The Heritage Foundation, whose success as an institution of political propaganda is remarkable, has an unbroken record of hostility and assault on the UN and its purposes. It is in the vanguard of the movement that is destroying American conservatism and advocating American imperialism as the new ideology. In a recent document [Heritage Lectures, June 5, 2003], one of its spokesman argues for the abolition of the UN, insisting that it has outlasted whatever usefulness it had as a peacekeeping institution, stating, among other things, that “its bureaucracies and subordinate networks are rife with corruption…” The paper alleges that the Soviet Union used the UN as a front and supported the capture of the United Nations Association “by the peaceniks.” For years, the analysis of the UN by the Heritage Foundation was directed by the late Charles Lichtenstein who, as Ambassador Kirkpatrick’s assistant at the UN, had publicly suggested that the East River headquarters of the UN be sawed off – to use his elegant expression – and allowed to float into the Atlantic Ocean.

Regarding Iraq, the Heritage Foundation never fails to find the UN responsible for its problems and disasters. Here is one of their recent arguments: “By impeding George Bush, Sr. from pursuing the Gulf War to its logical conclusion, the UN ensured the repression and massacre of those involved in the uprisings at Basra and elsewhere…”
Since the Heritage Foundation and its offshoots, like the American Enterprise Institute, the Federalist Society and that libertarian sanctuary of anarchy, the Cato Institute, reflect the uncompromising arrogance of their political sponsors, there is no easy way to refute them but I did take comfort recently in reading to one of their advocates who made this same argument, this excerpt from George Herbert Walker Bush’s memoir, *A World Transformed*, written five years ago:

> Trying to eliminate Saddam… would have incurred incalculable human and political costs. Apprehending him was probably impossible… We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq… there was no viable “exit strategy” we could see, violating another of our principles. Furthermore, we had been self-consciously trying to set a pattern for handling aggression in the post-Cold War world. Going in and occupying Iraq, thus unilaterally exceeding the United Nations’ mandate, would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish. Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land.

How illuminating it would be to share that passage with the readers of the Heritage Foundation literature. Perhaps it might then be read by the National Security Council and even by the son of the author.

The American Enterprise Institute and the Federalist Society have recently launched a new UN project called NGO Watch. The meager resources of those NGOs which support the UN in principle and work constantly to make it a better, more effective organization will undoubtedly have to be diverted in part to respond to what you can be sure will be ferocious, well financed assaults on their efforts.
Since the UN itself does not respond to these assaults from member states, since the US government is now the ideological ally of these radical forces, and since the groups in opposition to this ideological movement against the UN do not have the resources to respond effectively, the Heritage Foundation and its think-tank allies have had an open run against the UN. They feed their formidable output on a daily basis to their Congressional supporters, to their loyalists in the government, and to their spokesmen like Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter in the media. The constant, negative drumbeat of these rightwing groups has taken an unconscionable toll on the possibilities of the UN.

Despite this uninterrupted assault on the UN by the neo-con intellectuals for more than thirty years, the astonishing thing is the continuing support of the United Nations by a strong majority of the American people as registered in every poll. How can this consistent, clearly majority public opinion be ignored by the President and the Congress? How can American foreign policy be controlled by enemies of the United Nations when the American people feel so differently?

Congress never has been, and by its nature and composition probably never will be, a cheerleader for the United Nations. A Brookings Institute study entitled Misreading the Public (by Steven Kuel and I.N. Destler, 1999) is indispensable reading for anyone interested in understanding the divergence in attitude between the government and people of the United States. As the Brookings study states: “The American public does not give priority to international issues when it chooses public officials. The executive branch does not give priority to public opinion when it makes foreign policy. The legislative branch cares a great deal about public opinion, but not opinion on international matters, [knowing that] whatever the Members’ position on foreign affairs, they are unlikely to be punished by voters for disagreeing or being disagreeable… And,” the Study continues, “individual policy practitioners, particularly in the executive branch, do not challenge the widely held belief in public neo-isolationism because they fear they will be labeled unrealistic or even naive, and this will undercut their influence…” So, it appears that in the greatest representative democracy in history, the attitude of the people, at least as it relates to their country and the United Nations, is hardly relevant.
A former President once analyzed why political leaders pay scant attention to these polls, saying that those who hate the UN, vote their position while those who support the UN have many other priorities that define their vote. But what if a President took a chance and went to the people explaining why it is in our national interest to take certain initiatives — would not this positive, constructive approach find support and encouragement from the clear majority of Americans who want the UN to succeed? Presidential greatness is made from that kind of political courage.

The stunning Republican victory in the 1994 Congressional elections brought the Republican ideological right wing to positions of power it had not had for more than 60 years. It brought a large new group of Congressmen and Senators who were remarkably inexperienced and uninterested in international affairs — and who became the loudspeakers for a xenophobic, often irrational, eccentric group which made the UN the target of unrelenting abuse.

Senator Helms, became Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and used his power to intimidate the foreign policy establishment, controlling, among other things, the confirmation process of policymaking and ambassadorial appointments. With a White House unwilling to fight, Senator Helms took control of the U.S. relationship to the United Nations. The UN agenda became dominated by the non-payment, the partial payment, the conditional payment of America’s assessed dues. The problems of American participation in the United Nations have nothing to do with money. The annual assessed share of the United States for the $1.4 billion annual UN budget amounts to $310 million, about the cost of one half a day of our presence in Iraq. The United States has a $2.2 trillion national budget. Its economy produces a gross national product of over $8 trillion. In that context certainly, an appropriation of $310 million to fulfill a significant international treaty obligation is not an onerous burden. In fact, the money spent on UN assessments is probably the most cost effective dollar spent for our national security. The assault on the UN is not to save money. The objective is to undermine the United Nations, to diminish it as an obstacle to American hegemony in international
affairs, to make it marginal and irrelevant to the exercise of American power. Ambassador Holbrooke through heroic effort resolved the funding crisis but I always found it despairing that a person of Ambassador Holbrooke’s formidable talents was obliged to spend so much of his time on such a matter, instead of negotiating the conflicts where his abilities could have made such a difference in the real questions of war and peace.

The UN has been made to endure many humiliations by its most important member. In the front rank of those experiences is the obsequious decision to solicit an invitation to Senator Helms to address the Security Council in the first days of the new century. Helms began by singling out a statement made by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on the question of sovereignty where Kofi Annan had said: “The last right of states cannot and must not be the right to enslave, persecute or torture their own citizens,” clearly stating that the UN must be quicker to react to large-scale violations of human rights, even if that means intervening in a nation’s internal affairs. One would think that those who live with daily remembrance of the cataclysmic crime of the Holocaust would take comfort that the leader of the UN was saying in his own eloquent way – Never Again! But Americans forget that the ratification of the Genocide Treaty was delayed for 40 years in the Senate by southerners like Senator Helms who saw the treaty as a challenge to that perverse concept of States Rights that had protected the lynchers – not the lynched – and had created a wall of Apartheid that finally the federal constitution had to blow away. The Secretary-General’s words incensed Senator Helms. Citing a long list of U.S. interventions for which it neither asked for nor received the approval of the United Nations to legitimize its actions, Senator Helms stated: “The United Nations, my friends, has no power to grant or decline legitimacy to such actions.” Using the oldest of rhetorical devices, he set up a straw man and beat it to death, saying that “a United Nations that seeks to impose its presumed authority on the American people, without their consent, begs for confrontation – and eventual U.S. withdrawal.” Of course, such an action by the UN has never happened and could never happen because of the U.S. veto on the Security Council. When the hostile forces which dominate these issues in the Congress talk about sovereignty, they are echoing the attitudes of those in American
history who have argued States’ rights to forestall every progressive advance from the recognition of labor’s rights to a system of social security to the constitutional protection of civil rights and desegregation. Racism has been at the core of the struggle between States Rights and the federal obligation to assure justice, due process and equal opportunity.

What a mischance of history that American policy toward the UN should be in thrall to those whose hostility toward international organizations is so profound that they can talk of American withdrawal from the UN as a plausible option in the conduct of our foreign policy. For the purposes of the last presidential campaign, the Know-Nothings were carefully concealed from public view but the platform adopted in May, 2000 by the Republican party of Texas with 8000 wildly cheering delegates in attendance and with every major Republican officeholder in Texas in attendance, stated categorically and unconditionally that “all U.S. participation in the United Nations should come to an end.” We used to think that the ideological fringe whose attitude this statement reflects was certainly less than 10% of the American public, but whatever the true measure of their political strength, they have a power in the Bush Administration that the extremist radicals have never had in American history. Reinforced by a Christian evangelical movement that preaches that the United Nations is the anti-Christ, supported by the Falwells, the Robertsons, the Limbaughs and the DeLays whose venom is never-ending, the radical ideologues who have branded this Texas administration with arrogant unilateralism are in the saddle.

American policy relating to Iraq was profoundly influenced by this group. I cite as an example Richard Perle, who as Chairman of the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board led the demand for war and the invasion of Iraq and who, at the same time, accepted a $725,000 contingent fee from a corporation seeking Pentagon approval for the sale of assets to Asian investors, a transaction the Pentagon had deemed a major risk to U.S. security. Mr. Perle insisted that his role was that of an advisor not a lobbyist, but a contingent fee means that the money is paid only if success is achieved and the person to whom it is
paid can claim a significant role in bringing about that success. Such fees are not paid to “advisors.”

On March 21, his war in Iraq now fully launched, Mr. Perle wrote in the Guardian: “Saddam Hussein’s reign of terror is about to end. He will go quickly but not alone – he will take the UN down with him. Thank God for the death of the UN”

John Bolton, the Undersecretary of State for Disarmament, is another one in the Perle mold. He travels the world throwing lightning bolts against real and perceived enemies of the United States. According to a recent article in the New York Times, he remains a presidential favorite even though an awful lot of time is spent picking up the pieces after every John Bolton visit to the China shop. He seems so much better suited to the Rumsfeld/Wolfowitz Pentagon yet he is deliberately planted in the State Department where his diatribes against the UN and his commentary on various sensitive negotiations have undercut Secretary Powell time and time again. When the responsibility for managing multilateral arms control is given to those who have spent their careers trashing such controls, what conclusion is possible except to understand that the real objective is to destroy the framework of international governance that bipartisan efforts have created over the last 60 years. Aware of what they say publicly, do we have any doubt about the destructive anti-UN discussions these radicals have among themselves and in policy-making sessions protected by the unparalleled secrecy of this government?

The terrorist attack of September 11th compelled our government to go to the UN, the only place where the necessary international coalition could be organized quickly. The results were impressive – the military defeat and ouster of the Taliban government, the election of President Karzai, the opportunity to defeat Al Qaeda with the economic and political support of an international coalition. France and Germany are leading countries in supplying forces and resources to help the new Afghanistan resist the constant threat of Taliban resurgence. Our terrorist enemy is deeply rooted in many countries. Al Qaeda is an enemy against whom the strongest army in the world has only limited effect. It is an enemy that can only be defeated by a universal coalition of nations. The UN enabled
Pakistan and other Muslim countries to join us in the disruption and destruction of the Taliban government and the Al Qaeda leadership. The UN response enabled member states to express their overwhelming support for America and Americans in a time of crisis. By closing ranks to break up terrorist cells and the fanatic groups that threaten democracy everywhere, the UN and the United States took a giant step together to strengthen international governance under the Rule of Law.

As Mr. Perle indicated, those who crafted the unilateral invasion of Iraq anticipated the added dividend of making the UN irrelevant not only in Iraq but in the larger framework of problems that challenge international governance. The government’s decision to go to war was made recklessly, endangering the very purpose of its action by its disdain of the United Nations. The postwar planning for Iraq was criminally inadequate. We are left as “an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land” and those words of his father should remind his son that George Herbert Walker Bush once led both the United States and the United Nations brilliantly in the Gulf War, a struggle where France as well as the United Kingdom, where Germany as well as Japan, where Arab nations as well as Israel, where Turkey as well as Mexico stood with us and even paid the financial burden of $100 billion.

The ideological radicals who control the policies affecting the UN may hear what the majority of Americans express as their hope, but they do not listen, and when all is said and done, they do not care. As James Traub wrote recently (New York Times, October 26, 2003), “Today’s Republican Party is arguably the most extreme – the furthest from the center – of any governing majority in the nation’s history.” The so-called neo-conservatives who are so determined to damage or destroy the UN are neither new nor conservative. They are as old as the forces that shattered the League of Nations, and they are about as conservative as Huey Long and Joseph McCarthy.

Another factor that historians will write about is the mischance that such extreme forces are in control of American policy toward the UN at a time when the UN has an extraordinary Secretary-General who is the best hope we have ever had to transform
Franklin Roosevelt’s vision of the United Nations into reality. Kofi Annan is a great moral leader possessed of dignity, confidence, courage, compassion and faith. He understands America better than any of his predecessors. He believes deeply in the greatness of our country, he knows our history and our ideals, he understands and admires our great strength and power. He also knows the strengths, limitations, and weaknesses of the UN structure, its total dependence on the support and goodwill of its member states. With the confidence in his leadership shared by both the Security Council and the developing world, he can help guide the nations of the world as they take the long, unending journey, small step by small step, to a better world, a world safer for our children than it was for us, a world more abundant in well-being for their children than it is for them.

This lecture is directed to the American enemies of the UN but I am certainly aware of what other nations can do and of significant reforms the UN must undertake. As John Ruggie has written so well in a recent UNA essay, the developing countries and Europe probably need a viable UN more than the United States does. I have spoken in other places regarding the opportunity and responsibility of the European Union and its member states to play a larger role in resolving the UN’s organizational problems as well as its commitments as expressed in the Millennium Summit Declaration. I do not believe the European opposition to the invasion of Iraq was borne of a desire to use the UN to balance American power – after all, it was a point of view shared by most of the world, including all of the countries in our western hemisphere. But certainly any intent to use the UN that way would be self-defeating. It is also time, in my judgment, to hold developing nations as well as the industrial world to a higher standard of responsibility, for example, finding new financial resources for economic development and disease control by cutting back their enormous expenditures for armaments.

For those who believe in the ideals of the United Nations, who understand its achievements and possibilities, who are aware of its limitations and prepared to work as did the generations before us to repair its deficiencies and strengthen its structure – for those the time has come to stand up to the extremists with a response that is forceful,
tough, truthful and unrelenting. If we believe in internationalism, in America’s role in leading the world toward democratic values, in the United Nations as an important instrument in the age-old struggle to control the greed, violence and corruption of Mankind, then we must do battle to save the hope that great generations of Americans before us have given to the world.

When all is said and done, if the UN is to be successful, the US must fulfill the responsibilities of the world’s only superpower and lead it, not by command and directive, but by diplomacy and careful concern for the interests of others.

Presidential leadership is absolutely vital to our role in the UN. The Congress can be hostile, the extremists can continue their rhetorical explosions, but if the President is clear in his purpose and willing to exercise the necessary political will, the United States can inspire the world by making the UN a powerful, effective instrument in the governance of a world that pleads for our leadership.

We have watched Presidents who presumably share our commitment to the possibilities of the United Nations waste their opportunity to fulfill them. We hear presidential rhetoric at the beginning of every General Assembly that sounds as though Franklin Roosevelt were delivering the message. But rhetoric and doublespeak are no longer acceptable in lieu of deeds. What is so frustrating is to know how anxious the world is for America’s leadership – and how incapable we seem to be of responding constructively. Yes, as this 21st century begins, we are as we have been for the last 60 years, the most powerful military, economic, cultural power the world has ever seen. But if history is our guide, we know that the window of opportunity for the beneficent exercise of our power will not remain unchallenged. Other nations will emerge in this century that will rival us and challenge our dominance. We will deserve the harsh judgment of our grandchildren if we fail to use this extraordinary time and opportunity to create a better world with the United Nations as part of that historic achievement.