



The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations

Paul Kennedy

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“With all its defects, with all the failures that we can check up against it, the UN still represents man’s best-organized hope to substitute the conference table for the battlefield.”

–Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961

The signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945 was an unprecedented development in the history of humankind. For the first time, the world’s most powerful sovereign nation states came together to create an autonomous organization designed to, in the Charter’s words, “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war [and] reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights.” Sixty years later, the UN still doggedly pursues that mandate, albeit not without difficulty and certainly not without criticism.

In *The Parliament of Man*, the distinguished scholar Paul Kennedy gives a thorough and timely history of the United Nations that explains the institution’s roots and functions while also casting an objective eye on the UN’s effectiveness as a body and on its prospects for success in meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

Building on expertise he gained in drafting official reports for the UN’s fiftieth anniversary on how to improve the organization’s performance, Kennedy makes sense of the many commissions and committees, and how its six main operating bodies—General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council (UNESCO), Trusteeship Council, Secretariat, and International Court—operate and interact. Citing examples from the UN’s history, he shows how the five permanent members of the Security Council—the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and France—on numerous occasions overcame political antagonisms to spearhead military supervision of aid in humanitarian crises, and how lack of cooperation among the great powers has hamstrung such initiatives as the control of greenhouse gas emissions and exacerbated the deleterious effects of globalization on developing nations’ economies.

As a body, the UN emerges here for what it is: fallible, human-based, oftentimes dependent on the whims of powerful national governments or the foibles of individual senior UN administrators, but utterly indispensable. In *The Parliament of Man*, Kennedy ably proves that “it is difficult to imagine how much more riven and ruinous our world of six billion people would be if there had been no UN social, environmental, and cultural agendas—and no institutions to attempt to put them into practice on the ground.”

The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations Details

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From Reader Review The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations for online ebook

Halldór Thorgeirsson says

Nicely structured book about the past, present and future of the UN. He starts by painting a picture of the situation at the end of the second world war and the League of Nations. The final chapter is another "bookend" and looks to the future. In between you have the story as it has unfolded on six thematic fronts. I find the author striking a nice balance between the aspiration and the reality. This is particularly evident in his discussion on the option on Security Council reform.

Gwilym says

This book is recommended for all those interested in international politics and particularly the role of the UN on the world stage. I bought it in conjunction with books considering the failures of the organisation in Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Somalia - Kennedy gives a clear insight as to how and why these operations stumbled taking into account the limits of a charter established over 60 years ago.

Especially interesting for those familiar with Kennedy is how he utilises the "Great Power" theory outlined in The Rise and Fall [...], and how with international crises ballooning in numbers following the end of the Cold War, the UN itself faced something of an "imperial overstretch".

I haven't reached the final chapter on reform yet, but the problems outlined by the current structure leave both the reader and Kennedy without much hope for successful or meaningful advancement of the UNSC system - greatly undermined by independent operations such as Iraq (2003) and more recently the Russia/Georgia

Chris says

Kennedy's book putatively attempts to explain (with a middling level of detail) the creation and history of the United Nations, along with its concordant and subsidiary bodies and the roles they have played, along with important programs and influential individuals. It also goes into a bit of detail of the public perceptions and reactions to different UN bodies and UN characteristics. Quite a task, and the second reading of this book has enriched my understanding of Kennedy's topical and historical sweep.

The book first looks to the creation of the UN, the UN Charter (contained in the Annex), then explores the Security Council and its powers, and then discusses the General Assembly, concordant bodies to the UN such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the softer programs such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the role of the Secretary General, and the growth of the General Assembly in the 1960s and 70s.

Kennedy ends with possible steps to reform the UN, which as a pretty boring section as this part of his book was adapted from a report he wrote for the UN itself. He then discusses challenges to reform and overarching challenges to the UN structure as a whole - especially considering the UN Charter was drafted right after WWII and in light of a few global superpowers, a situation which has changed in the past 60 years in many,

many respects.

The UN has always aimed very high with its lofty and utopian goals, and regrettably suffers much criticism when it does not reach those goals, along with cautious and weary Member States suffering from donor fatigue and cynical domestic legislatures hesitant to allocate any powers which might even suggest a loss of national sovereignty.

Despite its many failings, the UN has actually accomplished many laudable actual achievements over the years, and it has made progress towards a safer, more stable and equitable world. This progress and stability is almost always overlooked and diminished.

Kennedy's book is the best introductory text to the UN that I know of.

Kamil Salamah says

Good to read

MSW says

I like it, the UN has had a colorful/interesting/tragic life so far. Roots + past useful to understand more of UN & why it often fails and sometimes succeeds. Helps better understand current wrangling re Iran, North Korea etc. Well written though maybe not top notch.

Omar Abdelaziz says

Recommended for all those interested in international politics
History of the League of Nations and United Nations
Covers the major areas of the UN , Goes through the past, present and future of the UN.
He starts by the end of the second world war and the League of Nations.Then the UN rule in the current days how the UN works and it's councils , The final chapter is about the future and the expected difficulties.

Brenden says

The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations by Paul Kennedy (2006)

Joe says

It's not a bad book, it's just a bit dry and a bit vague. Having worked at the UN, I would say the Kennedy's

heart is where that of most reporters' is: the Security Council, which gets the vast bulk of UN coverage. Then the Secretariat. Then, well behind those two, the General Assembly. And way down the list is civil society, NGOs, etc.

Thus, I would recommend checking this book out, reading the intro and the chapter on the history of the Security Council, which is very helpful to rounding out any understanding of Cold War diplomacy. Skip the part about the NGOs and civil society.

If you're interested in the UN—and you should be—I would also recommend James Traub's *The Best Intentions*, which is an excellent explanation of the UN, particularly through the travails of the 1990s and under the Kofi Annan era.

Marc says

A brilliantly written book traces the history of the League of Nations and the United Nations. For those pondering: what works, and what doesn't work, in trying to create world peace, this scholarly work provides a lot of answers, and much more to think about.

Mike Cognato says

What a disappointment. Kennedy is a heck of a historian, but he mailed this one in. Instead of new insights or information about the UN, Kennedy just gives us warmed-over potted history and a handful of stale arguments - the same ones repeated over and over and over throughout the book.

More frustrating than anything else is his determination to treat the UN as a coherent institution capable of taking action whenever it does something that he likes, and to switch his attention to the member states' (and usually, the United States') actions when the UN doesn't. This makes it impossible to understand how different ideas about growth and development or peacekeeping or arms control actually bubbled up and gained support in the institution - they just sort of appear fully formed, with the sort of an ambiguously defined "developing world." Cold War conflict is just brushed aside as a sad paralysis of the Security Council, with no mention of the pull of the US and USSR on their allies or of how that shaped debate.

The economics chapter is especially frustrating. It goes way too far afield in trying to talk about the World Bank and IMF, and fails completely - Kennedy doesn't even mention the worldwide popularity of state-led, socialist development in trying to explain why the developing world remained so poor, and similarly missed the turn away from that approach that has done more than anything else to actually reduce poverty in China, India, and the rest of Asia.

All of which is a shame, because the UN is a genuinely fascinating creature. Very good in-depth analyses of specific time periods or functions are out there, but there really is an opening for a good general history to bring together all of that thought. This, sadly, isn't it.

David Alonso vargas says

Un poco tedioso para tratarse de Paul Kennedy. Una sucesión de misiones y organismos que puede llegar a caer en el tedio y la monotonía. Es indudable el gran trabajo tras el libro. Pero a veces se hace monótono.

Ann says

I was definitely confused by the alphabet soup paragraphs at first, even having researched the UN. Otherwise, an insightful book.

Matthew says

Okay. I learned more about the UN. The first chapter on how the UN came about and the lessons learned from the League of Nations fiasco was strong. The other chapters on potential reform and current workings were less strong.

Jet says

A reminder of the idealist I once was, I say. The book hasn't quite hooked me, three chapters on - which I suspect is a result of the very historical narrative of the formation of a world government (or at least a semblance of a world government). Not a book for someone who is already attuned to the history of the UN.

I was rather hoping that the blurb at the back of the book held true "Ultimately he shows why, despite its fallibility and its foibles, the UN remains utterly indispensable to our future". But at this point, I am not seeing an argument yet.

Julian Haigh says

Best introduction to the UN that I have found. Covers the major areas and gives some idea to what is holding the UN from being a really effective institution and states it in a fair way to show that sometimes you don't really want the UN to work, but this comes at the loss of it not working sometimes when we'd rather. Nuanced arguments, it's basic premise is that the UN is two steps forward.
