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THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations was born in 1945. The United States hosted an international conference in San Francisco at which the UN Charter was signed.

World War II was over in Europe and it was soon to end in Japan. The 54 governments at San Francisco wanted to learn the lessons of history, particularly from the two world wars, and so avoid a World War III.

World War I had come as a great shock to everyone. No one expected such a large or lengthy conflict. There was widespread agreement that that should be the "war to end all wars".

But how was that to be achieved? There was disagreement over what caused the war. Several unofficial groups said the fault lay with the system of competing countries. The system itself was at fault and so there should be a new international system.

On the other hand, many politicians believed that the system was basically sound, but it had been destabilised by the unification of Germany in 1870 and so Germany ought both to be punished for its past aggression and to be prevented from trying to repeat it.

This basic disagreement was never resolved. A tough peace settlement was inflicted upon Germany and it helped give rise to Adolph Hitler who rode to power in 1933 on the wave of German resentment. Ironically, the "appeasement" policy of Britain and France was initiated by people who believed that Germany had been too harshly treated and so should be "appeased" (that is, soothed) by being permitted some concessions.

Meanwhile, a new international system was also created. The League began operations in 1920. It was designed principally as the place where two or more governments would bring their international disputes. It had no automatic right to intervene; governments had to agree to bring their disputes to it. Most governments did not.

It had only limited membership. Its highest-ranking advocate, US President Woodrow Wilson, could not get Congressional approval for US membership of it because of the "isolationism" in Congress. The Soviet Union joined late and was expelled over its invasion of Finland.

Britain and France, the League's two most important members, were wary of it. They were not accustomed to working together through an international organisation.

The League, then, was flawed from the outset. It was able to make some progress in world health, care of refugees, the suppression of slavery and the drug trade, the protection of minority populations, and improvements in employment conditions in factories and elsewhere. It settled, particularly in the 1920s some international disputes.

But once the military dictators took over in Japan, Italy and Germany, the League was powerless to stop them. The member-nations were reluctant to introduce coercive measures. Consequently, the League ceased to have much political relevance by the early 1930s.

The UN was deliberately created as a much more ambitious organization than the League.

Generals always prepare to fight the last war; diplomats design methods to avoid having to fight the last war. The ghost of Hitler (who had died only two months before the San Francisco conference) underpins the original vision for the Security Council.

If, the reasoning went, enough nations had worked together in the League of Nations, then Hitler would have been deterred from his aggressive foreign policy. Consequently, the League's successor, the UN, was given - on paper - immense power.

All UN member-nations agree to be bound by Security Council resolutions (the only part of the UN system with such power) and all member-nations "shall hold immediately available" defence forces to be deployed as required by the Security Council. A Military Staff Committee was created, drawn from the representatives of the Chiefs of Staff of the five permanent members, to co-ordinate the military operations.

Because of the Cold War, this elaborate system was never used.

Instead, there evolved an ad hoc system of peacekeeping for intervention in disputes where the two super powers agreed not to intervene if the other also did not. Much of the peacekeeping work was done by Canada, Ireland, Sweden and Australia.

The ending of the Cold War has seen a great increase in the UN's peacekeeping work. The UN is now mounting more peacekeeping operations than at any other time in its history.

Whereas the League only hesitatingly paid attention to economic and social co-operation, at least 80 per cent of the UN's budget (up to the recent expansion in peacekeeping operations) has gone on economic and social co-operation.

Even during the height of the Cold War, countries were working across national lines to make the world a better place. Technical experts were brought together, such as sending letters

from one country to another, exchanging ideas on educational material, and pooling resources on foreign aid.

Diseases and pollution do not recognize national boundaries and they need to be combated by international co-operation. Smallpox has been eradicated through the World Health Organization (the first disease in world history to be eradicated) and there are hopes that polio may be eradicated this year.

The UN has lasted three times as long as the League of Nations. The League was often seen as the “great experiment”, with the implication that it may not be here to stay (which in fact is what happened). But the UN has outlasted all the predictions of doom. Even the Bush Administration (easily one of the most hostile anti-UN Administrations in US history) is not seeking to wind it up.

Virtually every country in the world is a member of the UN. As soon as a territory achieves independence it seeks UN membership as part of its journey into the international community. East Timor is the newest member.

A century ago, European domination of the world was taken to be the norm. Almost all the world was under the control of Europeans or peoples of European descent (such as the US). It seemed that the empires would last for many more years to come. White people seemed destined to rule the world.

But decolonization was a major item for the UN’s early decades. Almost all the empires have now been wound up. Now the smallest number of people (as a percentage) are in a colonial situation since human records began.

The UN has also provided a platform for small states. Until 1945, a handful of countries ran the world. They still do of course (though it is now a different collection of countries, with other ones emerging, notably China and India).

But the UN has enabled other countries to have a say in how the world is run. This has been important for countries like Australia, which have other been only on the margin of international politics.

But the UN is not a "world government" and it is a long way from ever becoming one. An example of this is the UN's perpetual financial crisis.

The total amount of money that goes to the UN (with the exception of the loan money which passes through the World Bank) is about US\$8 billion per year – less than the amount of money the world spends on defence forces each week. The average Australian, via taxes, pays each year about A\$8.



The Fire Department of the City of New York operates with a far larger budget. More people work for Disneyland than for the UN. The Premier of NSW has more staff than does the UN Secretary-General.

But, then, the UN was never designed to be perfect. Winston Churchill, who helped create both the League and the UN, said that the UN was not designed to get us to heaven but to save us from going to hell.

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