

Once More Unto the Breach

The current session of the General Assembly, which opened September 16, has, as usual, an impossible agenda. Of course one way to avoid the impossible is to talk it to death. Dag Hammarskjöld, the most perceptive of the secretaries-general, said his greatest fear was that the Great Powers would throw into the lap of a fragile U.N. all the international problems they were unable to solve and the organization would simply collapse.

Among the agenda items for this session are the perennials—Israel and the Palestinians; South Africa (apartheid and independence for Namibia); world hunger. Sure to be lost in the clutter are individual human rights, world disarmament, terrorism, and refugees. The New International Economic Order (NIEO), the subject of a Special Session that began on August 26, will be given particular attention by the less-developed countries while the industrialized nations try to ignore the hot rhetoric. A hopeful note could be struck by a serious discussion of the draft treaty prepared by the Law of the Sea Conference. This document might prove to be one of the greatest achievements of a beleaguered United Nations.

To remind delegates of their responsibilities as representatives of sovereign nations, some relevant sections of the United Nations Charter appear below.

Article 2(4)

All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purpose of the United Nations.

(See Czechoslovakia, Lebanon, Cuba, Hungary, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, Vietnam, the two Congos, etc.)

Article 43(1); Article 45

All member of the United Nations, in order to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security, undertake to make available to the Security Council, on its call and in accordance with a special agreement or agreements, armed forces, assistance and facilities, including rights of passage, necessary for the purpose of maintaining international peace and security....

In order to enable the United Nations to take urgent military measures, Members shall hold immediately available national air-force contingents for combined international enforcement action....

(See Korea, Vietnam, Israel-Syria border, and SALTs I and II.)

Article 55

With a view to the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the United Nations shall promote:

a. higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;

(The Committee of the Whole (COW) met, struggled, and came up with no viable plan to raise the standard of living of the developing countries.)

b. solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation;

(To show displeasure, cultural and educational exchanges gave way to Olympic boycotts, the refusal of a U.S. visa to Carlos Fuentes, and the Soviet suppression of the writings of Sakharov.)

c. universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

(For fundamental freedoms see the arrest of Helsinki "observers" and Amnesty International members in the Eastern bloc; the military regimes in Chile, Uganda, Bolivia; Indira Gandhi's India, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and, always, the Union of South Africa.)

From the preamble of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

The Governments of the States parties to this Constitution on behalf of the peoples declare:

...that since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed...that a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.

(For further information on the "minds of men" the reader is referred to the minutes of the U.N. Disarmament Commission, which meets regularly in Geneva; the proceedings of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights; and the transcripts of the delegates' speeches during the present session.)

Like the English at Agincourt, the delegates at the current General Assembly are being asked to perform a formidable task. As they go forth to do diplomatic battle, one can only wish them a keen-edged pen, a strong backside, and unflagging patience.

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