

Mirage

I never believed in the United Nations — the body created after the Second World War and draped in an endless litany of declarations from the powerful, illusions for the weak, and hopes for those who cherish high ideals and long for justice to prevail so that the fearful may be reassured, the anxious calmed, and hearts at last find rest.

My distrust did not spring suddenly. A similar organization had arisen after the First World War and did nothing to stop the aggressor, nothing to crush the oppressor; it neither established security nor radiated justice. It merely spent vast sums, filled the world with words and illusions, tempted the weak to trust their weakness, and encouraged the strong to grow stronger.

Before that first body was formed, President Wilson proclaimed those grave principles meant to be the foundation of peace. No sooner had nations, especially the oppressed, rejoiced at them than Wilson himself hastened to recognize the British protectorate over Egypt.

Before this second body even took shape, the Atlantic Charter was proclaimed; the weak rejoiced, the powerful smiled, and Britain's prime minister hurried to sign. He was likewise swift to break it — to repudiate the pledge he had given himself — when he acted in Greece, a wartime ally, and watched first German fire, then English fire, sweep the land.

I placed no faith in any of this, for experience teaches that promises of the powerful tend to be broken. If their words have any face, it is often merely a mask: one side mercy, the other all manner of torment. They are masters at giving promises and equally skilled at breaking them; power seduces them until the strongest become weaker even than the weakest, and humbler than the humblest.

So too the British flattered the weak to excess when they needed them in the war; once victory was assured, they turned arrogant and cruel, indulging in oppression. When Winston Churchill was asked in the House of Commons, during his rough suppression in Greece, about the loftiest ideals he had set out in the Atlantic Charter, he said: "These are things we wish for and call for, but the road to realize them is exceedingly long."

Nothing annoyed me more than Egypt's hurry to join the United Nations and to sign its charter before she had secured her full rights from Britain. And I have never doubted more than I doubt this Security Council that protects no one, restores no one's rights, does not vindicate the oppressed against the oppressor, nor deter the aggressor — a body I have, on occasion, called the Council of Fear. Power is only intimidated by power; force only fears force; iron is only broken by iron. Never have we seen a powerful state grant rights out of respect for right, or affirm justice because it believes justice must rule the world. The strong always choose between two courses: they either lash out when they can, or they plot when they cannot lash out.

These institutions — the General Assembly that meets once or twice a year, costing nations time and money, and the Security Council that meets monthly and burdens them with work and expense — have not changed colonial realities. Under their umbrella the old patterns endure: peoples humiliated and exploited without compassion or restraint; communities unable to resist because they have not yet discovered a means to resist; exploiters unaware of any need to be merciful, since they fear neither reprisals nor consequences. Other peoples fight, plead, and petition — and no one answers; their voices go unheard by the Assembly and the Council, and so they repress their wrath, compose

themselves, and continue their patient struggle until God judges between them and their oppressors — and God is the best judge.

The most tragic spectacle is when matters of oppressed peoples are brought before the Assembly or the Council: much eloquence is expended, tireless efforts are pledged in their defense, and the grievances and crimes of colonialism — in Marrakesh, Tunisia, Palestine, and wherever injustice rears its head — are placed in the hands of the world. The world listens to the words, witnesses the labors, and waits for the solemn resolution which — so everyone hopes — will vindicate the oppressed, chastise the oppressor, and open the gates of a safe, contented life.

Then the mountain labors and gives birth to nothing — at best a puff of air, if one can call it that. Blood continues to flow, lives are destroyed, rights trampled, sanctities violated, and peoples remain crushed in misery, hardship, and deprivation. None of this moves the Assembly or Council to action. The only thing that truly engages their deepest concern — the one cause they champion most jealously, sometimes at the cost of principle and human life — is that the compact among the colonial powers remain intact, free of weakness and immune to division. So France may brutalize any peoples it pleases, and Great Britain may oppress whom it wills: the primary object is not to stop brutality or eliminate oppression, but to preserve an understanding among the great states that allows each to act where and as it pleases, often supported by the United States, so long as the agreement of wickedness holds and blocks those nations that disagree with them in doctrine, policy, or financial management.

Everything turns on advantage — the advantage of the strong, not the weak; the advantage of the great in resisting their principal enemy, while their smaller enemies may be disregarded or sacrificed. Thus the colonizers plan and act with their own benefits foremost, before anything else and after everything else; they will never hesitate to sacrifice the interests, lives, and dignity of others so long as their own interests are ensured.

What is stranger still is that these advantages are not guaranteed; they may conflict, collide, or force sacrifice of one for another. France might have to accept a European army system the French people dislike, or persist in pointless slaughter in Indochina while the public there grows weary. Britain might need to sacrifice some of its trade in the Far East and eastern Europe to make an anti-Communist blockade effective. These two powers may have to pay a price for America's tacit approval of what they commit elsewhere.

When the great powers agree among themselves, nothing stands in the way of their bargains — no difficulty or obstacle. If they wish to coordinate their benefits, many problems will arise, and conferences proliferate only to disperse fruitlessly: ministers travel to Europe and then to Bermuda, and return as they left — like an ostrich in search of horns that returns without ears.

Thus the oppressed nations and the subjugated peoples have one plan and one plan only: the single course the ancient Arab poet expressed best in his immortal couplet:

He who will not defend his basin with his sword deserves to have it ruined;
And he who does not wrong others will himself be wronged.

The proper course is to defend our own basin with our arms and not to oppress anyone — to refuse to allow others to oppress us.

— Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

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