

## Introduction: The UN Today

The United States played an important role in the founding of the United Nations in 1945. After the terrible destruction of World War II, people in the United States believed the United Nations could provide the foundation for maintaining international peace and security. They were proud of their leadership and vision and hoped that it would establish the basis for a more peaceful world. Yet today, the U.S. commitment to the UN is uncertain.

Within the United States, the role of the UN is part of a larger debate about U.S. foreign policy. The role of the UN raises an important question about how the United States should address its security concerns. Should the United States protect its security by cooperating and seeking consensus with other countries at the UN? Many people in the United States wonder if the UN helps or hinders U.S. foreign policy. Many others remain committed to the organization.

Internationally, much discussion about the UN's future involves the question of U.S. cooperation with the organization. The debate is about the role of the UN, its effectiveness, and its fairness. Some have called the UN a place for humanity to unite for peace and security, while others have deemed it naïve and idealistic. While upholding faith in the aims of the UN, some criticize the way the organization operates. Some critics accuse the UN of serving only the interests of powerful states, while others regard it as an inefficient and meddling institution.

Today, the world faces threats that no one foresaw at the time of the UN's founding in 1945. AIDS, terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, and global climate change were not international concerns when the UN was

formed. Some wonder if the UN has the capacity to face the challenges of a changing world. Others note that the UN's success, above all, depends on the commitment its members have to working together to solve problems. They argue that the UN itself does not fail or succeed, the countries that make up its membership do.

***“The United Nations is only as good as its members, especially its primary members, want it to be.”***

—Brent Scowcroft, former U.S. national security advisor

Today, the UN provides a forum where diplomats can address some of the world's immediate and long-term problems. The UN has programs spanning the globe in numerous areas: for example, peacekeeping and preventing conflict, caring for refugees, and reducing poverty, to name a few. It has more than fifty thousand employees around the world performing a wide variety of tasks.

In the following days, you will have the opportunity to immerse yourself in the history of the UN and the debates about its role. Part I will introduce the history and charter of the UN. Part II will examine the role of the United Nations in the world. After completing the readings, you will be asked to consider the U.S. role in the UN and how the organization should be reformed, if at all. These issues connect to other, more fundamental questions about international relations. What role should the UN play in the world? What should be the role of the United States in world affairs?

## Part I: The UN and the International Community

During World War II, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) led an effort to create an organization that would bring countries together in a new system of international cooperation. On June 25, 1945, fifty countries signed a document known as the United Nations Charter. According to the charter, the central aim of the United Nations (UN) is to “maintain international peace and security.” The Charter discusses human health and well-being, as well as safety from violence, as key matters of security.

Roosevelt was not the first U.S. president to propose a system of international cooperation. Having seen Europe devastated by the violence of World War I (1914-1918), President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) hoped that it would be “the war to end all wars.” In addition to committing troops, Wilson outlined a proposal for an organization of states he called the League of Nations. His proposal led leaders from around the world to give real thought to the idea of organizing the international community.

### *What is the international community?*

Both President Wilson and President Roosevelt’s visions for a world organization were founded on a concept of an “international community.” Each foresaw an organization run by representatives from governments around the world. By the twentieth century, the

### Part I Definitions

**Sovereignty**—the authority of a state to govern itself without outside interference.

**Territorial Integrity**—the idea that international boundaries should not forcibly be changed.

world’s population had come to be organized under various governments. These governments, also known as states, oversaw distinct geographic regions. International law gave states supreme authority, or sovereignty, over all those living within the boundaries of that territory.

At times of widespread international conflict, it became clear that the system of state sovereignty alone could not prevent war. The world faced the question of who ought to govern the interactions between sovereign states. The international community established the League of Nations, and later the United Nations, as bodies of authority that would promote international order. In addition, they hoped that international cooperation could address hunger, poverty, racism, exploitation, slavery, disease, and other worldwide problems. Both organizations faced the challenge of balancing their authority with the participating states’ sovereignty.

### What is the difference between a nation and a state?

The 193 official members of the United Nations are states, not nations. A **nation** is a group of people who are united by a common language, religion, history, or homeland. In international relations, a **state** is a country with a defined territory and government that is recognized by its citizens and other countries and has sole control over its military. States may contain one or more nations within their boundaries, and nations within a state may or may not feel that the state accurately represents them as a group. Many nations within states rally behind the cause of “self-determination,” claiming that they, and not the states claiming to represent them, should govern their affairs. For example, Kurds, an ethnic-linguistic minority in the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Syria, see themselves as a nation and are seeking the establishment of an independent Kurdish state that could represent their political interests.

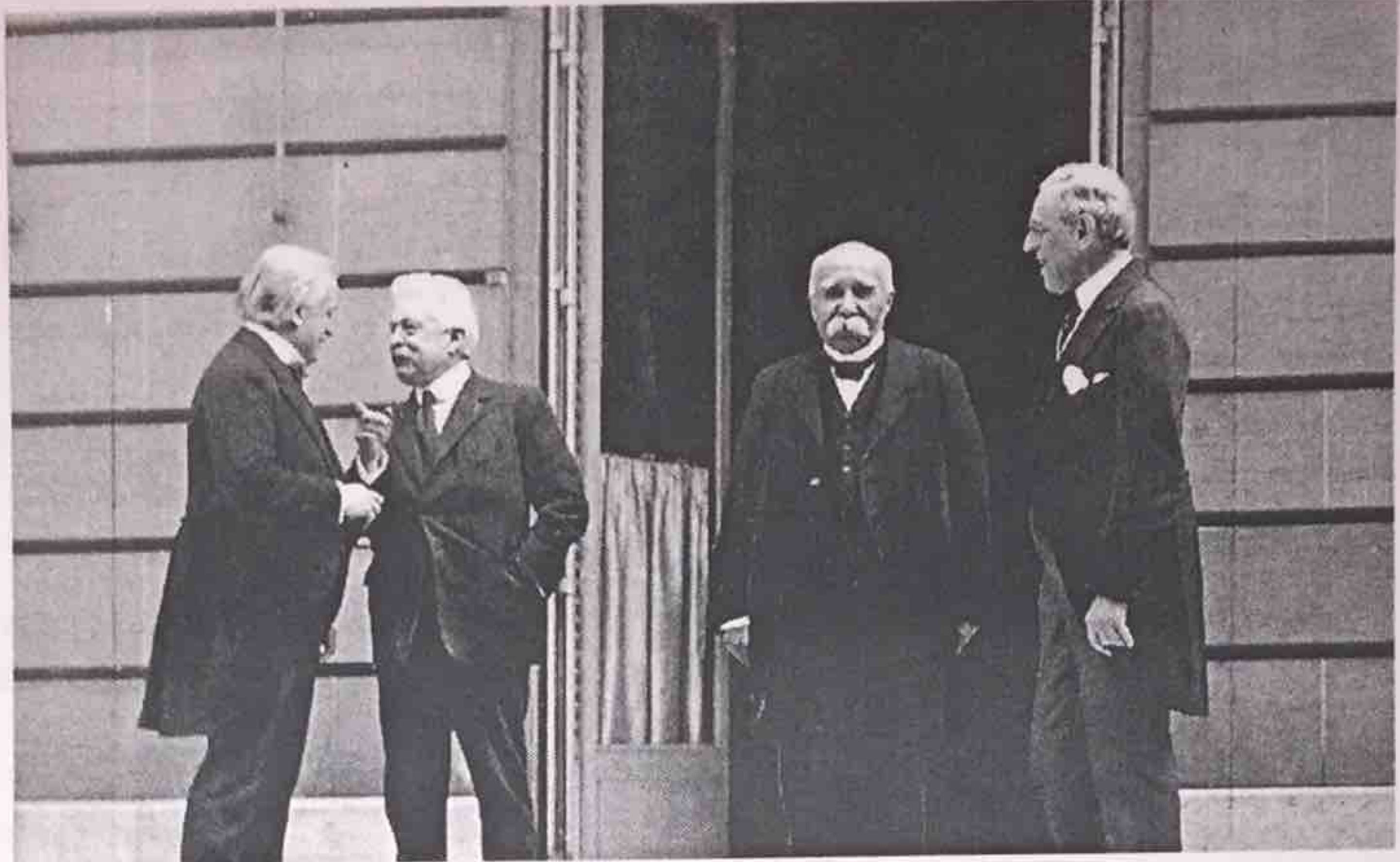
## The League of Nations

The League of Nations was the predecessor of the United Nations. The League was a far-reaching effort to prevent war and maintain international peace. It lasted for twenty-six years, between 1920 and 1946, and its failures led to the creation of the United Nations.

### *How did the League of Nations intend to serve as the “conscience of the world?”*

The United States entered World War I in April 1917. Nine months earlier, President Wilson had proposed a plan to end the fighting and prevent future conflict. Wilson suggested the creation of a new international organization. The organization would eliminate the causes of war by encouraging open diplomacy, securing freedom of the seas, developing free trade, and reducing the production and trade in arms. He called this permanent global organization the League of Nations. Wilson believed that if states held one another accountable for preserving peace, each would behave more conscientiously in its international relations. In this way, Wilson hoped the League of Nations would serve as the “conscience of the world.”

In a document known as the League of Nations Covenant, Wilson and other world leaders outlined the principles of the proposed organization. A central feature of the covenant was the idea of “collective security.” Collective security was based on a member’s promise “to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League.” It urged states to respond to an attack on any League member as though it were an attack on itself.



The “Big Four”—Prime Minister Lloyd George of Britain, Prime Minister Orlando of Italy, Premier Clemenceau of France, and U.S. President Wilson—played leading roles in the creation of the League of Nations. May 1919.

Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

Many people in the United States bristled at the idea of collective security. Critics of the League of Nations said signing would obligate U.S. troops to fight in conflicts abroad. They worried that joining the League would threaten the sovereignty of the United States. Furthermore, Wilson’s conflicts with congressional leaders hampered any possibilities for compromise. Wilson, a Democrat, did not include Republicans in the drafting of the covenant. In response to this snub, his opponents in the Senate were skeptical of his ideas before they even reached the table. In 1920, the U.S. Senate defied Wilson and rejected U.S. participation in the League.

### *Why did the League of Nations fail?*

The organization began to fail after the League of Nations Covenant took effect in January 1920. The League did not have the power to compel sovereign states to respect its authority. Members had little incentive to honor their pledges of cooperating to stop aggression, protect human rights, and limit the production and spread of armaments. The League required unanimous decisions, and differences of opinion prevented it from acting in many cases.

The League struggled to live up to its

promise of being a global organization. Because the covenant's authors were enemies of Germany during World War I, the covenant reflected anti-German sentiments. Britain and France saw to it that Germany and a number of other important countries, such as the Soviet Union, were excluded from League membership. Their exclusion, along with the fact that the United States never joined, diminished the League's credibility.

**“[The] League was considered a European and not a world organization.”**

—Lord Edward Grey,  
British foreign minister

## The UN Takes Shape

When World War II (1939-1945) erupted, the League of Nations' goal of preventing another world conflict had clearly failed. Not only did the death toll of World War II surpass that of World War I, but the fighting caused unparalleled destruction. The war also alerted the international community to the human capability for mass execution of civilians on an unprecedented scale, known as genocide. The search for a lasting solution to conflict had never been more urgent.

### *What conditions made a new international organization possible?*

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and U.S. involvement in World War II made people in the United States aware of how connected countries and their conflicts could be. As a result, the U.S. public became more open to international cooperation regarding matters of peace and security. Other governments saw new value in international organizations as well. While governments resolved to abandon the League of

Nations, they focused on creating an international organization that could serve as the League's replacement.

**“If it [the League] were to disappear today, nearly every treaty of a political character which has been concluded during these thirteen years would vanish with it.... A state of chaos would result.... [T]he first task which would confront the statesmen on the League's disappearance would be to reinvent the League.”**

—League Secretary-General Eric Drummon

President Franklin R. Roosevelt, who had denounced the creation of the League in 1932, took the lead in creating a new international institution, the United Nations. Recalling President Wilson's inability to get the League of Nations Covenant passed in Congress, Roosevelt did not bring the United Nations Charter to Congress for approval until he knew he had the votes to guarantee ratification.

### *How was the UN established?*

President Roosevelt died before the United Nations could be officially established. However, his successor, Harry S. Truman (1945-1953), was determined to carry out



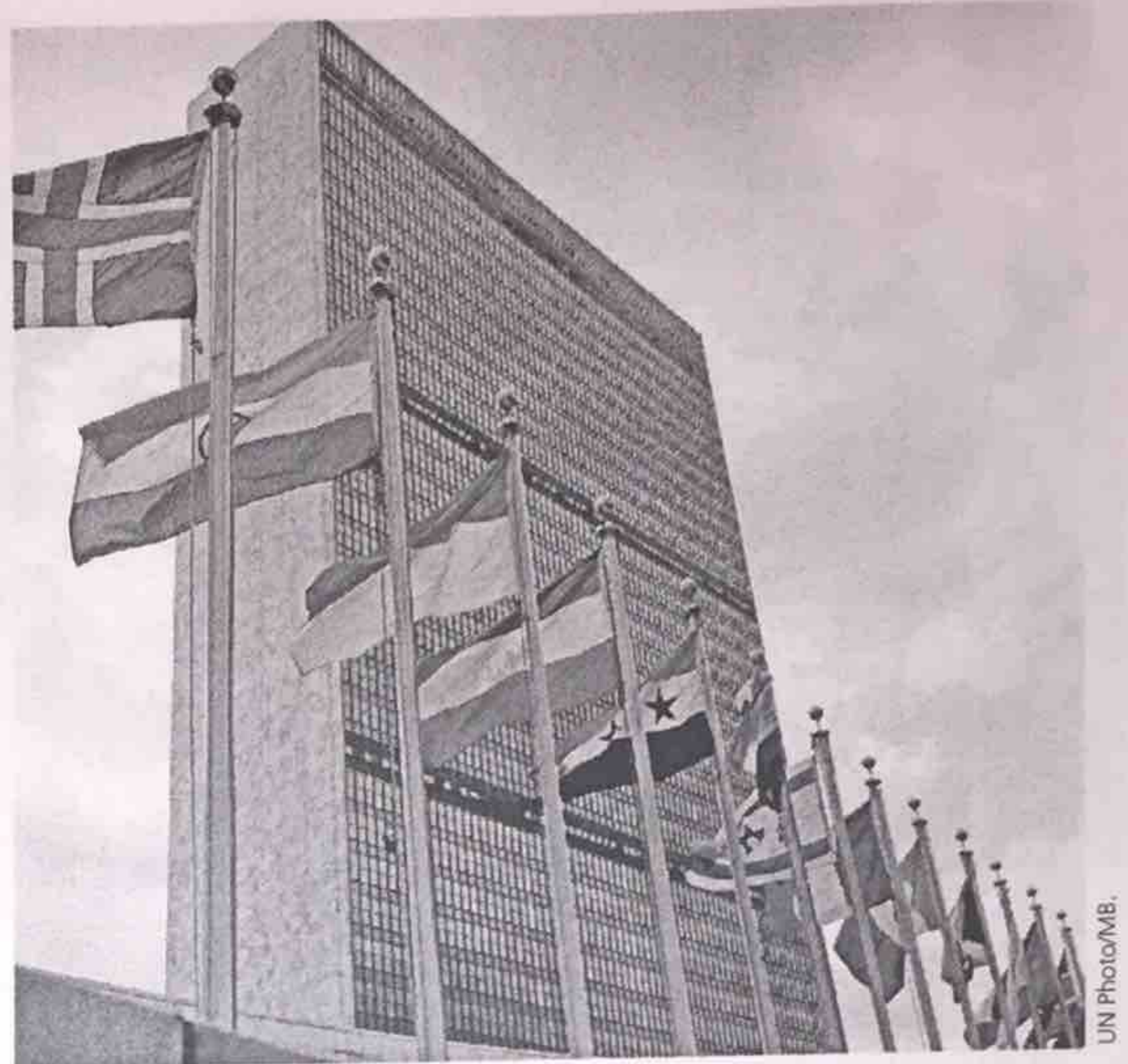
Egypt signs the UN Charter, June 6, 1945, San Francisco.

United Nations photo library.

Roosevelt's vision for the UN. On June 25, 1945, just weeks before the end of World War II, fifty countries gathered in San Francisco to approve the United Nations Charter. Of the fifty states to sign the United Nations' founding document, only a handful played a role in its drafting: Britain, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The League of Nations ceased to exist and transferred its powers to the United Nations.

In early 1946, the United Nations set up its headquarters in New York City. The decision to house the UN headquarters in New York marked a new phase in the history of the international community. Prior to the two world wars, Europe was seen as the center of international politics, but World War I and World War II had called European stability into question, and the United States emerged as a strong and stable player in the international arena.

Many in the world believed that placing the headquarters of the United Nations in the United States would help engage the U.S. public in world politics. The technological capabilities, democratic media, and available facilities in the United States made it a practical choice as well. People in the United States saw hosting the UN headquarters as a step toward spreading U.S. values and pursuing U.S. interests abroad.



UN headquarters in New York City.

#### *What are the core values of the UN Charter?*

**Sovereignty:** The first underlying principle of the United Nations Charter is the sovereignty of all member states. Sovereignty means the authority of a state to govern itself without outside interference. Governments support the UN on the condition that their right to govern themselves will be respected. At the same time, the charter gives the permanent members of the Security Council authoritative power over others.

**Self-determination:** Self-determination is the right of a people to choose their own

### Choosing a Headquarters

In a vote of 30 to 14, the UN decided to place its headquarters in the United States. Switzerland, though it had housed the League of Nations, had concerns about hosting the United Nations. Its priority after World War II was to maintain neutrality. (In fact, Switzerland did not join the UN until 2002.) Indeed, the failure of the League of Nations had tainted all of Europe as a site for the new international organization.

Cities like Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia and New York vied for the honor. New York City was chosen as the temporary site. U.S. oil businessman John D. Rockefeller offered the UN \$8.5 million in order to purchase a specific piece of property in New York City. The deal was settled, and the United Nations set up headquarters in New York City in early 1946. The UN headquarters remains in New York City today.

government. Examples of self-determination include the right to establish a constitution, run for office, and vote for local and national officials. The cause of self-determination has inspired nations to challenge empires and states that rule them. Throughout history, some world leaders have viewed self-determination struggles as a threat to international peace and stability. With thousands of ethnic groups in the world, fully honoring the principle of self-determination could lead to the creation of thousands of states.

**Territorial Integrity:** Territorial integrity is the idea that international boundaries should not forcibly be changed. The United Nations is committed to respecting boundaries.

### *What controversies surrounded the creation of the UN Charter?*

In the nearly seventy years of its existence, the UN Charter has undergone few changes. As the first international treaty of its scale, the charter is one of the most important documents in international relations. Still, there are a number of provisions in the charter that have been subject to multiple interpretations and disagreement over the years.

In 1945, some delegates insisted that the charter promote self-determination and racial equality. But this line of thinking ran contrary to the practices of member states that maintained colonies overseas, such as France, Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Colonial systems were often characterized by violence, racial oppression, and segregation. In the case of the United States, racial discrimination was part of many states' laws.

Though the perspectives of numerous peoples who lived under colonial rule and systems of racial oppression were not included in the creation of the United Nations Charter,



**GLOBAL DEMOCRACY**

Kirk Anderson. Reprinted with permission from Artizans.com.

some delegates present echoed concerns about discrepancies between the values the UN's founders claimed to uphold and the ongoing injustice that prevailed around the world.

**“[T]he peoples of the world are on the move. They have been given a new courage by the hope of freedom for which we fought in this war. Those of us who have come from the murk and mire of the battlefields, know that we fought for freedom, not of one country, but for all peoples and for all the world.”**

—Carlos Romulo, delegate from the Philippines at the San Francisco Conference, 1945

Ultimately, the UN Charter prioritized the principle of sovereignty over these emerging concerns. In this way, colonial powers and, later, other world leaders could defend their actions by claiming sovereignty protected them from outside interference.

## **The Structure of the UN**

The United Nations is a vast organization spanning the globe that employs more than fifty thousand people. UN employees perform a wide variety of tasks and include scien-

tists, doctors, diplomats, refugee and disaster specialists, security personnel, and administrators.

The organization is divided into sections known as “organs.” There are six principal organs of the UN: the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Secretariat, the International Court of Justice, the Economic and Social Council, and the Trusteeship Council (see box).

#### ***Who sits on the Security Council?***

The UN’s executive body, the Security Council, holds the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. The Charter gives only the Security Council the legal authority to enforce its decisions through diplomatic or military action.

The Security Council has fifteen seats: five permanent and ten nonpermanent. Elections are held every year for half of the nonpermanent seats. Their terms are for two years. Current practice allocates five elected seats to African and Asian states, two to Latin American and Caribbean states, one to an Eastern European state, and two to Western European

and “Other” states. (The UN uses “Other” to refer to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Turkey, and Israel.)

The five remaining seats belong to the permanent members—the United States, Britain, France, China, and Russia. Each of the five permanent members has the right to veto Security Council decisions. (To veto means to prevent a resolution from being enacted.) In order for a resolution to pass, nine of the fifteen members on the Security Council must vote in its favor, and no permanent member can use the veto. All UN members are legally required to abide by resolutions of the Security Council.

#### ***Why has the veto power of permanent members of the Security Council been criticized?***

The five major victors of World War II granted themselves the exclusive power to veto resolutions. The veto power gave the permanent members a final say in UN Security Council resolutions.

Other founding members of the UN expressed concerns over the fairness of the

### **The Six Organs of the United Nations**

**The Security Council:** The Security Council is the UN body responsible for peace and security. It is the most powerful of the six organs. The Charter gave the five major victors of World War II—Britain, China, the Soviet Union (now, Russia), the United States, and France—permanent positions on the UN Security Council.

**The General Assembly:** The General Assembly is composed of representatives from every UN member state. Votes in the General Assembly carry moral weight, but are not binding.

**The International Court of Justice (ICJ):** The ICJ is the judicial organ of the United Nations. Cases come before the ICJ only when all parties (states, not individuals) involved agree to appear in court.

**The Secretariat:** The Secretariat carries out the decisions of the organs of the United Nations and is the administrative section of the UN. The secretary-general is the head of the Secretariat.

**The Economic and Social Council:** The Economic and Social Council coordinates the work of the UN’s specialized agencies, functional committees, and regional commissions, which do much of the UN’s work.

**The Trusteeship Council:** The Trusteeship Council oversaw the transition of colonies to self-government or independence. This organ ceased regular operations on November 1, 1994, and now only convenes as needed.

veto power. They worried that disagreements among the permanent members of the Security Council could create deadlocks that would hinder the UN's ability to maintain peace and security. Although permanent members vowed not to obstruct operations of the council with their veto power, many states were skeptical of this promise. At the same time, they conceded that the full participation of the five permanent members was essential for the UN to succeed where the League of Nations had failed.

While the status of the five permanent members of the Security Council has not changed since 1945, it has not gone unchallenged. Two important historical periods—the Cold War and the era of decolonization—had dramatic consequences for international politics and highlight some of the issues surrounding representation and power in the UN.

### ■ The Cold War

Many of the original UN members' concerns over the veto power quickly proved valid. Following World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union became involved

in a long, drawn-out conflict that caused more than forty years of hostility between these two states and their allies. This conflict, known as the Cold War, lasted roughly between 1947 and 1989 and limited the Security Council's ability to respond to global issues.

### *What was the role of the UN during the Cold War?*

While the UN Charter enshrined international cooperation, the United States and the Soviet Union—two permanent members of the Security Council—were locked in an ideological battle during the Cold War. The Security Council could not act without their joint permission. The Security Council passed an average of fifteen resolutions a year during the Cold War. Today, the Security Council typically passes one resolution per week.

Nevertheless, three important developments took place during this period. First, the UN established a peacekeeping program and began its first operation in 1948. During the Cold War, there were eighteen peacekeeping operations around the world. Second, the UN became an international leader on issues of development, human rights, and the environ-



In July 1967, the UN hosted the "Seminar on Apartheid, Racial Discrimination, and Colonialism in Southern Africa." The photograph above depicts the opening ceremony in Kitwe, Zambia.

UN Photo #116280.



ment. Finally, less powerful countries of the world discovered that the UN was a forum to voice their concerns. The UN became an important tool for many African and Southeast Asian countries that were striving for independence from colonialism.

### ■ Decolonization

At the same time the Cold War was taking place, decolonization movements were growing in strength across the world. Colonies in Africa and Asia became independent states and gained UN membership. The UN played a significant role encouraging independence for colonies. In 1960, the General Assembly adopted the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.” The declaration reinforced the UN’s commitment to self-determination.

**“The subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and cooperation.”**

—“Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples,” December 14, 1960

With increased membership, criticism of the distribution of power on the Security Council grew louder. Newly independent countries argued that the Security Council

underrepresented countries from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In 1965, the UN General Assembly added four nonpermanent (elected) seats to the council, bringing the total to the current number of ten. The Assembly also established quotas for the number of seats filled by different regions of the world.

Overall, decolonization rapidly expanded UN membership from 51 in 1945 to 159 countries in 1990.

### *How did the end of the Cold War affect the United Nations?*

Improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union brought the Cold War to an end in the late 1980s. When the Soviet Union dissolved, former Soviet republics became independent countries and UN membership grew even more.

The end of the Cold War was a rebirth for the UN. Cooperation among the permanent members grew, while demands on the UN were greater than ever. One of the pressing concerns was how to appropriately address the fact that membership had nearly quadrupled since the UN Charter had first been signed. In addition, the changing nature of global concerns required the Security Council to consider the reach of its authority.

The next section will discuss the leading concerns of the UN today—representation in the Security Council, peacekeeping, and human rights—and consider several of the debates surrounding these topics.