‘A Great Day in History’
Brian Urquhart, NYRB, January 15, 2004

_Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations_
by Stephen C. Schlesinger
Westview, 374 pp., $27.50

In April 1945, as the Allied forces poured into Germany, Franklin Roosevelt’s dream of an international security organization, conceived in the heat of war, was about to become a reality. The arrangements for the San Francisco Conference were nearly complete, and the poet Archibald MacLeish had started work on the President’s opening speech. On April 12, thirteen days before the conference was to open, Roosevelt died. In the shadow of an immense and universal grief, his conference went ahead as planned. I remember that, to me, serving in Germany, it seemed a magic moment, a revival of hope, common sense, and the possibility of a decent future.

Inexplicably, for nearly sixty years there has been no readable history of this milestone in the search for a better way to run the world. Stephen Schlesinger’s _Act of Creation_ goes a very long way toward providing one. His account of the birth of the United Nations describes in lively detail the personalities and the dramas that attended, and sometimes nearly aborted, the conference which, after nine weeks of unremitting labor, produced the United Nations Charter. His book also shows how uncertain this venture was, even at its creation. For those now earnestly searching for ways to revitalize the world organization, this book will provide some very useful background information.

1.

Schlesinger shows how much the United Nations was the personal creation of Franklin Roosevelt, and how, to the day of his death, he kept the process moving and brought along his far less enthusiastic wartime allies, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin. Already in 1939 Roosevelt had instructed his then secretary of state, Cordell Hull, to set up a team in the State Department to work on postwar international security. From the start, a Russian-born economist, Leo Pasvolsky, was the mastermind of this work. This now forgotten hero remained the central figure in the development and drafting of the UN Charter until its final approval at San Francisco six years later. Pasvolsky’s determination to build a strong centralized world body rather than a regionalized one was immensely important to the ultimate design of the United Nations.

Roosevelt had attended the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference when the League of Nations was discussed only as one of the myriad problems of the peace settlement. With this depressing experience in mind, he insisted that the United Nations Charter should be the sole subject of a conference that would take place under United States auspices before the fighting stopped. “This time,” he told Congress,

we shall not make the mistake of waiting until the end of the war to set up the machinery of peace. This time, as we fight together to get the war over quickly, we work together to keep it from happening again….
Roosevelt took great pains to keep the United States Congress on his side. He also insisted that a major effort be made to win over the people of the United States before the Charter was to be considered by an international conference. To this end, he launched a nationwide public relations campaign that was headed by Archibald MacLeish and Adlai Stevenson, a brilliant young lawyer and public servant. Ironically, the success of this effort to sell the as yet unborn world organization to the American people—94 percent were estimated to be in favor of San Francisco—has sometimes been blamed for the eventual, perhaps inevitable, disillusionment with the less impressive reality of the United Nations.

The New York Times columnist Anne O’Hare McCormick, Roosevelt’s closest confidante among journalists, wrote that it was primarily because of the United Nations that he made “the hard, perhaps fatal, trip to Yalta…. ” Schlesinger quotes McCormick’s account of her last interview with Roosevelt:

He was looking to the inauguration of the San Francisco Conference as the crowning act of his career…. He prepared it, set the time and place of the meeting, speeded up the preparations in the belief that it was supremely urgent…. All his hopes of success in life and immortality in history were set on getting an international security organization in motion.

Roosevelt had even mentioned to his inner circle that he would consider resigning the presidency when the war was over in order to become secretary-general of the United Nations.

Harry Truman was, in his own way, a no less fervent supporter of the future world organization. Schlesinger mentions that from his early days Truman had carried in his wallet the famous visionary verses from Tennyson’s Locksley Hall that culminate in the lines, “Till the war-drum throbbed no longer and the battle-flags were furl’d/In the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World.” Truman’s first act as president was to confirm that the San Francisco Conference would go ahead as planned.

2.

Roosevelt had personally appointed the United States delegation to San Francisco. It was headed by the secretary of state, Edward R. Stettinius, a former chairman of the board of US Steel, chairman of the War Resources Board, and later supervisor of Lend-Lease. As the opening date of the conference approached, a well-founded rumor circulated that Truman intended to replace Stettinius as secretary of state with Senator James F. Byrnes. After demanding reassurances of support from Truman, Stettinius took up his extremely challenging San Francisco assignment even though his future was in fact uncertain.

The delegation included the recently converted isolationist Republican senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan; the humorous and cantankerous chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democratic Senator Tom Connally of Texas; Governor Harold Stassen of Minnesota, a strong internationalist; Adlai Stevenson; Nelson Rockefeller, who was to deal with Latin American questions; Averell Harriman with the Soviet Union, where he had been ambassador; and John Foster Dulles. These headstrong
personalities, some with strong views of their own, had to be kept in line on day-to-day decisions on US policy as well as on the handling of the crises, large and small, that erupted during the conference. Truman, whom Stettinius consulted daily by telephone, was unfailingly supportive so long as both the Republican and Democratic members of the delegation were in agreement.

The backing of two parties in particular, the US Congress and the Soviet Union, was vital to the ultimate success of the conference. As president of the conference, Stettinius had also to preside over the daily meetings of the Big Five foreign ministers: France, Great Britain, the US, the USSR, and China. (France, thinking better of its original idea of leading the smaller nations, asked to become the fifth big power during the conference.) The Big Five had a veto over proposals coming before the conference and frequently disagreed among themselves. Vyacheslav Molotov, the dour and unpredictable foreign minister of the Soviet Union, required special handling. Other groups—the Latin Americans or the smaller states opposed to the veto—also demanded constant attention.

One of Schlesinger’s many important contributions is his reinstatement of Stettinius as a serious public figure. Washington tended to be prejudiced against Stettinius, who was seen as a rich outsider, superficial, inexperienced in international diplomacy, and generally maladroit. His achievements at San Francisco, as described in detail by Schlesinger, belie such criticism. Stettinius’s handling of the presidency of the conference was a major factor in its success. In the last days of the conference, he was informed that Byrnes would indeed replace him as secretary of state and that he would be offered the post of the first United States permanent representative to the UN. He served in this post in London and New York for only six months. An affable, always smiling, theatrically handsome man with snow-white hair, black eyebrows, and unnaturally white teeth, he treated his fellow ambassadors as honored guests and was generally well liked, if not widely respected. Once the news of his replacement as Truman’s secretary of state became public, his achievements at San Francisco were quickly forgotten. Stettinius died in 1949 at the age of fifty and was belatedly praised by Averell Harriman as “one of the most underrated Secretaries of State.”

For the foreign delegates at San Francisco, many of whom came directly from the wreck and squalor of war in their own countries, the sparkling beauty of the city itself and the conference’s vision of hope, peace, and a new beginning were dazzling. Schlesinger quotes Francis Williams, the British wartime controller of the press and censorship, who described coming “from blacked-out London into a fantastic world of glitter and light and extravagant parties and food and drink and constantly spiralling talk.” The United States assumed all costs of the meeting, including the travel of many of the delegates. Special trains brought some of them across the country from Washington; US military transport planes delivered others, including Molotov. (In an effort to ensure that nothing went wrong, the United States bugged the communications of forty-three of the forty-five original delegations.) There were 850 delegates, including 37 foreign ministers and 5 prime ministers; 1,000 members of the secretariat and 120 interpreters; and, dwarfing all other groups, 2,500 journalists.

Schlesinger quotes the remark of Arthur Krock of The New York Times that San Francisco was “the most over-reported of all international conferences.” John F.
Kennedy, on his first journalistic assignment, was an accredited reporter, as were, more surprisingly, Lana Turner, Orson Welles, and Rita Hayworth. The most celebrated American journalists and commentators—and they were all there—played an important, and not always helpful, part in the proceedings. As Anne O’Hare McCormick put it, finding it hard at best to drum up daily interest in a drafting job, especially in competition with a crashing drama of action in the war theaters, the reporters tend to exaggerate the tugs and pulls that are bound to develop in such meetings and to describe them in terms of real warfare as “victories” or “retreats.”

Krock and his colleague at the Times James Reston, who had better official sources than anyone else, persuaded Stettinius to appoint Adlai Stevenson to brief United States correspondents. “I’m the official leak,” Stevenson told them.

While his every action was dissected and publicly commented on in the national press, Stettinius had to deal with a series of political dilemmas, each of which could, theoretically, wreck the conference. He soon found out that the most sensitive discussions within his own delegation would invariably be leaked to Reston, complicating immeasurably his dealings with Molotov and Andrei Gromyko, and sometimes with other delegations as well. The most difficult problems were with Molotov. United States public opinion was still largely friendly to the Soviet Union, a wartime ally still fighting the Nazis and with twenty million dead. Commentators as different as Walter Lippmann and I.F. Stone were sensitive to any positions that appeared to take an unduly hard line with the Soviets. Harriman and Vandenberg, on the other hand, were more skeptical. Molotov himself was certainly aware of these differing perceptions and exploited them skillfully.

Stalin, fearful of being outvoted, had originally proposed that all sixteen Soviet republics be members of the future UN. After Yalta that proposal had come down to Belarus and Ukraine, which seemed acceptable until the Latin American group, with its commanding bloc of votes, announced that it would not vote for Belarus and Ukraine unless Argentina was admitted. Argentina, with its pro-Nazi war record, was a particularly bitter pill for Washington and its allies to swallow, and Molotov upped the ante by insisting that Poland, under the Soviet-imposed Lublin government, should also be immediately admitted. The conference finally voted in favor of the two Soviet republics and Argentina, and critics on all sides were quick to blame Stettinius for the compromise. The inclusion of Poland was only solved later in the conference by an agreement reached by the ailing Harry Hopkins in talks with Stalin in Moscow.

Nearly one thousand pages of amendments to the draft of the Charter were tabled by the smaller nations, but the work of considering them, the main business of the conference, was usually overshadowed by highly publicized differences with the Soviet Union. There was also a major crisis with the Latin American group over regional responsibility for security—a confrontation that finally resulted in three new articles in the Charter, including Article 52, which accepts a role for regional organizations in the maintenance of international peace and security.

The most controversial question at the conference, Schlesinger points out, was the Big Five veto in the Security Council. As Arthur Vandenberg put it, “The veto makes it
difficult to maintain the semblance of sovereign equality.” The smaller nations, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Herbert Evatt of Australia, made a spirited attempt to challenge, or at least to limit, the veto, but their initiative was doomed because they needed the United Nations more than the big powers did and knew that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would join the organization without the veto.

Although Pasvolsky had managed, earlier on, to get agreement that the veto would be restricted to “substantive” matters in the Security Council, a late and unexpected crisis arose when the smaller nations submitted twenty-three questions relating to the veto. This irritated Gromyko—Molotov had gone home when the war in Europe ended on May 8—who asserted the right of a permanent member to veto a decision on whether a matter was procedural or substantive. Then, moving further into the realm of the absurd, Gromyko claimed that the veto applied even to the discussion of such a question.

No Western government could agree to such a muzzling of the Security Council, and to complicate matters further, Reston’s faithful source in the US delegation allowed him to reveal that Stettinius had appealed to Harry Hopkins in Moscow to take the matter up with Stalin. This leak seemed likely to make any withdrawal too humiliating for the Soviet leadership, and the San Francisco Conference, now in its final days, appeared to be on the edge of collapse. Miraculously, Stalin, happy at the compromise over Poland, a country in which the Soviet Union now held all the cards, told Hopkins that the veto on discussion was an insignificant matter and accepted the United States position. For the last time the conference was saved. The smaller states were so unnerved by this crisis that their campaign to limit the veto petered out.

The stage designers Jo Mielziner and Oliver Lundquist had devised a lavish setting for the ceremonial signing of the Charter on May 25 in the San Francisco Opera House. At the beginning of his speech, President Truman exclaimed, “Oh, what a great day this can be in history!”

3.

Truman was right to qualify his enthusiasm by using the word “can.” San Francisco had produced an international charter that marked a considerable advance on anything that had preceded it and turned out to be surprisingly flexible and pragmatic as a guide to international action. However, the way the United Nations was supposed to carry out its primary task, maintaining international peace and security, was based on assumptions that soon turned out to be false.

The Charter, written while the war was still going on, took the wartime alliance as the basis for its system of peacetime collective security, the main wartime allies becoming the veto-wielding five permanent members of the Security Council, with special responsibility for monitoring, and if necessary enforcing, world peace. In the euphoria of 1945 the Military Staff Committee, which consisted of the chiefs of staff of the five permanent members and was to advise the Security Council on enforcement measures and on arms control, was sometimes referred to as “the teeth of the Charter.” The Charter provisions for dealing forcefully with threats to the peace and acts of aggression were hailed as a historic step forward, but, as Adlai Stevenson told the Chicago Bar
Association in June 1945, “Everything depends on the active participation, pacific intentions, and good faith of the Big Five.”

Within three years, the biggest potential threat to world peace was the mutual hostility among the five permanent members themselves. By the time of the Berlin blockade in 1948, the Charter’s much-touted forceful machinery for keeping the peace and dealing with aggressors was paralyzed, if not already dead. It was successfully invoked in 1950 over Korea only because the Soviet Union had foolishly absented itself from the Security Council in protest over the nonrecognition by the other members of the People’s Republic of China. The Soviet representatives never again absented themselves from the Council, even for a moment.

In the belief that arms races always lead to war, Article 26 of the Charter called for a system for the regulation of armaments as being essential both for maintaining peace and security and for the economic well-being of states. Already at San Francisco, amid a general feeling that universal disarmament might only be a matter of time, Averell Harriman, fresh from Moscow, was warning that the United States must maintain its wartime military establishment. Within three years, far from developing systems of arms control, let alone disarmament, the most devastating military buildup in history, including nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, was underway on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Although there were heated discussions about self-government, even independence, for colonial territories at San Francisco, the actual fact of decolonization still seemed far away. The acceleration of the decolonization process after Indian independence in 1947, and its virtual completion in less than twenty-five years, was certainly not anticipated in 1945. Decolonization was the main cause of the increase in the UN’s membership from fifty-one to its present 192 members, and of the organization giving new emphasis to economic and social development. It also provided the largest voting bloc in the General Assembly, the so-called third world, so that Western countries no longer had an automatic majority. The Assembly, of course, had no authority to take direct action in matters involving international peace and security.

During the cold war, with its capacity for forceful action under the Charter largely paralyzed, the Security Council was forced to seek new means of responding to dangerous situations. These included peacekeeping, conciliation, and quiet diplomacy as well as an expansion of the role of the secretary-general, who had originally been seen as a largely administrative official, to include political action. The Council also provided a last resort for negotiations and compromise among the mutually hostile permanent members, while through peacekeeping operations, a method not foreseen in the Charter, it was often able to contain regional conflicts—for example, in the Middle East, the subcontinent, or Africa—that might otherwise have triggered an East–West confrontation.

4.

“The Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World” was not what Roosevelt, Churchill, or Stalin had chiefly in mind in 1945. First of all they wanted an organization
that would stop aggressors and prevent another world war. This organization would be dominated, in peace and security matters at any rate, by the five Great Powers. Because the participation of the United States and the Soviet Union was essential for the success of such an organization, they got what they wanted. For them, as Schlesinger makes clear, the other parts of the Charter, for example economic and social matters and international law, which are now the largest part of the UN’s work, were important but secondary.

When in 1990 the end of the cold war theoretically enabled the Security Council to function as originally intended, the composition of the group of permanent members was already something of an anachronism. Efforts to make the Security Council reflect the world power situation of the early twenty-first century have so far been frustrated. The fact that the veto applies to revisions of the Charter may well make it difficult to change the present permanent membership without unreasonably increasing the number of permanent members.

An even more serious question is the place and function of the United Nations in the very confused international world of the early twenty-first century. In 1945, after six years of world war, the task seemed clear enough—to stop aggressors, reduce armaments, reconstruct a shattered world, and support the evolution of international law, economic and social development, decolonization, and human rights. How could any nation fail to cooperate in such a program? Even in 1990, after the cold war and the Soviet Union had both come to an end, there was a brief period, ending with the first Iraq war—which was fully authorized by the Security Council—when it seemed possible that the world organization might begin to function as its founders had intended.

Now the place of the United Nations in maintaining international security and stability is less clear. The nations of the world have yet to agree on the best way to handle relatively new threats like large-scale terrorism or nuclear proliferation, or the now critical problem of “failed” and sometimes “rogue” states. There is still no clear consensus about humanitarian or any other form of intervention. Religion and race are once again causing serious international tension in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, as well as in the relations between Islam and the Western world. The single superpower, the world’s indispensable leader in dangerous times, has, for the moment at least, replaced the basic principle embodied in Article 2.4 of the Charter—that all nations shall refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state—with the announcement of its right to take preventive or preemptive action, including forcible “regime change.” The doctrine of unilateral action, if widely adopted, would very soon lead to international anarchy and worse.

Perhaps most debilitating of all, the original idea that the UN’s capacity to maintain peace and security would derive from a dedicated and unanimous group of great powers in the Security Council has been seriously weakened, both by disagreement among those powers themselves, most recently over Iraq, and by the fact that several of the world’s most powerful nations are not permanent members of the Security Council.

It is possible that sobering experience with the doctrine of preventive war, especially in Iraq, may cause Washington to reconsider the wisdom of going it alone. In a recent
the British historian Robert Skidelsky considers how the “New American Century” may develop. He believes that if it is pursued, the attempt to establish unilaterally a Pax Americana will inevitably break down because of increasing opposition and anti-Americanism and because of the unsustainable drain on the resources of the United States.

Skidelsky believes that the unilateral American quest for security brings no real security, only an indefinite extension of insecurity. He therefore suggests a new form of multilateralism designed to bring the United States “back within the fold of international law through a reform of the UN charter.” This reform would address a single question: “How can military intervention, which may be justified in today’s world, be reconciled with the rule of law as embodied in the UN Charter?” Skidelsky lists the grounds for intervention that go beyond the limits now defined by the Charter. They include genocide and humanitarian disaster, prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and, possibly, to rescue peoples from gross misgovernment. “The most important need today,” he writes,

is not to create a universal democracy—a parliament of the world—but to restore collegiality among those countries which, however unevenly, have power to shape the future. Such power is the best way to preserve the independence and to protect the interests of small countries.

To deal effectively with threats to peace and security requires not only power but the willingness to act expeditiously. A core of powerful states is still essential to the Security Council’s effectiveness, and the United States must be one of them. I have quoted Skidelsky at some length because his idea cuts through much of the diplomatic fog that often surrounds discussion of the shortcomings of the UN and suggests one possible way in which the organization might become better attuned to the very real dangers of our time, while also reducing the dangers and divisive effects of unilateral US action.

The delegates at San Francisco, although they were unaware of the nuclear weapons that were about to change radically the nature of international relations and of war, recognized, however reluctantly, the absolute necessity of the great powers cooperating within, and to some extent dominating, the new world organization if it was to be able to act when necessary. The world today is more immediately dangerous than it was in 1945. Catastrophe can now come more speedily and far less predictably from sources operating outside the rules, not to mention the control, of the traditional international order, quite possibly using the terrible weapons that the world’s nations have failed to eliminate in time. Any reform of the United Nations’ peace and security function has to take account of the new face of danger. If it fails to do so, the world may go its all too possibly disastrous way without the United Nations.

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