Introduction

There are those in our world whose pleasure it is to speak ill of the United Nations, as though that organization were the source of all their frustrations, a barrier to what they regard as a healthy nationalism, and as money down the drain.

It is always difficult to argue with such people, since by nature they are more adept at expressing opinions of their own than at listening to those of others, and therefore have difficulties with the rules of debate, and the fundamental principles of democracy.

Because of this, they regard themselves as essentially political animals, always alive to any quirk of national policy not to their liking, forever writing to newspapers and to Congressmen in order to express their outrage at this or that. As often as not, they are members of pressure groups to right real or imagined wrongs, and to protect themselves against often peaceful folk who do not happen to share their views.

It stands to reason that once such people find it hard to stomach internal democracy, any form of democracy tinged with (or, in their views, tarnished with) internationalism is bound to act as an intolerable provocation.

A sophisticated idea such as the United Nations, born of the world's deceptions, and the errors of the League of Nations, which, on top of other novelties, gives small nations the illusion of being as worthy of attention as the greatest powers on this planet, is the ultimate of impertinences to them.

It stands to reason, therefore, that the agencies of the United Nations—the shop as opposed to the shop window of the General Assembly—have come in for their own share of misconception and abuse.

The International Labour Organization and UNESCO have had more than the usual share of marching and countermarching, of threat and of gesture. Even Unicef, the organization with the least controversial of platforms, comes in for its regular ration of suspicion and abuse.

'Isn't we enough undernourished and poor children of our own without bothering with those of other countries?' The cry usually emanates from rich parts of the developed world, and one must admit that, while one is often saddened by the degree of poverty in developing countries, one is sometimes shocked by the prevalence of poverty in wealthy countries. But it surely does not need an international organization to help solve problems
which are not those of dire necessity, but of policy.

Unicef directs its energies and ideas towards those who are born where history and geography have precluded a natural or available affluence, and it is right that this should be so. Its strength as an organization is the very fact of its independence from religious or political colour. One remembers that in Nigeria, Unicef was encouraged to continue its mission of mercy immediately after the conclusion of the civil war over breakaway Biafra at a time when other organizations were denied this urgent access. One may also recall the appeals from the Governments of both South and North Vietnam, as well as from the Viet Cong, for Unicef to become active even before the cessation of hostilities in order to save as many young lives as possible as the chaos of the final debacle engulfed them.

Nowadays, the initials remain, even though Unicef is no longer called the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, but merely the United Nations Children's Fund—no doubt because the emergency is ongoing and perpetual. There are always conflicts, famine and tragic migrations in the news. There has never been so much for Unicef and its sister organizations with overlapping interests, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization, to face up to.

At a time in which it is fashionable to reduce national contributions to international organizations in order to find funds for sections deemed imperative, such as defence, the ingenuity and will to survive of these servants of humanity are put to a severe test. It is remarkable with what resilience they have met the challenge.

Unicef has helped develop, and is now promoting worldwide, a cure for diarrhoeal dehydration, that great killer of babies, which costs the equivalent of 11 cents US a packet . . . hardly an extravagance. Unicef has also estimated that it is possible in this day and age to immunize all the children in the world against the handful of lethal diseases which affect childhood for a cost amounting to less than that of three strategic bombers.

Now, certainly to its pilot and to its designer one of these aircraft is a thing of beauty—and as an object of sheer design, it may well awaken feelings of aesthetic admiration in many of us. But let us compare it to a child. First of all, for all its extraordinary technical complication, it is far less sophisticated than a child. Its capacities are all destructive, and it cannot develop. It can merely age. That a child can do also, but a child can grow, in size and in experience. It can even, if it has the inclination, become the master of such a machine, or its victim, if we all lose control over the monsters we never cease creating.

Think, every time that such a machine falls from the sky by accident or design, that the supply of vaccine which could have protected millions of the world's children has been splashed uselessly over the landscape.

The time has come in the development of the human animal for a
decision to be reached. Which are more important, people or things? Despite the fact that we spend infinitely more on things, on the pretext that these things are for the ultimate benefit of people, those who regard a particular nation as being above the rest instead of part of the rest must forgive me if I vote for people. People of every colour, every race, every belief. People.

Peter Ustinov

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