What Role Among the Nations?
Excerpts from the New Book by James Skillen,
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With or Against the World?


Last December, President Bush pledged in a speech to pursue three international goals in his second term. “The first great commitment is to defend our security and spread freedom by building effective multinational and multilateral institutions and supporting effective multilateral action.” In March of this year, the president named John R. Bolton to be the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, a surprise to many because of Bolton’s well-known criticism of multilateral institutions. Bolton once said, for example, “There is no such thing as the United Nations. There is an international community that occasionally can be led by the only real power left in the world, and that is the United States when it suits our interest and we can get others to go along” (Washington Post, 3/8/05).

Now it could turn out that Bolton will become an effective agent in helping the president to transform the United Nations into an effective multinational institution. But the inherent dilemma is this: if President Bush believes in building multinational and multilateral institutions but only under U.S. leadership when it suits American interests, then the likely outcome will be the undermining and disappearance of effective multilateral institutions. The question is whether the Bush administration now, and the United States for decades to come, should have a different aim. That is the question addressed in the concluding chapter of Skillen’s book, excerpts from which follow.

The international role the U.S. should play in the decades to come is one that gives priority to helping to reform, strengthen, and create international organizations for the better governance of the world. This is essential not only to fight terrorism and to strengthen national security, though Michael Ignatieff demonstrates why terrorism “presents a very powerful argument for the reinvigoration of all forms of multinational and multilateral cooperation.” Beyond security, the priority of international institution building is essential because of the way in which the world is simultaneously shrinking...
and expanding. Human societies are rapidly becoming ever more interdependent, especially economically, which is bringing to light for all to see the diversity of human cultures, religions, and ideologies, different levels of human development, and the wide range of economic, vocational, and political ambitions of the people in this one world. Consequently, as Walter Russell Mead says, part of America’s response to the magnitude of current changes in the world “must be a new and more creative approach to issues of global governance.”

This priority does not call for revolutionary action or sudden policy shifts on the part of the U.S. To the contrary, it calls for long-term, political, economic, social, and defense policies that build out carefully and historically from contemporary domestic and international realities. Nevertheless, if the stated priority were to be adopted by successive American administrations, it would depend on and lead to significant changes in the American view of the world and to changes of considerable magnitude in American foreign and defense policies.

The American people need to gain a deeper understanding of what it means that the world’s peoples and states share a single global commons, the governance of which is becoming more and more difficult with each passing decade. The current international system, even with American military supremacy, is inadequate to deal with global crises such as terrorism, migration of peoples, spread of disease, degradation of environments, the maldistribution of basic resources, and the consequences of bad governance in many states and internationally. Democratic states depend, for example, on capital markets, says Ignatieff, but a free market in everything, including weapons of mass destruction, threatens democracy itself. “Economic globalization could become the means of our own destruction, unless globalization is accompanied by a steady expansion of regulatory capacity on the part of states, companies and international institutions. Yet no single state,” argues Ignatieff, “not even the global superpower, has the resources to police a global market in lethality. Hence all states have an interest in devising effective regimes of multilateral regulation.”

The Limits of Realism and Idealism

The modern state’s endurance as the almost universally adopted mode of organizing large numbers of people under government, is the basis for the realist approach to modern international relations. States, through their governments and citizens, can understand their own interests, their own power, and what they need to sustain themselves, say the realists. States cannot have a similar understanding of, commitment to, or responsibility for the people of other states. They cannot know what “justice for all” could possibly mean at the international level. That is why the government of any state should assume that states everywhere, just like people, act in their own interests. The most likely possibility of achieving mutual understanding and stability in the relations among states, therefore, is for each to be accurately aware of its own power and limitations, to work diligently for its own interests, and to recognize that others are doing the same. On that basis, each state can make realistic assessments of why other states are acting as they are and react accordingly. On a realistic basis, diplomacy, trade, and decisions about entering into treaties and participating in balance-
of-power arrangements can be carried forward with the greatest likelihood of sustaining one’s own state and the state system.

Over against state-centered realism stand various forms of idealism that want to transcend the limitations of the current state system. The element of truth in the various idealisms and utopianisms is that humans are indeed bound together by more than national self-interest, greed, and suspicion or hatred of foreigners. There is but one humanity in only one world. The meaning and purpose of political order is about more than calculations to protect national interests in keeping with realpolitik. Political life entails some kind of political-legal moral obligation, and there is but one world, not merely a large number of self-interested states. Governing is about right and not only about might, and therefore the question of what is right for my neighbors and for the whole world, as well as for me and my state, will not go away.

If the moment of truth in the best of realism is its recognition of the reality of states in an imperfect, competitive world, the moment of truth in the best of idealism is the recognition of ineluctable normative obligations that states and international organizations ignore at their own peril. If realists tend to overlook or discount trans-state norms of justice, idealists tend to overlook or discount the necessity of institutional enforcement of trans-national law. If realists hope that international stability can best be achieved and maintained by means of each state basing its foreign policy decisions on its own interests with carefully calculated balances of power, idealists hope that human beings who desire peace rather than war will increasingly influence their respective governments so the latter can see that even out of self-interest they should voluntarily abide by international law. Realists tend to focus attention on the state because of its historical endurance in monopolizing force for the sake of governing. Idealists tend to underestimate the tenacity and durability of states because they see so clearly what states have failed to do, namely, avoid war, and in the long-term war cannot serve the interests of people who want to live in peace.

Normative Statecraft

The challenge for the United States, today is to pursue “normative statecraft,” which necessarily entails the building of trustworthy international and transnational organizations. This means taking seriously the importance of real governing institutions, which today are mostly states, while recognizing that the normative demands of justice increasingly require more than the governance of and by states. To the extent that justice holds for the domestic obligations of states, their governments have real responsibilities to act for the public protection and well-being of their citizens, including the responsibility to defend their countries against unjust aggression (in accord with just war principles). To the extent that justice calls for upholding the common good of the international public order in ways that cannot be adequately achieved by separate states acting alone or merely in cooperation, justice requires the building of international and transnational governance capabilities that improve the quality of state responsibilities while also building out beyond state sovereignty.

The fact that states—especially the most powerful states—are generally unwilling to relinquish some of their autonomy to help create necessary international and transnational institutions does not prove the invalidity or meaninglessness of
transnational norms of justice. It is a sign, on the one hand, of a proper caution that any state should have about subjecting its citizens to rules and regimes that it does not control by itself. On the other hand, and at the same time, the reluctance of states to relinquish degrees of sovereignty confirms the limitations of the state system to achieve what will increasingly be needed for the just governance of a shrinking world and the well-being of states.

On the other hand, the fact that there is so much international injustice, particularly to the poor and to those in weaker and malformed states, does not prove the invalidity or the meaninglessness of the state as a means of governance. Some aspects of international injustice simply demonstrate the need for better and newer forms of governance that transcend the limits of states. Yet the building of those institutions will have to be done in the same way that states were (and are still being) built, namely, by the gradual efforts of states and other institutions to act in a normative fashion to achieve just governance.

“The signal failure of American foreign policy since the end of the cold war,” says Ignatieff, “has not been a lack of will to lead and to intervene; it has been a failure to imagine the possibility of a United States once again cooperating with others to create rules for the international community.” As human societies grow in complexity and become more and more interdependent internationally, the demand for international justice grows in urgency. According to Michael Sandel, “In a world where capital and goods, information and images, pollution and people, flow across national boundaries with unprecedented ease, politics must assume transnational, even global, forms, if only to keep up. Otherwise,” he says, “economic power will go unchecked by democratically sanctioned political power. Nation-states, traditionally the vehicles of self-government, will find themselves increasingly unable to bring their citizens’ judgments to bear on the economic forces that govern destinies.”

Development of the European Community into the European Union (EU) is one dynamic illustration of the tension inherent in international institution building. Questions about the welfare, health, and education policies of the EU require answers of a normative kind about the plural structure of society and the proper distribution of governmental responsibilities between national and EU-wide institutions. The more the EU becomes a publicly integrated entity beyond a mere trade zone, the greater becomes its need for transnational governance, including strong legislative and judicial branches of government at the federal level in which all the people living in EU states are adequately represented through elections. The same thing can be said for international integration in other regions and on a global scale. The more that issues of global finance, trade, environment, terrorism, war and peace, and human migration determine the conditions of political life both inside and among the states, the greater the normative demand for different kinds of international and even transnational governance with adequate representation of the people in achieving the rule of law.

Through both its strengths and its weaknesses the U.S. has helped to magnify the partial vacuum that exists in this one world of many states experiencing the growth of interdependence. That vacuum concerns international governance for the sake of
both the many states and the global commons. The U.S. has been instrumental in contributing to the development of international law and organizations over the last century, primarily in response to global military and economic crises. At its founding, the U.S. pioneered a unique experiment in confederalism and then federalism that has considerable relevance for the strengthening of transnational governance in the future. Nevertheless, in almost every instance in the twentieth century, international institutions were designed primarily to uphold the principle of national sovereignty, and particularly to preserve U.S. sovereignty. What is increasingly needed now are designs and commitments that strengthen trustworthy international governing capabilities.

One reason why some criticisms of the Bush administration have been naive is because they simply call on the president to fall back into patterns of the first Bush and the Clinton administrations. However, the international status quo was not adequate prior to 9/11. The distribution of political power and authority had changed to such an extent during and immediately after the Cold War that it had become incompatible with the structure and aims of the U.N. system itself, not to speak of the security interests of the U.S., and of the security and economic interests of other states. John Kelsay points out that the emphasis on state sovereignty when the U.N. was established was intended in part to provide protections for new states from the more powerful states as the former were emerging from colonialism. But now that the principle of state sovereignty has been established for all states, the wider concern about what makes for international peace and order must be reconsidered, including questions of humanitarian intervention and interventions to stop terrorism and to guard against the development and use of weapons of mass destruction. The U.N.’s undergirding of the principle of state sovereignty, according to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, was never intended to protect small and weak states in a way that would make room for them to cloak the violation of human rights.

We may well be facing a crisis of international law and order today more profound than the crisis that emerged with World War II and the loss of the European empires, and more profound than the crisis that gave birth to the Treaty of Westphalia. The U.N. does not represent states among which power is relatively evenly distributed and among which a political-moral consensus about international obligations is universally shared. James Traub reminds us that back in 1948, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall predicted that “should there be ‘a complete lack of power equilibrium in the world, the United Nations cannot function successfully.’” Not only is there no power equilibrium in the world today, but the U.N. does not even represent a consensus about the kind of political and legal systems its member states should have.

In the early 1990s, according to Niall Ferguson, “it seemed as if the United States had established a unipolar order. Yet today’s transnational threats such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation and organized crime—to say nothing of disease pandemics, climate change and water shortages—put a premium on cooperation, not competition, between states.” Philip Heymann stresses that American leadership requires the trust
of others. It can’t be forced on the world. “Great power can lead to great resentment as readily as to admiration.”12 All the more reason, then, for the U.S. to concentrate on working with other states to build trustworthy international institutions. Stanley Hoffmann argued almost twenty-five years ago that to develop a better world order “we need a statecraft that stresses long-term collective gains rather than short or long-term national advantages; that accepts the need for a large measure of institutionalization in international affairs, and for important commitments of resources to common enterprises; that shows great restraint in its use of means; and that goes, in its choice of ends, far beyond the realm of interstate relations.”13

None of this should be taken to suggest that I have sympathy for what Hedley Bull called “global centralism”14—a single, centralized, world state. Instead, with Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer I am leery of a type of centralization of government in the world that would, in Walzer’s words, lack the “capacity to promote peace, distributive justice, cultural pluralism, and individual freedom.”15 Sandel and Walzer both want to avoid centralized oppression as well as anarchy. For Sandel this means that sovereignty needs to be “dispersed” rather than “relocated.”

The most promising alternative to the sovereign state is not a cosmopolitan community based on the solidarity of humankind but a multiplicity of communities and political bodies—some more extensive than nations and some less—among which sovereignty is diffused. Only a politics that disperses sovereignty both upward and downward can combine the power required to rival global market forces with the differentiation required of a public life that hopes to inspire the allegiance of its citizens.16

For Walzer, even a “federation of nation states” would be too uniform and centralized, because it would probably “make its peace with material inequality” and would be too oligarchic. A global federation would more likely “be reached and sustained by pressure from the centre than by democratic activism at (to shift my metaphor) the grass roots.”17 Walzer proposes something looser and more pluralistic than a global federation, namely, “the familiar anarchy of states mitigated and controlled by a threefold set of nonstate agents: organizations like the UN, the associations of international civil society, and also regional unions like the European Community.”18 Walzer, however, does not adequately distinguish governmental from nongovernmental organizations. If there is not to be a single global federation, then undoubtedly the stronger states will have greater control of the UN, the European Community, the World Trade Organization, and other regional and global organizations, as is now the case. The most important normative question, it seems to me, is not how people and nongovernmental institutions can manage to thwart anarchy and centralization, but rather, how governments and international organizations can do justice to individual rights, nongovernmental institutions, and the resources and networks of the global commons. The question is what does just international governance require, not what should it avoid.
Ultimately, the questions about government around the world today are questions about norm-responsiveness. The answers to these questions will not be found simply by noting that democracy is better than totalitarian communism, or that democracy leads to greater happiness and prosperity for more people than does dictatorial government, or that a middle way needs to be found between anarchy and centralization. The answers will not be found simply by fighting to retain the supposedly sovereign state at all cost, and particularly the sovereignty of the United States. Rather, the U.S. should persist in a long-term commitment to cooperation with other states to build stronger, more trustworthy and sustainable international institutions that can lead, demonstrably, to a more just ordering of the international commons.

Of all the “certainties” that have been proposed and fought for in the world, one in particular has proven very durable over the centuries, namely, that there is but one world. The fact that human cultures and languages are many and that there has been more war than peace has not undermined this certainty. As the world continues to shrink with respect to the density of human interdependence, its oneness becomes all the more apparent. Yet what is also clear is that the world has not been unified by human efforts—whether imperial or democratic—even though many efforts have indeed been made to try to bring the entire “known world” under the roof of a single authority. Neither the Pharaoh nor the Roman Empire, neither the Middle Kingdom nor Christendom, neither Islam nor the modern state has been able to constitute the world as a political unity. An American imperium, even if only a military security umbrella, will also fail. The modes of human government have been plural and often in conflict. Nevertheless, the world as a single globe continues to shrink even as humans societies continue to expand and become more complex. The system of states that has been developed since 1648 is of crucial importance, but it is insufficient for the just governance of the world. The unavoidable challenge to all states, and especially to the United States, at this point in history is to decide how to cooperate in governing themselves and in building the right kind of international and transnational institutions.

Notes

5Michael Sandel, “America’s Search for a New Public Philosophy,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1996): 72. Almost twenty-five years ago, Stanley Hoffmann made a similar point: “One of our greatest present difficulties is that the transnational society which crosses borders and plays a vital role in economic affairs, communications, education, and science, as well as in the service of many good causes, does not coincide fully with the international system.” Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 222.
6The best detailed reflection on, and proposals for, European federal integration can be found in the study by the policy research center of the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (<wi@bureau.cda.nl>) titled, *Public Justice and the European Union* (The Hague, CDA, 1999).


13Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders*, 205.


16Sandel, “America’s Search,” 73-4.
