

Thomas Mallon

THE PEOPLE NEXT DOOR

A resident of New York City's Turtle Bay crosses the street and discovers the perverse lost world of the United Nations.

It's 11:05 a.m. on September 25 and here at 321 East 45th Street we are under our benign annual house arrest. In fifteen minutes President Bush will arrive at the United Nations, which is 100 or so yards away. About a dozen people are in the apartment-house lobby waiting for him to get safely up First Avenue and into the General Assembly Building, so they can get permission to leave their own building from one of the many policemen stationed on the block. On one of Ronald Reagan's visits, we had the Highway Patrol in the lobby.

Even when the President isn't making his yearly visit, this stretch of East 45th Street is one of the safest blocks in the city. The U.S. Mission to the U.N. is on the corner, and a New York City policeman occupies a kiosk outside it twenty-four hours a day. When the co-op board of 321 held its annual meeting two summers ago and considered spending money for another doorman's shift—the last one now ends at midnight—one woman argued that she hardly saw the need: the man with the Uzi near the back of the mission made her feel very safe.

It is highly unusual for the residents and property-owners of Manhattan Island to argue against additional security for themselves. But this little East River neighborhood is different: if the U.N. has failed in its aim to make the world safe, it can at least be credited with having done that for Turtle Bay. A block up from the U.S. Mission is the Turkish Center, which makes for another cop in another kiosk, presumably to discourage Armenians or Greeks bearing plastique. (The car-bomb barriers around the U.S. Mission are disguised as appealing oval-shaped planters.) But no one worries much about terrorism here; the resi-

dents are quite happy to risk the odd international outrage in exchange for all the extra deterrence to street crime. In fact I live on the first floor of 321, without bars on the windows, either.

As I sit at my desk on weekday afternoons, multilingual children's chatter drifts across the street from the International Pre-Schools. I get lunch from the U.N. Plaza Delicatessen, have clothes mended at the U.N. Cleaners, and get my hair cut at the U.N. Hair Cutters. The automatic teller at the nearest bank displays its functions in French. The neighborhood is a gentle mix of brick apartment buildings, old townhouses (a recent for-sale sign offered one ideal for a family "or small mission"), and the sort of tall green-glassed international-style structures that the U.N. brought in its postwar wake. The sloped General Assembly Building and the 39-story Secretariat tower have stood for almost forty years on the site of some old slaughterhouses, a fact which some interna-

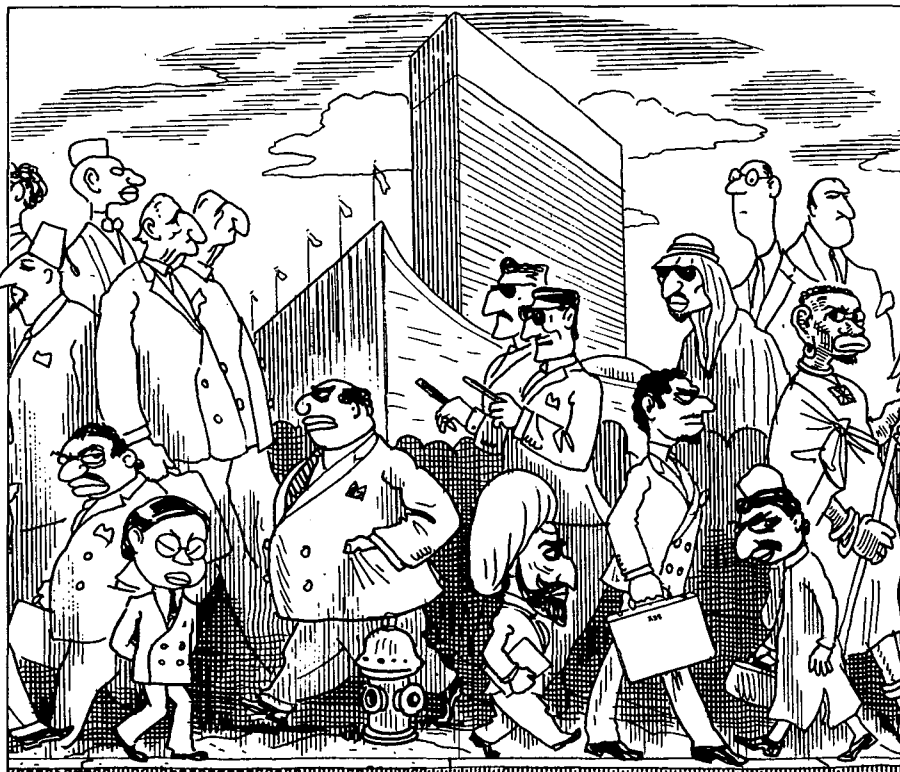
tionists probably took to be hopefully metaphorical.

It gets quiet here early. Workers at the United Nations are not known for burning the midnight oil; indeed, I often catch a bus up First Avenue at about 8:00 p.m.—hardly a late hour for people to be knocking off a day of world-salvational labor—and I am usually the only person at one of the stops closest to "the Organization," as its employees often call it. (It occurs to me that the racehorse Secretariat may have gotten his name because he always finished early.) While waiting for my bus, I ponder the quiet, enjoy the sea breezes (the East River is actually a body of salt water), and regard the glassy nighttime facades of the buildings that seem both monumental and ephemeral, like empty pavilions at a deserted world's fair.

When I moved here four years ago I hoped to be able to run in the good-sized park north of the General

Assembly Building, but the U.N. only permits strolling there. The slower pace unfortunately enforces a more lingering look at the sculptures donated by various member states. From Finland there is an uninspiring configuration of rotted-out piping, and from the Soviet Union a heroically pumped-up bronze man performing the suspiciously Biblical beating of a sword into a plowshare. In 1975 the East Germans presented "The Rising Man," who appears more cringing and tormented than anything else. Most popular of all with tourists, who are always photographing themselves beside it, is a 1988 gift from Luxembourg by Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd—a great big handgun that's twisted into an ineffectual knot atop its pedestal. Its sixties Pop Art look seems more progressive than nostalgic here, because the rest of the U.N. is eternally cloaked in the atmosphere of the fifties, from its architectural style to the blond woods of its elevators and desks and the great splashy non-representational paintings and tapestries.

WELCOME TO THE UNITED NATIONS! IT'S YOUR WORLD! says the sign for a wall of smiling Kodacolored faces of many lands and races. The U.N.'s tour begins with an explanation of the Organization's origins and the information that "the land of the U.N.," even though it was purchased with John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s money, "is not part of the USA." The Host Country is always a touchy subject, and while the tour starts by adhering to a bland moral equivalence—going past a blown-up photo of Reagan and Gorbachev shaking hands, and a kind of ballistic product map ("Nuclear Threat: Ominous Ration of Warheads to People")—one quickly gets a sense of Who's Really To Blame. There are no fewer than six cases of artifacts—broken crockery, etc.—from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as, from the latter, a radiated statue of St. Agnes and her lamb. The front is undamaged because, less than two thou-



Thomas Mallon's new book is *Stolen Words: Forays Into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism* (Ticknor & Fields).

sand feet from ground zero, it fell face forward at the moment of the blast; the back is charred and mottled. Before moving on from this unsettling display, the guide draws attention to the garden beyond the window. It contains the Peace Bell, a gift to the U.N. in 1954—from Japan.

The “partial international character to the territory,” explains another guide, is illustrated by the occasional vexing situation like the American denial of a visa to Yasir Arafat, who wished to address the General Assembly. Whatever American legal rights might have been in this matter, she says, it was really not in keeping with the spirit of the U.N.-U.S. arrangement. When asked if there have been problems like this with anyone else, she comes up with one example—that of Kurt Waldheim, whose picture is still available on postcards in the U.N. Bookshop.

The day I began attending U.N. press briefings as an accredited correspondent was July 31, when word came that Lt. Col. William Higgins, the American hostage who was serving with U.N. forces in Lebanon, had been killed in retaliation for the Israelis' kidnapping of Sheik Obeid. Between fifty and seventy-five reporters listened to a spokesman for Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the SG (as the Secretary-General is called with a kind of affectionate diminution), say that his boss “strongly hopes” Higgins is alive. But hope was followed by contingency mourning: “If the report can, however, be confirmed, the Secretary-General can only express his outrage and revulsion . . .”

Just back from Geneva, the SG would be having lunch with the Yugoslavian ambassador, and would be getting an award as “personality of the year” from some group or other—a piece of news that made two women reporters near me look at each other and laugh. The briefing is a kind of hour-by-hour diary of the SG's activities along with reports of twitching by some of the Organization's many acronymic tentacles: there's been an UNTAG report from Windhoek, and a discussion of UNIFIL by the Security Council.

One quickly realizes that assignment to the U.N. is the media equivalent of being sent to the glue factory. None of the several dozen reporters was recognizable, except for Jeanne Moos of CNN, who seemed to be doing temporary duty here instead of her usual featurettes on such subjects as folding umbrellas and a New York woman's collection of pet rats. After the briefing I count thirty-four typewriters—manual Underwoods—in the press room. Only

one is being used, by an Indian-looking gentleman. A woman covering the Security Council, which met this morning on the subject of hostage-taking, is on the telephone explaining to someone why she'll be unavailable to do something: “I'm sorry. This is the first thing that's happened in months.” The U.N.'s slow season, when the General Assembly is not in session, generally lasts eight months, from January through August.

Still, the press room contains, in mid-summer, rack after gun-metal-gray

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rack of press releases from the U.N.'s Department of Public Information (DPI) and various individual missions. Correspondents walk along the racks each day and pick up sheet after sheet, automatically, like secretaries sleepwalking past an immense collating copy machine. “New Permanent Representative of Afghanistan Presents Credentials”—so this goes into the pile. The most important daily document is the *Journal of the United Nations (Journal des Nations Unies)*, which announces meetings held, meetings scheduled, and which contains, in its equivalent of baseball box scores, a section titled “Signatures, Ratifications, Etc.” There is good news on August 18: the “Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons which may be Deemed to be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects (and Protocols), concluded at Geneva on 10 October 1980” has now been ratified by—Liechtenstein.

As Jennifer Metzger points out in a paper for a recent conference on “Media and the U.N.”: “Whereas most major newspapers, magazines and broadcast outlets once maintained full-time staff correspondents at the world body, today only the *New York Times* does so.” But the press facilities themselves, like the rest of the U.N., retain their lost-in-the-fifties look. The press releases all have a mimeographed appearance; the words on them are snowy and pulverized.

The language of the U.N.'s Department of Public Information is a kind of sweetened Newspeak, a diction so abstract it soothes grammar to sleep. The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons began in 1983, and correspondents are reminded that “The

main goals of the World Programme of Action are prevention, rehabilitation and equalization of the opportunities for disabled persons.” Does the World Programme really seek to prevent opportunities for the handicapped? Actually, meaning hardly matters if utterance is viewed as a noble end in itself. In her 1973 study of the U.N., *Defeat of an Ideal*, the writer Shirley Hazzard, who worked there for years, said that “‘productivity’ is more often than not assessed in wordage,” and that much U.N. documentation is

“useless in two or three languages.”

It is of course the nature of bureaucracies to seek the stasis of perpetual motion, to keep themselves going in order to keep going, but it is the United Nations that sets global standards for circularity. A press release issued this August 3, concerning the meetings in Geneva of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, notes the following: “During the session, which will last until 4 August, the Group is expected to review developments pertaining to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous populations and to give special attention to the evolution of standards concerning those rights.” Carts precede horses in an endless parade of deferral. The SG's office on his receipt of the latest Central American peace proposal: “While awaiting reception of an official version of the document, the advanced text which he has seen is being studied in a preliminary fashion . . .”

In terms of reflecting the Organization itself, the DPI's rhetoric must be judged wholly appropriate, for it is the department's duty to relay, with zomboid impartiality, both the meaningless—the King of Morocco has told the Conference on Disarmament of the “great responsibility to prevent the annihilation of humankind”—and the mendacious: “Cuba had no political prisoners,” said the Cuban representative to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. “Prisoners were sentenced under the penal code and not for their political opinions. There were, however, counter-revolutionary prisoners who were involved in various subversive activities against the State.”

On September 12 the Secretary-General issued an advance version of his annual report, noting in the course of his *tour d'horizon* (a cherished U.N. term) that “Natural disasters are too frequently a cause of human loss, economic and social hardship.” It was sometime later that month, during the week of Hurricane Hugo, in fact, that I began throwing away some of the United Nations documents that, after two months of my frequenting the press room, were beginning to overrun my apartment.

“Where's Apartheid?” asks a man behind the information desk of his colleague.

“Trusteeship,” answers the colleague, so I now know where to go for the 630th meeting of the Special Committee Against Apartheid.

The Trusteeship Council Chamber is one of the U.N.'s many vast auditoria and conference rooms, and today, August 8, the gallery is nearly empty. Only a few reporters seem present, though some tourists wander in and out. I follow the tinny whisper of the translated proceedings through headphones attached below the armrests of the chairs. The acting chairman, Jai Pratap Rana of Nepal, who looks like a Central Asian Sam Nunn, listens as Ann-Marie Lizin, the secretary of state for Europe 1992 and a former member of the European Parliament, says that the “frontline” states in southern Africa have only known war and oppression and that “the search for genuine peace in the region” can only be fulfilled through the elimination of apartheid. She says that for three years colloquia have been held in Brussels on this topic, though “nothing has really changed.” What is needed is “a refocusing of attention.” Indeed, “what we need to do is attack the problem at its root.” That it is impossible to keep attention focused on any topic if you meet to discuss it 630 times is not an insight that would be speakable here.

The chairman acknowledges Miss Lizin's speech with senatorial courtesies (“I thank her Excellency . . . for her important statement”). The journalist who follows her, Miranda Ebenezzer, a member of the African Women's Organization of Azania and of the Media Workers Association, then addresses Mr. Jai Pratap Rana as “Comrade Chairperson,” before approvingly quoting Kwame Nkrumah and discussing the establishment of the African National Congress in 1912. She declares that “the settler regime” has “no rights”; that there “is no room for the imperialist, the colonizer, the capitalist”; and that in the struggle against apartheid, “African women have courageously taken the bull by the horns.”

The woman sitting next to me has closed her eyes. Some people on the delegates' floor not far from the place marked for Djibouti are talking loudly. The chairman thanks Miss Ebenezer "for her informative and important statement."

Three days later, the Security Council meets at the request of Panama to discuss alleged U.S. violations of the Panama Canal treaty. The gallery is perhaps one-sixth full; the green metal chairbacks are chipped, and the first couple of earphones I try are broken. Pérez de Cuéllar, who has the appearance of a well-meaning high school teacher too shy to confess his yearnings for retirement, sits next to the council's temporary president, Hocine Djoudi, from Algeria.

"Your country and mine have continued to enjoy cordial, productive relations," the red-headed deputy U.S. representative, Herbert Okun, says to the Algerian, before responding to the declaration by Jorge Ritter, Noriega's foreign minister, that "The United States is running out of excuses, and the Panamanian people is running out of patience."

Mr. Okun is a calm droner, no Moynihan or Kirkpatrick. He points out that it is General Noriega who has violated the treaties, on 900 occasions, and that this meeting has been called to distract attention from the OAS's efforts to get him to surrender power.

Like the Panamanian people, I am soon running out of patience, and it occurs to me that one reason Pérez de Cuéllar reminds me of my old science teachers is that attending meetings at the U.N. has turned me back into something I haven't been since high school: a clock-watcher. I retreat from the gallery to the press room, where a TV monitor shows the videotape the Panamanians have provided as evidence of the U.S. violations. It contains shots of a helicopter, a police car, a couple of little boats, a tank—all of them meaninglessly spliced together. The monitor now scans the representa-

tives watching the video in the chamber. Two Chinese are laughing to each other. Even Perez de Cuellar and the Algerian president can be seen smiling. But Mr. Jorge Ritter insists that these are "real" pictures, not done in a movie studio; furthermore, "there's a great deal more of this film." Jeanne Moos of CNN, sitting in front of the monitor with someone who asks her what she thinks the helicopter on the screen is supposed to signify, responds: "This must be the 'menacing maneuvers.'" In his only Moynihanian moment, Herbert Okun says that you can

when the committee praises the work of the United Nations North American Regional NGO Symposium on the Question of Palestine, which was held in June. NGOs are "non-governmental organizations" that affiliate themselves with the U.N. in order to achieve solutions to such pressing problems as this one. Among the North American NGOs participating in this particular symposium were the National Lawyers' Guild, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, American Jewish Alternatives to Zionism, and the Committee for Academic Freedom

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see worse on the streets of New York every day.

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People holds its 164th meeting in the chamber of the Economic and Social Council on August 15, which means that it is 466 meetings behind the apartheid committee in grappling with its assigned enormities. A guide in the gallery tells tourists that the exposed beams and workings of this room (a la Beaubourg) were deliberately left as they are so that the room's unfinished look would serve "as a symbol" of all the work that the Economic and Social Council still has to do. The tours come in and out as the meeting assembles itself, but even though it's an "open" one, not a single member of the public has come to sit and watch it. It reminds me of a bad poetry reading at a college; perhaps they're delaying the start in the hope that people will show up. I look down from the gallery and see the goateed permanent observer of Palestine, Zuhdi Labib Terzi, whom I recognize from the neighborhood and from "Nightline." The Cuban representative sits next to the one from Afghanistan. (Do they chat about the Soviets the way housewives talk about boorish husbands?)

The delay has actually been caused by the late arrival of Ronald Spiers, a U.S. diplomat for many years and now a U.N. under-secretary. He finally shows up, with a small entourage and a manila folder. Between the usual courtesies and his inexplicable reference to recent positive developments in the Middle East, he says his experience tells him that "externally derived" solutions for Palestine won't work—although things can be helped "by a fair wind from the international community."

That wind really begins to blow

in the Israeli Occupied Territories. Yasir Arafat sent his regards. He was "delighted" they were meeting, as well he might have been, since the symposium's Resolution 2 was a rather witty series of calls for the United States to reduce its aid to Israel: First, by "an amount equal to the sum expended by Israel in maintaining its belligerent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, including East Jerusalem"; second, "by an amount equal to the sum expended by Israel for settlement maintenance and expansion in the occupied territory"—and so on.

In this committee, as with the Special Committee on Decolonization, one quickly sees that the purpose is not the exchange and mediation of opinion, but its creation and manipulation—spreading the message, getting North Americans and Western Europeans to see it the U.N.'s way. It is announced that a Latin American and Caribbean Regional Seminar and NGO Symposium is going to be held in Buenos Aires, and an Asian version will take place in Malaysia later this year. Terzi thanks the government of Malaysia.

The next item on the agenda? Applications from new NGOs to participate in the committee's work. "More and more organizations," says the chairwoman, are applying to participate in symposia sponsored by the committee. "All these NGOs have been screened . . . and the Bureau recommends them for approval." There's another symposium in Vienna in August. She's also accepted an invitation to represent the committee at the Non-Aligned Summit in Belgrade in September. And she's "accepted in principle" an invitation for a representative of the committee to go to the Presidium of the Soviet Committee of Solidarity with African and Asian Countries in 1990.

Actually, the real purpose of these meetings is not so much the manipula-

tion of opinion as the assurance of other meetings, just as the real purpose of U.N. reports is that they be written. Ambassador Terzi praises one on the violation of human rights in the occupied territories, saying that it is "worthy of becoming a document" within the committee's larger report.

The United Nations is so involved with death—that is, of the intellectual and moral variety—that with the word "séance," which the U.N. uses as its synonym for "meeting," French seems less like the language of diplomacy than of bluntness. If the U.N. had a school song, it wouldn't be "Kumbaya" or "It's A Small World After All"; it would be "We're Here Because We're Here Because We're Here." On August 24, in order to review the 1979 Vienna Programme of Action, the 97th meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology for Development took place in Conference Room 4, which is in fact a vast hall. The participants were scattered like distantly planted shrubs to listen to the Hungarian representative say that "what is essential is for the Intergovernmental Committee never to tire of examining the influence of science and technology on development"; that "programs of a comprehensive nature" must be developed; that these programs be "monitored" and "coordinated"; and that, in conclusion, "the various programs must be interrelated." We must, in short, "do something; not leave it in the merely theoretical realm," even though "there is no such thing as instant success and easy solutions." Three weeks later, at a conference of NGOs on the relationship between environment and development, held in this same room, Robert Savio, director-general of InterPress Service Third World News Agency, would speak to a large audience on the difference between information and communication. Information is a vertical structure; communication is not. He would also consider whether environment "is an event or a process."

After some weeks of listening to it, one comes to realize that such talk isn't meaningless or amusing, but that it is simply evil. The denial of reality it in-

Mr. Alistair Harrison of the United Kingdom had the day before put a little Thatcherite oomph into the proceedings, declaring, as the subsequent U.N. press release put it, that "the Committee had been founded on the myth that problems could be solved simply by declaring a programme of action and preceding it with the name of a well-known city. The vacuousness of such an approach was all too evident ten years later." His statement should have been nothing more than agreeably self-evident, but for the United Nations it bordered on the electrifying.



volves is so total that it has led to a kind of final irony for the United Nations—namely, that it has become a world unto itself, a small clean space colony of frozen bodies sent up to escape a dying planet. Unable to remake the real world, the inhabitants of the U.N. have seceded into a toy one.

Here in Turtle Bay the corner of Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza at East 47th St. has for months now been occupied by Chinese students and rechristened Tiananmen Square. In their very polite way, they ask residents of the neighborhood who are running errands along First Avenue to sign their petitions. (Their two portable toilets are gently labeled “S-T” and “P-E.”) Along with the petitions there have been videos of the massacres, as well as signs saying “Hang Li Peng!” and—a borrowing from the left—“PEOPLE UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED.”

On seven successive Saturdays this summer there were services to honor the dead students of Peking. At a Buddhist ceremony late in July, New York politicians like Rep. Bill Green and the ghastly Ronald Lauder belled up to a small altar hung with black crepe and set out with flowers and fruit. Passing out black armbands and incense sticks, the demonstrators were organized, neat, and smiling—enough to make one think that if American students had behaved this way twenty years ago, their parents would have stopped the Vietnam war just because they were so pleased with their children’s manners. A Japanese tourist bus passed as a Buddhist monk in a saffron robe got ready for the ceremony, which included chanting and the beating of a small hand drum. A man not wishing to be photographed, wearing a white plastic bag over his head (with a have-a-nice-day smiley face printed upside-down on the back), was led by a woman to the altar to pay his respects. Speeches followed the ceremony, one of them urging Americans to stop doing business with China until the executions stop. With the kind of realism one almost never hears uttered across the street, one speaker reminded potential boycotters that “In the long run you will have the support of one billion Chinese consumers. . . .”

“Tiananmen Square” has had a distinctly anti-U.N. flavor: “U.N. WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR THE WORLD? SHAME ON U.N.,” read one sign. There is no mention of the Chinese situation in the Secretary-General’s annual report, and it is not at all certain it will get on any important U.N. agenda. That it has managed to come up at a meeting of the Subcommittee on Human Rights in Geneva—a fact recently pointed out by U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering in a generally encouraged assessment of the U.N.—is hardly inspiring.

The United Nations concerns itself with only a handful of available evils, chief among them apartheid. A press release of August 9 shows Iceland seeking a clean bill of health from the Racial Discrimination Committee by stating it has no diplomatic relations with South Africa. When the Special Committee Against Apartheid deplores a planned trip to South Africa by some British cricketers it makes the “Friday Highlights” sheet from the DPI. The

against Iraq) over to the next one. Still, this meeting provides an opportunity for the U.N. to proclaim its own relevance, something it does with surprising confidence and frequency these days. The outgoing GA president, an Argentine, stoutly declares that “this, more than any other time, is the time for the United Nations.” In “the post-Cold War world” of today, the U.N. has “demonstrated its efficiency.” (The 1988 Nobel Peace Prize to the

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General Assembly is largely made up of dictatorships, but what one cannot do in the U.N. is speak in relative terms. Only a pariah like Israel does that. Without relative thinking there can be no debate, and finally no morality—just a succession of madly absolute statements. But what the United Nations will not do is admit the existence of our vicious world of pots and kettles. Indonesia talks of the South African “reign of terror” in Namibia, but it would be impertinent to mention Indonesia’s own domestic slaughters of the 1960s. What happens is that the genuine evil of apartheid ends up tamed by its own enshrinement. Czechoslovakia worries to the Decolonization Committee that “information on the options available to the peoples of small territories [is] not being provided nor [are] all administering Powers promoting the economic development of their territories in preparation for independence.” One wonders: Would he like those same materials more widely distributed in, say, Czechoslovakia, in case it is ever decolonized by the Soviet Union and given a chance for economic development? But it would be rude to ask.

The General Assembly’s huge hall is ringed with vertical beams resembling the pipes of a huge organ. The last meeting of the 43rd session takes place on Monday, September 18, and is a bit of a parliamentary fiction. Insofar as anything at the U.N. is real, the GA had its last real meeting in July, after convening on fewer than a dozen days since the previous December. But now, one day before the 44th session opens, the 43rd must close itself out by agreeing to carry certain items from the previous agenda (like Israeli aggression

U.N. Peacekeeping Forces is the Organization’s chief current point of pride.) Perez de Cuellar, in his annual report, took similar note of the “conciliatory atmosphere around the world” as a nourishing one for the U.N. The superpower thaw is thought to be good for business, even though the INF treaty he extols on page 14 was the result of American willingness to play bilateral nuclear chess. (A prisoner of the U.N.’s inflated language, the SG even oversells the idea of trying not to oversell the U.N., saying there must continue to be a “rigorous analysis” of its limitations and a “constant review” of its peacekeeping methods.)

The U.N.’s supposed new usefulness is a theme now being echoed by the United States. At an editors’ breakfast sponsored by the United Nations Association (with DPI cooperation) on the

day the 44th General Assembly opens, Ambassador Pickering says that name-calling at the U.N. has “diminished markedly,” maybe 1000 percent in recent years, and that reductions of the bloated Secretariat staff are under way: the goal is to cut it by 15 percent. A man who looks bland and paunchy sitting down, but formidable standing up, Pickering, who was U.S. ambassador to Israel and El Salvador, is also, rhetorically, no Kirkpatrick or Moynihan. But their eras, when the U.S. was briefly willing to speak in relative terms, are in the past. The administration of George Bush, a former U.N. ambassador himself, has decided to play nice. It “strongly welcomes” the U.N. observers for upcoming elections in Nicaragua, for example.

The U.N. is clearly happy with the change of heart, because more than anyone else it is still the U.S. that—to paraphrase Ronald Reagan—is paying for the microphone. The administration has asked for full funding of U.S. assessments this year, and is also asking Congress to appropriate our “arrearages,” the money held back by the Reagan Administration in more contentious times. Another reason the U.N. is glad of the rapprochement is temperamental: as Shirley Hazzard says, the Organization demands “a bedside manner from the world.” It simply hates being criticized, even by the oafish United States. One notices how François Giuliani, the SG’s spokesman, and other Secretariat people will respond to simple questions as affronts, as if any inquisitiveness necessarily betokens bad faith.

Thérèse Paquet-Sevigny, the under-secretary-general for public information, follows Ambassador Pickering at the editors’ breakfast. A peppy Canadian who wears a black pleated skirt



and smokes little cigars, she seems yet one more throwback to the 1950s, an appealing one. She says the U.N. places "such great value on U.S. opinion" not only because of the size of the American financial contribution, but because of U.S. values, too. During the past several weeks, this is the only time I have heard American values praised in the United Nations, and it comes as something of a shock. But Miss Paquet-Sevigny's business is public relations. Her office watches a lot of polling, and she is pleased to report that the U.N. has rebounded from a 1985 low point, when 54 percent of Americans thought it was doing a poor job, to the mere 29 percent who think that's the case now. Unfortunately most Americans just don't know either way, and "an enormous effort" is required to explain the U.N.'s role to them.

If the U.N. does require a bedside manner, the United Nations Association, which was headed for a number of years by Elliot Richardson, is its most solicitous hand-holder. UNA-USA, which according to one pamphlet seeks to make the U.N. "even more effective," is represented at this morning's breakfast by John Tessitore, a slightly pudgy, gold-wire-rimmed fellow resembling an assistant professor who won't get tenure. He says he's "not here to sell" the U.N., "wonderful product" though it is. Rather, the UNA wishes to use "candor" and admit the Organization's weaknesses along with its strengths.

As it turns out, a number of the speakers laid on for the editors throughout the day display the same testy defensiveness as the SG's spokesman. In a panel on "Human Rights and the U.N.," Bertie Ramcharan, a principal officer of the Secretariat, speaks of the six components of the "human-rights infrastructure" and the five "building blocks" for dealing with human rights violations, though he seems less than eager when asked to quantify instances where U.N. intervention has really made a difference to someone's human rights. Felice Gaer, executive director of the International League for Human Rights, tells what she thinks is the sadly amusing story of one media organization based in Paris that sent its *wine critic* to cover a Geneva meeting at which the Afghans would be directly questioned about human rights violations. Afterwards, no story ever ran. When asked why, the reporter explained that nothing happened after the questioning—no vote, no action, nothing. Of course it was the wine critic and not Miss Gaer who got the point, but this is the sort of story that makes UNA people shake their heads with the self-satisfaction of the useless-ly well-intentioned.

M. Jean-Claude Faby, deputy director, U.N. Environment Program, New York Liaison Office, is actually impressive in his own *tour d'horizon* of global concerns, but he too has the U.N. disease, noting with pleasure that Shevardnadze now devotes five pages of some utterance, instead of five lines, to environmental matters. Similarly sympathetic is James P. Grant, the

The U.N.'s supposed new usefulness is a theme now being echoed by the United States.

head of UNICEF, who has the craggy good looks and gravelly voice of the actor Hal Holbrook. In talking about his group's dependence on voluntary contributions and fundraising, he notes that, while still much less than those from the U.S., Soviet contributions are now twelve times what they were not long ago. Unfortunately, he adds, they come in rubles, which are supposed to be used to buy Soviet supplies, and in these days of perestroika, a lot of Soviet suppliers won't accept rubles. So UNICEF is trying to get the Soviets to make their contribution in convertible currency. As Mr. Grant is introduced we learn that 40,000 children die every twenty-four hours from hunger and disease—"a Hiroshima every three days." Unfortunately, Mr. Grant is the luncheon speaker, and we learn this while we're drinking wine, eating portions of chicken twice as big as anyone needs, and awaiting a heavy dessert.

The UNA-sponsored day moves slowly along as clouds roll over the East River and the landscape of northwest Queens, whose church spires, smokestacks, and watertowers, as well as Pepsi-Cola sign, have scarcely ever looked more inviting. The second to last speaker, on the subject "Global Hotspots," is Giandomenico Picco, the SG's special assistant, who talks about the U.N.-sponsored Iran-Iraq cease-fire and sees a "renaissance of the U.N." now that unilateralism's failure is recognized. "Multilateralism" is the good word at the U.N., but one suspects that the Iran-Iraq cease-fire was in fact a triumph of bilateralism—namely, the mutual exhaustion, after eight years and one million deaths, of Iran and Iraq. Mr. Picco says that once you take a side in a dispute you are introducing power, not peace. What he does not mention is what one always learned about the U.N. in elementary school—that what was supposed to distinguish it from the paralyzed League of Nations was precisely its ability to introduce power—its own—into disputes. (The official U.N. tour does not stop at the plaque in the lobby put up "in grateful remembrance of the

Armed Forces of Member States who died in Korea in the Service of the United Nations 1950-1953.")

Finally Hedi Annabi, the special assistant to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Humanitarian Affairs South-East Asia, discusses, somewhat bewilderingly, how the Cambodian peace conference that collapsed in Paris last August was, in fact, a

partial success. Keith Burris from the *Hartford Courant*, sitting next to me, whispers an explanation of what the parties accomplished: "They've agreed on rebuilding the country after they have the next civil war."

The 44th General Assembly has elected Joseph Nanven Garba of Nigeria to be its president. Looking down from the topmost gallery on this opening day, one can see the nameplates for countries one's never even heard of: just behind Madagascar and a few seats to the right of Mozambique is Myanmar. (Myanmar turns out to be the new name for Burma.) The delegates sit behind shiny, lime-colored table-tops as an Austrian is elected president of the Sixth, or Legal, Committee. Since the U.N.'s recent experience with Austria has been more on the criminal side of things, it's nice to have yet more evidence that the Organization doesn't hold a grudge. Costa Rica's three seats are occupied by women in bright clothes: two are in yellow tops and another is in black-and-white swirls. One watches things like this because the proceedings themselves are impossible, though not difficult, to follow. George Orwell came to realize that his public school was "a world where it was *not possible* for [him] to be good," and by now I have realized that the United Nations is a world in which it is not possible to pay attention. The vice presidents of the General Assembly are being elected, and Yemen has "gracefully yielded" its candidature to Iraq. The representative of Bahrain praises Yemen by saying that "A friend in need is a friend indeed," noting that the prophet Mohammed said Yemen is the land of wisdom.

There are 155 items on the GA's agenda this fall, ranging from the eternal (Palestine, apartheid) to the obscure (#29—"Question of the Comorian island of Mayotte") to the merely puzzling: #42—"Declaration of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of Afri-

can Unity on the aerial and naval military attack against the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya by the present [sic] United States Administration in April 1986."

But before these items can be discussed there are the weeks of speeches by heads of state and foreign ministers. Historic utterances (by the new Polish foreign minister, for example) capture more attention here than they might in another venue. But in the world of one-nation, one-vote, the U.N. is seen putting ministers from Fiji, Cape Verde, and Luxembourg under the same spotlight for the same number of minutes. On September 29, Dr. Virgilio Barco Vargas, president of Colombia, receives a standing ovation, mostly for having managed to finish his speech without being assassinated by the Medellin drug cartel.

In a northeast corner of the General Assembly Building the Meditation Room is open to visitors. It seems a place designed more to frighten than soothe, a small stone-floored trapezoid, by my measure fifteen paces by seven at its widest points. An abstract fresco is at the narrow end, and in the back are eleven small benches with straw seats. It is dark in here. A small single bulb in the center of the ceiling bathes a block of naked stone—like a denuded altar—in weak light. Sitting down in back one has the feeling of being in a ransacked chapel, a place with no clear sign of what to pray to, a place so determinedly universal as to be unreal, like the United Nations itself, which, in its attempt to create one world, ultimately reminds one of those apparently bogus experiments in "cold fusion"—room-temperature panaceas produced on the cheap and, finally, against the laws of nature. We live, after all, in an age marked less by recombination than by an ever greater provincialism. From Quebec to Eritrea, the world, as it becomes ever smaller, wishes to be ever more local. Indeed, one of the Léger murals in the General Assembly hall looks like an amoeba quivering in the struggle to divide. The totemless Meditation Room is the Stonehenge of an era whose hopes never came to pass because it couldn't get people to hope them. After two months at the United Nations I have seen the past—and it still doesn't work. More than anything, the Meditation Room is a relief from the endlessly verbose Organization itself, providing as it does a chance to sit and follow the instructions on a sign near its entrance, a sign announcing that you have arrived, at last, at a place where "only thoughts should speak." □



BOOKS FOR CHRISTMAS



It's that time of year again, as eminent readers and writers recommend tomes—some old, some new—certain to delight giver, recipient, and Santa alike.



ELLIOTT ABRAMS

The bicentennial of the French Revolution moved me to read two very different, and very fine, books worth recommending. The first is one of the year's hits, Simon Schama's *Citizens*. Schama deserves all the praise he has gotten: the book is extremely lively and lots of fun, as well as a significant contribution to the new scholarship about the Revolution. Not to be missed.

Reading *Citizens* brought very much to mind again Talleyrand, that intriguing figure who survived, and indeed flourished, under the Ancien Regime, Directorate, Consulate, Empire, and Restoration. During the worst days of the Terror, he found himself in America—a story which alone is worth a book. The best biography in English is still Duff Cooper's *Talleyrand*, written in 1937. It's a very old fashioned book: just the facts, no psychobabble, lit up not by the author's prose but by the subject's brilliance. Your local bookstore does not have this in the window, but with perseverance you can dig up a copy—and won't be sorry.

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state in the Reagan Administration, practices law in Washington.

LEE ATWATER

The Prince—Machiavelli
The Republic—Plato
Crime and Punishment—Dostoevsky
Huey Long—T. Harry Williams
Art of War—Sun Tzu
Stonewall Jackson—Burke Davis

Lee Atwater is chairman of the Republican National Committee.

JACQUES BARZUN

In the excellent series of Lakeside Classics privately published by R. R. Donnelly, the great Chicago printers, Volume 62, issued in 1964, is a particular treasure. Under the title *Two Views of Gettysburg*, it contains an English colonel's report as observer on the Confederate side and Lieutenant Frank Haskell's account as Unionist participant. Both are readable and in many ways amazing, but Haskell's work is an ignored masterpiece of American literature. Though the lieutenant was bred a lawyer, he is a born stylist, a brilliant observer of man and nature, and a true philosopher, for whom war is not all horror and glory. The pair, moreover, are types we shall not soon meet again—men of honor.

John Lukacs is well known for his

histories and with special esteem for his work of theory, *Historical Consciousness*. Now he has delved into his own past and produced the *Confessions of an Original Sinner*. Like any good intellectual autobiography, it is rich in explicit opinion and intimate fact, but two things about it are uncommonly agreeable: the intimacy is dignified, not obtrusive; and the opinion, which somehow comes naturally out of the events related, is easy to agree or disagree with. In short, the character self-portrayed is both likable and worthy of respect. He calls himself a reactionary largely because he reacts, and an original sinner not because he has invented new sins, but because he shows his modest performance in that line as originating decisions and conditioning thought.

The figure of Berlioz the creator is now pretty well known, in the best way possible, by his great works. But it took

some doing to pull him out of obscurity and misrepresentation. It was done first through many scholars publishing evidence and argument, and then by the proof engraved on long-playing discs. Now after nearly half a century, it has become possible to write a dispassionate, leisurely biography, and the English critic and conductor David Cairns has done it. The first volume is out and it is a delight. His grasp of the many-sided subject and his engaging prose give the large book the speed of good fiction and make the prospect of the next anything but daunting.

Quite different, but properly so, is W. L. Morison's study of *John Austin*—no, not a misprint for Jane Austen, let us give her a rest from palaver. John Austin was the founder in the early nineteenth century of an important school of jurisprudence, now supposedly outgrown. Mr. Morison shows the opposite by combining technical exposition with intellectual history. At the end, he finds the modern sequel to the original Austinism in the work of Harold Lasswell. At that point, I had one balk—the latter's vague language and loose-jointed ideas repel and I question the link. But this closing section takes up only ten pages out of 200 and leaves what precedes a superb monograph.

In his eightieth year, Patrick Devlin, the greatest English judge of our time, did a unique thing: he wrote an account of a famous criminal trial over which he himself had presided. The case was that of Dr. Adams, accused of having drugged to death his elderly women patients in order to secure their gifts by will. Lord Devlin's book, *Easing the Passing*, is a wonderful interweaving of the substance of the trial, including material evidence and cross-examination, with his inner debate about the decisions he made and with his reflections on the law and those who administered it on that occasion.

