

United Nations Nations Unies

THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LE PRESIDENT DE L'ASSEMBLEE GENERALE

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Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte, President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly, at the Yale Model United Nations 30th Annual Session

Secretary General of the Model United Nations, Members of the Faculty, Distinguished Delegates of the Yale University Model United Nations, Ladies and Gentlemen, students:

I am deeply committed to the United Nations and to multilateralism. It is this commitment that underpins my Presidency of the Fifty-eighth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, and which is the incentive that brings me to Yale University to join you at the opening of this Model United Nations.

I wish to thank President Levin and all at Yale University who have so warmly welcomed me here, and Mr. Favours and the organizers of the Model United Nations for affording me this opportunity.

Multilateralism - the belief that nations act more effectively when they act together to address issues of a global nature - has been an organizing principle and the foundation of the work of the United Nations from the start. We all know, however, that obstacles to economic and social progress, human right and fundamental freedoms and peace and security remain, notwithstanding strong support for multilateralism. Daily, the United Nations faces new and emerging challenges, some of which have proved to be quite daunting.

When the United Nations Charter was signed at San Francisco in 1945 nearly fifty-nine years ago, it would have been difficult to predict what would be the shape of the world of the early twenty-first century. Today, we can say authoritatively that it is a time of challenge and change for the world, and indeed, for the United Nations.

I imagine that it would have been difficult to contemplate at San Francisco that the ranks of the United Nations fifty-one founding members would be swelled to the one hundred and ninety-one Member States it is today. A forward-looking United Nations took up the cause of colonial countries and peoples for self-determination and independence. Some, no doubt, may have quibbled about this open door policy and about what in fact constituted a viable nation state that might take a place in the United Nations. Today, nations large and small sit in the United Nations General Assembly - the organization's only universal organ - with equal rights and duties under the Charter.

The reality we face today is that the achievement of national independence has not significantly reversed the economic imbalances between former colonies and colonial powers. Disparities

between rich and poor nations, in many cases compounded by globalisation and trade liberalization, is marginalizing many countries, particularly in the developing world. Poverty worldwide - the burden of which falls unequally on our most vulnerable groups - children, women, the elderly and the disabled - harbour the seeds of instability, hatred and conflict. At the same time, there has been a marked drop in official development assistance from richer to poorer countries.

We could not have known in 1945 that as we work to improve public health and eradicate disease, new and deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS would emerge to threaten societies and nations. Yet this disease, in particular, continues to wreak havoc among the most productive sectors of the population, and especially our youth, and to negatively impact the economies of many countries, particularly in the developing world. We also could not have anticipated how difficult it would be to erase age-old attitudes like racial discrimination and religious intolerance. Nor could we foresee the extreme contemporary forms these now take.

At San Francisco, we could not have foreseen the "internationalization" of major perils we face today - the illicit traffic in drugs and small arms and light weapons, the organized criminal networks that control these nefarious trades and other transnational crime, and the ever present threat of terrorism - to name a few. National borders, even those of the most powerful, cannot protect nations against these perils. Even international credentials and a mandate to act on behalf of the international community is no longer a safeguard. For last August in Baghdad, the United Nations itself became a terrorist target.

Today, conflict and war continue to be major challenges for the United Nations, threatening international peace and security and constituting a major impediment to development in many regions of the world. While the United Nations continues to act in respect of conflict and war, many situations seem to be intractable.

There is much to be said for the manner in which the United Nations is rising to today's challenges and to change. It has been credibly demonstrated that the nations of the world acting through the United Nations on behalf of their peoples, can come together to overcome obstacles to progress and to peace.

Notwithstanding the high anxiety of war and conflict, the world has managed to avoid a major international conflagration and to prevent or shorten a significant number of regional conflicts. The United Nations has, in almost every situation of conflict and war, been able to play a meaningful role. In so doing, the Membership has, by and large, sought to live up to the Charter obligation to maintain international peace and security. When we have failed or delayed longer than we should, it is because we could not, as Member States, achieve consensus on how to proceed.

We have recognized and accepted, including through our signature, ratification and accession of international treaties, that we cannot alone protect ourselves from perils such as drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism. These critical global problems know and respect no national

borders. Therefore, we have accepted obligations to uphold international standards and to act together to protect us all.

Just as our membership in the United Nations requires us to act jointly to maintain international peace and security, we are also required to take joint action to support socio-economic development and to eradicate poverty worldwide. The United Nations agenda for development is, of necessity, a work in progress, for circumstances change, and a variety of external forces impact our work. Natural disasters, diseases and changes in attitude among more powerful Member States all have an impact.

Work to promote development and eradicate poverty being done within the United Nations system includes that of the Specialized Agencies, which focus their particular competencies in areas such as food, health and education. If I had to describe in a few words this development and poverty eradication work, I would say that we work to elaborate attainable development goals, to create the mechanisms for reaching them together, and to impress upon Member States the importance of keeping their commitments in this area.

Let me cite the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a specific example of goal setting, on which all United Nations Member States agreed as we moved into the Twenty-first Century. These are practical and fairly modest goals, aimed, among other things, at eradicating poverty and hunger, combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. A major commitment has been made, and a tremendous effort is underway to attain these goals, which we have pledged to implement by 2015. Acting together is a prerequisite for success.

Since San Francisco, many innovative and imaginative ways have been found to bring home to the "peoples" of the United Nations for whom the Charter speaks, exactly what the United Nations does, and why it is important to the world's people. Few initiatives to do so have been as effective as the rôle-playing exercise of the 'Model United Nations'. Model United Nations take place each year, in many countries, and at different educational levels. It is noteworthy that even in troubling times, when the relevance of the United Nations was being called into question, Model United Nations were being organized and conducted.

Commitment to the Model United Nations concept, I believe, comes from the abiding curiosity that people - especially young people - have about other nations, their circumstances, their goals and aspirations and the challenges they face. In the case of this model United Nations, I do hope that you are also committed because of your own belief that solutions to the world's problems can indeed be found by working together; by understanding other people's perspectives; and by acknowledging that the more people that have agreed on, and have "bought into" a decision, the more likely it is that the outcome of such a decision will endure.

This exercise in which, for a short time, you become leaders and diplomatic representatives of countries not your own and largely unfamiliar to you, has important benefits for you. It also benefits the country you represent, as well as the United Nations. In addition to being exhilarating

and rewarding - which I am sure it will be -- it builds skills that can be very useful to you, not just in the short-term as students, but as future leaders with major responsibilities.

Already you will have done intensive research, both on your new country and on the items on your agenda - which are also items on the global agenda. By now, you are ready to argue forcefully and convincingly the positions your country would take, from the perspective of that country, a perspective that may be quite different to that of the country of which you are a citizen. I know that you have prepared effectively, and that your considerable effort would be rewarded by a meaningful contribution to this forum.

If I may now take off my Presidential hat and put on my Minister of External Affairs of St Lucia and Caribbean Community (CARICOM) hat, let me say that I hope that the delegations representing the countries of CARICOM have done their homework well, and are ready to represent us with distinction! Now, I return to my Presidential hat.

This Model United Nations also bears centrally on leadership and decision-making skills. Many of you will represent Presidents, Prime Ministers and Ministers. Your priorities will compete with those of other leaders. You will have to show your people that the decisions you have taken have brought them a benefit. At the same time, you will have to demonstrate to other leaders that you are prepared to take, or join in, decisions that will advance international goals and objectives. You should have a fairly good idea after this exercise of what it is like to be under the spotlight of public opinion, and to be accountable, both at home and in the United Nations.

Your negotiating skills should be considerably honed by this exercise. Never mind what they say about "diplomacy being the art of letting somebody else have your own way" - negotiation is an arduous and often insuperable process. Negotiations are not a matter of victory or defeat, but about mutual advantage. Diplomacy puts a premium on compromise, and oftentimes compromise is the only option you will have - you may have to abandon that "grand design" for a more modest outcome.

Hence, you need good judgment, including about the other person's position - is it flexible? Is it set in stone? Is the person prepared to give up something, and are you? Negotiating - this is the skill that lies at the heart of the work of the United Nations. Importantly, it is at the centre of what we do in our lives.

Whether the scope of your Model United Nations permits you to focus on the media and civil society, I want to make comments on both, as relations with them are critical to the success of any country's delegation. Your interaction with the media should be in a manner that would reflect your country's point of view accurately, and in the best possible light. It is also expedient for you to go outside the official ranks of delegations and make common cause with the organizations of civil society. It is these non-governmental and other organizations that have the experience, the contacts and the energy to earn public support for an idea, and give it life beyond the conference room.

Above all, as you negotiate and take decisions, you must ask yourself whether your decisions can be effectively implemented, to meet your goals and objectives. If they cannot, your work may well have been an exercise in futility.

There are a few final thoughts I would like to leave with you. The first concerns the "fundamental democracy" of the United Nations General Assembly, and what it takes to be a truly effective delegation. It is often not the powerful countries that marshal the most interesting and innovative ideas through the United Nations. It was Costa Rica that was responsible for driving the idea of a High Commissioner for Human Rights through the General Assembly. The concept of the Law of the Sea and the possibility of mining the deep seabed for the benefit of all mankind was driven by the small island state of Malta. And Trinidad and Tobago, supported by the countries of the Caribbean Community, was the driving force behind the most recent initiative that led to the establishment of an International Criminal Court. In short, a good new idea, persuasively presented and patiently negotiated, can become part of the world's agenda even if it comes from a very small State.

The second thought I wish to leave with you concerns the General Assembly, the only representative organ of the United Nations. As such, agreement would ultimately have to be forged within the General Assembly on much of the issues on the international agenda. For it is the Assembly alone that contains the world as it is, that reflects both the world's problems and possibilities. Importantly, it is in the Assembly that reform of the United Nations, whether General Assembly or Security Council, would be negotiated and endorsed.

Yes, questions concerning the "relevance" of the United Nations have focused on the General Assembly, at a time when great powers are asserting their right to act unilaterally, and to deal with the United Nations through more limited membership bodies. But I must tell you that, in the months that I have been privileged to serve as President, I have been constantly impressed by the General Assembly and its Member States - their determination to find ways through obstacles; their willingness to negotiate; their readiness to examine new ideas, and above all by their conviction that this uniquely universal organization, the United Nations, must be enabled to survive and to do the great work for which it was designed.

I hope that your deliberations will bring each of you new insights into the work of the United Nations, and importantly on where the organization stands in this period of challenge and change. Whether your future takes you into academia, the professions, business or government, I believe that the skills you acquire in this Model United Nations will serve you well. Above all, I hope that your participation persuades you to remain involved with the United Nations and the global issues it addresses. The world needs the United Nations. And the United Nations needs you.

I thank you.