17. The United Nations: FDR and the Creation of the Postwar World

In the months before his untimely death in April 1945, having led the United States to the brink of victory in World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt was determined to use the catalyst of global conflict to fashion a postwar world organized not by lawless violence but by respect and cooperation among nations.

In October 1944, as the Allies stood poised for the final assault on the German homeland, FDR spoke to Americans about the next great challenge: “waging peace.” He urged them to support the international peacekeeping organization whose basic shape had been hammered out by the major Allies only weeks before at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC. He reminded them how strong had been the inclination among some Americans to maintain a pristine disengagement from world affairs and avoid entanglement in the war at just about any cost. Joining the battle to defend their country and its ideals had, in the end, risen “from the hearts and souls and sinews of the American people,” FDR observed, and the experience had left them a “seasoned and mature” people with a newly prominent role to play in the world.

“The power which this Nation has attained—the political, the economic, the military, and above all the moral power—has brought to us the responsibility, and with it the opportunity, for leadership in the community of Nations,” FDR said. “It is our

An aerial view of New York City showing, at left, the white-edged Secretariat Building of the United Nations headquarters complex on the shore of the East River. At the tip of the East River’s Roosevelt Island is the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park. Opened in 2012, this memorial to FDR in his home state affords visitors a unique vantage on the international peacekeeping organization he worked for many years to establish. Iwan Baan
affairs. As a top navy official, he'd been a passionate advocate for the League of Nations, which was established after World War I to keep the peace, and he was bitterly disappointed when the U.S. Senate refused to join the fledgling organization in 1919, weakening it substantially.

Nearly a year before Pearl Harbor, as the Nazis exulted in their conquest of continental Europe, FDR, in his historic January 1941 State of the Union address, gave Americans his sense of what was at stake in the conflict: either the dictators’ “new order of tyranny” would soon dominate the world, enslaving the great democracies, perhaps for generations, or “a greater conception—the moral order” would triumph. The essence of this moral order, FDR said, lay not in obscure partisan interests (later that month an unhinged Adolf Hitler would label the Allies a “Jewish-international-capitalist clique”), but in the establishment “everywhere in the world” of four fundamental human freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Even as Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan joined forces to menace the globe, FDR assured the American people that this better world was “attainable in our own time and generation.”

He worked assiduously to attain it, always careful to emphasize ultimate goals in his wartime rhetoric, and, on a practical level, orchestrating a series of meetings, conferences, and declarations that ultimately led to the establishment of the United Nations (UN) and the post-1945 multilateral order that prevails to this day.

It took a quarter century for FDR’s ideas about international cooperation to come to fruition. Sadly, he died on April 12, 1945, just a few months before the Allies celebrated a final victory over fascism in both Europe and Asia, and little more than six months before nations of goodwill formally founded the UN he had envisioned for so many years. But the legacy of his work would be very long lasting indeed. “Take a look at our present world,” the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. said in 1998. “It is manifestly not Adolf Hitler’s world. His Thousand-Year Reich turned out to have a brief and bloody run of a dozen years. It is manifestly not Joseph Stalin’s world. That ghastly world self-destructed before our eyes. Nor is it Winston Churchill’s world. Empire and its glories have long since vanished into history. The world we live in today is Franklin Roosevelt’s world.”
Woodrow Wilson and
the League of Nations

In February 1919, World War I recently concluded, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt sailed home from Europe after a trip of several weeks during which FDR, as undersecretary of the navy, had been responsible for demobilizing the American fleet. They shared the journey with President Woodrow Wilson, who had been in Paris negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, which set the terms of peace, and in particular pressing for the inclusion of a charter that would found the League of Nations. This charter called on member nations to protect one another’s political independence and territorial integrity from external aggression, to reduce armaments, and to submit to an executive council any disputes likely to lead to war. It also established a World Court.

Wilson ardently believed the league could help prevent future wars. FDR agreed. The mood aboard ship was hopeful, ebullient even. But the balance of the year would bring great disappointment.

On this trip, Wilson’s steps were dogged by antileague senators Hiram Johnson of California and William Borah of Idaho, who spoke against the treaty with a passion equal to Wilson’s. In the Senate, Borah memorably invoked Thomas Jefferson’s warning against “entangling alliances” with foreign nations. The isolationists’ main concern was that the league’s charter would compel America to go to war in defense of other member nations. Wilson suffered a major stroke in November, and the Senate rejected the treaty (and the League of Nations) in November and again in March 1920.

America was becoming an ever-more-powerful player on the world stage, and its refusal to join the league compromised the organization’s perceived muscularity. On several occasions member nations proved unwilling to take strong action to check aggressors, including the Japanese when they invaded Manchuria in 1931 and the Italians when they attacked Ethiopia in 1935. Japan and Germany dropped out of the league in 1933. Italy followed in 1937.

In planning for an international peacekeeping organization during the 1940s, FDR learned from these earlier failures. He supported a veto power for permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, a reassurance to the United States and other permanent members that their sovereignty would not be compromised. He made sure a bipartisan U.S. delegation attended the 1945 San Francisco Conference establishing the UN. And he helped ensure UN actions would not require unanimous member consent, a rule that had stymied the League of Nations in moving against aggressor states.
The Atlantic Charter, August 1941

Over the course of four days in August 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill conferred in a shipboard rendezvous on the frigid waters off Newfoundland. Though the two men had met briefly years earlier, this was their first face-to-face encounter as would-be partners in global war and statecraft.

A great deal was at stake. Though the United States had recently pledged itself to the Lend-Lease program funneling war supplies to Allies, it remained officially neutral in the great clash of power taking place in Europe and Asia. And the war was not going well.

Churchill wanted FDR to bring the United States clearly, definitively to Britain’s side; he wanted an American declaration of war. He also hoped FDR would agree to threaten retaliation against Japan if it continued its southward advance in Indochina.

FDR, on the other hand, wanted the leaders to issue a joint statement describing a vision for the future—one that would give comfort to a besieged Britain, while at the same time reassuring war-wary Americans that the Allies’ ultimate goal was a just, nonviolent world, not endless quest for empire.

Churchill, though frustrated at Newfoundland in his efforts to bring America into the war, would have his U.S. declaration of war before the year was out.

FDR got his statement, dubbed the Atlantic Charter, during the leaders’ meeting at sea. He and Churchill first sat down together aboard the USS Augusta on August 9, and by the afternoon of August 11, the two men had cobbled together a charter that simply—but, given the circumstances, audaciously—stated what kind of world the Allies sought to achieve by vanquishing the Axis.

They foresware territorial expansion for themselves, as well as any change of national borders without popular consent. They called for worldwide economic advancement, labor rights, and peace. They insisted on global freedom of the seas. And, critically, they promised that the mistakes of the punitive post–World War I era would not be repeated: victor and vanquished alike would have access, “on equal terms,” to the resources needed for prosperity.

In the Atlantic Charter, well before the United States entered the war and tested its might against the Axis powers, FDR wanted to establish that the Allies had something else in their favor—legitimacy. He wanted to persuade the world, including Americans and citizens of potential enemy nations, that an Allied victory would not merely substitute one form of despotism for another, but would bring about a world in which all people have the opportunity for self-determination.
Launch of the United Nations Alliance, January 1942

The surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, stirred Americans quickly to the cause of war. It also launched the process by which Franklin D. Roosevelt hoped to draw nations into a global alliance committed not only to defeating the Axis powers, but also to upholding the principles he and Winston Churchill had sketched out in the Atlantic Charter during their shipboard meeting off Newfoundland.

On New Year’s Day 1942, just weeks after the Pearl Harbor bombing, FDR and Churchill convened at the White House to draft what came to be known as the United Nations Declaration. FDR, Churchill, Soviet ambassador Maxim Litvinov, Chinese ambassador T. V. Soong, and representatives of twenty-two other nations signed the document, agreeing to:

- adhere to the principles of the Atlantic Charter;
- employ their full resources against the Axis powers until those powers were defeated; and
- cooperate with one another, not making a separate peace with any Axis power.

The declaration—in which the Allies and their friends dedicated themselves to “a true peace based on the freedom of man,” as FDR would say in 1942—represented the first official use of the term United Nations (UN), a phrase often used by the press and others to describe the Allied forces fighting the Axis. The term would, of course, become the official name of the postwar international organization that is with us today.

By the time the war was winding down in the spring of 1945, fifty nations had signed the UN Declaration, forming the original core group of states that would meet in San Francisco in the fall to draw up and sign the UN Charter establishing the postwar organization.
The Moscow Conference and Four-Power Declaration, October 1943

In the months after Pearl Harbor, as war raged in Europe and the Pacific, officials in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s State Department (under the direction of Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Undersecretary Sumner Welles) began quietly carrying out work to craft a new international organization to replace the League of Nations. By mid-1943 FDR was privately referring to this instrument for global cooperation as the United Nations Organization.

These initial efforts came to a head in October 1943 at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers, where Hull, British foreign secretary Anthony Eden, Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, and Chinese ambassador to Russia Foo Ping-sheung issued a document that, like the Atlantic Charter, looked to the future. In the document the powers called it a "necessity" to establish "at the earliest possible date" an international organization "based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving states, and open to membership by all such states, large and small, for the maintenance of international peace and security."

The statement also promised punishment for wartime atrocities ("Let those who have hitherto not imbued their hands with innocent blood beware lest they join the ranks of the guilty"), addressed the postwar reintroduction of self-government in Austria and Italy, and pledged that after the war the four signatory Allies would refrain from using their militaries in the territories of other states “except for the purposes envisaged in this declaration and after joint consultation.”

The New York Times called the Moscow Declaration the “first formal undertaking by the United Nations ‘Big Four’” indicating that these Allies “would work together not only in war but in peace.” The Times and other major news organs applauded the statement as a major step toward the creation of a new international organization.

Just a few weeks after the close of the Moscow Conference, FDR, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin met at Tehran, where FDR elaborated on his vision for the postwar peace and security organization, including his concept that the “Four Policemen”—the United States, Britain, China, and the USSR—must play a leading role in such a body.
The Bretton Woods Agreements, July 1944

In the years after World War I, economies around the world faced increasing strain, and many countries responded by adopting protectionist policies—including discriminatory trading practices, high tariff barriers to imports, and competitive devaluations of domestic currency. These hard-knuckled policies contributed to a downward spiral in the world economy that reached its nadir in the Great Depression. By the end of the 1930s and the onset of World War II, both Franklin D. Roosevelt and his secretary of state, Cordell Hull, became convinced that if there was to be any hope of establishing a more prosperous and peaceful world in the war’s wake, the protectionist trend had to be reversed.

The first order of business, FDR and Winston Churchill believed, was to promote freer trade and equal access to raw materials. But to achieve this goal, world leaders had to grasp a prickly nettle: the difficult issue of currency stabilization. Nations in the ’30s had devalued their currencies in order to lower the price of their exports abroad, making these products more competitive and maintaining jobs at home. But when other nations adopted the same practice, what resulted was an unproductive “beggar thy neighbor” currency war.

In the spring of 1942, therefore, British and American Treasury officials began a series of conversations in Washington, DC, about how to foster more international cooperation in economic policy for the good of all. These talks culminated in the Bretton Woods Conference of July 1944. Officially known as the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, this gathering, which included delegates from forty-four countries, met over three weeks in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, to agree on new rules for the postwar international monetary system.

The conference created two organizations that continue to be important players in the world economy of the twenty-first century: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), later called the World Bank.

The IMF would be responsible for maintaining a system of fixed exchange rates centered on the U.S. dollar and gold, and the organization would provide a forum for nations to consult and cooperate on monetary issues. To foster the expansion of world trade, the IMF also would give short-term financial assistance to countries experiencing temporary deficits in their balance of payments (a summary of all monetary transactions between a nation and the world). Longer-term balance-of-payments problems could be addressed by modifying a country’s exchange rate.

The IBRD, meanwhile, was tasked with providing financial aid to help the many countries devastated by war to rebuild, and to help poor countries develop their economies and engage in the newly emerging global economy—a role the World Bank plays today.
Dumbarton Oaks: Designing the United Nations, August-October 1944

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had sketched out their vision of a postwar world during their first face-to-face meeting in 1941. But the document they produced, the Atlantic Charter, was provisional in nature—more a statement of principles than an organized plan. Indeed, the charter explicitly called for “the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security” at a more opportune time in the future. In that phrase lay the germ of the United Nations (UN).

FDR once again took up this project near the close of the war, convening, at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom, the USSR, and China—the “Big Four” powers of the 1942 UN alliance—to design a basic shape for the new international organization.

The structure they proposed consisted of a General Assembly to include all member states, and an executive Security Council composed of eleven members. These eleven would include five permanent members—the Big Four plus France (as soon as a postwar French government could be formed)—and six rotating members, to be elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms. The draft also called for the establishment of a Secretariat, an International Court of Justice, and an Economic and Social Council, all working under the authority of the General Assembly.

The Security Council would hold the weighty responsibility of maintaining peace. Member states could place armed forces at its disposal for this purpose. The General Assembly, meanwhile, would have the authority to initiate studies and make policy recommendations to promote peace, help secure basic human rights, and foster international collaboration in social, economic, and cultural matters.

At the close of the conference, the Big Four submitted their proposals for review to the other members of the UN alliance.


Left: Representatives of the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States meet at Dumbarton Oaks, a private estate in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC, August 21, 1944. At this series of meetings, which also included the Chinese, officials created a blueprint for the United Nations Charter that would be approved in San Francisco less than three months after Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death in April 1945. UN Photo
The United Nations and the Yalta Conference, February 1945

One important issue was left unresolved at Dumbarton Oaks: the voting procedure of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, vested with the critical authority to call on members to bring economic sanctions against aggressor states or indeed to deploy armed forces.

This matter was ultimately settled at the Yalta Conference of February 1945, when Franklin D. Roosevelt secured Soviet marshal Joseph Stalin’s agreement to accept a voting formula granting the five permanent members (who would be most likely to provide forces for UN operations) the right to veto resolutions, but not to block council consideration of any issue. This would reassure both Stalin and members of the U.S. Congress that decisions could not be made without their nations’ assent, while also guaranteeing a fair hearing on any issue for all member states, large and small. In exchange for this agreement, FDR and Winston Churchill acceded to Stalin’s request for two additional seats in the General Assembly for the Ukraine and Byelorussia.

FDR has been criticized for yielding too much to Stalin at Yalta—for not insisting on more rigorously enforced agreements calling for self-government in postwar Europe and especially Poland, and for conceding territory in the Far East, such as the Kuril Islands. But uppermost in FDR’s mind had been winning two promises from Stalin. With the atomic bomb not yet added to America’s arsenal, FDR wanted Stalin to pledge Soviet participation in the war against a determined Japan. Second, FDR wanted Stalin to agree to join the UN peace and security organization. He knew that, for good or ill, the Soviet Union would emerge from the war a major power, and he believed that Soviet participation in the UN was critical to its success. Having succeeded on both counts, FDR returned home from Yalta exhausted—he had only two months to live—but cautiously optimistic about his achievements there.
The United Nations Is Born: The San Francisco Conference, April 1945

The Yalta agreements establishing a voting procedure for the United Nations (UN) Security Council cleared the way for the San Francisco Conference, which began on April 25, 1945. There, the members of the UN alliance crafted the UN Charter, which formally established the UN Organization.

More than eight hundred delegates and their staffs—a total of 3,500 people—gathered for this historic meeting. For efficiency, the conference formed a steering committee and four separate commissions: one to consider the main purpose and principles of the new organization, and three others to finalize the powers and responsibilities of the Security Council, General Assembly, and International Court of Justice.

After many weeks of intense debate and discussion, the commissions placed the UN Charter before the assembled delegates for a vote on June 25, 1945. The charter passed unanimously, eliciting thunderous applause from the more than three thousand staff, press, and visitors assembled in the San Francisco Opera House, where the stage was decorated with four golden pillars linked by olive branches, symbols of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms. In a second emotional ceremony the next day, each delegate signed the document.

Then the charter went through a ratification process requiring the approval of the five permanent members of the Security Council, plus a majority of the other signatory states. On October 24, 1945—United Nations Day—this requirement was fulfilled. Though FDR had been laid to rest in the rose garden of his family estate at Hyde Park, New York, the organization he had worked so hard to establish came to life.
The United Nations in the U.S. Senate

Not long before the election of 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a speech in which he asked Americans to support the United Nations (UN) Organization, which he hoped would foster peace for many years to come when at last the hostilities of World War II came to an end. In the speech FDR railed against isolationists in Congress who had thwarted U.S. preparations for the war, voting against the relaxation of neutrality laws, Lend-Lease aid to Allies, and the draft. He also harkened back to the aftermath of World War I, when those who would have the United States avoid foreign involvements voted against the League of Nations. The president named names.

“One of the leading isolationists who killed international cooperation in 1920,” FDR said, “was an old friend of mine, and I think he supported me two or three times—Senator Hiram Johnson. Now, in the event of Republican victory in the Senate this year—1944—that same Senator Johnson—who is still a friend of mine—would be Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And I hope that the American voters will bear that in mind.”

In his State of the Union address the following January, FDR once again took up the subject of an international body for peacekeeping. He conceded that there was reason for concern about the state of international relations even among friends, for example in Poland (where Soviet power was expanding) and Greece (where Britain had sent forces to suppress a communist uprising). But he cautioned that these were just the kind of concerns that had led America, after World War I, to reject the League of Nations.

Let us not forget that the retreat to isolationism a quarter of a century ago was started not by a direct attack against international cooperation but against the alleged imperfections of the peace.

In our disillusionment after the last war we preferred international anarchy to international cooperation with Nations which did not see and think exactly as we did. We gave up the hope of gradually achieving a better peace because we had not the courage to fulfill our responsibilities in an admittedly imperfect world.

We must not let that happen again, or we shall follow the same tragic road—again the road to a third world war.

In this final State of the Union speech, FDR was fighting for the UN. But some of the most hardcore isolationists—including three FDR had mentioned in his October speech—were no longer leaders in the Senate. William Borah of Idaho had died in 1940. Gerald Nye of North Dakota had been unseated in 1944. Johnson of California was ailing and would pass away in August. What’s more, the war itself had convinced many Americans that FDR’s position on international relations—that America must engage and even lead—was the correct one.

A few days after FDR’s 1945 State of the Union, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, a determined isolationist before the war, gave an influential address (dubbed “the speech heard round the world”) in which he proclaimed his support for an international peace and security body. The United States would take one of two paths, Vandenberg said.

The first way is the old way which has twice taken us to Europe’s interminable battlefields within a quarter century. The second way is the new way in which our present fraternity of war becomes a fraternity of peace. . . .

I hasten to make my personal viewpoint clear. I have always been frankly one of those who has believed in our own self-reliance. I still believe that we can never again—regardless of collaborations—allow our national defense to deteriorate to anything like a point of impotence. But I do not believe that any nation hereafter can immunize itself in its own exclusive action. Since Pearl Harbor, World War II has put the gory science of mass murder into new and sinister perspective. Our oceans have ceased to be moats which automatically protect our ramparts.

Pleased, FDR appointed Vandenberg a delegate to the San Francisco Conference, which would found the UN, and the Republican senator went on to become an important architect of bipartisan foreign policy. On July 28, 1945, the U.S. Senate voted eighty-nine to two to ratify the new organization’s charter. (One of the senators who voted against it lost his seat the next year.) On December 4, 1945, the Senate voted sixty-five to seven to authorize full American participation in the UN.
United Nations Headquarters: A World Capital

Franklin D. Roosevelt did not survive to see the United Nations (UN) Organization formally established in late 1945, nor could he have imagined that the international body would find a permanent home in a sweeping modernist complex along the East River, little more than a mile from the Manhattan townhouse FDR had shared with Eleanor Roosevelt and their children.

FDR, perhaps the world’s foremost proponent of the UN itself, had strongly championed an American headquarters for the organization—he’d even thought the Secretariat, essentially the executive office of the UN, might be located in a Manhattan skyscraper. But the matter was far from settled in December 1945, when the U.S. Congress voted to invite the UN to locate itself in America. Indeed many Europeans wanted to site the UN in Geneva, a location FDR opposed because of its association with the troubled legacy of the League of Nations. A few days after the U.S. invitation, when the Preparatory Commission of the UN voted to locate the organization’s headquarters in America, Britain and France voted against the measure, preferring a base in Europe.

Nevertheless, the UN decision kicked off a yearlong hunt for a suitable American location. Cities from San Francisco to Boston to Chicago vied to host the global organization, as did smaller communities from the Black Hills of South Dakota to Claremont, Oklahoma, to Miami Beach, Florida. Jay LeFevre, a Republican congressman representing Dutchess County, had written to President Harry Truman relaying his constituents’ “fervent desire” to host the UN headquarters in Hyde Park, New York, FDR’s hometown.

By early 1946, the Preparatory Commission had settled on the East Coast for its relative accessibility to Europe and assigned representatives to investigate more than a dozen locations, focusing on suburban sites to avoid the expense and difficulty of acquiring a large tract of urban land. On February 14, 1946, at its first session in London, the UN General Assembly voted to locate UN headquarters near New York City, somewhere in Fairfield County, Connecticut, or Westchester County, New York. But residents of the city’s northern suburbs, especially Greenwich, Connecticut, soon voiced staunch opposition to hosting the new world capital, concerned it would ruin the character of their quiet, well-to-do residential towns.

New York City itself had lobbied for the honor of hosting the UN. “I felt,” Mayor

The United Nations Secretariat Building and Dag Hammarskjöld Library, with the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive in the foreground and the East River just visible at right, undated. Begun in 1947 and completed in 1952, the thirty-nine-story Secretariat Building was the first New York City skyscraper whose facade consisted of a glass skin. It became a prominent modernist symbol of the UN. LOC

William O’Dwyer would later recall, “that this was the one great thing that would make New York the center of the world.” But land in the city center was in short supply and very costly, and delegates had not been persuaded by the offer of Flushing Meadows, Queens, where the General Assembly was meeting temporarily and which had been the site of the 1939 World’s Fair. With an impasse...
developing in the New York suburbs, the city’s UN Committee redoubled its efforts to win over UN representatives, as did boosters for a site in Philadelphia.

Within hours of the December 11, 1946, deadline for a UN headquarters committee to choose a site—with Philadelphia the expected winner—the New York group came through with a stunning offer: six blocks of prime Manhattan real estate along the East River, owned by developer William Zeckendorf for a planned residential and commercial complex, to be purchased for the UN with an $8.5 million gift by John D. Rockefeller Jr. His son, Nelson Rockefeller, had served in FDR’s State Department and had been a delegate to the San Francisco Conference, which founded the UN, Nelson Rockefeller was also a member of New York City’s UN campaign committee.

On December 14, 1946, The UN General Assembly voted to accept Rockefeller’s gift and build the UN a home in the city. New Yorkers and UN delegates alike saw the city as a felicitous location for the center of global diplomacy—a diverse global crossroads that was “vital and dynamic and truly inspiring,” in the words of then UN secretary-general Trygve Lie, a Norwegian.

**A design collaboration**
The delegates decided not to hold a traditional competition for the design of the UN buildings, but instead, in keeping with the theme of international cooperation, to hire an international team of ten architects nominated by their governments, to be led by Wallace K. Harrison, a lead planner of Rockefeller Center. Work on the designs began early in 1947. Brazil’s Oscar Niemeyer and the French-Swiss Le Corbusier, both leading lights of the modern architecture that had emerged in the 1930s, took prominent roles.

What rose on the riverside site exemplified modern architecture and all it stood for: clean, balanced shapes free of ornament or historical reference, embracing the new and the universal. The thirty-nine-story Secretariat Building in the International Style (a term coined in conjunction with a 1932 exhibit on modern architecture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art) became the icon of the UN. Its simple block form features the first glass curtain walls on a New York City skyscraper—tinted a delicate green—and slender sides of mottled white Vermont marble. The General Assembly Building, by contrast, is low-slung and oblique, while the Conference Building, fittingly enough, is cantilevered over the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive that borders the East River. UN Secretary-General Lie laid the cornerstone of the complex in 1949, and builders finished it in 1952.

The eighteen-acre headquarters is international territory, not subject to U.S. jurisdiction, although by agreement with the American government, fugitives cannot use it to evade arrest. In 2009 the UN began a massive renovation of its headquarters—the first in its history—to upgrade energy efficiency, interior layout, and security features.
The United Nations Today

In the decades since its founding, the United Nations (UN) has grown to include 193 member countries, essentially all the world’s recognized sovereign states. As in 1945, its overall purposes include maintaining world peace; developing friendly relations among nations; promoting basic human rights by reducing poverty, disease, illiteracy, and other social and economic ills; and serving as a world forum.

Its functions around the globe are more diverse than ever. In recent decades, the UN has deployed peacekeepers to protect civilians in conflicts from the Bosnian War of the late 1990s to fighting in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the twenty-first century. The UN’s hundreds of conventions, multilateral treaties, and standards help guide and develop international law. Its observers monitor democratic elections, and its weapons experts help nations develop safety policy and make inspections in various hot spots to foster the transparency required for peacemaking. The UN has rushed to the aid of victims of natural disasters, from the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia to the 2010 Haitian earthquake. The UN’s World Food Programme feeds the hungry around the globe, and its Refugee Agency protects the rights and cares for the basic needs of people driven from their homes by war or other catastrophes. Other UN agencies work to study, slow, and help nations adapt to climate change.

The UN assembly chamber in New York has been the scene of such unforgettable confrontations as when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, responding to a remark by a Filipino delegate about the subjugation of Eastern Europe, banged his shoe on the table and called the delegate a “lackey of imperialism” in 1960, and, some forty-six years later, when Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez implied that U.S. president George W. Bush, who had preceded him at the podium the day before, was the devil (Chávez crossed himself and claimed the smell of sulfur hung in the air).

The international body is certainly not immune from criticism. It has been assailed for failing to stop nuclear proliferation and tragedies like the Rwandan genocide of 1994 on one hand, and, in other circles, for threatening private or national prerogatives with international agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), which the United States has refused to ratify. Yet most agree that the UN is an indispensable instrument for global cooperation.

Its aspirations reflect the values and the vision articulated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his tireless effort to fashion, out of the ruins of war, a new and better world founded on four fundamental human freedoms—freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights—drafted under the guiding hand of Eleanor Roosevelt not long after FDR’s death—calls these four freedoms the “highest aspiration” of the common peoples of this planet. The international peace and security organization FDR envisioned stands, today, as a living testament to his legacy.